

# A GUIDE TO TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACHES TO HISTORY PEDAGOGY

Traumatic subjects are common in history education.

Historical teaching and research can play an important role in witnessing, promoting understanding, and lighting pathways for the resolution of cultural and historical trauma. Yet exposing students to traumatic content in the classroom poses risks to students' (and teachers') safety, as we often have complex emotional responses when exposed to information about harms that have been experienced by others. Unfortunately, educators are rarely trained in ways to minimise the risks of harm to students and themselves when teaching with and about difficult materials.

This guide provides an introduction to managing the risks of vicarious trauma in history teaching and learning. It offers some simple strategies to mitigate risks of harm when dealing with difficult materials in the classroom. The guide has three sections: an introduction to trauma and vicarious or secondary trauma; what educators can do to minimise risks to students and to themselves; and how we can train students to be aware of risks and care for themselves when learning about difficult subjects.

## 1. WHAT IS TRAUMA AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

**Trauma and vicarious trauma are closely related, differing primarily in the nature of exposure to distressing content. Their symptoms and treatment are also very similar.**

**Trauma** is a stress response to a distressing event or series of events. It may lead people to feel helpless and overwhelmed, diminish or alter their sense of self, and reduce their ability to respond to challenges or other issues they encounter. Particularly if the trauma is experienced in childhood, the effects can be long lasting and complex (Wright & Laurent, 2021: 42).

**Vicarious or secondary trauma** is a stress response that can be experienced by those who haven't experienced a traumatic event directly, but are exposed to it through the accounts of survivors or other records of the event. Vicarious trauma is associated with compassion fatigue, burnout, and can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (and post-traumatic growth).

Various **factors** increase the risk of someone having a vicarious trauma response. It may not be obvious to a person or those around them, that they are experiencing vicarious trauma. However, there are a range of behaviours that may **indicate** that someone is experiencing vicarious trauma.



### VICARIOUS TRAUMA RISK FACTORS

- Cumulative exposure
- Extent of immersion
- Moral injury
- Poor mental health
- Prior exposure to trauma
- Lack of support
- Maladaptive coping strategies



### VICARIOUS TRAUMA INDICATORS

- Absenteeism
- Frequent errors and mistakes
- Lack of motivation
- Withdrawal
- Substance use
- Mood swings
- Irritability

**It is important to remember that trauma is normal.**

A trauma response is a form of self-protection, a set of normal physical and psychological responses to a difficult experience or set of circumstances. How you react to a trauma response is key to your ongoing wellbeing. Not dealing with trauma responses can lead to post-traumatic stress. However, dealing with trauma responses well can lead to post-traumatic growth.

# 2. TRAUMA INFORMED TEACHING PRINCIPLES

Three simple principles can assist in minimising the risk of students and staff having trauma responses when exposed to difficult content in the classroom:

1

## USE adult learning principles.

Let students know what is coming up so they can decide how much to engage.

2

## AVOID needless or gratuitous exposure to difficult content.

Trauma is like radiation. Repeated exposure increases the risk of injury.

3

## FOREGROUND reparative framings.

Locate traumatic content in liberatory, healing and justice focussed narratives wherever possible.

# 3. TECHNIQUES OF SELF CARE FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Even with best practice trauma informed teaching, it is likely that some people will have complex emotional responses to traumatic material in the classroom. Being educated about trauma responses and paying particular attention to your wellbeing when being exposed to accounts of traumatic events are protective against posttraumatic stress. Five key techniques of self-care are:

1. **BE** aware of personal vulnerabilities. Have you had recent emotional challenges, poor physical health, or prior exposure to related traumatic content?
2. **IDENTIFY** your purpose for engaging with traumatic content. What is your personal mission statement? What do you want to achieve with this work?
3. **GROW** your social supports. Identify who would you contact with a study related issue, when you feel vulnerable, to discuss a personal issue, or to celebrate an achievement?
4. **ATTEND** to your physical health. Physical fitness supports mental and emotional fitness.
5. **LIMIT** unnecessary exposure to traumatic content. Take good notes, eliminate needless repeat exposure, take breaks, and find ways to distance yourself.

## In sum, work well and rest well.

Be ethical, sensitive and accurate in your work – in line with your mission and purpose. And look after yourself. Take proper breaks, exercise, be mindful and aware, and remain connected to your social supports.

## Finally, don't be afraid to get help.

If you find that you're struggling to deal with your thoughts and feelings after exposure to difficult materials, reach out to one of the many support services available to you. Your University Wellbeing services, GP, friends and families, as well as the specialised services below can all be great resources when you need some extra help.

## SUPPORT SERVICES

- 13YARN, Counselling Support for Indigenous Australians: [www.13yarn.org.au](http://www.13yarn.org.au)
- 1800RESPECT, national domestic, family and sexual violence counselling: [www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)
- Qlife, LGBTI peer support and referral: [www qlife.org.au](http://www qlife.org.au)
- Lifeline Australia, Crisis Support: 13 11 14 or [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

## REFERENCES & RESOURCES

Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma: [www.dartcenter.org](http://www.dartcenter.org)

Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia*. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 2002.

Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From domestic violence to political terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

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