

Session 7 Teacher Deep Dive

Mindfulness and Trauma

Throughout this program, we've been careful to ask students not to put themselves into traumatic memories that might overwhelm and disrupt their guided practices. It's important for students to be able to hold boundaries and understand that this course is not the best place for them to address any past traumas.

However, in helping students explore their full range of experiences, emotions, sensations, and humanity, it is almost certain that you will accompany some through some difficult encounters. Those may include current stressors, physical or emotional traumas—all of which require a guide's sensitivity and preparation. Students may confront trauma during formal practices, during didactic presentations, or when engaging in mindfulness practices outside of class.

Trauma Sensitivity

The following guidance and information come from David A. Treleavan's book, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*. It is only very briefly summarized here, so we recommend that you review the entire book, especially if you have students who have disclosed a trauma or a worry about managing a trauma during the course.

In his book's introduction, Treleavan asks a crucial question: "how can we minimize the potential dangers of mindfulness to trauma survivors while leveraging its potential benefits at the same time?" (xvii). Acknowledging the many benefits of mindfulness, Treleavan is also aware that, practiced or taught without sensitivity and some subject knowledge, mindfulness can not only be difficult but also harmful for trauma survivors. "Basic mindfulness practice is safer and more effective when it's paired with an understanding of trauma."

Treleavan uses the following definition from a trauma specialist: "Any experience that is stressful enough to leave us feeling hopeless, frightened, overwhelmed, or profoundly unsafe is considered a trauma" (xviii). This can encompass many kinds of experiences, including violence, chronic stress, abandonment, neglect, harassment, or secondary trauma. What the experiences have in common is the effect on the individual and the symptoms and difficulties they cause.

For the Treleavan, "mindfulness can be an essential resource for survivors. Practiced with discernment, it can increase one's capacity to integrate trauma . . . whereas trauma is a dysregulating experience—often leaving us feeling disconnected from our bodies and out of control—mindfulness can help us regain a sense of agency" (26).

The First Core Principle to Support Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness

Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness offers a framework of five "principles and modifications designed to support trauma-sensitive mindfulness mediation." We present a summary of the first principle here, which is focused on helping you recognize physical and verbal indications of trauma arousal.

Stay within the Window of Tolerance: The Role of Arousal

Avoiding extremes—intense agitation or numbness—and being able to safely observe and tolerate their experiences is a goal that can be achieved by teaching students to “stay in the window of tolerance.” We all have a window of tolerance for multiple kinds of stimuli—heat, cold, stress, noise, interruption, strenuous activity, etc. One’s emotional window of tolerance refers to the “internal zone of support” where trauma survivors feel more stable, present, and regulated” (88).

Once we learn to identify the signs of someone who is moving outside their window of tolerance, we can offer appropriate modifications. Treleavan’s offers eight modifications to support the window of tolerance:

1. Watch for dysregulated arousal—if you observe slack or rigid muscle tone, hyper ventilation, exaggerated startle response, excessive sweating, dissociation, pale skin, emotional volatility.
2. Focus on stabilization and safety—the first priority is ensuring safety and stability in the individual and keep them within the window of tolerance.
3. Educate others about the window of tolerance. Having this concept as part of their vocabulary will help in self-awareness and learning self-regulation.
4. Use mindful gauges—somatic markers that help indicate responses to stimuli and health responses (breath, sensations, moods, feelings, or thoughts can be mindful gauges).
5. Recognize when to stop—slow the pace of a practice to ensure safety and stability (or take a break, a short walk, a few deep breaths, etc.).
6. Use the breath to regulate and find stability.
7. Utilize arousal scales—mark from 0 to 10 (with 5 being inside the window of tolerance) whether an individual is experiencing extreme fatigue or lethargy (1) or heightened reactivity (10).
8. Stay within your own window—notice your own responses and arousal triggers, practice broadening your window of tolerance, and practice self-care.

You are encouraged to read David A. Treleavan’s entire book for full background and in-depth exploration of all five principles and modifications for trauma-sensitive mindfulness:

Shift Attention to Support Stability: Avoiding the Fear/Immobility Cycle
Keep the Body in Mind: Working with Dissociation
Practice in Relationship: Supporting Safety and Stability in Survivors
Understand Social Context: Working Effectively Across Difference