

**COMPLEX TRAUMA: TEACHERS HELPING TEENS**

by

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I would like to thank my husband, Troy, and my children, Dustin and Jessie, who have supported me emotionally and accepted with grace the countless hours I have spent buried in textbooks and in front of my computer.

I would like to thank my friend, Nannette, who has been an inspiration. I hope, someday, to be as gifted a counsellor.

I would also like to acknowledge my students, both past and present. You are amazing! You have taught me far more than I could ever teach you. Thank you.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Many adolescents choose to leave, or are exited from, high school due to their inability to adhere to the rules and expectations within a traditional school setting, despite the best efforts and intentions of the staff at these schools. Their behaviours seem to stand in the way of their ability to take advantage of the academic opportunities provided. Often, such students are transitioned to alternative school programs with the hope that smaller class sizes will increase the likelihood of academic success. However, while lower student to staff ratios may indeed ease the task of managing challenging student behaviour, it does nothing on its own to address the cause or target the improvement of these behaviours. Perhaps if alternate education teachers can be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to adequately support their students' social and emotional needs, their goal of addressing students' cognitive needs can be better met and more students will have a chance to reach their full academic potential.

### **Significance of the Project**

Most of the students who enroll in alternative school environments have complex, and often tragic, personal histories. Some have received diagnosis such as depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, anxiety disorders, learning disabilities, or bi-polar disorder. Some have been involved in the juvenile justice system and may still be under the supervision of a parole officer. Many are in the care of the Ministry of Children and Families and may have resided in multiple foster and group homes over the course of their lives.

It should not be surprising, with stories such as these, that students usually continue to exhibit a variety of challenging behaviours even after transitioning to an alternative school

setting. Some have difficulty controlling their anger, maintaining healthy relationships, or actively participating in classroom activities. Others may come to school under the influence of drugs or alcohol, seek attention through disruptive or disrespectful actions, or engage in self-harming behaviours. These, and other concerns, make it extremely difficult for teachers to engage in challenging and enriching academic activities with their students. As a result, it may be imperative that teachers understand the potential cause of these behaviours, as well as a variety of the interventions that are available to target such behaviours, if they truly hope to enrich the lives of their students through learning.

### **Background of the Project**

I have been teaching in School District 57 since 1995. I began my career as a Teacher On Call, working mainly in primary classrooms. As I think back on those early years, I remember looking forward to teaching in classrooms that had been labeled as “challenging” or with particular students who had been given the same label. Even though there were certainly some difficult moments along the way, there was never a classroom that I refused to go back to nor a student who I was unable to appreciate and accept. Even as a new teacher, I was able to recognize that the “challenging” students were survivors, doing what they needed to do in an attempt to feel safe and in control.

Today, I am teaching at the Centre for Learning Alternatives (CLA), where I work with youth, between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, who have not been successful in traditional school settings for a wide variety of reasons, including truancy, drug and alcohol use, and disruptive or disrespectful behaviour. Some of my students chose to apply at CLA because they believed it was a more appropriate learning environment for them; others were exited from their mainstream high schools and advised to apply at CLA. All of my students

require support beyond their academic needs. They may be bigger than my elementary students of the past, but they are still doing what they believe they need to do in order to survive.

When I made the decision to pursue a teaching career in alternative education, I quickly realized that my current knowledge and skill set did not adequately prepare me to meet the complex needs of my students. I was confident that I had found my place as a teacher, but I needed to learn how to support my students' social and emotional needs as well as I had learned how to support their academic needs. I decided to apply for the Masters in Education in Counselling, at the University of Northern British Columbia. I use the knowledge and skills gained from this program in my classroom each and every day. I am a better teacher, advocate, counsellor, role model, and friend to my students as a result of my participation in the Counselling Program.

I truly believe that all teachers who choose to work in alternative settings understand that most of the students who walk through their doors carry with them some very difficult stories, stories that include thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that can create numerous barriers to classroom learning. They continue to teach in these classrooms because they care about the overall well being of their students. They want their students to be successful. They want their students to be happy. However, not all alternate education teachers are able to participate in a program such as the Masters in Education in Counselling. For this reason, I have created a project that will enable me to share what I have learned with my colleagues in order to provide them with some of the knowledge, skills, and strategies I have acquired, so that they, too, will be better equipped to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of their students.

The purpose of my project is to help alternate education teachers explore the impact of complex trauma and attachment disruption on classroom learning and behaviours. I have created a power point presentation that I will use to introduce teachers to the topic of complex trauma and the associated domains of impairment. The power point also provides an introduction to trauma informed teaching practices. In addition, I have created a manual that lists potential complex trauma responses under the domains of impairment introduced in the power point. The manual also expands on trauma informed teaching considerations and includes a series of lessons designed to help support students who struggle with affect regulation. Lastly, I have included a supplemental reading list for those who wish to explore the topic further.

## **Chapter Two: Literature**

### **Complex Trauma and the Classroom**

A review of recent literature reveals that many of the behaviours exhibited by adolescents in alternative school programs are consistent with the manifestations of complex trauma. Complex trauma refers to a child's exposure to repetitive or prolonged traumatic events of an interpersonal nature occurring within the primary caregiving system (Courtois & Ford, 2009). Furthermore, these traumatic events, which can include physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; neglect; loss; and the witnessing of domestic violence, have the potential to severely impact a child's development and long-term outcomes (Cook et al., 2005). Potential domains of impairment include attachment, biology, affect regulation, cognition, and self-concept (Cook et al., 2005). In many cases it is the symptoms associated with each of these domains that are often labeled as "problem behaviours" in a school context; symptoms that can make it extremely difficult for these students to focus on their studies and develop healthy relationships with their peers and teachers.

### **Domains of Impairment**

**Attachment.** Neufeld and Maté (2004) argue that attachment is the most critical factor in the healthy psychological development of human beings. They state that children must be emotionally attached to their caregivers until such time as they are prepared to live independently from them. Securely attached children are able to safely explore their environment and rely on their primary caregivers for guidance, direction, support and approval (Neufeld & Maté, 2004). Unfortunately, this attachment relationship is seriously compromised when a child's caregiver is the source of his or her trauma. In fact, such

children may eventually come to view all adults as potential sources of danger rather than sources of comfort and safety (Bath, 2008).

When attachment has been severely disrupted during childhood, adolescents are likely to display a variety of challenging behaviours. For example, they are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviours, in part, because they have difficulty understanding the perspectives of others, solving problems, and controlling their emotions and physical reactions (McClure & Teyber, 2003). They may appear hypervigilant out of a need to continuously scan their environment for potential threats (Bath, 2008; McClure & Teyber, 2003), making it difficult for them to focus and maintain attention on any given task. Further symptoms associated with attachment disruption, including problems with boundaries, distrust, social isolation, and difficulty interpreting the emotional states of others (Cook et al., 2005), can interfere with an adolescent's ability to develop healthy relationships.

**Biology.** When infants and young children are unable to trust their caregivers to meet their needs, they are forced to shift their focus from learning to survival. They must sacrifice their natural propensity for exploration in an effort to ensure their own personal safety (Bath, 2008). Ford (2009) summarizes the neurobiological impact of this shift by explaining that “the survival brain relies on rapid automatic processes that involve primitive portions of the brain [...] while largely bypassing areas of the brain involved in more complex adaptations to the environment (learning)” (p. 32). Children who experience ongoing trauma become hypervigilant, focused on threat-related cues, anxious, and impulsive in order to survive (Perry, 2012). Healthy opportunities for learning are greatly diminished, impacting a child's affective and cognitive capacities into adolescence and adulthood (Cook et al., 2005).



**Affect Regulation.** Impairment of attachment and neurobiology can lead to significant difficulties with affect regulation (Cook et al., 2005). Complexly traumatized children often struggle to correctly identify distinct feelings due to deficits in their ability to differentiate between, interpret, and label their emotions. They have not been able to express their emotions safely, nor have they had sufficient opportunities to learn how to modulate their affective states (Cook et al., 2005; Warner, Cook, Westcott, & Koomar, 2011). Unfortunately, adolescents who are unable to regulate affect often use dissociation or engage in self-soothing behaviours, such as self-harm, eating disorders, aggression towards others, substance abuse, or sexual promiscuity, in an attempt to cope with intense or threatening emotions (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005).

**Cognition.** Maltreated children also show impairment in the areas of attention, abstract reasoning, and executive functioning (Beers & De Bellis, 2002). More specifically, they have difficulty focusing and sustaining attention, recalling events and experiences, thinking through the decision making process, and following through on their plans (Ford & Cloitre, 2009). Furthermore, research by Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) revealed lower levels of academic engagement by maltreated children, with teachers reporting a variety of concerning behaviours, including lack of persistence, avoidance of challenging tasks, and an over-reliance on teacher guidance and feedback. These impairments in cognition certainly put children at a higher risk of academic failure, leading to a dropout rate in adolescence that is three times higher than the general population (Cook et al., 2005).

**Self-Concept.** In the absence of a secure attachment, coupled with the associated impairments in affect regulation, biology, and cognition, it is not surprising that complexly traumatized children have poorly defined and extremely negative self-concept (Warner et al.,

2011). They come to view themselves as “defective, helpless, deficient, and unlovable” (Cook et al., 2005, p. 395). Their feelings of powerlessness and incompetency, along with their anticipation of maltreatment and rejection, inevitably serve to compound the many I manifestations of complex trauma that have already been discussed.

The above examination of several of the domains of impairment associated with complex trauma helps to explain many of the behaviours regularly exhibited by students in alternative education settings. Unfortunately, teachers receive little formal training on the impact of complex trauma on children and adolescents. As a result, they may be ill equipped to respond to the social and emotional needs of many of their students, making it extremely difficult for them to address their primary goal of education (Ko et al., 2008). Thankfully, research in the area of complex trauma and attachment disruption is expanding to include ways in which healing can be promoted in non-clinical settings.

### **Trauma Informed Teaching**

Throughout the school year, many adolescents spend more time interacting with their teachers than any other adults in their lives. This may be particularly true in alternative school environments, where students often remain in one classroom with the same teacher for the duration of their school day. This structure provides alternate education teachers with a unique opportunity to create an environment that will support the complex needs of their students. For “one does not need to be a therapist to help address [...] three crucial elements of healing: the development of safety, the promotion of healing relationships, and the teaching of self-management and coping skills” (Bath, 2008, p. 18).

**Creating a Safe Classroom.** Creating a safe classroom will look different depending on the teacher and the needs of his or her students, but there are a number of interventions to

consider. Of course, classrooms need to be free of weapons, threats of physical assault, and verbal abuse, but there are also numerous, perhaps less obvious, components involved in the creation of a safe classroom atmosphere. For example, students who have experienced ongoing trauma are likely to respond better to teachers who are consistent, reliable, predictable, available, honest, and transparent (Bath, 2008). The use of praise and reinforcement is also beneficial for these students because it places the focus on their competencies over their deficits (Kinniburgh, Blaustein, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2005). Furthermore, it is critical that teachers remain mindful of the difficulty traumatized adolescents have with affect regulation, so they can react in ways that will help their students learn to cope with their emotional reactions instead of disciplining them for what they have not yet learned to control (O'Neill, Guenette, & Kitchenham, 2010).

**Developing Positive Relationships.** There is a great deal teachers can do to help cultivate positive relationships with their students, relationships that are critical to learning. Within the context of reliable and consistent relationships, teachers are able to support the social and emotional development that is a necessary precursor to improvements in academic achievement (Geddes & Hanks, 2006). Specifically, Bergin and Bergin (2009) recommend that teachers come to class well prepared in order to demonstrate care and commitment, provide students with choice as much as possible in order to build rapport, and help students be kind, helpful, and accepting in order to aid them in the development of positive peer relationships. With regards to discipline, they suggest that teachers employ “inductive rather than coercive discipline” (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 159). By this, they are referring to the use of open and honest communication regarding the reasons for specific rules as well as the consequences of breaking those rules, over the use of threats or the exertion of power that is

involved with the removal of fun activities, such as gym class, or the addition of punishments, such as detentions. By understanding the potential cause of challenging student behaviours, teachers are better able to respond with strategies and interventions other than punishment and exclusion and can, instead, focus on ways of helping their students begin to feel safe and cared for while at school (Geddes & Hanco, 2006).

**Teaching and Supporting Affect Regulation.** Teachers who are able to create safe classroom environments and develop secure relationships with complexly traumatized students are in an excellent position to teach new and effective ways of managing emotions and impulses. As discussed earlier, the impact of poor self-regulatory capacities is significant and far-reaching, often resulting in students either shutting down or becoming explosive (Kinniburgh et al., 2005). Teachers who are aware may be able to help these students better understand, express, and modulate their intense emotional states.

There is a wide range of interventions available for classroom use that target affect regulation. For example, children and adolescents who have not yet learned how to calm themselves down, due to inadequate caregiver support, may respond to a teacher's willingness to co-regulate with them (Bath, 2008). Listening to students actively and reflecting back their feelings is also beneficial as it can help them learn how to label their emotions (Bath, 2008). Furthermore, O'Neill et al. (2010) suggest that the simple act of allowing a student to take a short walk can serve to defuse a potential outburst. Bath (2008) argues that "any approach that promotes the use of rational processing and the development of the capacity to reflect feelings and impulses [...] would appear to have a role in helping children to develop self-regulation skills" (p. 20). Teachers need to know their students well

and invest the time and energy needed in order to figure out what interventions are most suitable in any given situation.

### **Summary**

It appears that many of the challenging behaviours exhibited by students in alternative education settings may be due, to complex trauma. Because these behaviours can make it extremely difficult for teachers to support their students' academic needs, it is vital that they also consider ways of supporting their students' social and emotional needs. Bergin and Bergin (2009) put it well when they stated that "children do not learn academically if they are not cared for" (p. 161). To this end, teachers working in alternative school environments would likely benefit from additional training and information around the impact of complex trauma exposure on learning and behaviour, in order to better understand the domains of impairment as well as the interventions currently available to target the resulting behaviours.

## **Chapter Three: Trauma Informed Teaching Manual**

### **Introduction**

I have created a trauma informed teaching manual with the hopes of sharing my knowledge of complex trauma with my fellow alternate education teachers. The power point has been designed to introduce the topic of complex trauma to teachers, so they will have the foundation necessary to utilize the more detailed and specific information contained within the remainder of the manual. I hope that teachers will walk away from my presentation with an increased understanding of the impact of complex trauma on behaviour and learning, and be able to use the manual as a resource to improve the learning conditions within their classrooms.

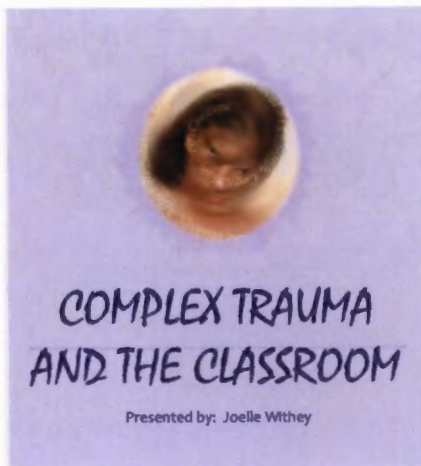
This manual consists of five main sections. First, the power point slides have been included and space has been provided for additional note taking. Next, examples of complex trauma responses are listed under the seven domains of impairment discussed in the power point presentation. Trauma informed teaching considerations are also provided, with a focus on safety, relationships, and competency, followed by series of potential teaching lessons designed to help students better understand and regulate their emotional states. Lastly, the manual concludes with a supplemental reading list for those seeking additional information and resources on the topic of complex trauma.

### **Power Point Presentation Slides**

The following power point presentation covers three main topics for discussion:

- What is Complex Trauma?
- Domains of Impairment Associated with Complex Trauma
- An Introduction to Trauma Informed Teaching Practices





## What is Complex Trauma?

- A child's exposure to repetitive or prolonged traumatic events occurring within the primary caregiving system. (Courtois & Ford, 2009)
- Traumatic events can include:
  - Physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse
  - Neglect
  - Loss
  - Witnessing domestic violence (Cook et al., 2005)

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## Domains of Impairment

- Attachment
- Biology (Neurodevelopment)
- Affect Regulation (Emotional Reactions)
- Dissociation (Disconnect)
- Behavioural Control
- Cognition
- Self-Concept (Cook et al., 2005)

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## Attachment Disruption

- In the absence of a secure attachment, children are unable to learn how to regulate their emotional states or rely on their caregivers to help them cope with stress.
  - These children are more likely to respond with flight-flight-freeze reactions and are less likely to be able to learn from their experiences.
  - Their feelings may become so extreme as to result in dissociative states or self-defeating behaviours.

(van der Kolk, 2003)

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## Attachment Disruption & Behaviour

- Antisocial Behaviours
  - may have difficulty understanding the perspectives and emotional states of others, solving problems, and controlling emotions and physical reactions
- Hypervigilance (McClure & Teyber, 2003)
- Skewed Boundaries
- Distrust
- Social Isolation (Cook et al., 2005)




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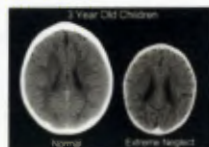
## Neurobiological Impact

- When infants and young children are unable to trust their caregivers to meet their needs, they are forced to shift their focus from learning to survival.

(Bath, 2008)

"The survival brain relies on rapid automatic processes that involve primitive portions of the brain ... while largely bypassing areas of the brain involved in more complex adaptations to the environment (learning)." (Ford, 2005, p. 32)

Ongoing trauma can dramatically affect both the structure and chemistry of the developing brain.




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## Biology & Behaviour

- Complex trauma can have pervasive effects on attachment and brain development and, subsequently, a profound impact on the following domains:
  - Affect Regulation
  - Dissociation
  - Behavioural Control
  - Cognition
  - Self-Concept

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## Affect Regulation

- Impairment of attachment and neurobiology can lead to significant difficulties with affect regulation. (Cook et al., 2005)
- These children have not been able to express their emotions safely, nor have they had sufficient opportunities to learn how to modulate their affective states. (Cook et al., 2005; Warner, Cook, Westcott, & Koomar, 2011)

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## Affect Regulation & Behaviour

- What can you do if you don't know how to manage intense emotional reactions?
    - Dissociation (Disconnect)
    - Self-soothing Behaviours
      - Self-harm (example: cutting)
      - Eating disorders
      - Aggression towards others
      - Substance abuse
      - Sexual promiscuity
- (Pearlman & Courtis, 2005)




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## Cognition

- Maltreated children often show impairment in the areas of attention, abstract reasoning, and executive functioning. (Beers & De Bellis, 2002)
- More specifically, they may have difficulty ...
  - Focusing and sustaining attention
  - Recalling events and experiences
  - Thinking through the decision making process
  - Following through on plans (ex. goal setting)

(Ford & Cloitre, 2009)

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## Cognition & Behaviour

- What might teachers see?
  - Lower levels of academic engagement
  - Lack of persistence
  - Avoidance of challenging tasks
  - Over-reliance on teacher guidance & feedback

(Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001)

- Result ...
  - A dropout rate in adolescence that is 3X higher than the general population.

(Cook et al., 2005)




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## Self-Concept

- Complexly traumatized children often have poorly defined and extremely negative self-concept. (Warner et al., 2011)
- They may view themselves as defective, helpless, deficient, and unlovable. (Cook et al, 2005)
- They may feel powerless and incompetent.
- They often anticipate maltreatment and rejection.

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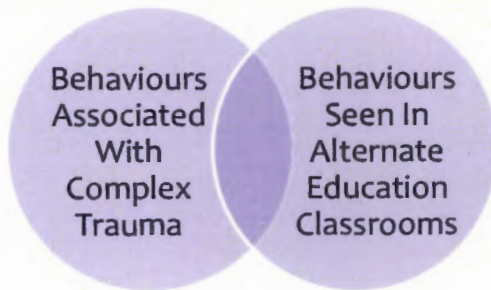
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## Our Students




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## Our Job

- *"The purpose of the British Columbia School System is to enable all learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy."*

From: [http://fulton.sd22.bc.ca/documents/mission\\_statmnt\\_MEd.pdf](http://fulton.sd22.bc.ca/documents/mission_statmnt_MEd.pdf)

- ... now factor in complex trauma. Thoughts??

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## So Now What?

- TRAUMA INFORMED TEACHING PRACTICES

- Creating a Safe Classroom
- Developing Positive Relationships
- Fostering a Sense of Competency and maybe ...
- Teaching and Supporting Affect Regulation




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## Safety

- We know that students who feel safe are free to explore, participate, question, challenge, and take risks in their learning.
- A sense of safety is essential for learning.

**How does complex trauma impact a student's ability to feel safe at school?**




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## Am I Safe Here?

- Be consistent, reliable, predictable, available, honest, and transparent. (Bath, 2008)
- Use praise and reinforcement – focus on competencies over deficits. (Kinniburgh, Blaustein, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2005)
- Remain mindful of difficulties with affect regulation – react in ways that will help students learn to cope with their emotional reactions. (O'Neill, Guerrette, & Kitchinham, 2010)

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## Relationships

- Remember the importance of secure attachments?
  - Secure teacher-student relationships predict:
    - greater knowledge
    - higher test scores
    - greater academic motivation
    - fewer retentions or special education referrals

(Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 154)

**How does complex trauma impact a student's ability to develop healthy relationships at school?**




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## Do You Like Me?

- Be careful to respond to behaviours in a manner that does not confirm a student's current expectations and beliefs about relationships.
- Provide choice as much as possible.
- Aid students in their development of positive peer relationships.
- Use "inductive" rather than "coercive" discipline.

(Bergin & Bergin, 2009)

- Take time to check in – seconds count!

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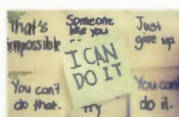
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## Competency

- Students' confidence in their ability to handle academic tasks has a significant impact on levels of interest and motivation in the classroom.
- Students must feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes.

(Ormrod, 2008)

**How does complex trauma impact a student's ability to feel capable of success at school?**




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## Can I Do This?

- Use praise that is concrete and specific.
- Use short, clear, and sequenced instructions and repeat them as needed.
- Discuss future activities to help make what is about to happen feel familiar. (Making Space for Learning, 2010)
- Minimize competitions, etc. in which a student might judge himself unfavorably in comparison to his peers. (Ormrod, 2008)
- Slow things down when you need to – the Prescribed Learning Outcomes may have to wait!

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## Teaching & Supporting Affect Regulation

- Has the foundation been built?
  - I am safe here!
  - My teacher does care about me!
  - I can do this!
- With a solid foundation established, teachers who are aware may be able to help their students better understand, express, and modulate their intense emotional states.

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## Trauma Informed Teaching

- “Children do not learn academically if they are not cared for” (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 161) ... even though you have developed the best lesson plan ever!!
- Of course we care – why else would we be teaching?
- But ... imagine the possibilities if we teach (care) through a trauma informed lens ...

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## Thank You

- Questions?
- Thoughts?
- Suggestions?
- Experiences?




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## Images

Spiral Face: <http://nursebuddha.org/2011/01/16/complex-trauma/>

Hands: <http://theburningworld.org/news/2012/03/05/parents-confrontational-approach.html>

Bubble: <http://www.indigodays.com/trauma/trauma-framework-calendar/introduction-to-trauma-informed-care/>

Hand on window: <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/hypervigilance-treatment.html>

Normal and Neglect Brain: <http://www.parentalizer.com/how-love-develops-a-brain/>

Angry girl: [http://education.byu.edu/youcandothis/adolescent\\_hate\\_inger.html](http://education.byu.edu/youcandothis/adolescent_hate_inger.html)

Where do they go: [http://witnessla.com/index.php/2007/01/01/onlydrop-and-drop-out/attachment/dissociated\\_notion\\_dissociation/](http://witnessla.com/index.php/2007/01/01/onlydrop-and-drop-out/attachment/dissociated_notion_dissociation/)

Safe hand: [http://arm8.stateofill.com/2016/05/26/8407\\_fda27e72\\_tag](http://arm8.stateofill.com/2016/05/26/8407_fda27e72_tag)

Teacher and student: <http://understandingteensagers.com.au/blog/2013/03/teaching-emotional-intelligence/>

I can do it: <http://images.com/image/can-do-it-1601.html>

Healing heart: <http://www.etsy.com/listing/146172102/Art-PuffBalloGallery/Inspiration/Healing-Heart/686073/>

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## Examples of Complex Trauma Responses

The following tables have been designed to help you identify potential complex trauma responses in your classroom. The behaviours listed within are not intended to be used as a diagnostic tool, but rather as a framework for considering ways in which symptoms of complex trauma can manifest in a classroom setting. In addition, these lists are by no means exhaustive, as responses to traumatic experiences can vary as greatly as the experiences themselves. Lastly, it is important to remember that there may be other reasons why students may exhibit some of the behaviours listed below.

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Table 1.

*Attachment: Examples of Complex Trauma Responses*

---

- history/observation of inappropriate physical boundaries
- difficulty trusting others; may appear suspicious
- poor peer relationships and limited social skills; may be socially isolated
- difficulty labeling internal states and emotions in self and in others
- difficulty understanding the perspectives of others
- history of attachment and relationship difficulties
- incidents of physical and/or verbal altercations with peers or adults
- observed difficulty or distress during unstructured activities (i.e., breaks, lunch)
- reports of bullying or rejection by peers, either by student or about student
- difficulty completing tasks that require social perspective-taking or problem-solving
- heightened reactivity to perceived criticism, rejection, failure, or threat

(Cook et al., 2005, p. 392; Tishelman et al., 2010, pp. 45-47)

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Table 2.

*Biology: Examples of Complex Trauma Responses*

- 
- problems with balance and coordination
  - reports of developmental delays
  - history of frequent somatic complaints (i.e., stomach ache, headache, cold, flu)
  - increased medical problems across a wide span (i.e., abdominal pain, asthma, skin problems, autoimmune disorders)

(Cook et al., 2005, p. 392; Tishelman et al., 2010, pp. 45-47)

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Table 3.

*Affect Regulation: Examples of Complex Trauma Responses*

- 
- problems identifying, labeling and expressing emotions
  - difficulty communicating wants and needs
  - observed sudden changes in mood
  - abrupt loss of motivation in response to perceived imminent failure
  - observation of behaviours associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder:
    - physical attempts to modulate arousal (i.e., fidgeting, shifting in seat)
    - impulsive responding (i.e. talking out of turn, jumping up)
    - low levels of arousal (i.e., “spacing out”, daydreaming)
  - observed anxiety (i.e., frequent need for reassurance, clinginess with teachers, “freezing” in class or on tests, an over-reliance on teacher feedback)

(Cook et al., 2005, p. 392; Tishelman et al., 2010, pp. 45-47)

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Table 4.  
*Dissociation: Examples of Complex Trauma Responses*

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- appears glazed/dazed at times
- sudden or unexpected shifts in mood state
- discrepancy between known cognitive ability and overall academic performance
- inconsistent academic performance across measures of the same ability
- markedly different behaviours/responses across time, situation, or person
- amnesia
- difficulty recalling state-based events

(Cook et al., 2005, p. 392; Tishelman et al., 2010, pp. 45-47)

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Table 5.  
*Behavioural Control: Examples of Complex Trauma Responses*

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- poor impulse control
- self-destructive behaviour
- pathological self-soothing behaviours: aggression towards others, eating disorders, self-harm (i.e., cutting), substance abuse, sexual promiscuity
- reports of sleep disturbances
- excessive compliance
- oppositional behaviour (i.e., defiance, disrespect)
- difficulty understanding and complying with rules/expectations

(Cook et al., 2005, p. 392; Tishelman et al., 2010, pp. 45-47)

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Table 6.

*Cognition: Examples of Complex Trauma Responses*

- 
- difficulty following directions
  - difficulty with verbal response and expression
  - difficulty organizing coherent written or verbal narratives
  - observation of socially inappropriate behaviours, with little self-awareness
  - reports or observations indicating challenges with executive functioning:
    - working memory (i.e. difficulty recalling events and experiences)
    - attention (i.e. difficulty focusing and sustaining attention)
    - planning and organizing (i.e. difficulty thinking through the decision making process)
    - processing speed
    - complex problem solving
  - learning difficulties; discrepancy between academic achievement and cognitive ability
  - lack of sustained curiosity; lack of persistence
  - problems with processing novel information
  - problems focusing on and completing tasks
  - difficulty planning and anticipating
  - problems understanding responsibility
  - problems with orientation in time and space
- 

(Cook et al., 2005, p. 392; Tishelman et al., 2010, pp. 45-47)

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Table 7.

*Self-Concept: Examples of Complex Trauma Responses*

- 
- unrealistically low scores on self-assessments
  - self-statements indicate lack of confidence (i.e. "I can't", "I'm stupid")
  - observed passivity in task initiative and/or social interactions
  - avoidance of challenging tasks
  - observed negative reactions to challenging tasks (i.e., negative self-statements, loss of motivation, perceived failure, lack of persistence, over-reliance on teacher feedback)
  - disturbances of body image
  - low self-esteem; may view self as defective, helpless, deficient, unlovable
  - feelings of shame and guilt, powerlessness and incompetency
  - history of poor hygiene
  - history of weight issues
  - reports or observation of inappropriate sexual behaviours
  - anticipation of maltreatment and rejection
- 

(Cook et al., 2005, p. 392; Tishelman et al., 2010, pp. 45-47)

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In the above tables, I have organized a variety of examples of complex trauma responses under the seven domains of impairment introduced during the power point presentation. As you can see, similar examples are often listed under more than one domain. I found many of the responses impossible to place under one domain only, because the effects of complex trauma can have a profound impact on numerous aspects of an affected person's functioning.

As already mentioned, I have created these tables to help you consider some of the troublesome behaviours you may observe in your classroom in relation to examples of complex trauma responses. Perhaps reading the information contained within these tables has reminded you of past students or has you thinking about someone currently in your class. Could some of these observed behaviours be responses to complex trauma? If your answer is, yes, you may be wondering what to do next.

### **Trauma Informed Teaching Considerations**

The strategies and interventions included in this section are not meant to tell you exactly how to teach through a trauma informed lens, but to provide suggestions for your consideration. It is my hope that you will be able to take the information contained within this resource manual and begin to make whatever adjustments are necessary in order to improve the learning conditions within your unique classroom. Please be aware that such change can take a considerable length of time, and it is imperative that students first feel safe, cared for, and competent prior to introducing any of the accompanying teaching lessons. Also, remember that you are not expected to be a trauma specialist, nor do you need to be in order to develop safety in your classroom, promote positive relationships and help teach youth some self-regulation and healthy coping skills.

**Am I Safe Here?** Teachers, especially at the elementary school level, invest a great deal of time and energy into creating warm and welcoming classroom environments. They seem to intuitively understand the connection between safety and learning. Students who feel safe are free to explore, participate, question, challenge, and take risks in their learning. Complexly traumatized adolescents are certainly not the exception. So, while helping these

young people to feel safe at school may prove more difficult, it remains an essential piece of the foundation for learning.

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Table 8.

*Suggestions For Creating Safe Classrooms*

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- Be consistent, reliable, predictable, available, honest, and transparent (Bath, 2008).
- Model the use of praise and reinforcement, in order to place emphasis on competencies over deficits (Kinniburgh, Blaustein, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2005).
- Remain mindful of the difficulty traumatized adolescents have with affect regulation, so you can react in ways that will help your students learn to cope with their intense emotional reactions (O'Neill, Guenette, & Kitchenham, 2010).
- Develop a safe area and/or safe person the student can access if a situation becomes too stressful or threatening.
- For planned absences, consider making arrangements for the student to work in a class with a teacher or an education assistant he has an established connection with.
- Provide students with opportunities to have a sense of control while at school.
- Keep students informed if any element of their environment is being changed or adjusted.
- Provide transparent and clear guidelines for behaviour (Making Space for Learning, 2010).
- Ensure that the student can sit/work in an open area of the classroom, so she will not feel closed in and know that she can exit the space easily if need be.
- Reflect on your tone, posturing, gestures, etc. when interacting with students, especially during moments of frustration or stress. Your student may interpret small changes as huge threats to his personal safety.
- Examine elements of your classroom space: lighting, furniture placement, decorations, etc.

Are there changes you could make to create a warmer, more welcoming environment?

---

**Do You Care About Me?** A teacher's ability to create a safe classroom environment is closely tied to his or her ability to develop positive relationships with students. As mentioned in the power point presentation, secure attachment is an essential component of healthy human development. Bergin and Bergin (2009) argue that this need should be met at school as well as at home. They explain that "secure teacher-student relationships predict greater knowledge, higher test scores, greater academic motivation, and fewer retentions or special education referrals than insecure teacher-student relationships" (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 154). However, creating secure teacher-student relationships with students who, due to insecure attachments at home, have learned to avoid and distrust adults can prove quite difficult. Try to respond to their challenging behaviours in a manner that does not confirm their current expectations and beliefs about relationships. Remember that these students may not have the skills needed to create positive and trusting relationships; therefore, it is up to you to help change your students' views of relationships in an attempt to foster the much needed secure teacher-student bond (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

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Table 9.  
*Suggestions For Developing Positive Relationships*

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- Come to class well prepared in order to demonstrate care and commitment.
- Provide students with choice as much as possible in order to build rapport.
- Help students be kind, helpful, and accepting in order to aid them in the development of positive peer relationships.



- Use inductive rather than coercive discipline. This refers to the use of open and honest communication regarding the reasons for specific rules as well as the consequences of breaking those rules, over the use of threats or the exertion of power that is involved with the removal of fun activities, such as gym class, or the addition of punishments, such as detentions (Bergin & Bergin, 2005).
  - Find time to connect with your students one-on-one - seconds count!
  - Include fun activities that are not defined as rewards.
  - Do class puzzles or games to have fun and rehearse flexibility.
  - Consider looking after an animal as a group (Making Space for Learning, 2010).
  - Avoid discussing concerns in front of the student's peers.
  - Take time to listen to your student; show interest in her thoughts and ideas.
  - Take nutritional breaks with your students.
  - Incorporate social skills activities into your curriculum for the entire class.
  - Acknowledge your students when they arrive - check in and connect.
  - Use humour.
  - Allow for fresh starts - a new school year, a new day, a new moment. Your students will continue to test you - "Do you care about me?" may shift to "Do you still care about me?"
- 

**Can I Do This?** As mentioned earlier, trauma-impacted children and youth often have poorly defined and extremely negative self-concept. They may come to your classroom feeling incompetent and hopeless, often to the point of anticipating failure in numerous aspects of their academic and social functioning. This provides an enormous challenge for teachers, as we attempt to balance the needs of all of our students with the expectations of the



system we work within. I would argue that the expectations of our education system cannot be met unless our students first feel capable of success.

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Table 10.  
*Suggestions For Fostering a Sense of Competency*

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- Promote the strengths and interests of the student.
  - Provide praise that is concrete and specific.
  - Find an activity that the student is good at and help her involve her peers.
  - Talk to your student about the qualities that he shows in undertaking and completing a task or activity.
  - Let your student know when she has done the right thing and help her reflect on her strengths and commitments.
  - Use short, clear, and sequential instructions and repeat them periodically as needed.
  - Display a list of what students will need for each class/lesson/subject.
  - Discuss future activities/field-trips to help make what is about to happen feel familiar.
  - Consider placing students in groups based on areas of interest, rather than social connections and/or academic ability.
  - Provide small challenges with achievable goals (Making Space for Learning, 2010).
  - Provide simple and clear ways for your students to track their progress over time.
  - Minimize competitions and other situations in which students might judge themselves unfavorably in comparison with their peers (Ormrod, 2008).
  - Help your student set realistic goals for herself.
  - Slow things down when you need to - the Prescribed Learning Outcomes may have to wait.
-

**Make Space for Hope.** I realize that I have given you a great deal to consider. I remember how overwhelmed I felt when I first started to teach in alternate education, and realized that I was in way over my head. There are still moments when I wonder if I have what it takes to do this job well. The fact that you are taking the time to consider the information within this manual suggests to me that you are well on your way. Remember that trauma informed teaching is not about specific strategies or interventions. It is about awareness, understanding, compassion, dedication, and self-reflection. It is about thinking about who you are as a teacher, who your students are as individuals, what you believe to be a healthy learning environment, and making it work for you and all of your students. Be patient with yourself and your students - make space for hope.

### **Teaching Lessons: Exploring Our Emotions**

I have chosen to include a series of teaching lessons on affect regulation because so many of my own students struggle with understanding and regulating emotion. I see how this impacts them physically and mentally, how it affects their relationships, and how it interferes with their academic success. However, helping students to increase their emotional awareness and improve their ability of manage their intense emotional reactions can be very challenging.

Behaviour is both learned and functional. Your student may not have had many healthy opportunities to explore or express her emotions. Perhaps her primary caregiver was not always available to help her calm down when scared or upset. Maybe that behaviour which is causing your student so much trouble in the classroom is something he has learned to do in order to stay safe. For these reasons, and countless others, it is vital that you first create a strong sense safety in your classroom, build strong relationships with your students, and ensure that everyone feels capable and successful prior to introducing any of the teaching lessons provided. Even then, which lessons you choose, the pace at which you move through the lessons, and the length of time between lessons will all depend on the needs and reactions of your students as you learn and grow together.

These lessons have been designed for use with students between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. However, they could certainly be adapted for use with children at the intermediate level.

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### **Building an Emotional Vocabulary**

**Objective:** To help students expand their emotional vocabularies.

**Background Information:** When a child has grown up in an environment where he has not been able to express his emotions safely nor learn how to regulate his emotional reactions under the guidance and support of a nurturing caregiver, he is likely to have significant difficulty differentiating between, interpreting, and labeling his emotions and the emotional states of others. As a result, I believe that helping such students to expand their emotional vocabularies is an appropriate place to begin. You may find it necessary to work through several of the following examples prior to moving on to subsequent topics.

**Materials:** Social-Emotional Dictionary Sheet (Prepare as needed for selected activity.)

**Activities:**

1. Ask students to pair feeling words as synonyms or antonyms.
2. Ask students to match the feeling words with their definitions.
3. Ask students to choose a feeling and describe a situation that may evoke this feeling.
4. Ask students to group feeling words that relate. (i.e. mad, furious, annoyed)
5. Create a feelings list and ask students to list words associate with a specific feeling.  
(i.e. words associated with sadness, anger, or joy)
6. Ask students to rank the feelings from least to most intense.
7. Discuss the continuum of feelings, with examples such as annoyed, mad, and enraged.
8. Discuss the difference between anger, aggression, and violence.
9. Play memory games using feeling words such as synonyms, antonyms, definition, and categorization.

10. Use feeling words to analyze characters (character traits) in movies, short stories, novels, etc. that are studied in class.
11. Use feeling words to develop characters for stories, poems, lyrics, etc. as part of class assignments.
12. Put the feeling words in a bag. Ask students to take turns picking a word from the bag and role-playing the feeling while the others try to guess. (You may want to use some of the less intense feelings for this activity, as some of the more intense feelings may be upsetting for some of the students to either act out or observe.)
13. Discuss concepts like fairness, respect, cooperation, injustice, and violence.
14. Create a semantic map or web to represent a problem or conflict. Draw lines branching from the centre of the web for students to present alternative solutions to the conflict.
15. Give students an opportunity to add their own words and definitions to the Social-Emotional Dictionary.

Adapted from: Reyes, C.Y. (2010). The Psycho-Educational Teacher: Helping Students with Recurrent Behavior Problems. Retrieved from: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/91719618/Social-Emotional-Dictionary-with-Exercises>

### **Facts About Feelings**

**Objective:** To give students an opportunity to use their expanded emotional vocabularies.

To help students further explore the complexity of emotions.

**Background Information:** Once students have had an opportunity to expand their emotional vocabularies, they may find it easier to both consider and discuss the complexity of emotions. This lesson is designed to help students broaden their understanding of their own feelings, as well as the feelings of others, so they will be better prepared to begin exploring the relationship between emotions, thoughts, and behaviours.

**Materials:** Facts About Feelings Sheet

**Activity:** Use the information on the *Facts About Feelings* sheet to facilitate a dialogue with the entire group. You may want to start by sharing a fact and asking for a volunteer to expand on what the fact is stating. Help to clarify as needed. Encourage students to debate the fact if they do not agree. Perhaps some students might be willing to share an experience that relates to a fact. You may also want to post the facts in your classroom, so you can revisit them at a later date or make reference to them in response to “teachable moments” as they arise. You may find that your students are willing to have a lengthy discussion that allows you to discuss all of the facts during one lesson, or you may want to explore them one at a time over the course of several days.

Adapted from: Reyes, C.Y. (2010). The Psycho-Educational Teacher: Helping Students with Recurrent Behavior Problems. Retrieved from: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/91718686/Facts-About-Feelings>



## Body Signals

**\*\* Please be aware that this activity does pose a higher risk of upsetting your students than previous lessons. Take care in moving forward with this and subsequent lessons.**

**Objective:** To help youth recognize where they experience feelings within their bodies.

**Background Information:** We feel our emotions in our bodies. Increasing our understanding of where and how we experience different emotions within our bodies can help us better understand our emotional experiences and help us identify what we are experiencing in different situations. Increased self-awareness will help youth be able to explain their emotional reactions better and may also help them improve their understanding of how others may be feeling.

**Materials:** Body Signals Sheet, blank paper, coloured pencils

### Activity:

Step 1. Provide students with a piece of paper each, and ask them to write down at least ten different emotions. Encourage students to include a variety of emotions, both positive and negative.

Step 2. Provide students with coloured pencils, ask them to choose a colour to associate with each of the emotions on their lists, and mark the words with the colours chosen.

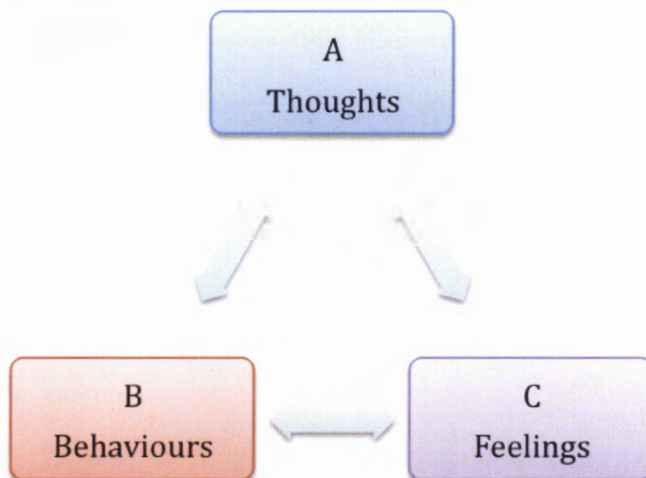
Step 3. Introduce the topic of body signals and provide each student with a copy of the Body Signals sheet. Ask students to use the colours they have chosen to show where in their bodies they experience each of the feelings they have listed. Encourage students to take their time. (If this activity or certain emotions appear too overwhelming for some students, ensure that they understand that they do not have to place every emotion on their Body Signals sheet and they can even stop participating in the activity if they want to.)

Step 4. Ask for volunteers to share, and facilitate a group discussion. Your students may appreciate hearing you share an example of your own if you are comfortable with doing so.

### The ABC's of Emotions

**Objective:** To help youth understand the link between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

**Background Information:**



In any situation, we all have thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Each point on the triangle above is connected to every other point. Nothing is happening in isolation. When you are feeling sad or scared, chances are your thoughts are being influenced by that and have a negative tone. When you are doing something you enjoy, your thoughts are most likely positive and you feel good. If you are thinking that you just can't take on a particular task, but you do so anyways and feel better, chances are your thoughts will become more positive. Introducing the ABC's of emotions can help youth understand that they can change their feelings by working on changing their thoughts and/or their behaviours.

**Materials:** Emotional ABC's Sheet

**Activities:** The following activities have been designed to be delivered in sequential format. You may find that you can move through some activities quite quickly while others may take more time.

1. Provide students with a copy of the *Emotional ABC's sheet* and facilitate a general discussion about the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviours.
2. Help students to clarify and differentiate between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours with the following activity:

**Step 1: Discuss the following with your students.** (Give students an opportunity to answer each question. Clarify and expand if necessary.)

What are thoughts? Thoughts are the ideas or opinions that we have in our minds. For example, you might think, "I really hate math," "My parents just don't understand me," or "I love to listen to music." Can you think of some other thoughts?

What are feelings? Feelings are the emotional responses and sensations we experience throughout of bodies.

What are behaviours? Behaviours are the way we act in response to our environment. The things we do, or don't do. For example, we laugh, cry, yell, refuse to talk, walk away, dance, etc. What are some other behaviours?

**Step 2: Read the words and phrases below one by one, and ask students to decide if each word or phrase represents a thought, feeling, or behaviour.**

<i>Excited</i>	<i>Eating</i>
<i>I can't wait for summer.</i>	<i>School is stupid.</i>
<i>Nervous</i>	<i>Sleeping</i>
<i>Scared</i>	<i>Courageous</i>
<i>This is so much fun.</i>	<i>Breathing</i>
<i>Chewing</i>	<i>I love chocolate.</i>
<i>Frustrated</i>	<i>Crying</i>
<i>It is my fault.</i>	<i>I can't do this.</i>
<i>Swimming</i>	<i>Angry</i>
<i>I will never get the job.</i>	<i>Shopping</i>
<i>Sad</i>	<i>I am awesome.</i>
<i>Lonely</i>	<i>Walking</i>
<i>Hitting</i>	<i>I want to go camping.</i>

**Step 3: Conclude this activity by asking each student to come up with his or her own word for the group to label as a thought, feeling, or behaviour.**

(Adapted from: Hendricks, Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, n.d.)

3. Ask students to think of a time they felt happy recently and record their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours at the time. Next, ask students to do the same for a time they were experiencing a negative emotion. They can write down their ideas on their Emotional ABC's sheet if they find it helpful to do so. Ask for volunteers to share their examples. You may want to use some examples to help students consider if changing the thoughts or behaviours may have impacted the feelings.
4. Give each student a piece of paper and ask them to create three columns with the titles: Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviours. Ask them to take this paper home and try to record at least three thoughts between now and the next time you meet. Students should also record how they felt in response to each feeling and what they did. Encourage students to bring these sheets back to school and invite volunteers to share their findings.

## **Triggers**

**Objective:** To help youth discover and label their triggers.

**Background Information:** Triggers are very personal. Different things trigger different people. A survivor of trauma may begin to avoid situations and/or stimuli that he or she thinks may trigger a flashback. A person may also react to a flashback with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. We may know some of our triggers but with multiple traumas it may be impossible to identify all of them. It is not even necessarily a good idea to try to identify all triggers. The most important thing is to teach youth strategies to recognize when they have been triggered and help them learn how to manage their triggers and the related flashbacks.

Although triggers are varied and diverse, there are often common themes. Here are some examples in each area:

### **Sight**

- Someone who resembles an abuser or who has similar traits or objects (clothing, hair color, distinctive walk)
- Any situation where someone else is being abused (anything from a raised eyebrow and verbal comment to actual physical abuse)
- An object that was used to abuse
- Objects that are associated with or were common in the household where abuse took place (alcohol, piece of furniture, time of year)
- Any place or situation where abuse took place (specific locations in a house, holidays, family events, social settings)

### **Sound**

- Sounds of someone angry (raised voices, arguments, bangs and thumps, something breaking)
- Sounds of pain or fear (crying, whispering, screaming)
- Anything that might have been in the place or situation prior to during or after the abuse or reminds her/him of the abuse (sirens, foghorns, music, cricket, chirping, car door closing)

- Anything that resembles sounds that an abuser made (whistling, footsteps, sound of a can opening, tone of voice)
- Words of abuse (cursing, labels, put-downs, specific words used)

### **Smell**

- Anything that resembles the smell of an abuser (tobacco, alcohol, drugs, after shave, perfume, car air fresheners)
- Any smells that resemble the place or situation where abuse occurred (food cooking, wood, dampness, odors, alcohol)

### **Touch**

- Anything that resembles the abuse or things that occurred prior to or after the abuse (certain physical touch, someone standing too close, petting an animal, the way someone approaches you)

### **Taste**

- Anything that is related to the abuse, prior to the abuse or after the abuse (certain foods, alcohol, tobacco)

**Materials:** paper, pencils, coloured pencils, rulers

### **Activity:**

Step 1. Introduce the topic of triggers and allow for questions and discussion. (Be careful to watch for reactions, and be prepared to adjust or postpone the lesson if need be. You may also wish to invite your school counsellor to help co-facilitate this lesson.)

Step 2. Facilitate deeper discussion. Ask students if they have a trigger they would be willing to share. How do they feel when triggered? What are their body signals? How is their thinking affected? How is their behaviour affected? Do they experience different levels of intensity depending on the trigger or the situation? What strategies do they use to cope when triggered?

Step 3. (Optional) Ask students to draw and colour a map of an imaginary place that has traps and places that can cause anxiety or fear. (Some of your students may be more comfortable considering triggers that result in anger, as they may not be ready to consider the



likelihood that their “angry” responses are manifestations of anxiety and/or fear.) Have them name these areas with names like “Valley of Sounds.” Help students create a legend which, for example, for the Valley of Sounds would include a description of sounds that are a trigger, such as raised voices, arguments, bangs, thumps, something breaking, crying, footsteps, etc. They may also want to include a place to put unknown or undiscovered triggers and name it “Mystery River” or “Mine Field.” (Work closely with your students during this activity, as this may be a very difficult task for them and could result in strong emotional reactions.)

Step 4. Be sure to allow time to debrief this activity. You may want to meet together again as a group, or take time to touch base with each student individually throughout the remainder of the day to ensure they are feeling okay.

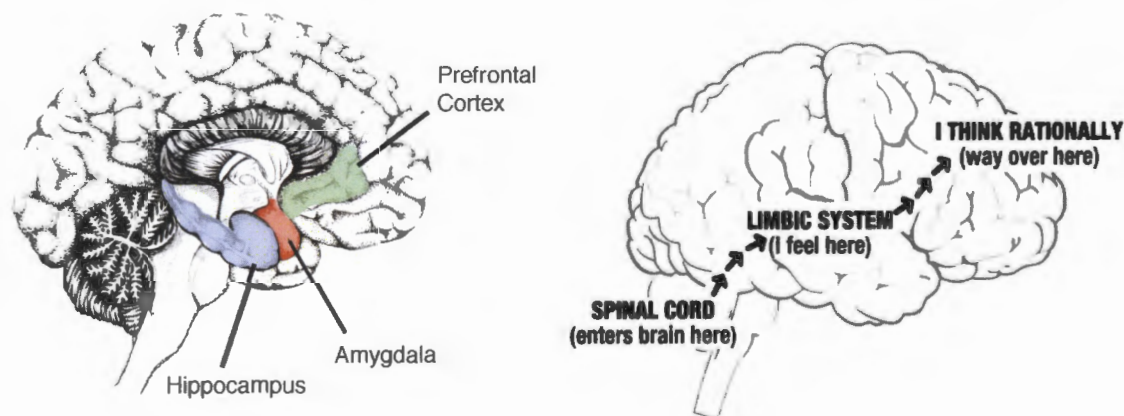
Adapted from: Sexual Assault Centre, University of Alberta. (2008). What is a trigger? *Psych Central*. Retrieved on June 1, 2013, from <http://psychcentral.com/lib/2008/what-is-a-trigger/>

## The Brain - Fight, Flight, Freeze!

**Objective:** To help youth understand how the brain responds to stress.

To introduce the fight, flight, freeze response.

### Background Information:



The limbic system is the area of the brain that controls our emotional response to stimuli. Two key players in the limbic system are the amygdala and the hippocampus. The amygdala starts functioning almost immediately following birth, and enables a child to experience fear and assess danger (van der Kolk, 2003). The hippocampus matures over the course of the first five years of life, and enables children to acquire, over time, the ability to identify and organize the nature of threat (van der Kolk, 2003).

The prefrontal cortex, which continues to mature throughout the school years, allows humans to learn from their experiences. Simply put, it takes in new information from all of the senses, compares it to what is already known, and analyses and evaluates in an effort to come up with appropriate responses (van der Kolk, 2003). When a child is calm, the limbic system sends information to the prefrontal cortex, allowing this process to occur (van der

Kolk, 2003). However, when a child is under stress or feels threatened, new information cannot pass through the amygdala to enter the prefrontal cortex for evaluation (Willis, 2013). Instead, signals from the amygdala activate automatic responses such as increased heart rate and blood pressure, as well as defense reactions such as flight, fight, or freeze (van der Kolk, 2003).

As you may recall, youth with complex trauma are often hypervigilant. This can be problematic, as it is not the job of the amygdala to distinguish between real and actual threats. Activation of the flight, fight, or freeze response can occur when the amygdala responds to stimuli reminiscent of a trauma. In other words, youth may respond to minor irritations (which act as triggers) with flight, fight, or freeze responses that prevent them from being able to evaluate stimuli and learn from experiences (van der Kolk, 2003). Willis (2013) summarizes this concept by stating that “it is important for teachers to know that when stress cuts off flow to and from the prefrontal cortex, behavior is involuntary. It is not students’ choice in the reactive state when they ‘act out’ and ‘zone out’” (para. 12).

(For a more in depth examination of the neurobiological impact of complex trauma, please read the article by Bessel van der Kolk that is listed in the supplemental readings and available as an online resource.)

**Materials:** The Brain Sheet

**Activity:**

Step 1. Provide students with a copy of The Brain sheet. Teach students about the functions of the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. You may want to encourage your students to do some research of their own.

Step 2. Introduce the flight, fight, freeze response. Talk about the role of the amygdala and explain to students why they may respond with a flight, fight, or freeze response when triggered. (You may find it helpful to use a snow globe or similar item for the following analogy: Shake the globe and compare it to a person's ability to think when triggered. In a severe snowstorm, it would be difficult to see clearly and come up with a plan. You have to do what is necessary, and quickly, in order to survive. When you are triggered, your amygdala is creating a snowstorm, making it impossible for you to evaluate your situation and decide what to do.)

Step 3. Discuss the importance of finding ways to allow the prefrontal cortex time to analyze and interpret information in order to determine the best course of action. (Give the snow time to settle so you can see clearly.) Your students are probably familiar with the idea of taking a deep breath or counting to ten before reacting to a situation. Ask them why this might be beneficial. Brainstorm what else might work.

Step 4. Let students know that you will be talking about some grounding techniques during the next lesson that can be very helpful when a person has been triggered.

## **Grounding**

**Objective:** To help youth stay in the moment when overwhelmed by thoughts or feelings.

**Background Information:** Up until this point, the lessons you have shared with your students have been designed to provide them with new knowledge and increase their self-awareness. This lesson shifts the focus to providing youth with valuable tools that they can use when they are experiencing intense emotional reactions and/or picking up on troubling body signals; in other words, when they have been triggered and are experiencing a flight, fight, or freeze response. Grounding is about learning to stay in the present or bring yourself back to the present - to the here and now.

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### **Tips for Grounding from Anxiety BC:**

**1. Eyes open.** When doing grounding techniques, make sure to keep your eyes open, so that you can see and focus on what is around you right now. It is also a good idea to speak out loud, describing what you are seeing and doing.

**2. Practice:** Like any other skill, it is important to practice grounding techniques. It will be most useful if you have tried using this skill when you were calm, and you practiced it often. That way, when you find yourself needing to use it, you already know how.

**3. Enlist help:** Teach a friend or family member about grounding and why you need to use it. If someone you trust understands when grounding is useful, they can remind you to use it (and do it with you) if you are starting to lose touch with the present. For example, they might say, "I think you might want to do some grounding now... can you describe what you are wearing? What am I wearing? Where are we right now?"

(Anxiety BC, 2013, p. 3)

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**Activity:** Help your students learn and practice a variety of the grounding techniques listed below. Ask students to rate their distress levels before and after grounding so they can tell which strategies work best, and create a list of the exercises that they find to be most helpful

and keep it somewhere handy as a reminder to use them. Also encourage students to start doing grounding exercises early in a distress cycle - watch for those body signals!

### **Examples of Physical Grounding**

- \* Stomp your feet to remind yourself where you are. Press your feet firmly into the ground.
- \* Try to notice where you are, your surroundings, including the people or the sounds around you, like the TV or radio.
- \* Concentrate on your breathing. Take a deep, cleansing breath from your diaphragm. Count the breaths as you exhale. Make sure you breathe slowly so you don't hyperventilate.
- \* Cross your legs and arms. Feel the sensations of you controlling your body.
- \* Call a friend and ask them to talk to you about something you have recently done together.
- \* Take a warm, relaxing bubble bath or a warm shower. Feel the water touching your body.
- \* Find your pulse on your wrist and count the beats per minute. Concentrate on feeling the blood pulse throughout your body.
- \* Go outside and sit against a tree. Feel the bark pressing against your body. Smell the outside aromas like the grass and the leaves. Run your fingers through the grass.
- \* If you are sitting, stand. If you are standing, sit. Pay attention to the movement change. Reminding yourself, you are in control.
- \* Rub your palms, clap your hands. Listen to the sounds. Feel the sensation.
- \* Speak out loud.
- \* Hold something that you find comforting. For some it may be a stuffed animal or blanket. Notice how it feels in your hands.
- \* Eat something. How does it taste? Sweet or sour? Is it warm or cold?
- \* If you have a pet, pat them and feel their fur beneath your hand. Say the pet's name out loud.

- \* Go to a mirror and make yourself smile. Watch your reflection as your expression changes. How does it make you feel?
- \* Step outside. If it is warm, feel the sun shining down on your face. If it is cold, feel the breeze. How does it make your body feel?
- \* During a non-crisis time make a list of positive affirmations. Print them out and keep them handy for when you are having a flashback. Read the list out loud.
- \* Take a walk outside and notice what is there. Pay attention to houses and count them.
- \* Listen to familiar music and sing along to it. Dance to it.
- \* Write in your journal.
- \* Watch a favourite TV program or video. Play a video game.
- \* Exercise. Ride a bike, lift weights or go for a walk.

### **Examples of Mental Grounding**

- \* Visualize a bright red STOP sign, to help you stop the flashback and/or memory.
- \* Imagine yourself in a safe place. Feel the safety and know it.
- \* Meditate, if you are comfortable doing it.

(Quayle, 2010)

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### **Additional Examples of Mental Grounding**

- \* Prepare a list of questions to go over when triggered. For example: Where am I? What is the date today? What is the weather like outside? How old am I? Who is my best friend?
- \* Look at today's paper. What is the date? What is the weather forecast?



## My Story

**Objective:** To provide students with an opportunity to tell their own stories.

To help students identify and explore their strengths and accomplishments.

To help students consider healthy ways of continuing to grow and change.

**Background Information:** Undoubtedly, many, if not all, of your students will have some difficult stories to tell. They have been through a great deal, and they have survived. Giving students an opportunity to tell their stories can help them look at the amazing things they have done to overcome obstacles and persevere under traumatic circumstances. This final lesson is intended to honour their strengths and accomplishments, and focus on healthy ways of continuing to grow and change.

**Materials:** paper, pencils

### Activity:

Step 1. Read the following story to your students:

I don't really remember much about my mom. My dad never talked about her much. Sometimes, when he was drinking, he would talk about her ... sometimes a nice story, sometimes not. My dad was okay. I know he loved me, but he was always so sad. My dad died when I was 11. I had to go live with my grandparents in another city. I had to leave my home, and my friends. I hated living with my grandparents. They don't get me and are always telling me what to do! At least my dad used to leave me alone. That's when I started to party lots with my new friends - drinking, some drugs - it was fun ... sometimes. Last year, my grandparents said they had had enough and kicked me out. I did some couch surfing for a while, but a social worker said I have to live in a group home. It's okay. I am okay.

Step 2. Discuss the following questions:

- \* What adversities has this person had to face?
- \* What coping mechanisms did he/she use?
- \* What are his/her strengths?
- \* What are some healthy choices this person could make?

Step 3. Ask students to write down their own stories. They can also use poetry or lyric writing to tell their stories if they prefer.

Step 4. If you have an extremely supportive group of students, you may feel comfortable inviting them to share their stories. However, you may find that some of your students do not want anyone to read what they have written - including you. Of course, the choice should be theirs. If some students are willing to share with the group, this might provide a fantastic opportunity to help them explore their strengths and coping skills. For those that do not want to share with the group but allow you to read their stories, this same feedback can be provided on an individual basis.

## Supplemental Readings

Lastly, I would like to conclude the resource manual with a supplemental reading list.

The more I learn about complex trauma and the better I get at working with affected students, the more I understand the importance of continuing to learn and grow as a professional. I believe that once you begin to implement some of the suggestions within this manual and see the results first hand, the more you will want to know. This supplemental reading list is intended to give you a place to continue your own journey.

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## **Conclusion**

The effects of complex trauma on children and adolescents are far-reaching and profound. They touch every part of their lives, and the lives of those of us who have the privilege of being their teachers. As teachers in alternate education, we have an amazing opportunity to help our students begin to heal. There is no magic wand, nor is there a recipe for success for students who have been impacted by complex trauma. However, I have seen, time and time again, the incredible things that can happen for students when they feel safe, cared for, and capable of success while at school. It is my hope that the information contained within this manual has helped to increase your awareness of the impact of complex trauma on behaviour and learning. I encourage you to continue to reflect on your teaching practices in relation to the wide variety of reactions you may observe in your classrooms, in order that you, too, may be better equipped to meet the social, emotional, as well as the academic needs of your very deserving students.

*Appendix A*

*Social-Emotional Dictionary*

Adore	loving deeply
Affection	a tender feeling
Afraid	fearful or frightened Syns: apprehensive, petrified, and scared
Aggression	a hostile action
Aggressive	hostile or combative
Agitated	to be upset emotionally
Agonize	to suffer great distress
Alarmed	a sudden feeling or fear Syns: alert and frightened
Amazed	affect with great surprise or wonder Syns: astonish
Ambivalent	the existence of mutually conflicting emotions or thoughts
Anger	great displeasure or hostility Syns: wrath
Angry	showing anger Syns: choleric, enraged, furious, indignant, irate, mad, sore, and wrathful
Anguish	a pain of the mind, torment
Annoy	to bother or irritate Syns: aggravate, bother, bug, irk, provoke, peeve, and ruffle
Antagonize	mutual enmity or hostility
Anxiety	a state of uneasiness or worry Syns: care, concern, and disquiet
Anxious	uneasy or worried
Appreciate	to value highly, to feel gratitude Syns: cherish, esteem, prize, respect, and treasure

Apprehensive	feeling fearful or uneasy; anxious
Arguing	to offer reasons for or against; to debate; to engage in a quarrel; to dispute Syns: bicker, contend, fight, squabble, and wrangle
Ashamed	feeling shame
Astonishment	a sudden wonder; to surprise greatly
Aversion	a strong dislike
Awe	reverence and dread mingled with wonder
Awesome	remarkable or outstanding
Awful	very unpleasant; dreadful
Bad	disobedient or naughty
Betray(ed)	to be unfaithful or disloyal
Bitter	harsh; showing strong animosity
Bittersweet	feeling both pain and pleasure
Blame	to hold at fault Syns: censure, condemn, criticize, and denounce
Blues	a state of depression
Blush	to become red in the face from modesty, embarrassment, or shame Syns: flush
Boast(ful)	to speak with excessive pride
Body language	postures, gestures, and expressions by which a person communicates nonverbally
Boisterous	loud, noisy, unrestrained, or undisciplined
Bored	to tire with dullness or repetition Syns: weary
Brag	to assert boastfully



Bravado	a pretense of courage; defiant; swaggering behavior
Brave	displaying courage, valiant Syns: audacious, bold, courageous, fearless, gutsy, heroic, intrepid, and unafraid
Brawl	a noisy fight or argument
Breakdown	a collapse in mental or physical health
Bug	to bother or annoy
Burden	something difficult to bear, physically or emotionally
Burnout	exhaustion from long-term stress
Calm	not excited or agitated; undisturbed Syns: peaceful, placid, serene, and tranquil
Captivate	to fascinate
Care	mental distress or worry; a source of solicitude or attention
Cared	to be interested or concerned
Catastrophe	a sudden and terrible disaster; a calamity
Cause	one that produces an effect, result, or consequence; motive; reason
Censure	an expression of strong disapproval or criticism
Cheerful	in good spirits Syns: bright, cheery, happy, lighthearted, and sunny
Chill	a dampening of enthusiasm or joy
Choleric	easily angered; bad tempered
Concerned	uneasy; troubled; worried
Condemn	to express a strong disapproval; to denounce
Contempt	bitter scorn or disdain
Contrition	sincere remorse for something done wrongly

Cordial	warm, heartfelt
Cry	to shed tears Syns: sob, wail, and weep
Curious	eager to know
Depressed	low in spirits; emotional disorder characterized by inability to concentrate, insomnia, and feelings of guilt and dejection
Desperate	rash or violent out of despair; almost hopeless; grave
Detached	not emotionally involved; indifferent
Determined	firm, resolute; decided or resolved
Detest	disliking strongly
Devastated	overwhelmed, destroyed, or ruined
Disappoint	to fail to satisfy the expectations, desires, or hopes
Discomfort	physical or mental distress; annoyance or inconvenience, to make uncomfortable
Disconsolate	beyond consolation; cheerless or gloomy
Discouraged	deprived of enthusiasm; disheartened Syns: dispirit
Disgust	to become impatient or annoyed; extreme dislike
Disheartened	discouraged, demoralized, or dispirited
Disillusioned	disenchanted or free from false belief
Dislike	a feeling of aversion; disapproval or distaste
Dismay	to cause fear or apprehension; intimidate; to discourage or trouble greatly
Distraught	anxious, worried
Distress	to cause anxiety or misery; to trouble greatly Syns: affliction, agony, anguish, hurt, and pain

Disturb	to trouble or upset the tranquility; to unsettle mentally or emotionally
Disturbed	showing signs or symptoms of mental or emotional illness
Dread	great fear or terror; a nervous or fearful anticipation
Ease	freedom from worry, pain, or agitation
Ecstasy	intense joy or delight Syns: rapture
Edgy	feeling or showing nervous tension Syns: fidgety, jittery, jumpy, restless, tense, uneasy, nervous
Embarrassed	to feel self-conscious or ill at ease, disconcerted Syns: abashed, confused, discomforted, and mortified
Emotion	a strong feeling; a particular feeling, as love or hate
Empathy	identification with and understanding of another person's feelings, situation, and motives
Envious	feeling, showing, or marked by envy
Envy	resentful desire for another's possessions or advantages
Exasperate	to make angry or frustrated; to irritate
Fear	alarm and agitation caused by expectation or realization of danger
Fearful	to be frightened
Feeling	an emotion that expresses compassion or sympathy
Frantic	emotionally distraught, as from worry or fear
Frenetic	wildly excited; frenzied
Frenzy	a state of wild excitement or violent agitation
Frustrate	to prevent from reaching a goal or fulfilling a desire; to prevent from taking place

Furious	full of, showing, or marked by rage; showing violent activity
Furor	violent rage, rage
Fury	violent anger Syns: ire, rage, and wrath
Fussy	easily upset; frequently complaining; hard to please
Gloom	depression or melancholy
Grateful	thankful or appreciative
Grief	deep sadness, as that caused by the death of a loved one; sorrow
Grudge	a feeling of ill will or deep resentment
Guilt	a feeling of responsibility for having done something wrong
Happy	having, displaying, or marked by pleasure or joy; cheerful
Hate	to feel animosity or hostility toward Syns: abominate, despise, detest, and loathe
Heartache	emotional sorrow or grief
Heartbroken	feeling great sorrow or disappointment
Hopeful	wanting or wishing for something with a feeling of confident expectation of its fulfillment
Horried	experiencing a feeling of horror; to be shocked or dismayed
Horror	an intense and painful feeling of disgust, terror, or great fear
Hostile	experiencing or expressing antagonism
Hostility	deep-seated hatred or opposition Syns: antagonism
Humiliated	an injury to the dignity or pride; humbled
Impatient	unwillingness to wait or tolerate delay; expressing irritation at having to wait Syns: restless

Inconsolable	incapable of being consoled
Indifferent	not mattering or unimportant; having no marked feeling or preference; uninterested; apathetic
Indignation	anger aroused by injustice or unworthiness
Infatuate	to arouse an unusual or foolish love
Infuriated	to feel very angry, enraged
Irritable	easily annoyed or irritated, ill-tempered Syns: cranky, grouchy, grumpy, irascible, and testy
Irritate	to make angry; to annoy or bother; to provoke
Jealous	resentful or bitter in rivalry (competition); envious; can arise from feelings of envy or bitterness
Joy	great happiness; delight
Joyful	displaying joy
Jubilant	expressing joy
Languish	to become depressed
Lighthearted	free from trouble, anxiety, or care; cheerful
Mad	angry, resentful; afflicted with a mental disorder or insane
Mean	marked by pettiness and ill will; malicious
Merry	full of gaiety (cheerfulness); high-spirited Syns: glad, happy, joyful, and joyous
Miserable	very unhappy or uncomfortable
Misery	a source or cause of suffering; affliction; emotional distress
Mood	a temporary state of emotion or mind; a feeling

Moody	given to moods, especially of gloom; temperamental Syns: gloomy
Mortify	to humiliate
Mourn	to express or feel sorrow; to grieve
Nervous	excitable, jumpy; worried; apprehensive
Nice	enjoyable; pleasant
Nostal(gia, gic)	a bittersweet yearning for things from the past
Nuisance	a source of inconvenience, annoyance, or irritation
Obsession	a persistent preoccupation with an idea or emotion
Offend	to arouse resentment, annoyance, irritation, or anger
Optimism	a disposition to expect the best possible outcome or to emphasize the most positive aspects of a situation
Outrage(ous)	resentful anger; exceeding the bounds of what are right and proper Syns: atrocious, flagrant, heinous, monstrous, and shocking
Passion	powerful feeling as in love or rage; great enthusiasm Syns: ardor, fervor, fire, and zeal
Perturb	to make anxious or uneasy; disquiet greatly
Pessimism	a tendency to take the least hopeful view of a situation, or to anticipate the worst
Petrify	to immobilize, as with terror
Pleasure	a feeling of enjoyment or satisfaction
Rage	violent anger; to be violently angry
Rampage	a course of violent, destructive, or unrestrained action
Rampaged	to move about wildly

Rejoice	to be joyful
Sad	marked by unhappiness or sorrow
Scared	a state of alarm or panic; to startle Syns: frightened
Serene	peaceful, calm
Shock	to strike with great surprise, agitation, outrage, or disgust
Sorrow	mental suffering; anguish
Stress	mental, emotional, or physical tension, strain, or distress
Stressful	full of or tending to cause stress
Surprise	to catch or take unaware; to cause to feel astonishment Syns: amazement
Sympathy	the capacity to share another person's feelings
Tantrum	an outburst of anger and rage
Temper	a usual state of mind or emotions; a tendency to become irritable or angry; a violent outburst of anger
Tense	experiencing emotional tension
Tension	mental or emotional strain
Terrify	to fill with fear
Terror	overwhelmingly intense fear
Thankful	showing or feeling gratitude Syns: grateful
Torture	mental anguish; something causing pain or anguish
Tranquil	free from disturbance Syns: serene
Turmoil	a state of great confusion or agitation
Unbearable	intolerable

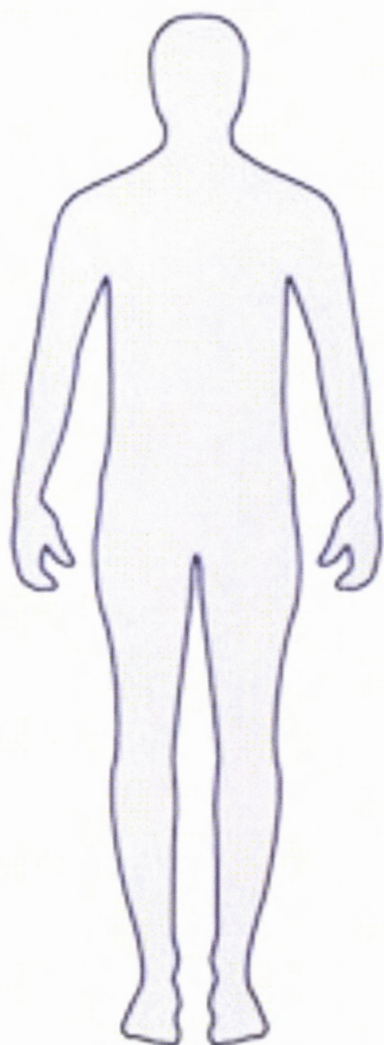


Uneasy	causing or feeling discomfort or distress; feeling awkward or embarrassed Syns: restless
Unhappy	sad, sorrowful
Vindictive	having or showing a desire for revenge; meant to cause harm or pain Syns: revengeful, spiteful, and vengeful
Worrisome	causing worries; inclined to worry
Worry	to feel or cause to feel anxious or distressed
Worries	mental anxiety or distress

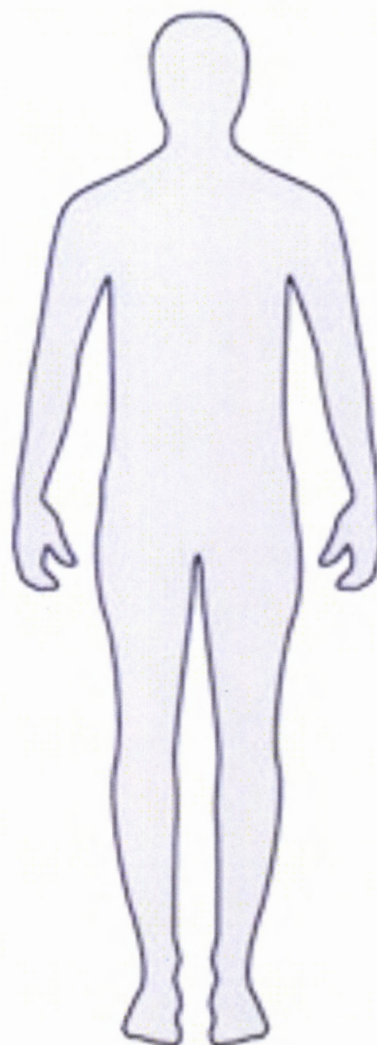
*Appendix B**Facts About Feelings*

1. Feelings are normal. We all have feelings.
2. People are capable of many different feelings. We are entitled to all of them.
3. There are simultaneous feelings; that is, different feelings can exist or be experienced at the same time. For example, we may feel happy and sad at the same time, or we may feel happy, sad, and surprised at the same time.
4. We can group similar feelings together; for example, sad, gloomy, melancholic, and the blues are similar feelings.
5. Sometimes contradictory feelings coexist. This contradiction can make us feel confused, or even angry.
6. Some feelings are pleasant and some feelings are unpleasant.
7. Some feelings are stronger than other feelings. Some feelings are very strong.
8. Feelings are temporal; no feeling lasts forever.
9. When a particular feeling moves away, another feeling replaces it.
10. Feelings are neither good nor bad, right nor wrong, true nor false. We do not have to judge our feelings.
11. Anger is a normal feeling. We all feel angry at one time or another.
12. Feeling angry at something or someone is okay; however, what we do when we feel anger can cause us trouble.
13. There is a difference between feeling angry and “doing angry things” such as hitting, kicking, cursing, punching, screaming, or hurting others. Anger is just a feeling; acting out one’s anger is the behavior.
14. We can “feel the feeling,” but we do not have to act it out.
15. Feelings are not facts; that is, we cannot verify feelings objectively. We make them factual only if we act them out.

16. Our feelings and our thoughts are just for us; they do not affect others. Our behavior (actions) affects others.
17. When we feel anger or any other strong feeling, we do not have to act it out. We can recognize the feeling and direct it in a positive way.
18. We “feel the feeling,” but we choose the behavior.

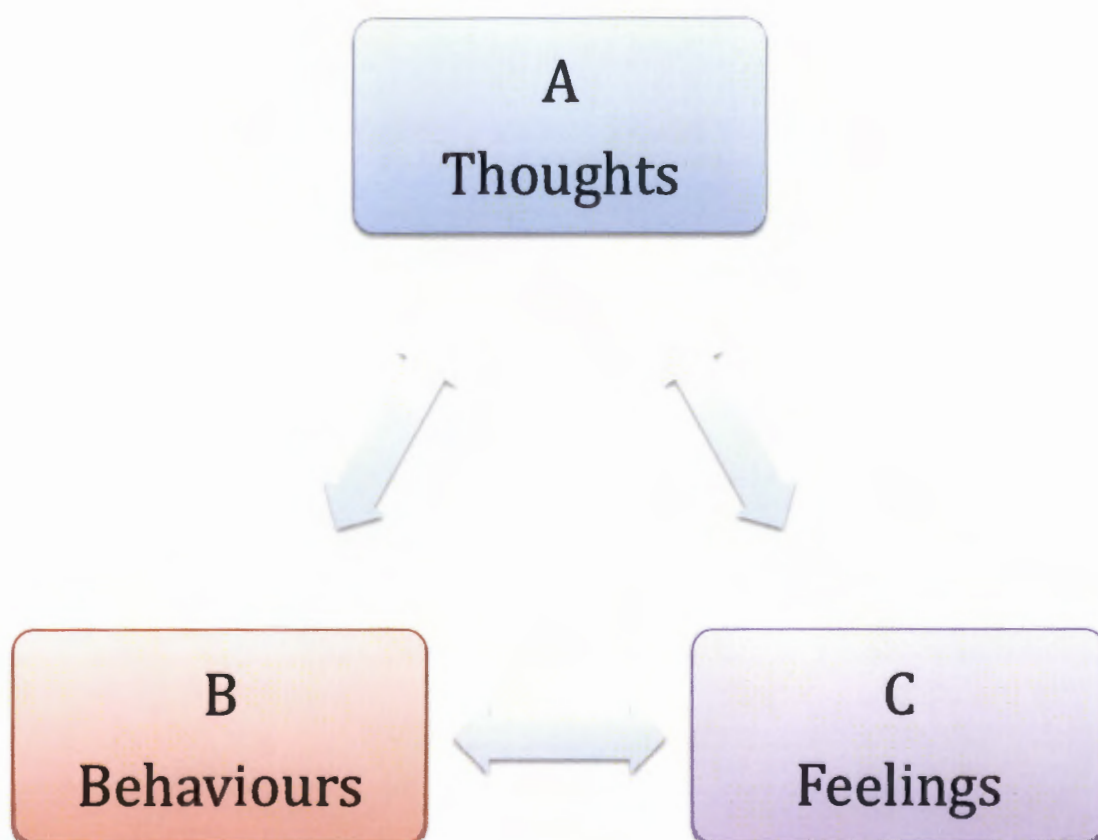
*Appendix C**Body Signals*

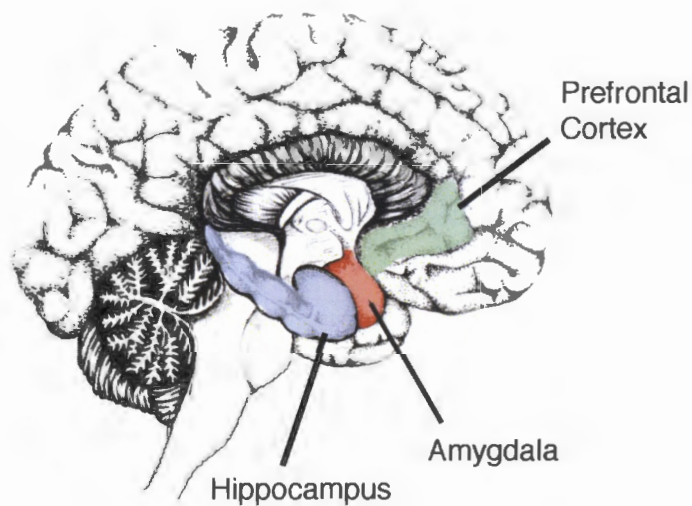
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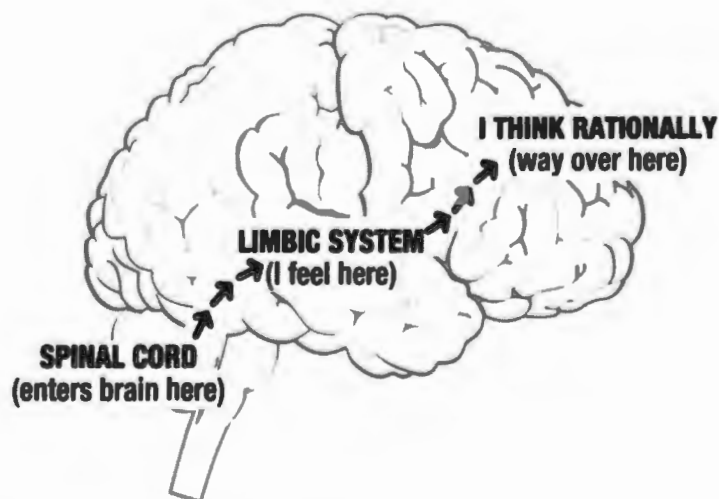
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*Appendix D**Emotional ABC's*

*Appendix E**The Brain*

Retrieved from: <http://tamutimes.tamu.edu/2012/10/02/researchers-identify-connections-in-the-brain-that-may-help-treat-anxiety-disorders/>



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