

Staff Wellbeing, Trauma-Informed Practice and COVID-19

Impact It is just as important to remember the impact that COVID-19 has had on us, personally and professionally as it is on students. Many of us will have found the experience similarly challenging.

Senior staff essentially had two days to develop an entirely new model of education once school closures were announced. There have been teething problems with free school meal voucher systems and we may have been worried for weeks prior to school closure about our own families and with further anxiety caused around being on a rota to be on site. We may have concerns over ensuring the safeguarding of key workers' children whilst operating with a skeleton staffing. The school site might have been closed in its entirety causing a feeling of loss or isolation and there may have been lengthy debates about using video call technology with students and how this can fit in with safeguarding obligations.

Many of us will be concerned about particular children and young people in our classes or tutor groups, concerned about the standards of home education differing children can expect and just how they're going to adapt when the students return. 'School readiness' is a concern from KS1 through to KS5 for the first time. There may be concerns about the future prospects of students whose exams were cancelled. There will be anxieties about lost curriculum time in an already narrow timeframe for content delivery. Some staff may have had to keep the building open through Easter and not enjoyed a well-deserved break. There are many reasons why this experience has been anxiety and stress-inducing for educators.

At a time of enforced changes and crisis many staff will be feeling desperate for something resembling stability or normality to anchor onto. Given that initiative fatigue is a very real phenomena experienced by those overloaded with changes, it is important that a trauma-informed approach is not seen as just another 'fad' or initiative that will blow over with the next wind. Instead, it is a way of being, that should be gradually introduced, as a collaborative endeavour.

We absolutely recognise that in many ways education is operating within challenging circumstances; there are funding shortages, problems retaining and recruiting staff, ever more complex safeguarding cases, frequent curriculum and examination changes and long hours. We do not seek to present trauma-informed practice as a magic solution that will solve all ills, because it won't. However, we believe it is a significant part of a successful response to our circumstances and can go some way towards healing our communities. It is an idea whose time has come, in response to the many stresses faced by educators. These have become acute in the wake of a pandemic that has exponentially increased stress, adversity, trauma and loss throughout our communities. We would strongly advocate that all schools use these circumstances as an opportunity to 'reset' their approach to wellbeing and ensure that this is just as high up the agenda as discussions around curriculum progress as educators move through this crisis towards the resumption of something resembling normality.

Staff wellbeing and trauma-informed practice There can be no 'off the shelf' manual for how this is done. Each setting will need to decide how to implement the principles of a trauma-informed approach. Trauma theory tells us that stress hormones are raised if we feel under pressure, unsafe or powerless. Stress rises if people are surrounded by perceived threats or feel trapped by their circumstances. High stress levels can have damaging impacts on physical and mental health in the longer term. Stressed staff are less effective. Staff wellbeing and staff resilience should not be taken for granted.

Staff wellbeing and trauma-informed practice Aside from the COVID-19 experience, it is also possible that certain members of staff will have their own experiences of loss, bereavement, trauma and adversity in their own lives. When it comes to trauma, there is no 'them and us', only 'us'. Staff are more effective at supporting trauma survivors amongst the student and staff body if their own wellbeing and skillset is provided for. Key points:

- 'Vicarious Trauma' and 'Compassion Fatigue' are also real dangers for professionals working with trauma. Its important to know the signs.
- Working with trauma and expecting not to be affected is like walking through water and expecting not to get wet¹.
- Put on your own oxygen mask first². You can't pour from an empty cup. Think about who is filling the 'cup' of the staff? What do the staff do for each other organically? How are these efforts being supported from SLT? What kind of culture is there in terms of staff wellbeing?

Vicarious Trauma This refers to the possibility that professionals who regularly work with individuals who have experienced adversity, loss or trauma may begin to 'take on' some of these experiences. Anyone regularly listening to stories on these themes runs the risk of developing their own 'triggers' for re-living these traumatic events through flashbacks to the moment they heard the stories. Over a period of time, immersed in these stories, it can begin to influence the way that a person views the world. We may begin to display signs of an altered character, altered beliefs, become alienated from others, become concerned by the fragility of life or discuss changed assumptions about our basic safety. In more extreme cases, a person exhibiting these signs is also experiencing burnout; feeling completely overwhelmed by their responsibilities and showing total exhaustion, isolation and disconnection. Educators may also begin to demonstrate signs of 'compassion fatigue'. This is the phenomenon where all reserves of empathy, patience and perspective taking are used up. We find it harder to give people our time or demonstrate these qualities as we have used all of these reserves up. We may become numb to the difficult stories and may begin to develop a threshold in our mind of what constitutes a student or colleague in need of assistance, as 'this one is not as bad as the last one'. We may find it hard to demonstrate the patience required to provide the best support to students in challenging circumstances. We are more likely to escalate when challenged and not act in the best interests of vulnerable students. This does not mean we are at 'fault'. These behaviours are communicating an unmet need. They are perfectly rational, scientifically explainable behaviours given the circumstances. It is important that colleagues know how to spot the signs of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue and know how to act to intervene and support each other's wellbeing.

Resources There are lots of useful resources for implementing a trauma-informed approach to staff wellbeing:

<https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind/resources-for-schools/supporting-staff-wellbeing-in-schools/>

<https://www.annafreud.org/media/7026/3rdanna-freud-booklet-staff-wellbeing-final.pdf>

https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Supervision%20in%20Education%20-%20Healthier%20Schools%20For%20All%20-%20Main%20report_0.pdf—How 'Reflective Supervision' focussing on wellbeing can be implemented successfully within Education.

<https://www.educare.co.uk/ofsted-teacher-wellbeing>

<https://www.traumainformedschools.co.uk/successful-schools>

How to support staff wellbeing Educators are extremely busy people. However, it is important we make time to connect with one another in spite of this. We must also practice self-care; so we are the best versions of ourselves for the pupils, our colleagues and also with our loved ones at home. Senior Leadership Teams can set the tone for the workplace culture. As SLT we can encourage and provide opportunities for staff to connect with one another and practice self-care. We can also lead by example with our own self-care practice.

Providing supervision for staff can be a very effective way to support staff well being. For the uninitiated, supervision is a regular 'check in' meeting between a member of staff and a more senior colleague (or external, independent professional). Supervision is regularly used in other professions such as healthcare and social work, though increasingly used within education too. Practitioners who regularly work with trauma and are therefore more likely to experience traumatic stress may have clinical supervision. This is supervision that is provided by a clinical psychologist in most cases. Where it has been used in Education, supervision has often been of a reflective nature. Staff are able to discuss their well being and any personal issues that may be impacting their work in a confidential environment. Supervisors are able to signpost colleagues to sources of support or agree ways to support supervisees. However, the main focus of the meetings is usually an opportunity for staff to reflect on their professional practice and any issues they may be experiencing. Supervisors can discuss these concerns and help their supervisees to arrive at solutions for how to resolve these dilemmas. Supervision is most effective when supervisors have received training in conducting supervision and when well being is a standing item for discussion. That being said, supervisors should not aim to be providing counselling for colleagues if they are not suitably qualified to do so and should instead seek to signpost colleagues. For more information on supervision, see the links in the resources section.

There are many other, more subtle ways to boost well being. These include ensuring staff have protected time to socialise and develop relationships inter-departmentally. The Anna Freud organisation links in the resources section demonstrate many case studies of schools who have implemented these types of measures. Whilst staff are likely to develop these activities organically, they are also more likely to do so if SLT support, encourage and model these efforts. Providing time and facilities can be important factors; eg: allowing staff to use a gym or music room on a Friday evening.

Other considerations may include; how the organisation celebrates and includes its staff through how birthdays, milestones, achievements and religious/cultural occasions are marked. What avenues are there for staff voice and how are these opportunities communicated? How does SLT feedback on staff suggestions? Are there break out spaces for staff? Is there a guardian angel type scheme in which staff are allocated a colleague to secretly cheer up or do nice things for (similar to secret santa)?

References

1. Remen in Dilonardo, M.J., (2018), What is Compassion Fatigue?, *MNN*, accessed at: <https://www.mnn.com/health/healthy-spaces/stories/what-compassion-fatigue>
2. Cunningham, A., (2016), *Drowning in Empathy*, accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsaorjIo1Yc>