

# 1. What is trauma and why is it important to be trauma-informed?

Imagine you are leading a group of young people in an activity or lesson. It's the start of the day and you're trying to establish a calm, attentive, energized dynamic in the room. You've asked everyone multiple times to sit quietly, facing forward, with clear desks. One person is using their bag as a pillow on the desk. Another is throwing crumpled up balls of paper at someone else's head, egging on a reaction. At the back, an argument is brewing- someone isn't letting someone else easily sit down, and is challenging them to 'make them' get out of the way. Another is systematically doodling on the school textbook they aren't meant to write in, despite having been told multiple times not to. What should you do?

## What is trauma-informed practice?

Trauma-informed practice is a way of engaging with others in personal and professional contexts that is informed by the latest psychological understanding of how experiencing trauma affects individuals, families, and communities. Being 'trauma-informed' with clients, students, colleagues, service-users, families and friends means being sensitive to the effects of trauma on a person's mind and body, and promoting a relational space where they are most likely to feel safe, grounded and in control.

For example, if you're a teacher, trauma-informed practice (hereafter TIP) training will empower you to teach, plan lessons, design resources, manage classroom dynamics, engage with pupils' 'bad' behaviour, provide pastoral care and resolve conflicts in a way that caters to the particular needs of traumatized young people. Because trauma can negatively impact how a person thinks, regulates emotion, socializes, concentrates, communicates and empathizes, it can drastically reduce a person's capacity to engage in school life, and reap the benefits of doing so. When teachers and schools are trauma-informed, they can far better serve their contingent of pupils, teachers and parents who have experienced trauma.

## What is trauma?

To understand the importance of TIP, it's crucial to understand what trauma actually is. Many people associate trauma and its effects (often identified as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) with car crashes, natural disasters, and soldiers coming home from the front line. However, traumatic experiences come in many more shapes and sizes.

A traumatic experience is defined as any experience that makes us sense a serious threat to ourselves, or to our attachments with those we rely on to stay alive. Trauma is not the dangerous situation, it is our internal bodily reaction to the dangerous situation. I am going to explain briefly what the body does when it senses overwhelming danger, as some grounding in the physiology of trauma is crucial to understanding best-practice when working with traumatized people.

Most of the time that we experience trauma, it is not a life-threatening situation, but it's useful to understand our response to any trauma as being a subconscious life-saving strategy to what our bodies -often falsely- identify as the threat of death. In order to explain the body's response to trauma, it makes sense to use a life-threatening scenario, one appropriate to the evolutionary context in which our threat-defense- mechanism came to be (millennia ago!), such as being chased by a hungry lion.

When we experience something threatening - a hungry lion chasing us- our instincts kick in and the subconscious part of our brain sounds an internal alarm that tells our body that we have to act fast to save ourselves from danger. When the alarm bell rings, we cannot choose what to do next using the conscious part of our brain. Instead, the subconscious alarm triggers us to go into 'survival mode', a physiological state that comes in 6 distinct forms. Which of the survival modes we go into depends on a split-second, subconscious decision we cannot choose which reaction to have, our nervous systems decide for us, based on which response it deems will most likely ensure our survival.

## The Survival Responses

So you're being chased by a hungry lion. You see and hear the lion running towards you and your internal safety alarm goes haywire and so your body goes into one of the following Survival Modes.

**Fight** - Muscles tense, pupils dilate, hormones pumping, heart pounding, you challenge the lion to a duel. You try to save yourself by trying to kill the lion before it can kill you.

**Flight** - Muscles tense, pupils dilate, hormones pumping, heart pounding, you run away from the lion as fast as possible. You couldn't possibly beat the lion in a duel (it's a lion) so you try to save yourself by instead running as far away from the lion as possible.

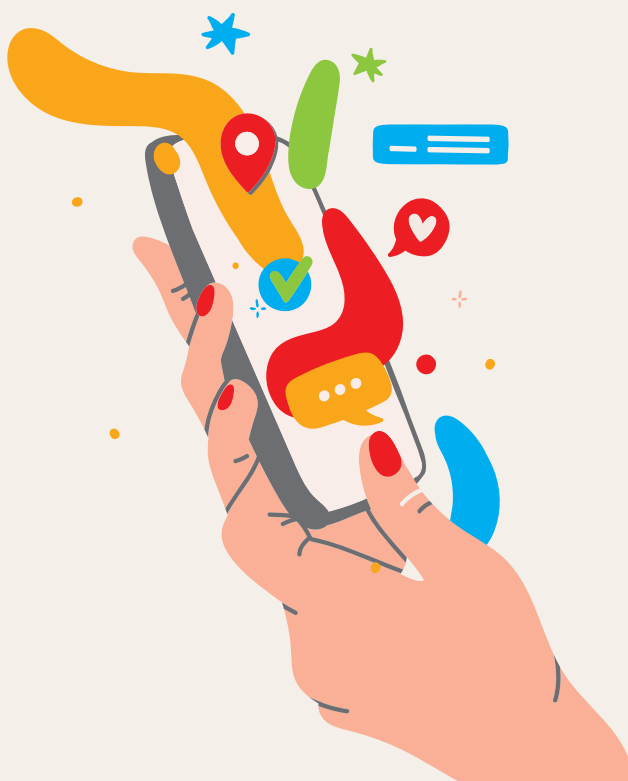
**Freeze** - Muscles tense, pupils dilate, hormones pumping, heart pounding, you do not move an inch. You cannot beat the lion in a duel or outrun it (it's a LION) so you try to save yourself by staying as still as you possibly can. Maybe, just maybe, the lion won't see you if you're not moving.

**Friend/fawn** - Muscles relax, eyelids heavy, different hormones pumping, heart rate slows, you move towards the lion. You cannot duel the lion or outrun the lion or pretend you're not even there, but maybe you can save yourself by befriending or seducing the lion. Perhaps if you ingratiate yourself with the lion, regain some control over the situation, it won't want to eat you anymore, or will eat you in a less gory and excruciating way. You try to save yourself by complying, by sweet-talking the lion.

**Flop** - Muscles relax, eyelids heavy, different hormones pumping, heart rate slows, you become literally floppy. In so doing, you reduce the physical harm of being beaten up by the lion (perhaps it's not hungry, just feeling fight-y?) by relaxing your body as much as possible. Or you successfully avoid the lion entirely by playing dead. Perhaps the lion is after the excitement of the chase, and will pass by a human who is already dead. You cannot fight or flight or freeze or fawn to protect yourself, so you try to save yourself by reducing the injury of an attack or pretending to already be dead.

**Faint** - Muscles relax, eyelids heavy, different hormones pumping, heart rate slows, and you save yourself from the conscious experience of inevitably being killed by the lion. Engaging with the lion will be hideous, so whilst you cannot save yourself from the lion, you can save yourself from the conscious experience of the lion, and the attendant pain and awfulness. You try to protect yourself by going under self-administered general anesthetic.

Obviously, few of us will ever be faced with a rampaging lion. However, there are all sorts of experiences that might trigger the same reaction - physical, emotional or sexual abuse/assault, witnessing interpersonal violence, living with someone with an unmanaged mental illness, living with someone struggling through addiction, feeling caregiver abandonment through separation or bereavement, severe poverty and structural discrimination, to name a few. Because we are utterly reliant on our caregivers for survival when we are young children, any threat to our caregiver's capacity to be attentive to our needs (because they struggle with severe mental illness or addiction or have an abusive partner or have to work long hours or are abusive to us themselves etc. etc.) will trigger chronic or repeated survival mode in us. This sort of developmental trauma (or 'adverse childhood experience' as it's commonly referred to) has a profound impact on us (our mental and physical health, the way in which we form relationships with others, our cognitive abilities) later in life.



## 2. What are the different responses to trauma and how might they affect student behaviours in a classroom or day-to-day?

In every classroom, there will be many young people who have experienced significant adverse, traumatizing experiences- [some studies suggest roughly half](#).

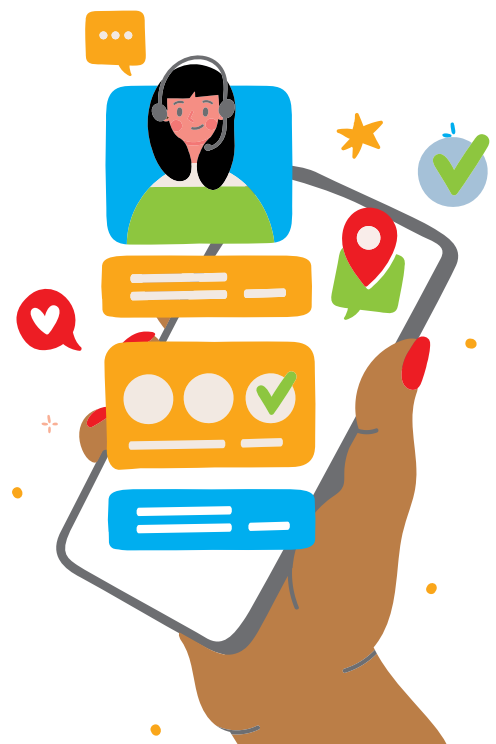
When a person experiences developmental trauma, they will be easily triggered- they will spend a lot of time in survival mode. Because our internal alarm system takes a 'better safe than sorry' approach, it does not wait for another lion to come along before setting off. Instead, anything that looks even vaguely like a lion, or smells like something that was in the vicinity when the lion first attacked, or has similar hair to the lion, or sounds a bit like the lion is sufficient to set the alarm off again, and trigger survival mode.

Perhaps you know someone who can't sit still- they constantly fidget, are easily startled, and jumpy and twitchy, like they're itching to get away. Or someone who is quick to anger, whose default mode is aggressive, angry, irritated, short-tempered - they are ever-ready to shout or knock something over or punch something or someone. Perhaps you know someone who is easily overwhelmed, seems often stuck and immobilized by the task at hand - frantic and stressed but seemingly unable to do anything about the cause of stress. Or perhaps you know someone who struggles to get out of bed, who is constantly tired, struggles to see through the fog in their mind, is entirely unmotivated and easily bored. Perhaps you know some people-pleasers- those who are submissive, compliant, desperately eager to please and who never disagree or assert themselves.

Characteristics such as these are indicators of someone being ungrounded- of being, to some extent, in survival mode. When your body is busy trying to protect itself from a quasi-lion, it redirects its energies and attention to the processes best suited to each survival mode (hormone levels, heart rate, respiration, sensory experience, pupil dilation, body temperature etc.). When someone is in survival mode, it is physically more difficult/ impossible to utilize the functions of the conscious part of the brain - cognitive focus, logic, reason, creativity, language, problem-solving, empathy. In other words, when someone is ungrounded, it is almost impossible to learn anything.

In order to meaningfully teach, mentor, support or coach young people, it is crucial to be able to provide a space that feels safe to them- that is free of quasi-lions- so they might be able to feel grounded and engage with the lesson/activity/session. TIP training is so important because it upskills professionals to establish an accessible space for trauma survivors, and gives professionals the tools to navigate the inevitable and extremely common eventuality of someone being triggered and in need of help to become grounded, calm and feeling safe again.

If you are someone who works with young people, my guess is all of the above characteristics are familiar to you, and that you already routinely navigate them in the classroom, or youth group, or sports pitch. You will already know that it's really hard to manage the dynamic of a group of young people- everyone has their own particular set of lion ghosts (some have many, some have huge ones, some have a collection of various sizes and levels of ferocity) and trying to navigate the array of moods and priorities and experiences and distractions in any classroom or group can be overwhelming. It is unreasonable to expect anyone to feel confident and comfortable and able to navigate these dynamics- ones that are directly informed by traumatic experiences- without specialist training to do so.



# 3. How do we approach trauma-informed teaching and what does our training for teachers involve?

Our TIP training is designed for any teacher/youth worker who works with young people. However, when developing the course we especially had in mind those who have ever felt overwhelmed, embarrassed, stuck or frustrated when managing 'bad' behaviour or tricky classroom dynamics. This training aims to build the skills and confidence necessary for teachers to effectively and compassionately navigate the dynamics that often arise in the classroom, with a focus on understanding young people's responses to trauma which might include disengagement or disruption.

We are keenly aware that teachers are under an enormous amount of pressure, and are expected to deliver learning outcomes from their students amidst an avalanche of ever-increasing expectations from senior leaders, parents, governments and colleagues. Our aim and experience is that TIP training will help to navigate difficult situations- for teachers as well as pupils- rather than be yet another expectation teachers can place on themselves on how best to perform at work.

## Participants will:

Explore what trauma is, the brain and body's responses (including the physiology behind a 'trigger') and its physical, psychological, emotional and social impacts

Practice how to navigate challenging comments and behaviour in the classroom which might be rooted in a young person's response to trauma

Develop strategies to create a classroom environment where young people feel grounded, safe and supported, i.e. being 'trauma-informed' in practice

Receive support on how to take care of themselves when feeling triggered, ungrounded or overwhelmed in the classroom.

Understand how to be trauma-informed when responding to disclosures of traumatic experiences from young people

## Training outcomes

TIP can help improve

Understanding of why young people are behaving the way they are (especially disruptive/disengaged/aggressive/volatile )

Learning outcomes for a whole classroom, particularly those whose past trauma is affecting their learning

Behaviour and communication management for teachers

Pastoral care of students (including early identification of underlying issues)

Self-regulation for teachers themselves, to overcome anger/frustration/overwhelm in the classroom

We acknowledge that teachers do themselves get triggered/activated/overwhelmed when in the classroom and our training offers a safe, non-judgmental and supportive environment in which they can explore what they need in order to ground themselves and be present and supportive for their students.

Our training integrates the broader values and mission of [School of Sexuality Education](#) - and is therefore explicitly sex-positive, non-binary, non-judgmental and intersectionally feminist.

## Remember our classroom scenario? What should you do?

TIP training will help attendees to work through their own frustration/exasperation/triggers, and approach 'naughty' kids with greater understanding and compassion and their 'bad' behaviour without shaming or blaming. All behaviour, 'good' or 'bad', is communication from a young person, and we hope that TIP training can help you work with your students to get the best wellbeing and learning outcomes for them and for you.

# Further Resources

## Trauma & its effects

- Meg John Barker- [www.rewriting-the-rules.com/trauma-work](http://www.rewriting-the-rules.com/trauma-work)
- Bessel van der Kolk- <https://www.besselvanderkolk.com/>
- Gabor Mate - <https://drgabormate.com/>

## Why TIP so important

- Margot Sunderland <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/trauma-informed-practice-in-schools/>
- Rachel Dickinson <https://adcs.org.uk/general-subject/article/trauma-informed-practice-in-schools-and-beyond>

## How-to be more trauma-informed in the classroom?

- Young Minds <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3091/adversity-and-trauma-informed-practice-guide-for-professionals.pdf>

By School of Sexuality Education