

SANCTUARY TIPS FOR OUR EVER-CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Trauma Theory 101

Many schools across the country have either transitioned to an online component or closed for the remainder of the year. Teachers are providing academic instruction virtually and parents are doing double-duty to make sure learning is still happening. Colleges are also holding classes and lectures through multimedia platforms. While in the digital age, knowing this was where we were headed, there is nothing like a pandemic to push you into places that you may not have been quite ready to go. Watching everyone come together to make sure learning and other invaluable services happen is truly a gift that has come from this time of crisis. At the Sanctuary Institute, we continue in our commitment to Social Learning and Growth and Change. As we cannot convene with you in our typical learning formats, we want to offer opportunities to continue our learning and remember what we have covered in times past. Regardless of where you find yourself on the trauma-responsive continuum, having just started your learning and implementation or post-certification practice, we want to remind you of a few things to help guide your approach to navigating COVID-19 and all the ways it has impacted our world.

A few things to remember, Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk teaches us that trauma is any external event that occurs where our internal and external resources are not substantial enough to outweigh said event. We know that the intensity and frequency of that event are both factors in the equation of our ability to withstand the experience. For most, if not all of us, COVID-19 has been at best chronically stressful and at most traumatic. Looking at news reports or memes on social media, we can see the far-reaching impact this pandemic has had on our world, and for our purposes here, our brains and bodies. Knowingly or unknowingly, most of what we have experienced from those around us are stress responses. Remember, our brains can only attend to the threat and we are constantly being barraged with new information of just how high this threat is. A faculty used the analogy that this experience is like enduring 9/11 but on a daily and consistent basis. It is an understatement to say that our stresses and adversities are becoming chronic and we are at a high risk for them becoming traumatic stresses.

Our goal is not to highlight just how bad things are but to challenge and charge you to remember what we know about how to manage and respond to traumatic stress. Whether it is your co-workers in your organization or your living room, how you might experience their behaviors (and even your own) are probably best attributed to the human stress response—fight, flight, or freeze. Repeating yourself often, finding that information did not stick from the first zoom call to the next, forgetting to complete tasks or seeing that tasks have been forgotten, short fuses and increased irritability over small things like the echo on the virtual meetings, difficulty managing emotions, having difficulty staying focused while working from home are all indicators of the impact of the stress that has resulted from the changes we have all been faced with. Good thing we have an app for that!

As we have been stating, the Model gives us great resources for navigating these difficult times. Creating and using Safety Plans to manage the difficult emotions that are sure to arise from day to day will be our lifeline to help us practice emotional intelligence and to keep relationships intact. Practicing self-care is imperative to keep our physical bodies safe as well as our spirit and our minds healthy. Coming together to find support through team meetings and supervision, where we begin with community meeting helps us manage remote working and social distancing protocols. When there are critical incidents (and there will be) and collective disturbances (and there will be), Red Flag Reviews are invaluable to help find solutions through theory-based approaches. Remember what we know about how trauma impacts us is the best way to manage the trauma that we are all facing through this pandemic.

If there are any ways that the Sanctuary Institute can support your organization through these uncertain times, please reach out to your consultant, or the Sanctuary Institute at info@thesanctuaryinstitute.org as we are ready to serve. Remember, we are a community that takes care of itself.

We'll be in touch next week with more ways the Sanctuary model can be a valuable resource during these stressful times. Stay safe and healthy!

