



# CREATING A GRIEF AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOM

Students who are facing grief, adversity, and trauma will experience the effects in a variety of ways, including higher rates of stress and anxiety, behavioral changes, feeling out of control, emotions that fluctuate, diminished regulation capacities, difficulty concentrating, and more. As an educator, you can play a critical role in helping a child or teenager adapt to this negative life experience, build resilience, and thrive through it. The most important factor that research points to in determining whether a child will be resilient is whether that child has a supportive adult caregiving relationship that can help them to navigate it. That adult can be a parent, teacher, counselor, coach, or mentor. Use the tips below as a guide for knowing how to be that supportive relationship to students who are facing significant losses and adversities.

## 1. BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN TRIGGERS

We all carry our own histories and experiences with loss and trauma into interactions with children. Often very painful experiences that have not been acknowledged or addressed leave adults wanting to avoid such topics. A student in your classroom will not have the perspective to understand why you might want to avoid it and might perceive lack of care or concern, which is not your intention. Start by being attentive to your own discomfort. Acknowledge it, and understand that you will need to stretch yourself to support your students.

## 2. KEEP CONSISTENT, PREDICTABLE ROUTINES

Post daily agendas—even down to specific times you will collect homework. That consistency will help to create a safe, predictable environment. Unpredictable routines feel like chaos, especially for a child whose world already feels very unpredictable and out of control.

## 3. INFUSE MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

Mindfulness and deep breathing are two of the few proven ways to “hack” our biological system and disrupt the automated stress-response system that kicks in when we experience significant losses and adversities. Deep breathing and mindfulness will help to quiet the stress, enhance focus and perspective, and improve other reasoning and regulation processes. All of this will help combat the negative effects of trauma.

## 4. BE CONSISTENT AND FAIR WITH CONSEQUENCES

For a child who has experienced significant adversity or trauma, any interaction can be more easily misperceived or serve to exacerbate existing stress. This is largely due to the fact that reasoning and regulation processes have been overridden by the stress response system. So it is incredibly important that any consequences for inappropriate behavior are dealt out fairly and with empathy and compassion. Never label the person, but just the behavior as being inappropriate.





## 5. IDENTIFY AND NAME STRENGTHS

Children facing loss and trauma often lose self-confidence and self-efficacy. Schools are a fertile environment for children to not only learn about math and science, but also about their own gifts and strengths. Name strengths and growth when you see them. Remember aspects of growth-mindset and name them not as a part of their inherent gifts, but within the context of continual learning and growing.

## 6. DON'T TAKE BEHAVIOR PERSONALLY

You will see a lot of changing behaviors with students facing loss and trauma. Understand that these behaviors stem from basic human needs that are not being met, such as safety, love and affection, and agency. Be empathic, patient, and flexible in response to these behavioral changes.

## 7. EMPOWER STUDENTS WITH DECISIONS

As much as you can, give students the opportunity to make decisions about their day, schoolwork, and how to manage their time. When students experience trauma, they often feel loss of control and agency. You can help to rebuild that by providing decision-making opportunities.

## 8. COMMUNICATE OPTIONS FOR BREAKS

Have safe spaces either in the room, with a counselor, or somewhere else that is an option for students to go to if they just need a break. This should never be used as a punishment, but an opportunity to take a break and withdraw for a short period of time. The goal is to eventually come back and rejoin the class, but breaks are a great option for students who are having a tough day.

