

# Trauma in the Classroom: Supporting Survivors



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Office of Victim Assistance  
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# Learning outcomes



Understand how the brain and body respond to traumatic experiences and how this can impact academic performance



Learn factors impacting responses to trauma events including multicultural considerations



Explore what you should know about using content and trigger warnings in class

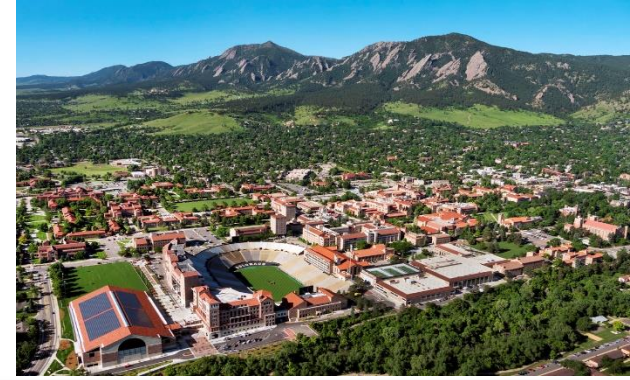


Learn how to provide trauma-informed academic support



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# Trauma in the College Years



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In 2015, about 47% of college students stated they had experienced an event that was traumatic or very difficult in the last 12 months

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PTSD diagnoses among college students more than doubled between 2017 and 2022

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Nationwide, college aged women (18-24) comprise the largest demographic of victims of intimate partner abuse

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At CU: In 2024, 18% of undergraduate women experienced sexual assault, 44% sexual harassment and 17% intimate partner abuse (grad women 6%, 25%, 12%)

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# Stress

**Stress** is a feeling of emotional or physical tension.

Stress is your body's reaction to a challenge or demand.



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# Trauma



- The response to experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing AND that overwhelm one's ability to cope.\*
- Individual trauma:
  - results from an event(s)
  - is experienced as physically or emotionally harmful/threatening
  - effects are lasting and impact functioning and well being ^

\*"In an Unspoken Voice," Peter Levine  
^SAMSHA



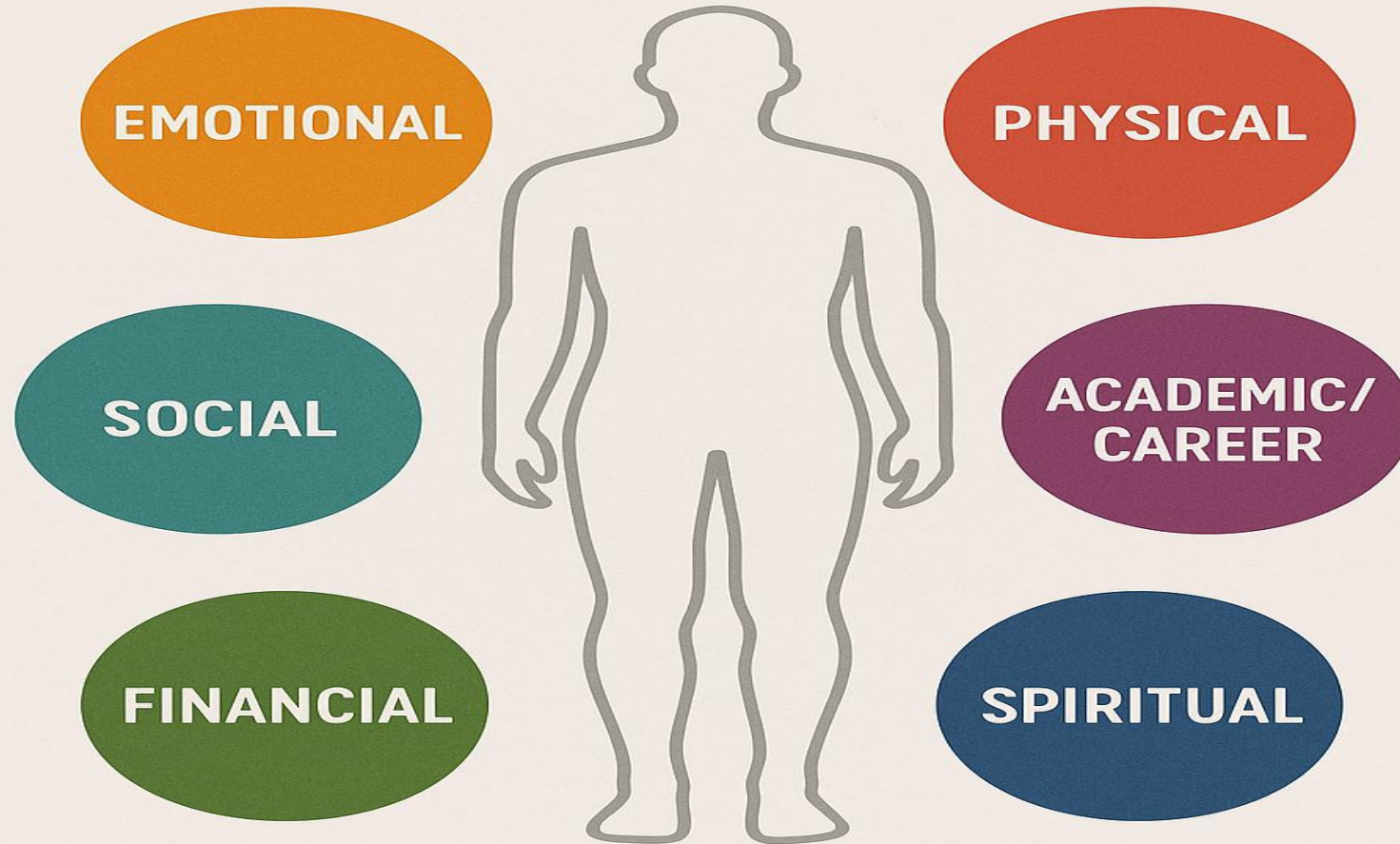
# A reminder about traumatic experiences

Not all traumatic experiences result in traumatic responses.

Trauma is about responses, not events.



# TRAUMA CAN IMPACT



# Societal response to disclosures of traumatic events



- Victim shaming
  - Silencing
  - Ignoring
- Dismissing



- Validating
  - Being non-judgmental
  - Restoring safety
- Respecting survivors' decisions





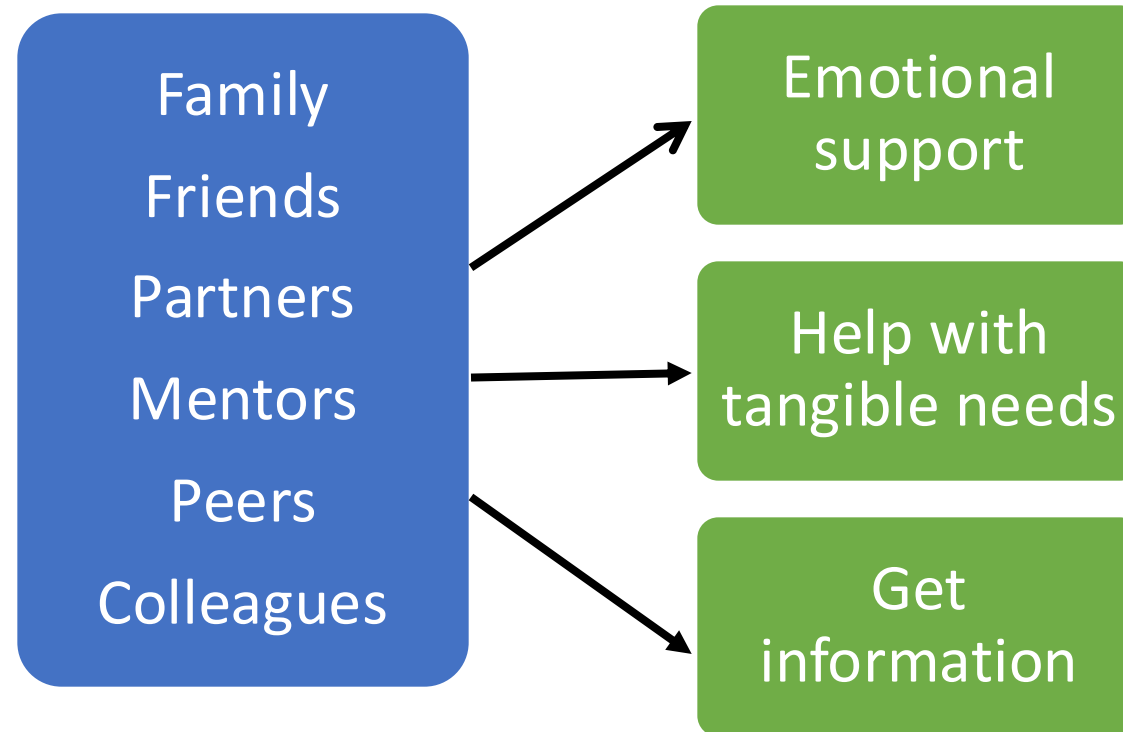
# Unique Barriers for Marginalized Populations

***Due to oppression and discrimination, people from underrepresented populations can experience:***

- Language barriers
- Mistrust of systems
- Fear and risk of deportation
- Higher likelihood of negative responses from others
- Allegiance to and protection of one's own community or group identity
  - Also fear losing community



# Benefits of Informal Support



# Impact from a Response

## Positive responses can produce:

- Fewer physical and psychological symptoms
- Ability to potentially leave an unsafe situation
- Decrease risk of harm continuing
- Less reluctance to seek further help
- Learning healthy coping skills
- Learning about options,
- Gain assistance navigating systems

## Negative responses can contribute to:

- Post traumatic stress
- Delayed recovery
- Poorer physical health
- Self-blame, shame
- Minimization, questioning the experience
- Silence – may never tell anyone else

***This impact can sometimes be over and above the actual traumatic event itself!***



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# Your Role

The way the first person responds to a survivor of a traumatic experience impacts:

- The healing process
- The survivor's likelihood to continue to seek support



First...



# Unsupportive Responses/AVOID:



- Taking control
- Escalating emotions
- Defining or labeling an experience
- Verbalizing judgment in the moment
- Placing blame



# Support in the Classroom

- Avoid being a detective
- Encourage student to utilize relevant campus resources
- Offer the accommodations you can, while maintaining academic integrity of your course
- Know the options in your department
  - (e.g. late drop, incomplete)
- OVA professor notification letter



# Cont. Supportive Responses

- Check on safety
- Listen/be open
- Give options and follow their lead
  - Let them decide what is best for them
- Respect privacy
- Validate feelings
- Open-ended questions
- **Help them get connected**
  - OVA



# What about “trigger” or “content warnings?”



Any verbal or written notices that precede potentially distressing content.



In the context of classrooms, these warnings are sometimes used to cover things like reading materials, lecture content, videos, homework assignments or topics that may come up in classroom discussions.

# Reasons trigger warnings have been used

Trigger and content warnings are *often used with good intentions*. In many cases they are meant to:

- Provide emotional support
- Help individuals prepare for or avoid material that may remind them of traumatization
- Alert individuals that content relates to the experiences of historically marginalized groups
- Validate strong emotional responses or dysregulation related to difficult topics
- Show solidarity with marginalized communities and/or trauma survivors



# However: A warning about trigger warnings

- Inherently make assumptions about how students may react or respond.
- Usually are given with a moment's notice, so they don't actually help anyone avoid or prepare for the subject.
- May heighten feelings of distress or fear for some people, **thereby backfiring**



# Trauma-Informed Practices

- Use your syllabi
- Provide timely reminders
- Focus on content over impact
- Be mindful of unexpected responses
- Demonstrate an openness to feedback
- Engage with student feedback
- Take advantage of resources and training opportunities



# Resources and Training Opportunities

## OVA's Trauma-Informed Presentations

- E.g. Supporting Survivors of Trauma, now available as a course on Percipio

## Center for Teaching and Learning

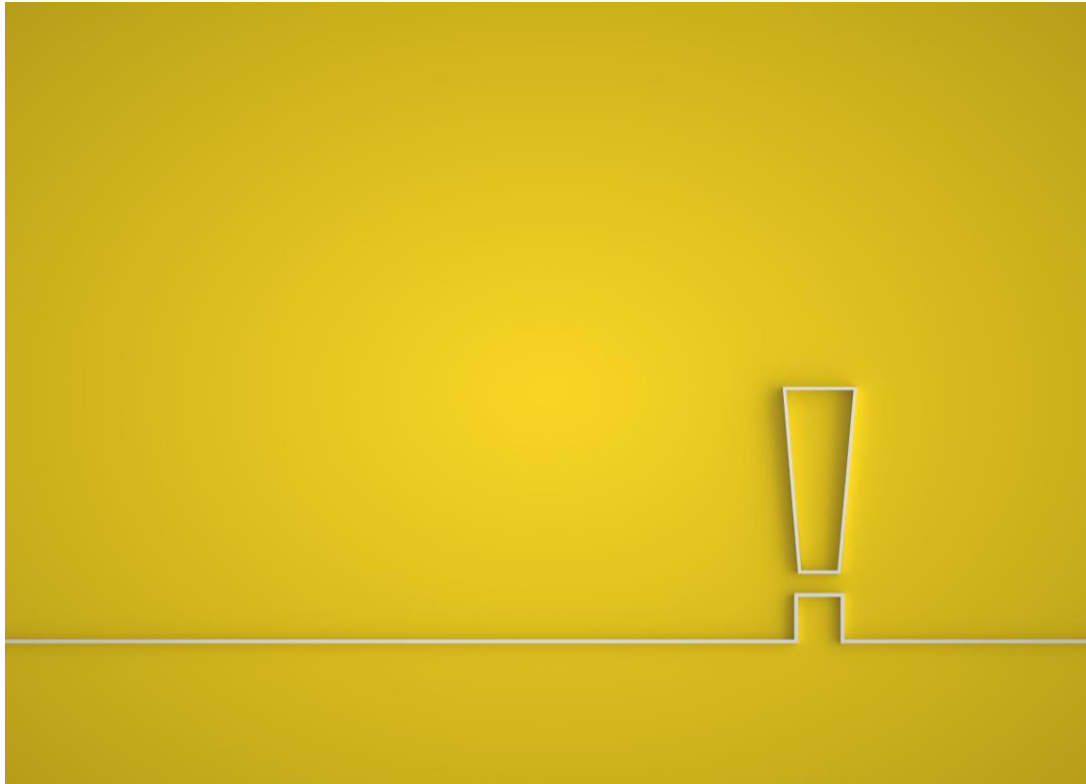
- Resources for classroom management and communication

## Supporting Student Resiliency Trainings

- A three-part series offered by Health & Well-being
  - Includes sessions on Student Mental Health, Responding to Trauma and Motivational Interviewing



# A brief look at secondary trauma...



It is *normal* to have an emotional reaction when hearing about someone else's traumatic experience.

## Common reactions include:

- Confusion, shock, anger, sadness, etc.
- Disturbing images as you “fill in the blanks” of someone's story
- Being triggered from your own past experiences
- Feeling unskilled or not trained to respond to the disclosure



# Utilizing Self-Care

## Self-Care



Adapted from a resource created by the Regents at the University of Michigan

GrieveWell.com

Preventative

In the Moment

In Response to



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# About OVA

*Do not have to identify with the word “victim” to receive services*

**Free and  
confidential**

Available to  
students, staff, and  
faculty

Provide trauma-  
specific counseling,  
support, &  
advocacy

Mon-Fri (9am-5pm)  
—see website for  
drop-in hours

Center for  
Community (C4C)  
N450

303-492-8855 -  
after-hours phone  
support



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# OVA Topic Areas

- Intimate Partner abuse
- Sexual Assault
- Sexual Harassment
- Stalking
- Experiences of bias
- Discrimination
- Harassment
- Death/loss\*
- Natural disasters
- Mass violence
- Physical Assault
- Hazing
- Serious accident
- Other crimes (e.g. burglary)
- Other\*



**OVA is here to help no matter when it happened and is incident specific.**



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[www.colorado.edu/ova](http://www.colorado.edu/ova)



303-492-8855 – has after hours phone support



[www.facebook.com/CUvictimassistance](https://www.facebook.com/CUvictimassistance)



[@buffs.supportsurvivors](https://www.instagram.com/buffs.supportsurvivors)



[assist@colorado.edu](mailto:assist@colorado.edu)



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Zhai, Y. & Du, X. (2024). Trends in diagnosed posttraumatic stress disorder and acute stress disorder in US college students, 2017-2022. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2024;7(5):e2413874. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.13874



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# Resources

## **CU System:**

CU Advantage - Employee Perks (system wide)

[advantage.cu.edu](http://advantage.cu.edu)

CU Employee Services

[www.cu.edu/employee-services](http://www.cu.edu/employee-services)

## **CU Boulder:**

CU Boulder Health & Wellness Services

[colorado.edu/health](http://colorado.edu/health)

CU Boulder Employee Wellness

[colorado.edu/health/WorkWell](http://colorado.edu/health/WorkWell)

CU Boulder Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC)

[colorado.edu/oiec](http://colorado.edu/oiec)

CU Boulder Benefits, Perks, and Resources

[colorado.edu/hr/faculty-and-staff-perks](http://colorado.edu/hr/faculty-and-staff-perks)

## **UCCS:**

UCCS Gallogly Recreation & Wellness Center

[recwellness.uccs.edu](http://recwellness.uccs.edu)

UCCS HealthCircle Clinics

[healthcircle.uccs.edu](http://healthcircle.uccs.edu)

UCCS Lyda Hill Institute for Human Resilience

[resilience.uccs.edu](http://resilience.uccs.edu)

UCCS Office of Institutional Equity

[equity.uccs.edu](http://equity.uccs.edu)

## **CU Denver:**

CU Denver Wellness & Recreation

[ucdenver.edu/wellness](http://ucdenver.edu/wellness)

CU Denver Counseling Center

[ucdenver.edu/counseling-center](http://ucdenver.edu/counseling-center)

CU Denver & Anschutz Office of Equity

[ucdenver.edu/offices/equity](http://ucdenver.edu/offices/equity)

CU Denver HR

[ucdenver.edu/offices/human-resources/current-faculty-staff](http://ucdenver.edu/offices/human-resources/current-faculty-staff)

## **Anschutz:**

Anschutz Health & Wellness Center

[medschool.cuanschutz.edu/health-and-wellness](http://medschool.cuanschutz.edu/health-and-wellness)

Anschutz Student Health & Wellness

[www.cuanschutz.edu/student/health-wellness](http://www.cuanschutz.edu/student/health-wellness)

CU Denver & Anschutz Office of Equity

[ucdenver.edu/offices/equity](http://ucdenver.edu/offices/equity)

Anschutz HR

[cuanschutz.edu/offices/human-resources/current-faculty-and-staff](http://cuanschutz.edu/offices/human-resources/current-faculty-and-staff)



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# HEALTH AND WELL-BEING **WELLABLE APP**

## **CU Boulder Faculty and Staff: Connect with a Healthier U**

Prioritize your well-being with WorkWell Connect!

- Unlimited, live health coaching
- On-demand fitness
- Meditation and mindfulness classes
- Recipes and meal plans
- Sleep stories
- Individual and team challenges



**Apple**



**Android**

**HEALTH AND WELLNESS**  
SUMMIT

# Take the survey

