

Reaching Students With Emotional Disturbances

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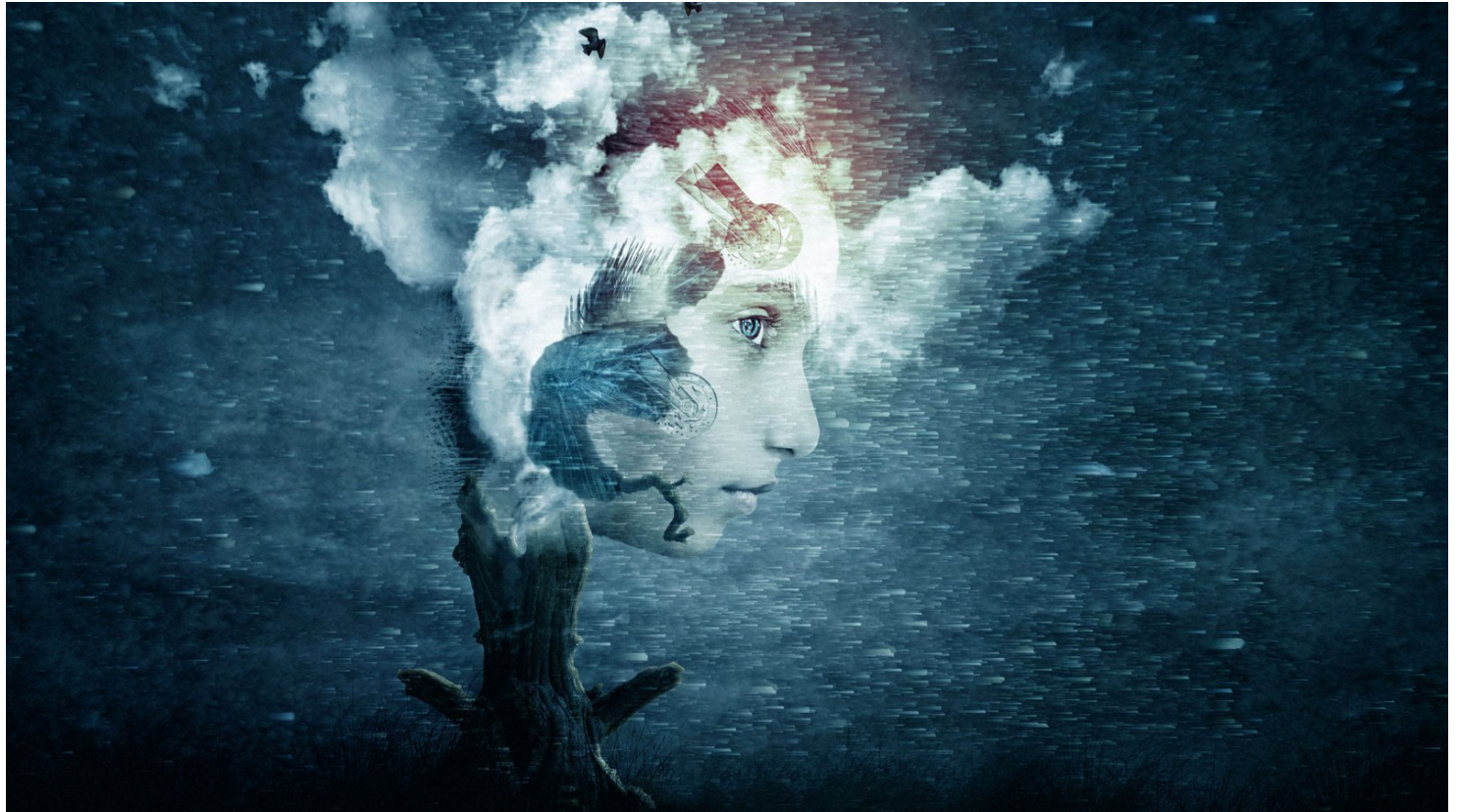
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Mental Health

A seasoned educator shares four ideas for supporting students who have suffered emotional trauma.

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In the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the term “emotional disturbance” encompasses significant challenges in a student’s behavior and mental health. For children with emotional disturbances, we can generally trace a developmental history where attachment and connection to an emotionally healthy caregiver has been broken in early development or a significant traumatic event has created a survival brain state that has continued throughout his or her early life. These young people are in a persistent state of alarm.

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Building Resiliency

The encouraging news is that young people have the innate capacity to bounce back from adversity. You can create

an environment that feels safe and connected by helping students understand how negative emotions hijack our learning. I am currently teaching young adolescents, many with significant emotional and behavioral challenges. To facilitate a predictable and consistent environment, we create class guidelines, procedures, and engagement systems so each student knows the class expectations and routines. Here are four strategies that have really worked with my students.

1. Brain-Based Learning Centers

In my classroom, students can go to one corner to recharge and calm down from negative emotion. This corner is called the “amygdala first aid station” as the amygdala is the fight/flight/freeze center in the brain. Students needing a quiet area with tables to study or to complete work can go to the “hippocampus area,” named after the part of the brain that memorizes and connects new information to what we already know. Finally, the “prefrontal cortex area”—named after the problem-solving center of the brain—includes tables and collaborative spaces for students who are ready to discuss projects or ideas, watch documentaries, and collaborate. When we teach students about their brain functions and connect them to specific activities, they become more self-aware and fluent in their own cognitive processes. Check out my post “[Brain Labs: A Place to Enliven Learning](#)” for a helpful resource as you think about how to design predictable and safe spaces to learn, socialize, and recharge.

2. Personalized Check-In Notes

If students are in a negative brain state, we must regulate behaviors before any learning will occur. The best way I have found is to first attend to their emotional temperature, to let them know I am present and available no matter the negative behaviors. To connect with and create consistency for a diverse array of students with different needs, I use waiters and prescription pads as a way of personalizing communication throughout the day. These are particularly effective for reaching those students who don’t respond to spoken communication. Share notes, small goals, affirmations, and requests to maintain individualized consistent connections. Once the task or goal has been ordered and received, you can create fun ways to make a payment or incentivize.

3. Structured Emotional Support

The “2x10 Strategy” developed by psychologist Raymond Wlodkowski is an excellent brain-aligned strategy to implement with our most challenging students. For two minutes each day, 10 days in a row, teachers have a personal conversation—either written or in-person—with a student about anything the student is interested in, as long as the conversation is G-rated. Wlodkowski found an 85 percent improvement in that one student's behavior. In addition, he found that [the behavior of all the other students in the class improved](#).

4. Locked Journal for Safe Self-Expression

When we write out our thoughts and feelings, we [clear space in the frontal lobes for positive emotion and higher cognitive processes](#). A locked journal can give students a safe place to release anxiety while maintaining control over their own privacy. If a student chooses to write or draw their feelings and thoughts through this format, we discuss how this journal can become a trusted friend, and how they might be able to use it to prototype creative forms of expression to be shared under the appropriate circumstances.

Delivery Matters

In working with students, your method of delivery will make a big difference. Students who are emotionally shut down and unresponsive to words may respond better with written notes. You can create note cards for directions, choices, or explanations, and give students the opportunity to write their responses rather than speak. All behavior is communication. Although I might not get a verbal response from a student, I always keep trying with the option of sharing notes and letters.

What I am learning every day—even as a seasoned educator—is that I must regulate behaviors before any learning will occur, and the strategies above have helped immeasurably. Students who struggle with emotional disturbances are some of our most vulnerable, but when we can create predictable and consistent supports for them, their inner resilience can shine.