



All staff handout

4. Navigating Crises Worksheet

A trauma-sensitive approach to crisis prevention and intervention is grounded in an understanding of the human stress response and its amplification in students exposed to trauma. For the purposes of this worksheet, the term crisis refers to a situation in which a student is in a state of emotional distress that is difficult for them to manage. This worksheet describes five phases of a crisis and, for each phase, particular considerations for youth affected by trauma. As you familiarize yourself with each phase, consider supportive strategies that you currently use or want to use.

Phase 1: Baseline

How a student usually behaves and responds defines the baseline phase. Students affected by trauma may function in survival mode, which makes them more anxious, fearful, and on the alert for danger at all times compared to youth who are not affected by trauma. Students affected by trauma tend to be overly reactive to cues or triggers in the environment—sights, sounds, smells, feelings, or situations—that cause them to relive their experience and react suddenly. To prevent students from quickly escalating to a crisis, particular strategies may be required.

Questions to consider

How do you foster a general sense of safety and calm as you work with students?

What additional strategies do you need to help students affected by trauma feel safe and calm?

Trauma-sensitive strategies

Check the strategies you currently use to prevent crises and help students remain calm. Circle the practices you would like to add or use more often.

☐	Establish clear routines.
☐	Ensure adequate staffing during times when students are more likely to have difficulties.

	Arrange your space to minimize potential trauma triggers (e.g., where students sit, amount of physical space, areas to take space when needed).
	Anticipate potential trauma triggers for students and plan ahead.
	Provide trigger warnings for content that may be upsetting.
	Plan for times of uncertainty and transition, and offer additional support to students who need it during these times.
	Make all your responses to students calm and respectful.
	Use positive behavioral interventions.
	Incorporate self-control practices, such as breathing exercises and mindfulness activities, into daily routines.

Phase 2: Triggering Phase

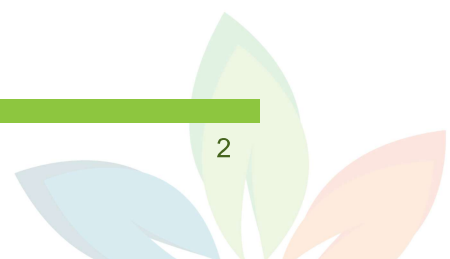
The stress response system is activated in the triggering phase. The brain's emotional control center begins to take over. You see changes in behavior and mood (e.g., shorter responses, tearfulness, moving or pacing, raised voice, becoming quieter, withdrawing, or unresponsiveness).

Students affected by trauma may be triggered by a range of stimuli that prompt them to relive a traumatic experience. Once triggered, students cannot easily access the thinking part of their brains that would help them maintain perspective and emotional control. The behavior of triggered students may be confusing to other individuals and may look like an overreaction to what adults may see as a relatively minor or neutral situation. At this point, adults may have only a short amount of time to recognize what is happening and to help a student calm down before the situation escalates.

Questions to consider

What types of situations or experiences might trigger a student affected by trauma?

What types of behaviors do you notice that tell you a student has been triggered?



What are some preventative responses you might use at this point?

What responses would not be helpful at this point?

Trauma-sensitive strategies

Check the strategies you currently use to intervene once a student is triggered. Circle the practices you would like to add or use more often.

☐	Validate feelings (even if the feelings do not appear rational).	☐	Provide a space for the student to calm down.
☐	Listen to what the student is saying.	☐	Avoid arguing with the student.
☐	Provide choices in the moment.	☐	Minimize public confrontation.
☐	Use encouraging statements and positive reinforcement.	☐	Avoid threatening punishment in the moment.

Phase 3: Escalation Phase

Increased agitation and intense, emotionally driven, survival-based responses typify the escalation phase. Fight, flight, or freeze responses of students affected by trauma include yelling, swearing, posturing, running away, refusing to talk, spacing out, or appearing disconnected. At this point, the emotional center of the brain has taken over and filters out unessential information, making nonverbal strategies increasingly important. Adults must stay aware of their own emotional state and avoid using punitive, threatening, or aggressive approaches that could be re-traumatizing for the student.

Questions to consider

What does the escalation phase commonly look like for students?

At this point, what types of responses tend to escalate the situation further? What responses might be re-traumatizing?

What types of responses help to de-escalate the person and situation?

What are the signs that the staff member is escalating?

Trauma-sensitive strategies

Check the strategies you currently use to intervene as a student is escalating. Circle the practices you would like to add or use more often.

	Use a calm and respectful tone of voice.
	Pay attention to your body language, gestures, and physical proximity to the student.
	Maintain boundaries and allow for a reasonable “comfort zone” to offer space.
	Use grounding techniques to help students access their thinking brain (e.g., breathing, providing something to hold or squeeze).
	Provide choices in the moment.
	Be clear about your intention and purpose in the situation.
	Refrain from giving a lot of directions.
	Identify, acknowledge, and label feelings.
	Offer support and reassurance.
	Avoid confrontation and punishment.
	Avoid arguing with the student.
	Check your own level of stress.
	Get support as needed.

Phase 4: Outburst Phase

Full-blown escalation characterizes the outburst phase and increases the potential for dangerous behavior. The focus goes to the safety of all individuals involved and to the effort to set limits and help the triggered student to calm down and feel physically safe. As a person affected by trauma starts to feel increasingly unsafe and out of control, the fight, flight, or freeze response intensifies. During this phase, those individuals trying to help could cause additional harm by inadvertently recreating a situation that mimics the triggered person's traumatic experiences. Adults must balance the need to keep themselves, the student, and other students safe as they try to avoid creating another traumatic situation.

Questions to consider

What does the outburst phase commonly look like?

What types of responses might you use at this point?

Trauma-sensitive strategies

Check the strategies you currently use to intervene during periods of full-blown crisis. Circle the practices you would like to add or use more often.

	Use a calm and respectful tone of voice.
	Pay attention to body language, gestures, and physical proximity to the student.
	Be clear about your intention and purpose in the situation (why you are there, what you plan to do).
	Refrain from giving a lot of directions.
	Provide choices for getting support on the student's own terms.
	Set clear limits.
	Be directive while maintaining a respectful tone.
	Set the tone that you expect the student will regain control.
	Check your own level of stress.
	Get support as needed.

Phase 5: Recovery Phase

The student returns to baseline, and adults help the student repair relationships and learn from the crisis. Students affected by trauma may feel disconnected and isolated after a crisis. Students also may feel ashamed and embarrassed, which can fuel additional trauma-related reactions and promote an ongoing cycle of distress and crisis. Post-crisis restorative practices include reassuring the student that he or she is a valued member of the school community, explaining the brain and body responses to stress, and planning to avoid future crises. Debriefing with colleagues can help you reduce your stress.

Questions to consider

How do you debrief with students after a crisis?

How do you repair relationships and rebuild connections?

How do you debrief with fellow teachers and staff after a crisis?

Trauma-sensitive strategies

Check the strategies you currently use to help students recover from a crisis. Circle the practices you would like to add or use more often.

	Re-establish a connection with the student.
	Clarify the chain of events.
	Identify triggers.
	Develop a plan (identify possible triggers, early warning signs, and helpful strategies).
	Teach new coping skills.
	Help the student practice new behaviors.
	Debrief with colleagues.

References

Knowledge Network by and for Educators. (2015). *Therapeutic crisis intervention strategies*. Retrieved from http://tccl.rit.albany.edu/knilt/index.php/Therapeutic_Crisis_Intervention_Strategies