

Overcoming the School Trauma Cycle

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To all the teachers, especially my mom, Bryn Kaufman,
who always believed in each one of her students, including me.

Overcoming the School Trauma Cycle

Academic and Emotional Supports
for Struggling Learners

Trynia Kaufman

Foreword by Jerome J. Schultz

 CORWIN

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FOREWORD

When I started out as a classroom teacher for kids with disabilities many years ago, I have to admit I was winging it. I wish I could take *Overcoming the School Trauma Cycle* with me in the way-back machine and execute a do-over of my first three years, following the suggestions and guidance it offers. I think of all the kids in my classroom who would have learned more and felt better about school (and themselves) because of it. Trynia Kaufman has written an excellent book that should be required reading for new and seasoned teachers alike. It's also a great guide for parents of kids with disabilities who are trying to understand what it really means to have the "appropriate" education that's called for in the special education regulations.

The timing is perfect for a book like this. Teachers across the United States are in a state of heightened stress, given the lingering consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic and the economic and political pressures of these times. Some politicians and parents who don't know much at all about education are questioning the value of teaching social-emotional learning in school, even though we are indisputably in the midst of what clearly is a mental health crisis. Unfortunately, many teachers are not being sufficiently prepared to deal with emotional issues in the classroom. This book will serve as a field manual to guide them as they work diligently to break the school trauma cycle by providing academic and emotional supports that are based in science and common sense. In a time where much is being asked of teachers, the practical and easy-to-implement strategies that fill these pages provide the tools they need to create classroom environments that will have a positive and therapeutic impact on struggling students, from the early years through high school.

Trynia skillfully weaves together personal anecdotes, vignettes of kids, current neuroscience, and a plethora of sensible best practices in teaching. All of this written in a tone that is respectful, encouraging, optimistic, and at times even playful. It is easy to read, extremely well organized, and filled with strategies that can be matched to the needs of individual students. She eloquently makes the point that what's good for the few (kids with learning, emotional, and behavior challenges) also benefits the many. *Overcoming the School Trauma Cycle* provides the architecture for building the ideal inclusive

classroom. The last chapter in this book focuses on the mental health of teachers and offers a menu of self-care strategies that are more important now than ever before. Trynia’s frequent use of the word “magic” in this book reveals her belief that when teachers follow solid advice to set the stage for success, unbelievable things can happen.

—**Jerome J. Schultz**, PhD, Clinical Neuropsychologist
Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

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PREFACE

Daniel crosses his arms and scoffs every time you prompt him to focus on his work. You see straight through this protective shell he has created for himself. You know he will overreact to everything you say in his hypervigilant state, always looking for the next threat, the next slight – especially from adults and authority figures. Because there have been too many adults without a positive thing to say. You know this. But you also know that even if you are nice to him and praise him when he works hard or achieves a goal, you can't reverse this trauma overnight. You know there will be days when you'll be at your wit's end. You will be as hypervigilant as he is, scanning the room, particularly his side of the room, for any signs of misbehavior. Your brain reasons that you can catch it before it gets out of hand. Meanwhile, his brain reasons that you are picking on him and that he can never do anything right.

Too many teachers have already yelled at Daniel. For forgetting a pencil (even though he has ADHD, which impairs his ability to plan ahead). Or being off-task (even though most of the time, he didn't understand how to do the task in the first place). And now, Daniel expects only negative interactions with teachers. Anything a teacher says comes at him through a dark lens. Tinting the words as a trap to be tiptoed over or destroyed.

When you tell him you're not treating him any differently than other kids, you aren't wrong. Most kids get along with you just fine, even if you occasionally chastise them. But that's the whole point – Daniel is not like most kids.

You know you can't treat him the same as kids who are not struggling. You'll have to choose your words carefully and be encouraging without being condescending. You know that it will be akin to walking a tightrope where you have to be comfortable swaying with the rope, rather than fighting to hold it still.

I wrote this book for kids like Daniel; the kids who struggle in school and grapple with the chronic stress and emotional fallout of feeling unsuccessful; the kids who are at risk of getting left behind or pushed out altogether; and for all the adults who are desperately trying to reach them.

Students with disabilities are more likely to experience stressful and potentially traumatic events, both within and outside of school. Some students also hold additional marginalized identities – like those based on race, ethnicity,

socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, or religion – and experience the added stress of discrimination and bias.

Researchers have found that students with disabilities have a higher risk of experiencing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Grossman et al., 2022). Additionally, individuals with ADHD and autism are more likely to receive a clinical PTSD diagnosis (Rumball et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2016).

Students who struggle in school are also at higher risk for other mental health challenges and disorders, especially anxiety and depression. Mental health challenges can further interrupt the learning process, causing a vicious cycle of academic and emotional issues. Students need both academic and emotional supports to help them break out of this school trauma cycle.

Mental health challenges in children and adolescents have also significantly increased over the past decade even before the coronavirus pandemic which exacerbated, and by some estimates doubled, symptoms of mental illness (Racine et al., 2021). Educators are faced with increased emotional and behavioral challenges that interrupt the learning process. During the pandemic, schooling disruptions prevented students from learning what they typically would have. Students with disabilities missed opportunities for critical services and learning opportunities which caused widening learning gaps and greater social and emotional strain.

My main goal with writing this book is to give teachers strategies to support students who struggle with learning and mental health challenges. Even though approximately 15% of students have disabilities and spend 80% or more of their day in general education classes, teachers typically receive minimal training and support in how to teach these students. Preservice teacher candidates and early-career teachers may find this book especially useful, though many mid-career and veteran teachers are also looking to stay up to date on current research and strategies to effectively support students with disabilities and emotional-behavioral challenges.

While special education teachers have received more training on understanding disabilities and differentiating instruction, their training in supporting students' mental health needs is still often limited. Special education teachers may be especially interested in learning more about how academic and mental health challenges can fuel each other and strategies they can use and share with colleagues to interrupt the cycle.

Parents and caregivers may find this book helpful in better understanding and supporting their child. Although most of the examples provided in the book are school-based, family members might identify ideas to share with their child's teachers or school. Additionally, many of the strategies suggested in this book could be just as useful at home as they are in school. I did my best to write this book in easy-to-understand language to be accessible for all audiences. I included anecdotes to illustrate many of the concepts but please keep

in mind that these are composites of different individuals. I've changed personal information to protect their identities. To my former students and their families, if you see pieces of yourself represented in this book, I hope I have treated your story with respect. Remember, too, that we are all much more than the stories others tell about us.

The content in this book will help readers:

- Understand how learning occurs in the brain and what can cause long-term, significant learning challenges.
- Understand the school trauma cycle through which academic and mental health challenges fuel each other.
- Learn strategies for supporting students in order to interrupt this cycle.

The book is divided into two parts:

- Part I: The Why – This section explores neuroscientific and educational research to help readers better understand what is happening in the brain when students struggle with academic and mental health challenges. At the end of each chapter, readers can review key takeaways to help consolidate their learning.
- Part II: The How – This section gives educators practical tools and strategies for supporting struggling students both academically and emotionally. Within each chapter, readers will have opportunities to reflect and apply the content to their teaching practice.

I encourage you to use this book in whatever way makes the most sense to you. If you want to jump straight into the strategies provided in Part II, go for it! Though when you have the time and mental space for it, I invite you to go back to Part I. Understanding what is happening in the brain and why your students may be struggling can have an incredible impact on your teaching practice and levels of patience. When I was a special education teacher, people would frequently say to me, “Oh you must have a lot of patience.” At the time, the comment didn't make much sense to me. Most of the time, I didn't feel like I had to recruit my patience at all. I loved teaching my students. I now realize this was because I understood them. When they struggled and became frustrated, I understood where it was coming from. This gave me the mental space to focus my attention on how I could better support them rather than adding my frustration to theirs. Not to say that I never got upset or was at a loss for what to do – that certainly happened! And usually it happened when I was being stretched too thin with too many responsibilities being asked of me or multiple students needing higher levels of support at the same time. Unfortunately, this is happening more and more with teacher shortages and students having higher needs following the interrupted learning and trauma caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In writing this book, I hope to save teachers time and energy that they don't have to waste. At the same time, I

hope administrators and other leaders who pick up this book recognize the intense demands teachers are facing and the urgent need for increasing support while easing stressful workloads.

I tried to write the book I wish I would have had when I was teaching – a book that is heavily researched, gives practical strategies with explanations of why they work, and acknowledges the nuance and art of teaching.

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