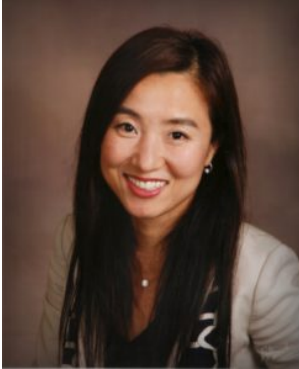# WABASH CENTER
For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Trauma-Informed Online Learning

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A traumatic event is one that is sudden and unexpected. Is Covid-19 a traumatic event? Jonathan Porteus, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist who oversees a crisis and suicide hotline in Sacramento, CA., points out high levels of emotional distress from the Covid-19 crisis, and recommends attending to this mental health crisis as a traumatic event. Porteus comments, "Our society is definitely in a collective state of trauma."[1] The Covid-19 pandemic may also lead to an upcoming wave of mental disorders claims Sandro Galea in an April essay published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.[2] Online learners may be experiencing traumatic emotional distress which may have an impact on their academic performance in their online classes. Then, how can educators in the online teaching of theology and religious studies offer trauma-informed care for online learners? And what should they avoid?

What to do: The educator will likely observe changes to an online learner's behavior and academic performance if mental health challenges arise from traumatic events.

In the face-to-face classroom, the educator is, presumably, more easily able to perceive mental health warning signs such as mood changes, change of appearance, absences, and unusual behaviors. In an online class, it is more difficult to assess warning signs of mental health

distress. Thus, online educators need to develop strategies for identifying mental health challenges in order to provide appropriate trauma-informed online learning. Trauma often impacts the psychological mechanisms which regulate emotions. If there is a sudden change in academic performance, disruptive interaction in the online discussion, disrespectful behavior toward peers and faculty, or failing grades, an educator should reach out and check on a student's emotional state.

It is critical for educators working from a perspective of trauma-informed online learning to know the warning signs of mental health challenges.

Bonny Barr offers these guidelines for identifying the warning signs of mental illness or emotional distress in online students.[3]

ATYPICAL BEHAVIORS (a change from the usual)	UNUSUAL BEHAVIORS	ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS (Sharkin, 2006)
Becoming irritable/short-tempered/obsessive	Emails are accusatory, manipulative, sexually inappropriate or threatening	Late assignments from beginning of course
Sudden deterioration in quality of work	Discussion post contents are: bizarre, fantastical, paranoid, disruptive, confused, or show disorientation	Failing quality of work from beginning of course
Abruptly begins turning in late assignments	Student clearly seems out of touch with reality	Not returning emails or phone calls
Becoming disrespectful in discussion posts		Not turning in work at all
Stops responding to email		Not re-doing work when given an opportunity
Content of work becomes negative/dark/odd in tone		Ongoing display of anxiety about assignments

Trauma-informed care in online-learning is to acknowledge the earlier signs of traumatic experiences. It means that it is valuable to contact online learners when they display atypical behaviors. As Bruce Sharkin states, "Early intervention can help reduce the chance of a student's problems turning into a crisis situation later on."[4] An online educator should be encouraged to address a mental health concern in the early stages of a sudden change of behaviors and identify the emotional distress caused by stress.

What not to do: Trauma-informed online learning begins to create a safe space in the learning interaction. When an educator reaches out to learners by any vritual communication,

it is critical not to be judgmental. Remember you are not there to give a diagnosis or 'solve' mental health challenges. Your first contact is to initiate safe conversations with acceptance and encouragement. For example, an educator can say, or write an email, "I'm touching base with you because I noticed you hadn't submitted anything for several weeks. It seems as if you are having a rough time," or "In the discussion post, I see you are stressed out." An educator's concern and empathy can be expressed by virtual communications. This approach will encourage a learner to share their struggles without having defensive responses and confrontations. An education in trauma-informed online learning can be the first responder for students.

Also, a trauma-informed educator needs to equip themselves to have counseling resources available to students and to know the institutional policies for students with mental health challenges. If anything in the initial conversation leads the educator to be alarmed or have increased concern about the mental health of the learner, then the academic support process can be initiated.

Trauma-informed educators in online learning occupy a unique position to help learners be aware of their mental health struggles and seek helpful resources for their well-being. Further, trauma-informed educators in the online teaching of theology and religious studies are in a unique position to influence religious communities by caring for the online learner. When online educators equip themselves to address the mental health challenges of learners, the online educator becomes a great support system for responding to the psychological needs and wellness, not only for online learners, but also for religious communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

[1] Katherine Kam, "Mental Health an Emerging Crisis of COVID Pandemic," https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20200508/mental-health-emerging-crisis-of-Covid-pandemic?ecd=wnl_spr_051120&ctr=wnl-spr-051120_nsl-LeadModule_title&mb=210I6N5H5gRJeKEyXlsPHQPCAlmlkpgV9%40IzB8Po%2fgY%3d, May 8, 2020, (Accessed May 12, 2020).

[2]Sandro Galea, et.at., "The Mental Health Consequences of COVID-19 and Physical

Distancing: The Need for Prevention and Early Intervention," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Published online April 10, 2020. (Accessed May 12, 2020), doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.1562.

[3] Bonny Barr, "Identifying and Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Online Students in Higher Education," Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume XVII, Number II, Summer 2014 University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center, (Accessed May 12, 2020) https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer172/barr172.html

[4] Bruce S. Sharkin, College Students in Distress: A Resource Guide for Faculty, Staff, and Campus Community (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 52.

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