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Exploring elements of trauma informed mentoring to build stress regulation skills

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Cymorth i Fyfyrwyr | Student Support

Learning is inherently risky, and therefore stressful. In Dan Siegel's model of stress regulation, cognitive functioning is optimal inside the 'window of tolerance'. Self-regulation of stress returns us to the window of tolerance from dysregulated states. Certain conditions such as adolescence, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Trauma and experiences of othering, often reported by neurodivergent learners, narrow the window of tolerance, resulting in frequent dysregulation, which ruptures learning and injures self-efficacy beliefs.

Definitions of mentoring are heterogenous, but Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) describe agreement across the literature that mentoring is relational, with a developmental focus, operating through phases and transitions. For the purposes of the DSA funded mentoring for Autistic students and those with mental health conditions, our Student Support Service defines mentoring as a purposeful (for access and student retention), beneficial relationship in which the student is supported to transition into, through and out of their academic studies, building confidence and resilience to enable desired change. We propose that there are similarities with other developmental relationships in HE settings, facilitated by roles such as the Personal Tutor.

Learners who frequently experience dysregulation need support to consciously explore stress regulation strategies. We argue that the containment and reflective space provided by these developmental relationships can present an ideal context for this exploration. Our mentors have reflected on the key elements of trauma informed practice identified in the resource “Opening Doors; Trauma Informed Practice for the Workforce” produced by NHS Education for Scotland, and on ways to build these into our practice. Here, we invite participants to engage in a similar process, regarding developmental relationships in their broader HE contexts.

Finally, we assert that time for collective reflection is critical for professionals engaged in developmental relationships.

We offer this session as an initial query into what trauma-informed mentoring might mean. Our team is at an early stage in developing our own understanding, and we draw participants’ attention to the Trauma and ACEs Aware university wide project currently starting, led by Sara Childs, which will invite participants from across the university to work on policies, procedures and practices, as well as the physical environment.

