

TRAUMA-SENSITIVE MINDFULNESS: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing

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Distillation for Pine Street Teachers by Judy Butler

Trauma is defined as “an extreme form of stress that can overwhelm our ability to cope.” p. xvi “Pat Ogden wrote, ‘any experience that is stressful enough to leave us feeling helpless, frightened, overwhelmed or profoundly unsafe is considered a trauma.’” p. xix

While Mindfulness has in research been shown over and over to be beneficial in coping with stress, the question Treleaven poses is: what could go wrong here in its use with those who have experienced trauma? And, his answer is: plenty! Because, put in the most simplistic terms: attention can retrigger traumatic states. Traumatized individuals have often developed coping strategies. These have served to protect them and deserve to be respected. His book is a guide to teaching Mindfulness meditation in a trauma-sensitive manner so that students are not further traumatized. He recognizes that many students will require a therapist in lieu of, or in addition to, a meditation teacher.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS:

My Goal is to pull out some aspects of his work that will be helpful to your understanding of trauma, help you assess for possible trauma, and avoid further trauma to your student(s), especially for those of you who are not therapists or who are not therapists who have dealt with much trauma.

There are many ways in which our style of Reflective Meditation is much safer inherently than classic Mindfulness in that it gives students so many choices. A prime example is our practice of letting students know that they have control, i.e. that if they are experiencing discomfort of any kind, they can even get up and leave the space. That does not ensure that they can DO that; they might want to please us as their teacher or they might freeze but it is an important message.

Treleaven develops 5 main principles spending a Chapter on each.

Chapter/Principle 1: The Window of Tolerance:

“The Window of Tolerance is an internal zone of support for survivors and a starting point for all trauma-informed practice. It’s a way to help ensure people aren’t exceeding how much they can handle.” This is the way he lays it out in the book:

Hyperarousal Zone: Increased Sensation, Emotional Reactivity, Hypervigilance, Intrusive Imagery, Disorganized Cognitive Processing

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE – OPTIMAL AROUSAL ZONE

Hypoarousal Zone: Relative Absence of Sensation, Numbing of Emotions, Disabled Cognitive Processing, Reduced Physical Movement

He goes on to list things to watch that could suggest someone may be out of their Window of Tolerance:

Flat affect

slack muscle tone

Excessive sweating

Hyperventilating

Noticeable paleness of skin

Exaggerated startle response

Extremely rigid muscle tone

Noticeable dissociation: person appears disconnected from their body

Emotional volatility: enraged, excessive crying, terror

And he lists these things to watch for in interviewing someone:

Disorganized Speech or slurring words

Reports of blurred vision

Inability to make eye contact during interactions

Reports of flashbacks, nightmares or intrusive thoughts

TIPS FOR TEACHERS:

You will notice that in the Window of Tolerance chart above, some of the factors listed under Hyper or Hypoarousal Zones can also be common meditative experiences such as Increased Sensation or Disorganized Cognitive Processing, Relative Absence of Sensation or Numbing. Here are some questions for reflection and discussion:

How does one discern between meditative states that end with the meditation and those that intrude into the report?

Do Samadhi states regulate the Window of Tolerance?

When do the states themselves dysregulate students?

Chapter/Principle 2: Focus on Stabilization and Safety:

Treleaven states, “Our first priority as mindfulness practitioners is to ensure that people are safely strengthening their faculty to be present for life – not just cycle through stretches of dysregulated arousal.” He goes on, “If we learn or assess that someone we’re working with has experienced trauma – or is actively experiencing symptoms – our foremost concern is that they remain stable and safe.”

The following are tools he suggests for students to slow the pace in order to maintain a feeling of safety, stability and control. Helping to modulate the intensity of meditation is empowering to them:

Open one’s eyes during meditation

Meditate for a shorter period

Take structured breaks during meditation (stretch, walk)

Take a few slow, deep breaths

Place a hand on one’s heart or sense one’s feet on the floor

Focus on an external object (candle or object)

TIPS FOR TEACHERS: Monitor your own Window of Tolerance. Treleaven states effective teachers generally have wide windows of tolerance. We need to be attentive to our own self-care and meeting with our co-teachers to discuss challenges in this area. Here are some questions for reflection and discussion:

Was there an experience when you knew it was “too much?” What did you do or not do?

Was there an experience when you stayed with what seemed like too much and it led somewhere helpful?

What kind of teaching situations have likely put you outside your Window of Tolerance?

Chapter/Principle 3: Keep the Body in Mind: Working with Dissociation

“Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies...Physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past.” Bessel van der Kolk

TIPS FOR TEACHERS: Again, our approach is particularly suited to a trauma-sensitive approach. We seek to create a physical setting that is calm and comfortable and we encourage each student to work toward a comfortable body posture, not attempt to achieve some rigid ideal. This alone can provide some safety and model that each person is in control of what works for their body. The process of meditation and then journaling may also provide a helpful structure within which to organize one’s meditative experience after the fact. And, the process of talking about the content may also provide some scaffolding to assist one in reorganizing and processing sensitive and/or traumatic material.

Treleaven defines Dissociation as “cutting away from one’s physical and emotional experience.” Dissociation “exists on a spectrum” ranging from mild detachment, spacing out or daydreaming which any of us may

experience. It can also occur in “more potent forms, involving psychological numbing, amnesia, and the sense that the self or the world is unreal.” Dissociation will often be correlated with traumatic experiences. He gives some suggestions for how best to work with dissociation in the context of meditation.

Give choices whenever possible

Watch for signs of dissociation

Use the five senses of taste, smell, hearing and seeing to help someone return to their window of tolerance

Be respectful of physical boundaries

TIPS FOR TEACHERS:

Our approach is all about choices.

In interviewing students, watch for and reflect on signs of dissociation.

In interviewing we might also use the five senses to help someone return to their Window of Tolerance.

Always be respectful of physical boundaries. Pick up on subtle body cues.

Chapter/Principle 4: Practice in Relationship

Treleaven makes the point that healing occurs in relationships. This could be within healthy relationships, with a therapist, with a meditation teacher, within a Sangha. Any of these venues can be valuable resources. He clearly states, “we can’t heal trauma in solitude.” He indicates many mindfulness centers use a screening questionnaire to gather background information about a potential participant/student. Another suggestion is to develop a “collaborative relationship” with a student prior to beginning.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS: To relate this to Pine Street, I believe we begin slowly with educating students to our approach. We give them many choices and can offer them an opportunity to tell us as much as they are comfortable about their inner world and life history during an individual session. We can educate ourselves about trauma and about resources within the Sangha and within the community so that we can refer to other colleagues, as needed. It is important to recognize our limitations and know when to consult with another teacher. Some questions for reflection and discussion are:

What do you know about your triggers and limitations?

When might you consult with another teacher? Who do you feel comfortable consulting with?

Chapter/Principle 5: Understand Social Context: Working Effectively Across Difference

“Racism is a visceral experience.... You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.” Ta-Nehisi Coates, p. 127

“Allyship and solidarity offers a space for healing and transformation for those who are targeted by oppression and experiences of trauma.” Chris Lymbertos, p. 177

“Understanding social context means that we can see and understand difference – knowing that each of us has a unique history and is being shaped in a particular way by the systems around us.”

Treleaven, p. 179.

He goes on to identify nine social classifications from Nieto’s book *Beyond Inclusion Beyond Empowerment*, a powerful guide to social change practice in the context of oppression. These are: age, disability, religious culture, ethnicity, social class culture, sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, national origin and gender.

Essentially, the message here is that any of the nine social classifications above can be marginalizing and/or a significant source of trauma.