



# Trauma Informed Psychosocial Support For Migrant Students.

By Roberto Dansie, PhD

Trauma is an event or series of events where a person experiences threat or perceived threats to a person's wellbeing. For students who have such little control over their environment, a threat or perceived threat can create an ongoing anxiety disorder regarding their perceived safety.

We can all understand given the current cultural language in the United States about undocumented migrant families that are in danger of deportation, for a student of undocumented parents, it is understandable that they can become traumatized by the constant real threat of family trauma and can develop anxiety regarding their safety.

So, how do we help?

Let us begin with a list of Twenty Best Practices for Trauma Informed Education.

1. First, we must become aware of the trauma or perceived trauma at its roots, and how to create an interaction without re-traumatization.
2. Arrange for one on one support to talk about what is currently causing outbursts, anxiety or withdrawal in a way that the trauma is not exposed in a group setting.
3. Learn as much as you can through observation.
4. Develop your capacity to recognize facial micro-signals to read cues to respond appropriately.

5. Seek to understand the function of behaviors that serve as coping attempts and assist the child in finding a better coping behavior.
6. Provide an environment that makes the students feel safe and connected when possible.
7. Understand the Four Elements Personality Model of Cultural Wisdom™ to enhance your culturally specific approach.
8. Be ready to assist the other person in shifting their focus from past traumatic experiences to “here” and “now.”
9. Become proficient in breathing techniques to stay calm and present in tense situations.
10. Make it a habit to go into your best “resourceful mode” when students are displaying signs of trauma or toxic stress.
11. Become a resource to enhance mindfulness, calmness and wellbeing.



12. Practice self-care.

13. Be sure to choose the least-restrictive option possible in every situation for the student.

14. Trauma informed care may be perceived as punitive, seek to reassure the student that extra care is being taken because they are a member school community. Feeling the process as a WE is very important in addressing trauma.

15. Make time to debrief with involved staff members.

Prioritize debriefing after any crisis. This will help you find patterns and triggers—and prevent crises from reoccurring, and help develop successful coping skills for the next crisis.

16. Help the student focus in creating changes for current triggers or deficits that are negatively impacting them. Make a list of things that can be changed and things that cannot. Seek to empower the student to focus on those things that are in their control.

17. Create a trauma response plan with your core team members. This plan will seek both to address trauma in students, and to provide for your safety should the behavior escalate. With traumatized students, violent outbursts are often a response to an unknown trigger and the student may respond with violence. In this case, everyone on the team must act in unison to reduce the risk of injury for those involved.

18. Seek to create a space in which staff can be peaceful, meditate or practice deep breathing exercises. This space should be recognized as a “Quite Zone” and should be separate from students.

19. Identify triggers that you know will cause negative behaviors to escalate, keep every person who regularly interacts with the student aware when possible. Some key triggers may include, being touched, being isolated, loud noise, yelling, a person in uniform. When ever possible, seek to give the student the opportunity to control their environment and the outcome of the triggering event. Ask questions like , “Do you have a preference regarding the gender of staff assigned to respond you

during a crisis?” For students who have experienced sexual abuse, this is particularly important question to be asked.

20. Make a list of alternate activities that may deescalate a student who’s trauma response may be engaged such as:

1. Listening to music.
2. Reading quietly.
3. Talking with a peer support student that has been trained in peer support.
4. Talking with their doctor or therapist.
5. Physical exercise to balance an abundance of energy.
6. Art therapy, clay, paint, drawing, or any activity that engages the senses.
7. Creative writing or journaling to give an outlet to internalized emotions.
8. Breathing exercises.
9. Guided Meditation.
10. Using a weighted vest throughout the day.
11. Using a weighted blanket for a 30 min quiet voluntary time out.
12. Lying down with a warm or cold face cloth.
13. Identify whom the student considers to be trusted person to seek out if they have been triggered. If this person is often chosen by students, seek their leadership and involvement in the resolution process.

Younger students are most in need of these interventions, children are less resilient than adults to the impact of traumatic events. Children’s coping skills are less effective than those of adults, making them more likely to become overwhelmed and traumatized. The potential impact of trauma on children goes well beyond the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Traumatic experiences can interrupt normal development. This can lead to problems with self-esteem, trust, and interpersonal relations.

Culture is an important part of the healing process and must be considered as a tool that has both roots and wings. Culture when positive has the ability to heal and create a positive sense of identity, self esteem and sense of WE.

## Cultural Perspective of Healing Trauma

(Below you will find my chapter in the book produced for London Metropolitan University for medical professionals, “Responses to Traumatized Children” published in 2007, by Palgrave Macmillan. Since then cross cultural psychology has become more widely accepted as relevant to healing trauma.)

Culture sensitivity is becoming a significant variable in treatment and rehabilitation of traumatized children. Early work in this area, however, has been influenced by research on race, culture, migration and mental health (Murphy 1973, 1977; Ward et al. 2001; Fernando 2002). Indeed, some previous research work has faced design problems and has relied heavily on convenience cases and clinical samples (Brislin and Baumgardner 1971). However, the last four decades have witnessed a major shift from the medical model (Sum-merfield 1995; Timimi 2002; d’Ardenne and Mahtani 1989; Kareem and Littlewood 1992) towards the importance of culture influences on human behavior. One aspect of this new orientation was the establishment of research and the foundation of the new disciplines such as cross-cultural psychology (Triandis 1980, 1994; Triandis et al. 1988; Lonner and Malpass 1994; Brislin 1993; Matsumoto and Juang 2004; Matsumoto 1994); trans-cultural psychiatry (Leff 1988; Bhugra 1993; Bhugra and Bhui 2001; Dwivedi 1996; de Silva 1999) and multi-cultural counselling (Pedersen 1985, 1991; Abramowitz and Murray 1983; Pomterotto and Casas 1991; Palmer and Laungani 1999). This emphasis has recently been extended to cultural awareness in nursing and health care (Holland and Hogg 2001). All these new fields now attract a multidisciplinary audience and address topics ranging from concepts of normality and abnormality across cultures and culture bound syndromes to other issues relevant to childrearing practices across culture, acculturation, emotion across cultures, non-verbal communication and sensitivity to the values and beliefs of both minority groups and indigenous population during treatment and rehabilitation.

It should be emphasized here that these disciplines are studying variations in human behavior as well as considering ways in which behavior is influenced by cultural context. The new research in these disciplines has been also driven by the core propositions that sensitivity to culture can bring both better outcomes and avoid misdiagnosis and discontinuation of treatment (Abramowitz and Murray 1983). In fact, the patient's charter (DoH 1996) and the National Association of Health Authorities and Trust (NAHAT) in the UK are also taking this issue seriously. They have clearly stated in their guidelines, published in 1996, that the National Health Services (NHS) should respect both religion and cultural beliefs for all patients and families and avoid making assumptions about such needs. Further, John Cox (who served as President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, UK) in his foreword statement (Bhugra and Bhui 2001) made the following remarks: 'the Royal College of Psychiatrists insists that training in transcultural psychiatry and culture competence, for example, becomes a core requirement for trainees, as well as for consultants in continuing professional development'. Using a combination of cultural approaches alongside others seems to offer a better framework to help many troubled traumatized individuals.

Cultural psychology emerged and begun to grow during the 1960s as an independent discipline, evolving rapidly and led to several influential journals in the last four decades (Shiraev and Levy 2001; Berry et al. 1992). One of the most obvious goals of cross-cultural psychology is the testing of existing psychological knowledge and theories. Cross-cultural psychology also aims to improve our understanding of the diversity of human activity, and tries to understand the impact of culture on human behavior. It also aims to look at emotional and behavioral characteristics of people and dismantle stereotypes and prejudices (Matsumoto and Juang 2004). In fact, many clinicians and therapists, when encountering a culturally diverse population, tend to use their own appraisal, i.e. applying their own individual standards and understanding when coming across different cultures. And the expected outcomes are therefore more likely to be inappropriate diagnosis and inappropriate management due to the fact that a

psychologist here would be looking at a non-Western culture, through Western glasses, and failing to notice important aspects of the non- Western culture. However, the idea behind introducing this chapter is to make clinicians and other mental health professionals start thinking seriously about differences and similarities across individuals and culture boundaries. Culturally positive practices should be embraced, cultures have roots and wings, let us focus on those practices that provide wings for the students of the Migrant Education Program.

In the Migrant Education Program, there is much opportunity for healing as outlined in the article I wrote for Indian Country Today,

### MIGRANT WISDOM. -

To make a home in the world requires some skill. But to make of the world our home takes even greater skill. And yet, this is exactly what migrant wisdom has taught us across the ages. No boundaries: the whole world is our home. Just like the salmon, born in sweet water, travels around the world and finds his way with his inner compass, and the monarch butterfly travels thousands of miles and finds, always its sanctuary, in the same way, the migrant follows the currents of life and destiny. I was told, as a child, that the first Mexicans discovered their identity when they left their ancestral land, Aztlan. They called that which was in heaven, and earth and everywhere "Mexi", the Great Spirit. "Mexica" meant him or her who follows God. It was, right from the beginning, a spiritual way of life. From this perspective, the entire earth was felt as "tonantzin" which means our mother. With this understanding, no matter where one finds himself, one is home. Mystics from around the world have given us testimony of their sense of togetherness with life and nature. The farmworker knows this from the tomato, from the peach, from the lettuce. They find the life that lives in us all. The birds sing, every morning. Their song carries harmony along the day. "Buenos



Dias" they say, and they bless you with these worlds. It's plural. "Good days", which means that they wish you a good day even on those days when they don't see you.

You

are not alone. Someone already wished you a good day for today. That goodness is there already waiting for you, from the moment you wake up. The earlier the better.

There is a certain devotion to doing your task with skill and impeccability. The floors shine, the beds are flawlessly made, the roses bloom; the grass manicured, the fields sharp, the tables precise: art shines everywhere. So much for so little. Because it's a matter of doing everything "bien hecho" the right way. And there is generosity. There is pride in giving you the best meal, the best drink. The best of everything. The culture knows.

You ask a question, and they take time to answer. If the answer is complex, they take time to make things clear. You are more important than time: that is what it means to be sacred.

It is wonderful to see that somewhere, someone has preserved his humanity. Migrants do this for the world. At a time when others are confined to nationality, status or position, migrants quietly affirm "I am human." Everything that we do must begin with this, and everything that we accomplish, without this is meaningless.

Cesar Chavez was not eloquent: he just spoke the truth. When he was happy, he smiled. When he was sad, he cried. He was transparent. When he fasted, he felt the pain of others out of his own free will. Those who had it hard knew that he could relate to them, yet his eyes showed more than pain. Migrants know something about deep love. When you have, share. When you don't, give of yourself. A migrant knows he has a self to give.

This was a migrants' dream: From the field to every field. Let us all rise. "Si se puede!"

Yes we can!

And yet, the migrant knows that there is death, illness, misfortune. And just like in the celebration everyone is welcome to share in the joy, it is in adversity that the gregarious spirit of the migrant comes together, the bell of the soul calling upon everyone. The migrant knows something of the alchemy of life: that pain shared is pain reduced.

Rituals continue to chart the life of the migrant. They are there in the harvest and the planting; they are there when life begins and when it departs; they are there as we greet and when we say goodbye; they are there for sorrow and joy; they are there in days and in ages, for moments and for generations. They assist you along the stages of life and they help you to age gracefully. Migrants know how to become adults and how to grow old without fear. They well know that aging is a

privilege that not everybody gets. The migrant knows how to live the mystery of life, the wisdom of peace in insecurity. They live life with a passion. Just look at those colors and try those flavors! The spice brings tears and the sweet humming. The piñata is treated so tenderly but there is no hesitation when the time comes to break it.

Eating is always a celebration at a migrant's home. Rare is the migrant who eats alone, and even those surround themselves with invisible loved ones. Here and there you find photos of loved ones and somewhere a candle burns for those who are far away or on their way to heaven.

There are those who from their abundant foolishness have gleaned much wisdom. And they impart their lessons to anyone in need of their words via storytelling. Through neurological research we now know that story is the most effective tool in retaining memory. A student is much more likely to connect emotionally and therefore retain the longterm memory of the lesson. It is important not to moralize. Just to share their stories. Stories of solidarity are healing and allow for resiliency.

Migrants believe in miracles. Because they believe in them they happen.

Only then can they exercise "paz-ciencia" the science of peace. There is space in their world, you can hear yourself think. Their heart is like a still forest. And when they act, they become one with their action measuring their effort in tasks rather than hours. From then on they cultivate the flower of the heart "la flor del Corazon." From then on, his life becomes a path with a heart.

You will not find a higher way of life than this one, a path with a heart is filled with the science of peace and hope.



Toltec/Mayan Elemental Cultural Terms for Children and the attributes of those Elements.

In the Toltec/Mayan language of my ancestors, there was early on an understanding of how language influences actions. We know now through psychological research that only identifying with ones trauma or victimhood can lead to learned helplessness, anxiety and depression.

The four elements are the legacy of wisdom cultures -including Native American, Latino, African and European- that focus on natural forms of intelligence and ways of being. These four intelligences are: Earth, Water, Air and Fire, which represent, physical, emotional, mental and energy intelligence.

Earth Children

Intelligence ~ Physical

Center ~ Body

Focus ~ Sensation

Need ~ Order

Personality Type ~ Calculator

Faculty ~ Detail

Time Orientation ~ Past

Space Orientation ~ External Space

Daily Peak ~ Night

Natural Balance ~ Active Meditation

Best Practices ~ Gardening or activities in nature

Strength ~ Physical Intelligence

## Fire Children

Intelligence ~ Energy Intelligence

Center ~ Energy

Focus ~ Intuition

Need ~ Passion

Personality Type ~ Social

Faculty ~ Creativity

Time Orientation ~ No Time

Space Orientation ~ No Space

Daily Peak ~ Morning

\*Natural Balance Fire Children are often given this remedy to help calm their emotions ~ The Mayan Three Miracles Tea (Anise, Chamomile, and Spearmint)

Best Practice ~ Martial Arts

Strength ~ Inspiration

## Water Children

Intelligence ~ Emotional

Center ~ Heart

Focus ~ Emotions

Need ~ Harmony

Personality Type ~ Influential

Faculty ~ Empathy

Time Orientation ~ Present

Space Orientation ~ In between space

Daily Peak ~ Early Evening

Best Practice ~ Art

Strength ~ Compassion

Air Children  
Intelligence ~ Mental  
Center ~ Mind  
Focus ~ Thinking  
Need ~ Reason  
Personality Type ~ Developer  
Faculty ~ Complexity  
Time Orientation ~ Future  
Space Orientation ~ Inner Space  
Daily Peak ~ Afternoon  
Best Practice ~ Meditation  
Strength ~ Vision

I go deeper into these concepts in the hand out

“Children of the Four Elements”

And remember: In the world you may just be one person, but to one person you can mean the whole world.