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Cultivating Trauma- Informed Spaces in Education: A Quick Reference Guide for Educators

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✿ Cultivating Trauma-Informed Spaces in Education: A Quick Reference Guide for Educators



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The full Manual is available on SOURCE at
https://source.sheridancollege.ca/centres_sgg_2023_trauma_education/1/

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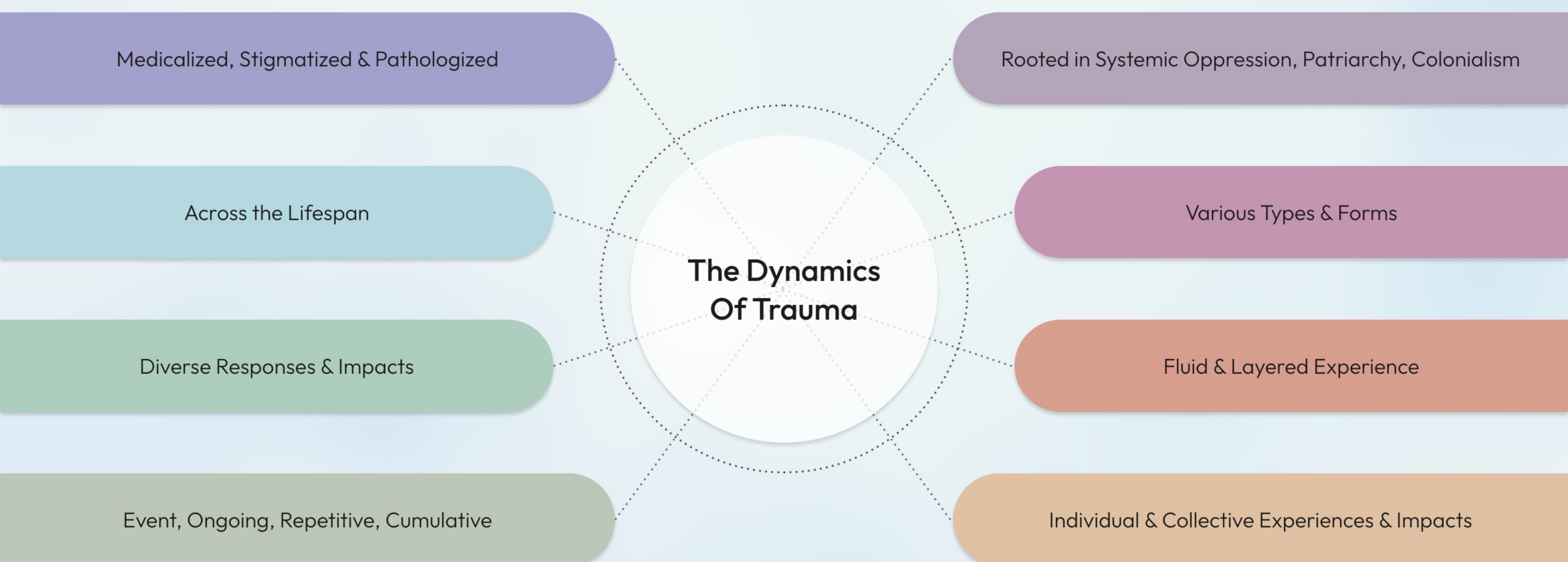
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Understanding Trauma

Trauma is a subjective response to an expected or unexpected event, collection of events, repetitive experiences, or the cumulation of multiple experiences, that compromise an individual's sense of safety and control (adapted from Klinic, 2013). Trauma can take different forms, such as single incident, complex or repetitive, developmental, historical, and intergenerational (Klinic Community Health Centre, 2013), and intersects with racism and various forms of oppression. Trauma is best defined by the person that experiences it. Trauma responses can impact a person in a multitude of ways including behaviorally, economically, emotionally, physically, psychologically, relationally, and spiritually. Trauma can be both an individual and collective experience, often the result of systemic oppression, patriarchy, colonization, and social determinants of health. Trauma can result from an individual's daily engagement in navigating the very systems intended to support people, including the criminal justice system, education, medical, and social service systems. Trauma can also result from demonstrating empathy and compassion for others, often referred to as Compassion Fatigue (Carla Joinson, 1992 as cited in Chachula, 2020), Vicarious Trauma (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995), and Empathic Distress (Singer & Klimecki, 2014 as cited in Tait, 2019).



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Understanding Trauma-Informed Education

Recognizing the lack of a universal definition for Trauma-Informed Education; and in an effort to address some of the gaps we have created the following term **“Trauma-Informed Education Grounded in a Systemic Analysis”** which is broadly defined as: Trauma-Informed Education Grounded in a Systemic Analysis is a multi-faceted pedagogical approach and practice which integrates principles of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression, Intersectionality, Harm Reduction, and Universal Design of Learning. It builds upon Harris & Fallof’s (2001) term “Trauma- Informed Practice” and the five core values of trust, safety, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. This approach recognizes the prevalent and systemic nature of trauma, the range of individual and collective trauma experiences, including historical and intergenerational trauma, and that trauma is institutionally embedded, including trauma in education systems and the many systems communities engage and operate in daily. Integrating a strength-based perspective, this approach recognizes there are a range of trauma responses based on diverse experiences and needs; and aims to understand that individual and community adaptations to trauma exist along a continuum of coping and survival strategies. Operating from a belief that every interaction can be Trauma-Informed, Trauma-Informed Education integrates specific helping qualities, skills, preventative and supportive strategies, and a commitment to social justice and social change. Trauma- Informed Education Grounded in a Systemic Analysis is a system-wide approach and practice that is best implemented across macro, mezzo, and micro, systems to effect real change.

“Trauma-Informed Practice is a way of reaching people with what they need, as opposed to what it is that we think that they need” (Community Agency, 2021).

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Why We Should Care About Trauma-Informed Education

✧ Benefits of Implementing Trauma-Informed Education

- Decreases new trauma experiences and re-traumatization and vicarious trauma.
- Supports positive organizational and learning outcomes for students and employees (increased engagement, retention, well-being, and support).
- Enhances safety and wellness for students and employees.
- Supports principles and practices of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, Intersectionality, and Universal Design of Learning.
- Supports systemic change.
- Destigmatizes trauma and trauma responses and recognizes the value of lived experiences in learning spaces and organizations.
- Supports strength-based and holistic views of students and employees.
- Enhances a sense of belonging and a healthier and more compassionate community.

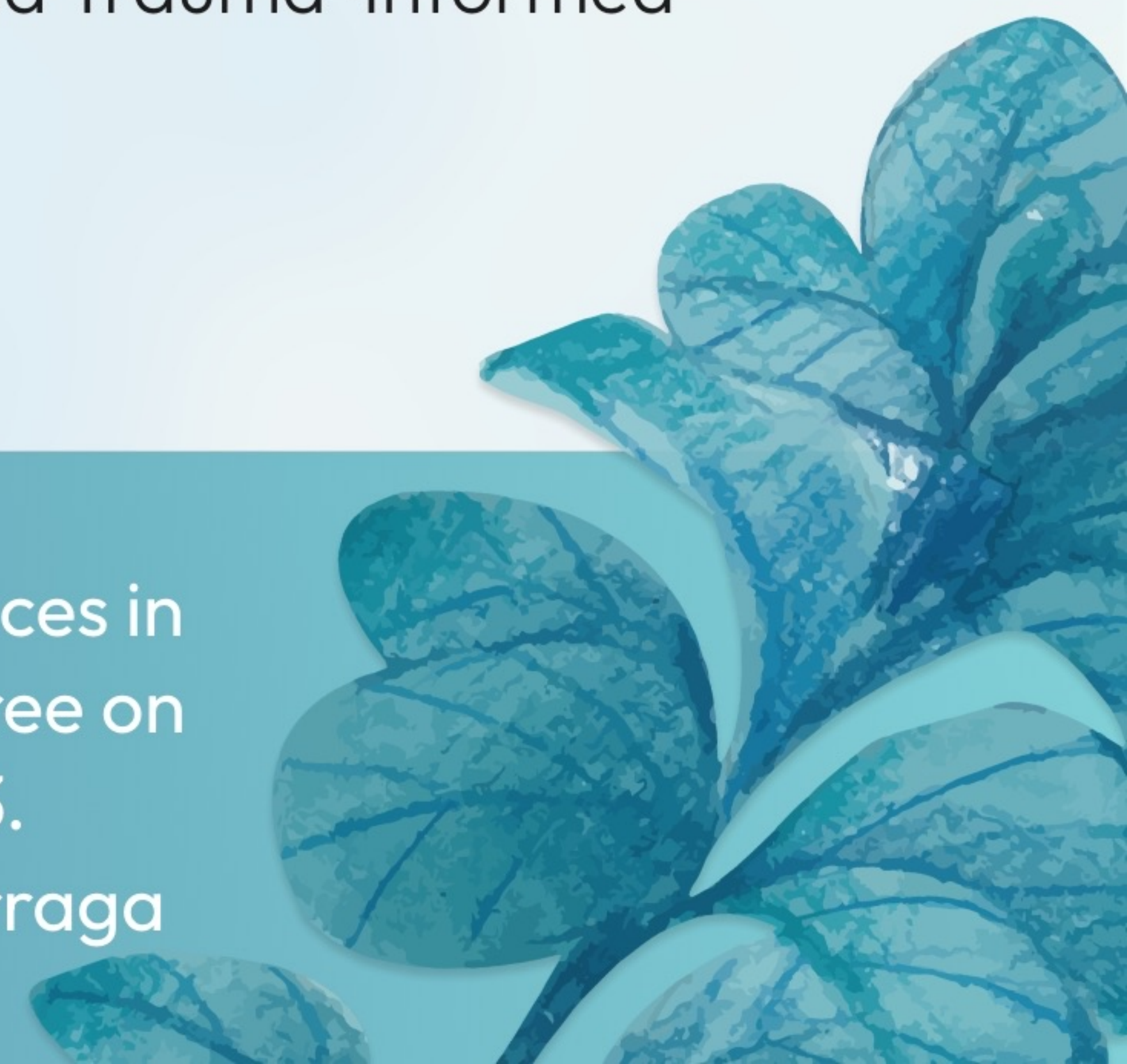
Post-secondary educational systems play an important role in proactively preventing trauma and supporting healing and systemic change.

✧ A Call to Action: 5 Things You Can Do

1. Re-evaluate your current practices and how your practices may inadvertently cause harm, trauma, retraumatization, and vicarious trauma (ex. assumptions, biases, judgments, communication styles, expectations, documentation, curriculum, policy).
2. Reflect on how you 'hold' space, cultivate and contribute to space (reflecting on social location, practicing cultural humility, committing to Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression, engaging in power 'with' models). Collaborate in creating safer learning and working spaces for diverse learners and employees.
3. Recognize your own historical and current experiences of trauma and how it may impact your practices and self. Engage in ongoing reflections and learning on trauma.
4. Integrate Trauma-Informed Education statements in department and program mission/value statements. Incorporate wellness statements and sensitive content warnings in the course syllabus, assignments, and student documentation forms.
5. Connect with others through debriefing circles, collaborative spaces, and Trauma-Informed Education Review Committees to support real systemic change.

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Our Hope

Our hope is that educators and educational institutions, through this preventative and harm-reducing approach, can enhance their learning spaces and workplaces to become more compassionate, supportive, equitable, and flexible; further supporting the collective care and well-being of the diverse community, while addressing the systemic causes of trauma within and outside of the educational system”

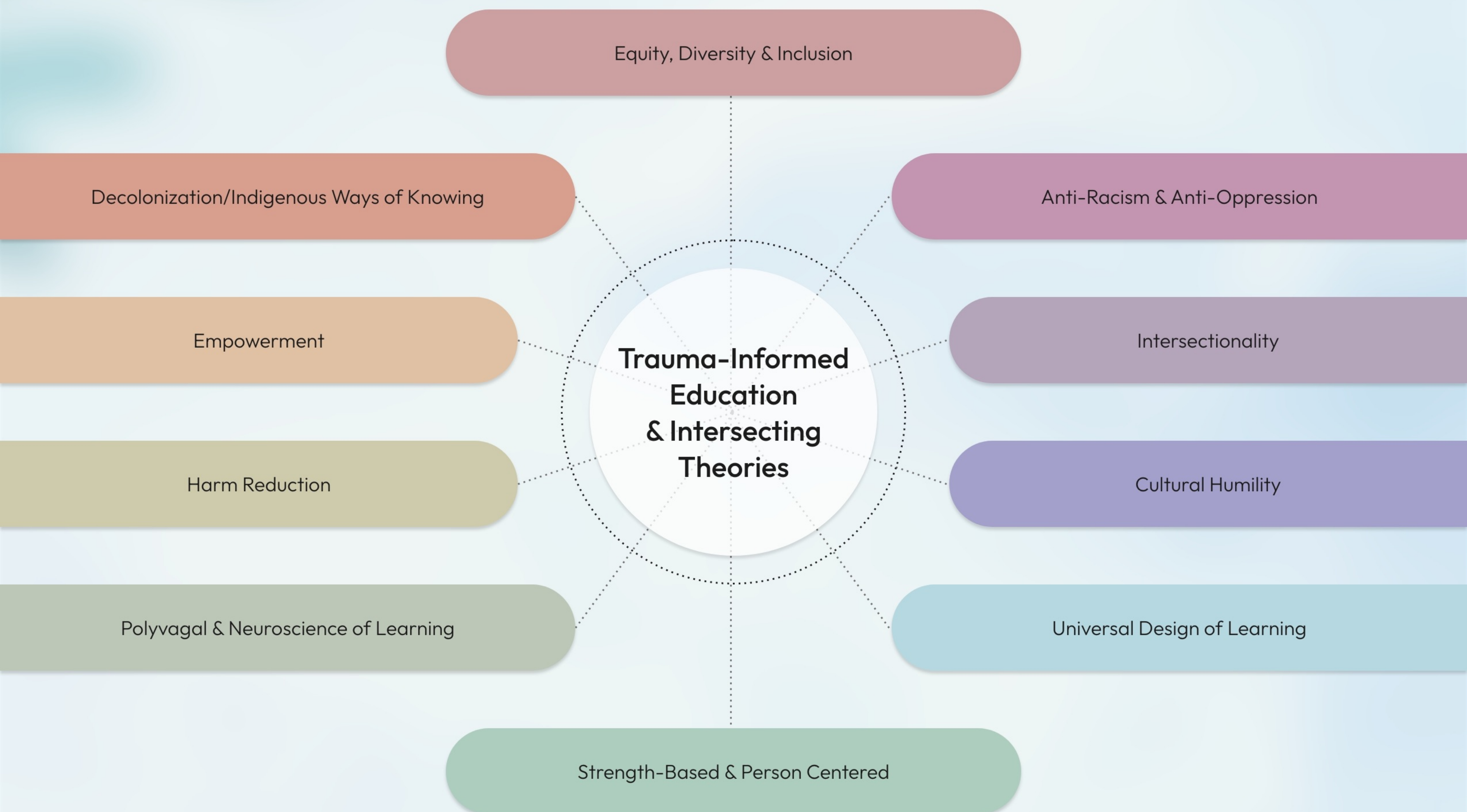


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Intersecting Theories



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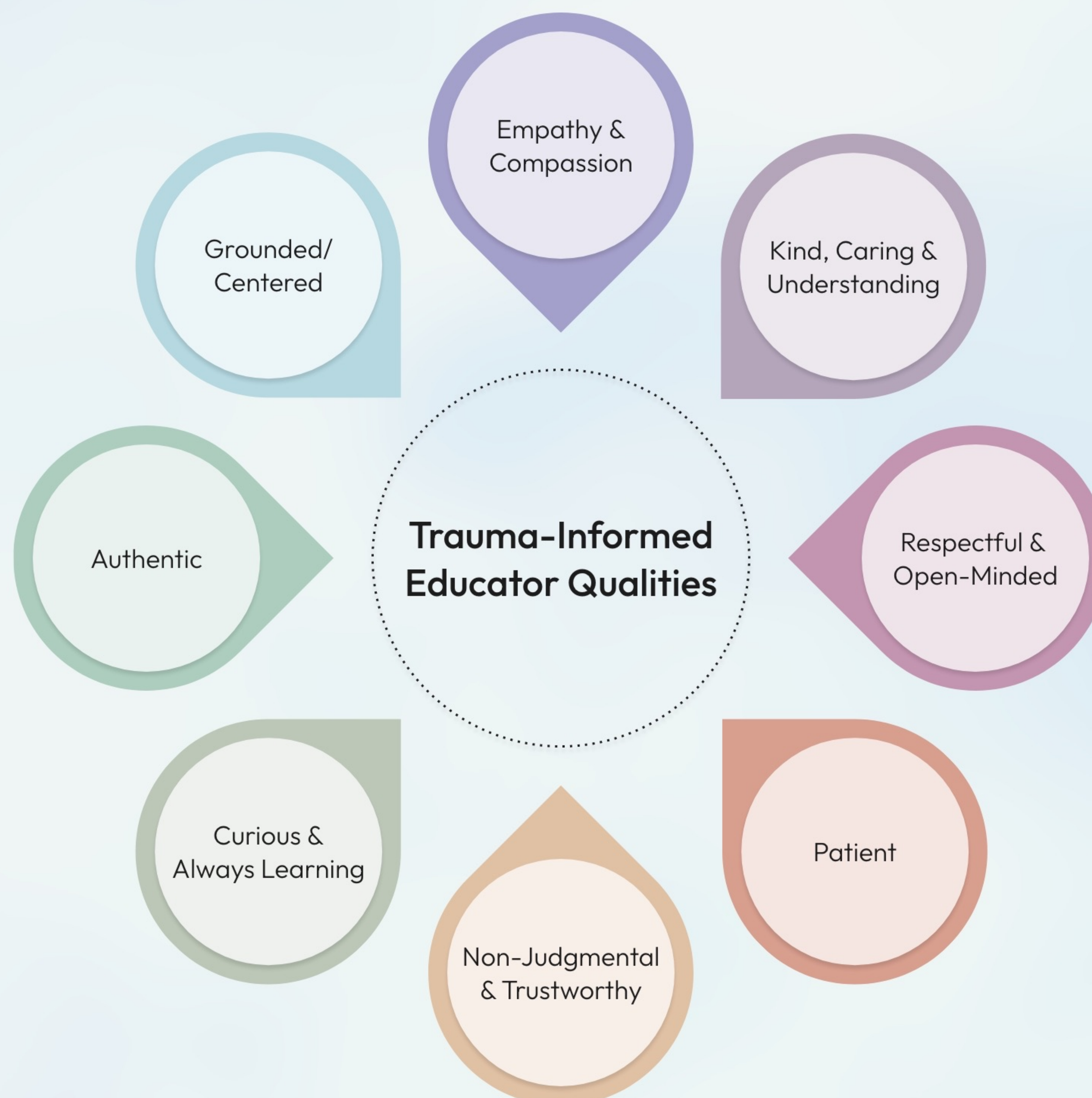
“Trauma-Informed Practice is unextractable from anti-racism and anti-oppression work. I don’t think we can divide a line between the two” (Employee, 2021).

“Indigenous teachings, as well as Trauma-Informed Practice, recognizes a person’s right to choose and self-determination” (Employee, 2021).

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Trauma-Informed Educator Qualities



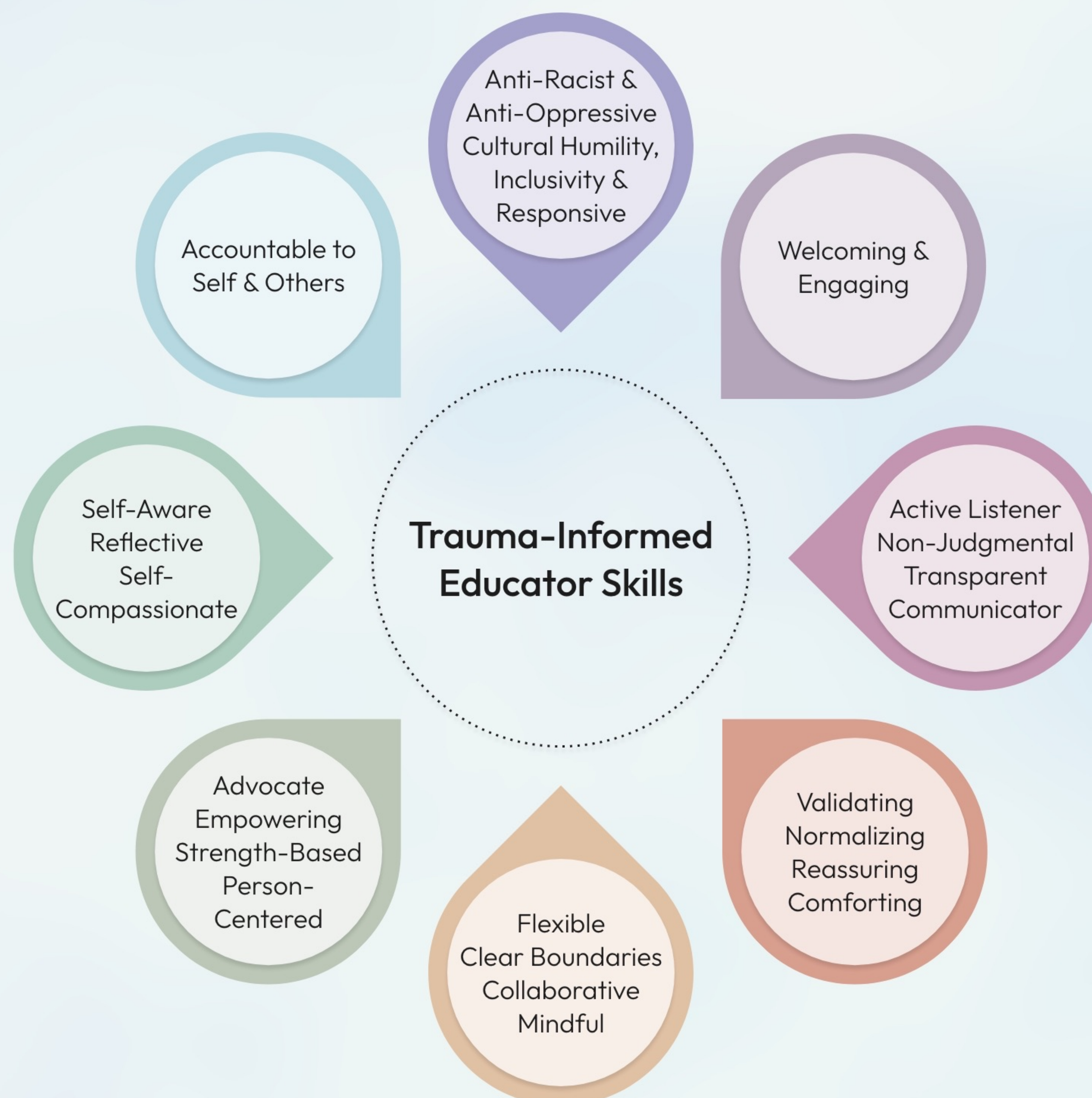
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“Every single moment of everything we do, try really hard to take a step back and look at how it might be felt from someone experiencing it” (Community Agency, 2021).

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Trauma-Informed Educator Skills



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“I take my time caring for people’s emotions and feelings” (Employee, 2021).

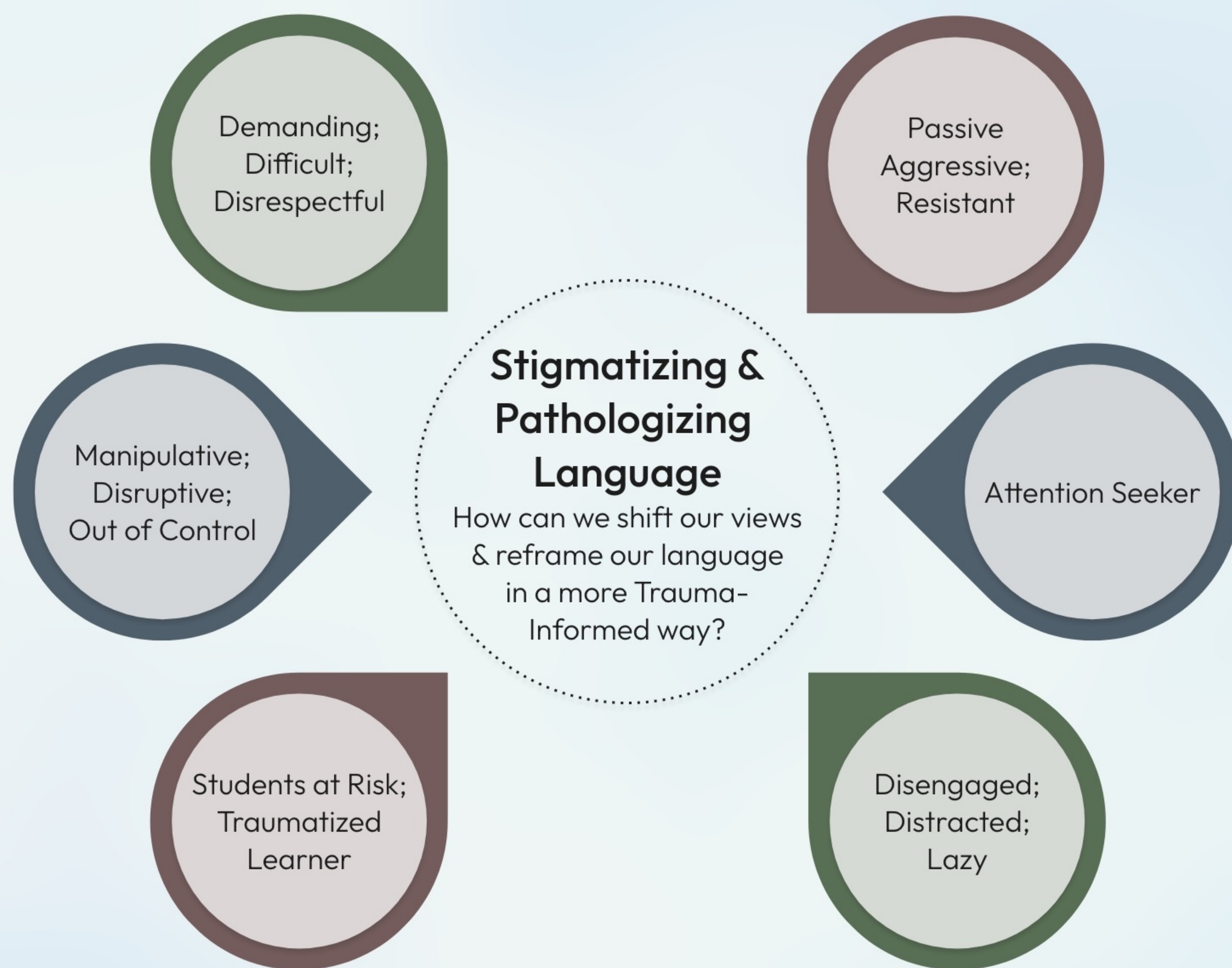
“Being kind and compassionate under any circumstance” (Employee, 2021).

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Understanding Behaviours and Reframing Language

It is important to understand the layers and complexities of trauma, the range of trauma responses, and how trauma informs adult learners' behaviors and diverse ways of being. It requires educators to shift from assumptions and punitive approaches towards reframing behaviors from a strength-based perspective and engaging in proactive approaches.



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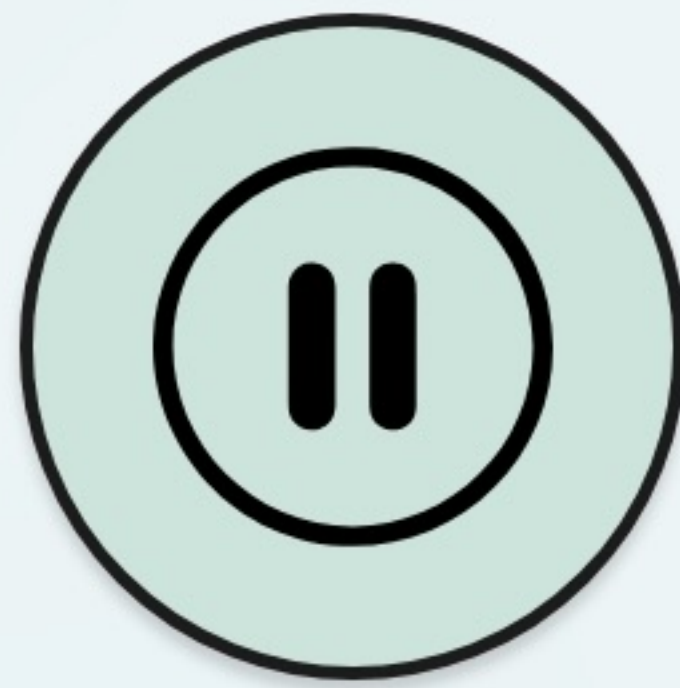
“With Professors who did not apply a Trauma-Informed Practice approach, you could feel sometimes that they were quick to interpret students behaviours and make a comment on it. Whereas there can be so many reasons for that behaviour” (Alumni, 2021).

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Strategies to Consider When Deficit Based Assumptions Are Being Made

Many students are impacted by experiences of trauma and re-traumatization. They may present various trauma responses. There is an opportunity for educators to engage in reflexive practice and growth and approach student behaviour in a more supportive way.



Pause & Notice

When assumptions, bias or judgements come up in your interactions.



Recognize & Empathize

Something may be happening in their life.

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Remember

Trauma responses are coping & survival strategies. They are neither good or bad.



Explore & Unpack

What is their need (sleep, food, control, connection, support, empathy)?



Connect

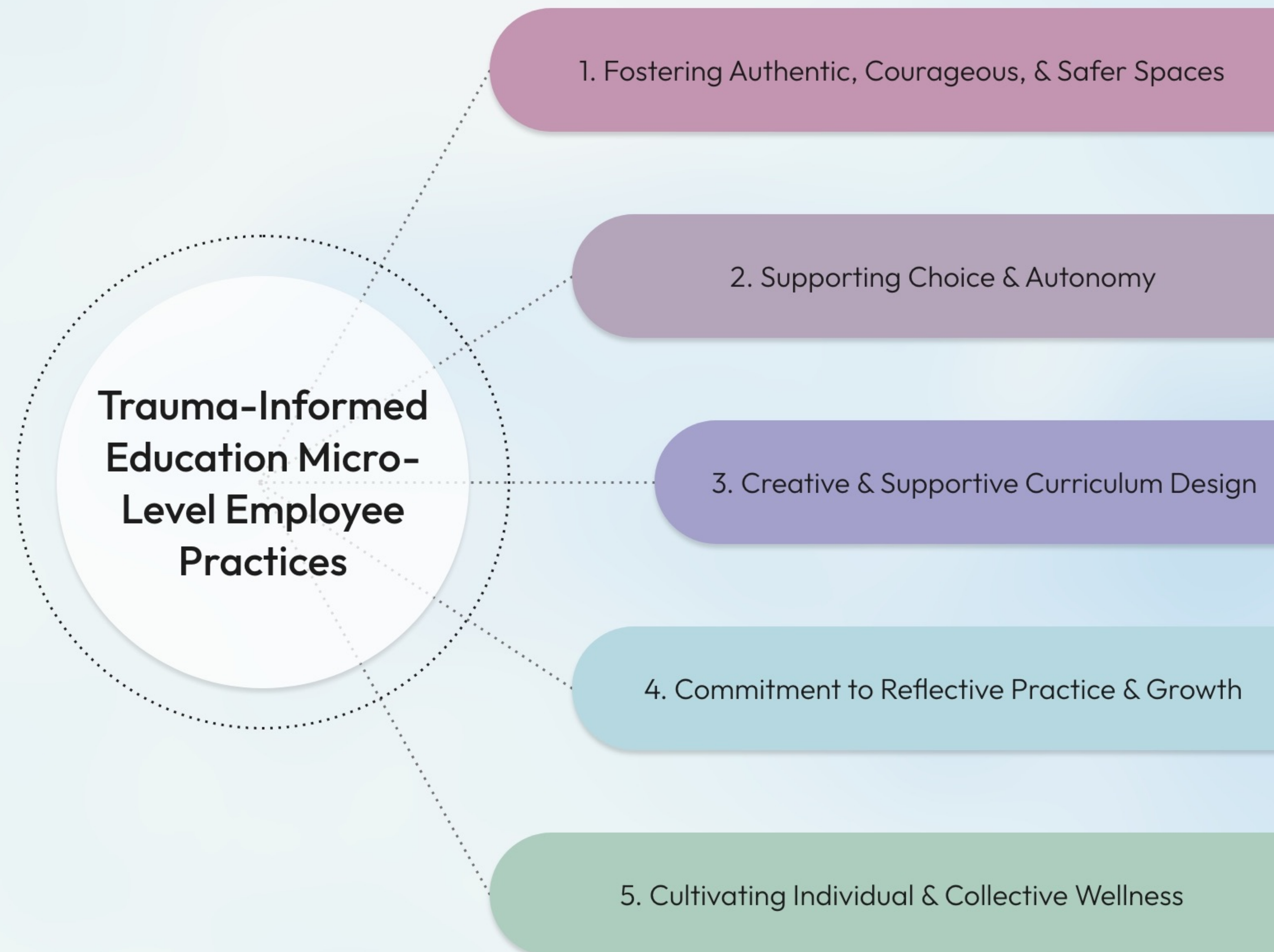
Believe. Support. Connect. Bridge a referral.

“I go through life assuming that I do not know what someone’s been through. If someone has a behaviour that does not make sense to me, maybe they are having a bad day, maybe they are triggered. I do not know what is going on in their life” (Alumni, 2021).

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Trauma-Informed Education Micro Level Practices



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“Trauma-Informed Practice needs to be a culture within each program as opposed to a culture within an individual classroom” (Employee, 2021).

“The role of the Professor has changed. There’s a lot more that you do in the classroom, you wear many hats and hold many roles for the students - you are a model; you are a mentor” (Employee, 2021).

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Strategies to Consider When Building Safer Spaces

- **Take the time** to get to know students (5-minute meet and greet before the term starts; personal sharing cards; a quick question of relatability; drop-in office hours).
- Engage in ongoing **rapport-building** activities to foster positive connections.
- Approach every class and interaction with a **welcoming and kind approach**.
- Explain to your students what Trauma-Informed Education is and what you are collectively hoping to **create together**.
- Verbally and in writing, **intentionally create** safer and more comfortable learning spaces that are conducive to learning.
- Support students in **shaping** what the space looks like and feels like.
- While recognizing power differences, try and co-create a collective, **collaborative atmosphere** - a power “with” model.
- Create a **predictable environment** and class structure that supports check-in and check-outs, debriefing, and wellness strategies.
- Model **inclusive practices** (such as gender pronouns; people-first language).
- Be accessible, emphasize your **availability**, and follow through.
- **Model respect**, empathy, and compassion.
- **Provide strategies** for emotional regulation and self-compassion.
- Be mindful of communication that is **minimizing**, dismissive, threatening, ridiculing, or that shows impatience, disappointment, or power differences (Carello & Butler, 2015).
- **Clarify roles**, expectations, and model professional boundaries.
- Explain and model **confidentiality** practices.
- Use self-disclosure appropriately and in a contained way to build **trust**.
- Create space for challenging moments, through silence, **accountability**, reflection, and debriefing.
- Address conflict, harm, **microaggressions**, and oppression. Safety is built upon a space that is committed to social justice and change.
- Integrate and explicitly discuss current **community** social justice issues in learning spaces, recognizing the need for a space where students can discuss the personal and collective impacts.

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Strategies to Consider When Building Safer Spaces

- Support **flexibility** with no questions asked; or assumptions made (i.e., students can arrive and leave when they need to, camera and laptop on or off).
- Bring **awareness** to classroom activities and assignments that could activate the student. Normalize, validate, and offer support and referrals. Recognize that some students may not realize they are being activated.
- Understand the window of **tolerance** and 7 f's of trauma responses.
- Be open to **feedback** from students about their experiences of being activated.
- Be mindful of other students in the room impacted by **disclosures**.
- **Normalize** stress and trauma by naming them.
- Assume that the student's behaviour has a **purpose** - it might be a pattern or serving them well. Bring a non-judgmental stance.
- Respect **proxemics** (i.e., personal space).
- Continue to reflect on creating ways to ensure your students thrive.
- Capture your learning and **success** stories and share them with others.
- Encourage the development of an **individualized** self-care/wellness plan.

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Fostering Authentic, Courageous & Safer Spaces

Awareness of individual & systemic barriers. Build cultural safety.

Strive for safer conversations.

Seek permission when asking questions.

Commitment to Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion Practices.

Actively challenge oppression.

Normalize triggers & activating experiences.

Model empathy, compassion & understanding.

Respect privacy & confidentiality.

Be welcoming & inclusive.

Promote support and wellness.

Engage in self-reflective practice.

Collaborate & share power (power “with”).

Build connections & trust.

Pay attention to proxemics & kinesics.

Be accountable & flexible.

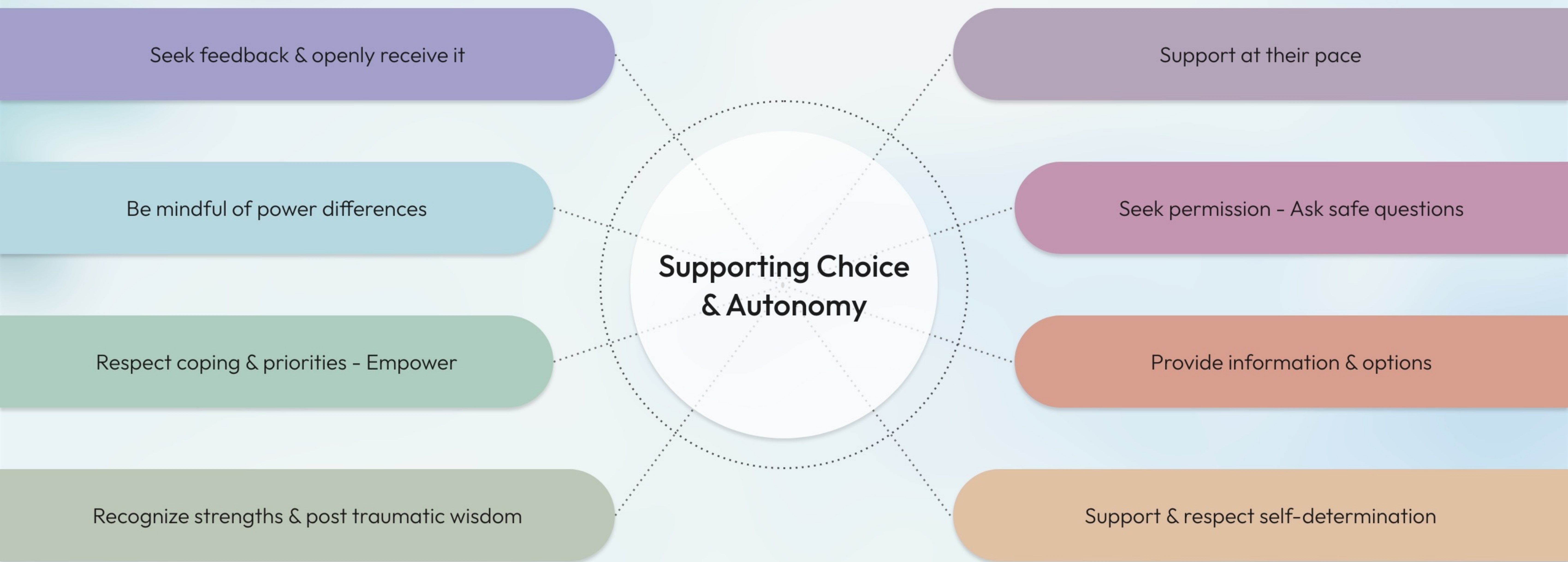
Model authenticity & vulnerability.

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Supporting Choice & Autonomy



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“Trauma-Informed Practice means giving the steering wheel of the conversation to the person that you are speaking to” (Employee, 2021).

“I try to be clear about respecting boundaries, so they are in control of how much they say or do not say. Providing a sense of knowing what is happening next and consistency in what they expect from me” (Faculty, 2021).

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Strategies To Consider

* The following are some strategies to consider

- Support students to identify their **strengths** and help them develop coping skills that work for them.
- Support them at their pace.
- Provide information to students on options and choices without overwhelming them.
- Recognize power differentials when providing students with choice and control. For example, students may select the option that we are leaning toward whether we do it explicitly or implicitly.
- Support students in making choices that are right for them.
- Support self-determination by “**fostering empowerment** [through] start[ing] at a very basic level with ceasing all attempts to control people’s bodies within schools.
- Remind students that they have the power to make their own decisions to support their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual **well-being**.
- Get permission to ask questions. Ask relevant and sensitive questions.
- Reframe questions from “What is wrong?” to “What would be helpful?”.
- Ensure students are not retelling their stories if they don’t want to.
- **Tread carefully** with the use of the word ‘trauma’ or consider not using it, as not everyone will identify their experience as being traumatic.
- Be cognizant of your role, and power imbalances, and **create opportunities** for them to share power and control of the outcome.
- Check in with all students as some may not ask for support.
- Follow-up to show care and interest in their well- being and success.
- Recognize that students may deal with stress points in the semester in diverse ways.
- **Witness and honour** someone’s experience without interpreting it or judging it.
- Help students **normalize** their experience and make connections.
- Recognize when a student needs support and the need to make **referrals**.
- Take the extra step to ensure a seamless referral (join them in making the appointment, walk them to **counselling**, explore what helping identities would make them feel safer).
- Model wellness and grounding **strategies**.

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Creative & Supportive Curriculum Design

Creating a curriculum requires thoughtfulness and creativity. It is critical for educators to be mindful of learning curricula that can potentially traumatize or retraumatize students and to remove possible barriers to learning (Carello & Butler, 2015). The following illustration reflects some strategies educators can consider to lower the risk of students facing re-traumatization or vicarious traumatization and support their academic success

Consider the ways you can implement Trauma-Informed Education into your curriculum, programs, practices, and strategies.

Emphasize confidentiality. Operate from a place of openness, trust, inclusivity & support.

Stress safety, choice and control. Offer optional or alternative assignments. Universal design approach to deadlines.

Reflect on the purpose of your content and teaching tools and their potential impact.

Be planful in how you deliver the content (screen videos and activities, avoid detailed examples of trauma or shock value stories).

Model compassion & flexibility (class attendance; avoid asking reasons for absenteeism; offer to review assignments).

Keep students well- being top of mind. Engage in check in's, debriefing opportunities, self-care/wellness reminders.

Give notice when there is heavy content. Normalize activating responses.

Engage in broader academic policy discussions. Consider team teaching approaches.

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Curriculum Design

* Sample statement to add to a course syllabus

Support and Wellness:

This course covers various sensitive topics, including trauma and oppression. There may be times when you or your colleagues feel uncomfortable and may experience a range of emotions, thoughts, and reactions. Your well-being is important to us. We encourage you to explore ways to support your well-being while learning, including wellness strategies and support systems. We can also support you with referrals to Student Services.

* Sample statement to add to assignments

Sensitive Content Warning:

Please note that the content in this case study assignment is sensitive in nature and may bring up a range of emotions, thoughts, and reactions. The content may impact some people in a more personal way. We encourage you to use supportive wellness techniques, and your support systems. We can also support you with referrals to Student Services.

“When you are teaching material, you don’t need to go into details. You can teach something without that shock value. So, students do not walk away feeling their stomachs dropped” (Faculty, 2021).

“Making sure that we have space to breathe after we have discussed something and giving them control over whether they want to share or not. Giving them choice that they can get up and walk out of the class and making sure they are safe” (Faculty, 2021).

Commitment to Reflective Practice and Growth

✱ **The following are some strategies to consider in your commitment to communities, to yourself, and to your practice as an educator**

- Recognize the environment you are cultivating and contributing to.
- Be continuously aware of your social location.
- Consider how you are perpetuating oppression and creating trauma.
- Practice cultural humility.
- Recognize you will make mistakes and will learn from them.
- Recognize your own historical and current experiences with trauma.
- Support yourself.
- Explore courageous vulnerability.
- Practice continuous reflection and learning.
- Integrate Trauma-Informed Education into everything you do.
- Seek out opportunities to debrief with allies in your environment.
- Connection is key to Trauma-Informed Education.

✱ **Commit to Anti-Racist Education**

- Teachers who are not recognizing the impact of racism may unintentionally perpetuate racism (Alvarez, 2020).
- Sensitivity to racial trauma must be a part of all Trauma-Informed strategies, recognizing the historical and contemporary systems of oppression (Resler, 2019).
- Failure to address race and racism within Trauma-Informed Practice has led to its “weaponization with educators implementing simplistic solutions that ultimately harm the students they are meant to support which reifies systems of oppression rather than preventing retraumatization” (Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020, as cited in Goldin et al., 2021, p. 3).
- The concept ‘white saviorism’ is a form of white supremacy, with the belief that white educators can and should save youth of color and youth living in poverty, through colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Sondel et al., 2019 as cited in Goldin et. al, 2021).
- It is “necessary to situate the dominant trauma discourse and research within a racialization framework to disrupt White supremacist notions of normality” and deficit beliefs about people of color (Alvarez, 2020, p. 85).

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Cultivating Individual & Collective Wellness

Compassion fatigue, empathic distress, and vicarious trauma are realities in helping professions including in the education sector. Educators and employees working in post-secondary education are impacted by the stories they hear from students and their colleagues, the curriculum they teach, and the services they offer to students. They can face their own lived experiences of trauma, oppression, and inequities in and outside of education. Confidentiality practices and limitations in time and space to debrief can result in employees trying to manage the impacts themselves, which can be overwhelming and isolating.

Literature and practices in the helping profession, tend to focus on “self-care” as the solution to these professional and personal impacts of the work. Although self-care can be a helpful tool, it can also be a limiting concept that does not always consider the lived realities and systemic barriers which impact the ability to practice and care for oneself. The impacts of trauma can also make it difficult to engage in self-care practices.

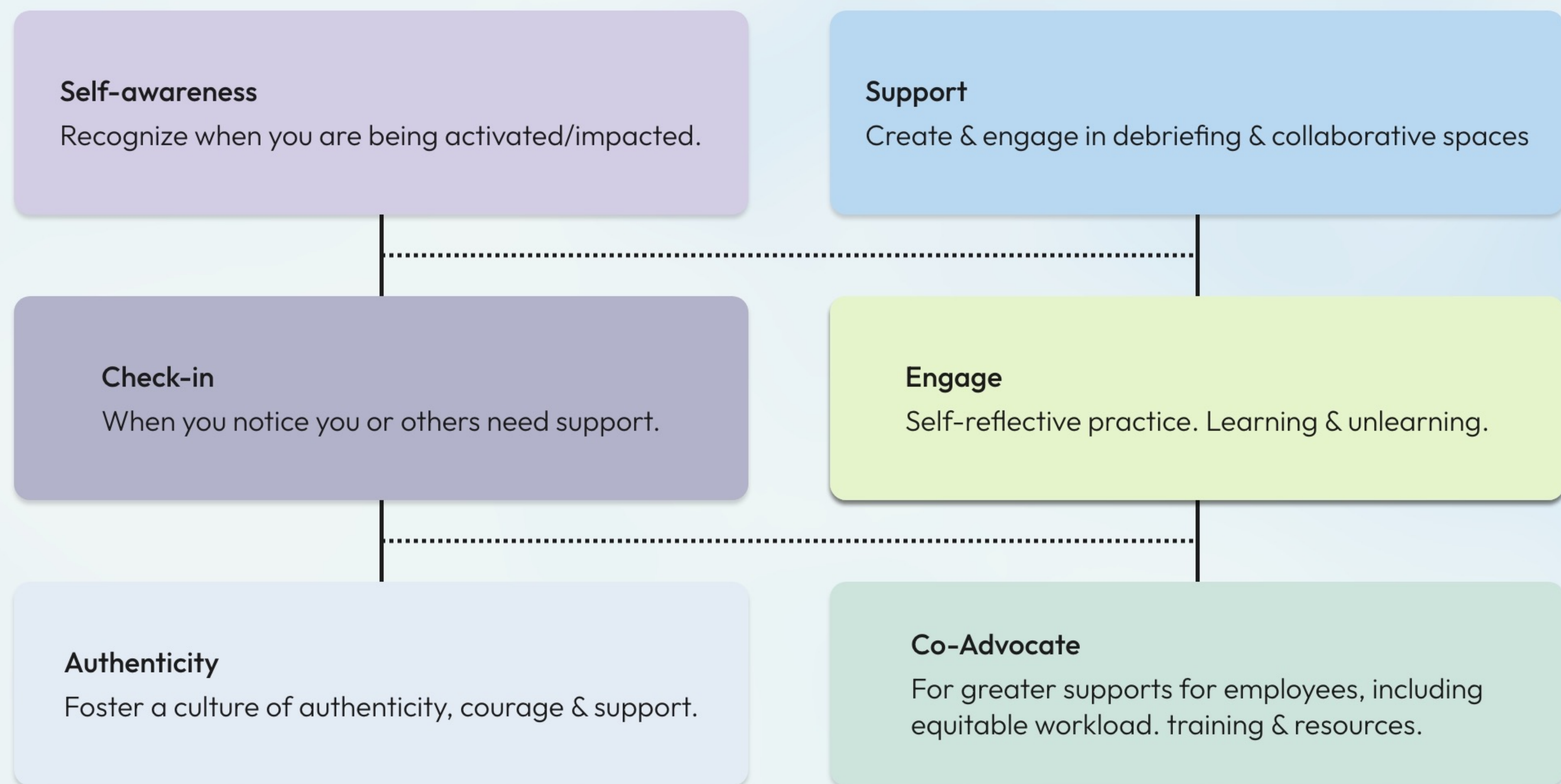
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Cultivating Individual & Collective Wellness

Implementing Trauma-Informed Education Grounded in a Systemic Analysis requires a priority on individual and collective wellness. The following are considerations to support individual and collective wellness for employees.



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“I have always been a firm believer that student engagement and student experience start with employee engagement and employee experience. So, if the employees feel like they have a safe place to work, then we can provide a safe place for students to learn” (Sheridan Employee, 2021).

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Self-Reflective Practice for Educators

How do you see your role as an Educator?

How do students experience you as an Educator?

How does your social location (areas of privilege and marginalization) play out in learning spaces?

How do you reflect on your teaching practices?

How do you see trauma playing out in learning spaces and how do you handle it?

What assumptions have you made about students based on their behaviour?

How do you address trauma in the curriculum (activities, lectures, videos, discussions)?

How do you address the possibility that students may experience discomfort with a course assignment?

Reflect on situations where you offered students choice and autonomy.

How do you support students facing challenging group work experiences?

How do you respond when a student has been missing class or not communicating with you?

How do you provide support for students when they are activated?

How are your teaching practices supporting your students to thrive?

How do you foster authenticity, courage, safety and wellness in your learning spaces?

Is there anything you can do to foster even safer spaces for your students?

How do you take care of your wellness when exposed to vicarious trauma, or when activated in the learning space?

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