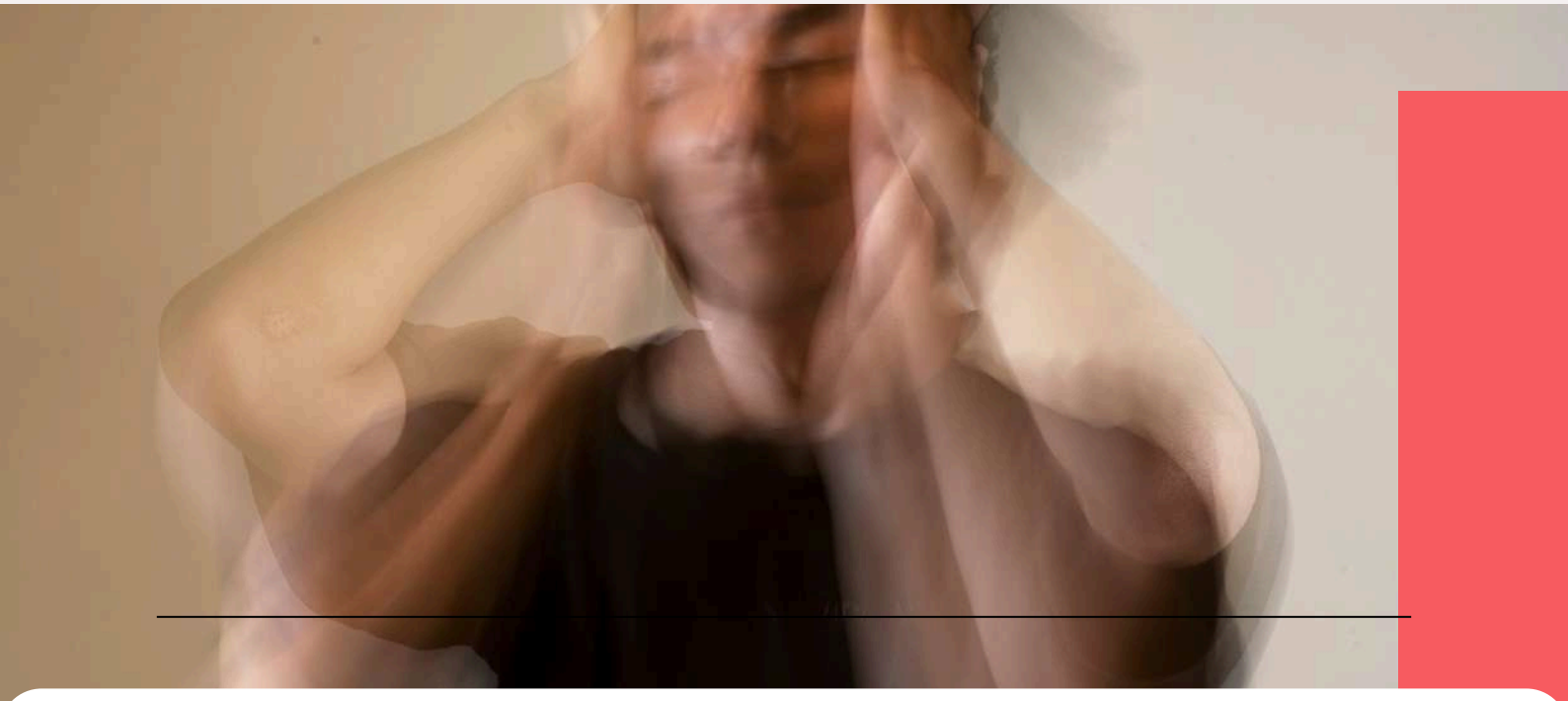
SAFELAB

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE E-HANDBOOK

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Associação Portuguesa de Instituições Vocational Education and Training

KLAIPĖDOS ERNESTO GALVANAUSKO PROFESINIO MOKYMO CENTRAS

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INTRODUCTION



Vocational Education and Training (VET) plays an important role in supporting learners' personal, educational and professional development. However, many students enter vocational education with experiences of trauma, chronic stress, adversity or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that may influence the way they learn, interact, respond to feedback and engage with their training. These experiences are not always visible, yet they can affect concentration, emotional regulation, motivation, attendance, behaviour and the acquisition of practical and professional skills.

In vocational education, these challenges can become particularly significant. Learning frequently takes place in workshops, laboratories and other practical environments characterised by noise, time pressure, close interaction, performance assessment and clear technical expectations. Although these conditions are essential for professional preparation, they may also increase stress for learners who have previously experienced adversity. Behaviour such as withdrawal, avoidance, lateness, emotional reactivity or resistance to feedback can therefore sometimes reflect a stress response rather than a lack of motivation, ability or commitment.

Trauma-informed education offers an alternative way of understanding and responding to these situations. Rather than asking only what is wrong with a learner or how a behaviour should be corrected, it encourages educators to consider what the behaviour may be communicating and what conditions might support the learner's ability to regulate, participate and learn. This perspective does not remove boundaries, accountability or professional expectations. On the contrary, it seeks to create the relational and cognitive conditions that enable learners to meet high educational and vocational standards more effectively.

At the centre of this approach are safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support and collaboration, empowerment and learner voice, and equity with cultural sensitivity. These principles are most effective when they are integrated into everyday teaching, institutional procedures and professional collaboration rather than applied as isolated strategies.

This e-Handbook has been developed as a practical resource for VET educators, trainers, school leaders and other professionals involved in supporting learners. It brings together conceptual knowledge, practical strategies, case scenarios, reflective activities, training experiences and adaptable resources. Its purpose is not to turn educators into mental health professionals, but to strengthen their professional awareness, confidence and capacity to respond appropriately to learners affected by trauma and adversity. It also highlights the importance of knowing when additional support is required and of working collaboratively with counsellors, psychologists, families and external services.

The handbook therefore moves from understanding trauma and ACEs to recognising their possible manifestations in VET learners, exploring trauma-informed principles, creating psychologically safe learning environments, applying practical strategies, strengthening collaboration with families and support networks, and reflecting on the experiences developed through the SAFELAB training activities. These activities followed a progression from understanding trauma to recognising its manifestations, reflecting on educational responses, practising strategies and developing supportive learning environments and practical tools.

Ultimately, trauma-informed practice is about creating educational environments in which learners can experience safety, predictability, respect, belonging and dignity while continuing to develop the knowledge, skills and professional standards required for their future. It is an approach that benefits not only learners affected by trauma, but the wider educational community, by promoting more respectful relationships, stronger engagement and more inclusive learning environments.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Trauma, ACEs and Trauma-Informed Education

1.1. Understanding Trauma in Educational Contexts

Trauma in educational research is increasingly understood not merely as the occurrence of a distressing event, but as the interaction between experience, perception, and physiological response (SAMHSA, 2014; van der Kolk, 2014). Individuals exposed to similar circumstances may demonstrate markedly different outcomes. What determines whether an experience becomes traumatic is less the objective severity of the event and more the perceived level of threat, the sense of safety at the time, and the presence (or absence) of reliable relational support.

Within educational environments, trauma can therefore be conceptualised as experiences that exceed a learner's capacity to cope and that subsequently influence their sense of safety, trust in authority figures, and capacity for emotional regulation. Such experiences may result from isolated incidents, including accidents or exposure to violence, but they more commonly arise through prolonged exposure to instability or adversity. Conditions such as family conflict, neglect, socioeconomic insecurity, discrimination, or migration-related uncertainty may gradually undermine psychological stability.

A notable proportion of learners entering Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways carry complex personal histories shaped by these experiences. These histories often remain invisible in everyday classroom interaction, yet they may significantly influence patterns of engagement, participation, and performance.

The expression of trauma within educational settings is rarely explicit. Instead, it frequently manifests through behavioural patterns that may initially appear unrelated to underlying experiences. Learners may withdraw socially, demonstrate emotional restraint, exhibit irritability, arrive late repeatedly, avoid particular tasks, or react strongly to corrective feedback. Without an appropriate interpretive framework, such behaviours may be misinterpreted as indifference, defiance, or lack of motivation.



However, insights from developmental psychology and neurobiology suggest that many of these responses represent adaptive mechanisms developed in response to earlier conditions of threat or instability (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). Recognising this distinction requires a shift in perspective. Rather than attributing difficulty solely to individual shortcomings, educators are encouraged to consider how previous experiences may shape present behaviour. This reframing constitutes a central premise of trauma-informed education.

1.2. Toxic Stress and the Impact on the Brain

Stress is a normal component of human functioning and, in moderate forms, can support adaptation and learning. Challenges arise when stress becomes chronic, intense, and occurs without adequate relational support. Under such conditions, exposure may evolve into what is described in developmental research as toxic stress.

Toxic stress refers to the prolonged activation of the body's stress response system. Sustained activation can affect neural development and influence brain regions associated with memory processing, emotional regulation, impulse control, and executive functioning.

Under conditions of perceived safety, higher-order cognitive systems operate effectively. The prefrontal cortex supports reasoning, planning, and behavioural regulation, while the hippocampus contributes to memory consolidation and integration of new knowledge.

When individuals perceive threat, however, neural priorities shift. The brain allocates increased attention to rapid threat detection, and the amygdala, responsible for processing danger signals, becomes more dominant. Access to higher cognitive functions may consequently become restricted.

In such circumstances, vigilance and self-protection take precedence over learning-oriented engagement. Difficulties retaining instructions, organising tasks, sustaining attention, or responding calmly to feedback may therefore reflect stress-related neurological adaptation rather than lack of ability.

These dynamics can become particularly visible in vocational learning environments where students are required to demonstrate procedural accuracy, manage time effectively, and perform practical skills under observation. Apparent inconsistency in performance should therefore not automatically be interpreted as limited effort or motivation. In many cases, it reflects a nervous system temporarily prioritising safety over complex cognitive processing.

Recognising this distinction enables educators to respond through structured guidance, predictable learning environments, and supportive instructional practices.



1.3. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs are a set of potentially traumatic events that occur before age 18. The concept emerged from public health research examining the long-term relationship between childhood adversity and adult health and social outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998). They include direct experiences of abuse—physical, emotional, or sexual—as well as neglect. They also encompass forms of household dysfunction such as parental substance misuse, mental illness within the family, domestic violence, incarceration of a household member, or parental separation.

A central element of trauma-informed practice involves understanding the physiological mechanisms underlying the human stress response. When individuals perceive danger, the body activates a coordinated biological reaction. Hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline are released, cardiovascular activity increases, and attentional focus narrows toward potential threats.

This response prepares the organism for immediate defensive action. It is commonly described through behavioural reactions such as fight, flight, freeze, or appeasement. In short-term situations, this mechanism serves an essential protective function.

When exposure to adversity occurs repeatedly during developmental stages, however, these responses may shape long-term patterns of emotional regulation, learning, and social interaction (Shonkoff et al., 2012).
Research conducted across Europe and internationally indicates that a substantial proportion of young people report exposure to at least one ACE, while many experience multiple forms of adversity.

The cumulative impact of such exposure is associated with increased likelihood of challenges related to educational achievement, psychological well-being, and long-term socioeconomic stability (Anda et al., 2006; WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2020).



Importantly, ACEs should not be interpreted as deterministic predictors of future outcomes. Protective factors—including stable relationships with supportive adults and structured educational environments—can significantly mitigate potential negative effects (Ungar, 2013).
For many learners, vocational education institutions represent one of the first environments characterised by consistency, clear expectations, and opportunities to construct a professional identity. Within this context, vocational educators can occupy a significant protective role. The presence of a reliable and respectful adult relationship can contribute meaningfully to resilience and adaptive development.
Trauma-informed education therefore does not position educators as therapists. Instead, it emphasises professional awareness of the relationship between emotional security, relational stability, and effective learning.

1.4 Trauma and Its Effects on Learning Processes

Trauma can influence several cognitive and emotional processes that are central to learning. One of the most immediate effects concerns attention. When individuals experience heightened stress, cognitive resources tend to shift toward monitoring the environment for potential threats. As a result, students may appear distracted or disengaged even though their nervous system remains highly alert.

Stress responses may also interfere with memory consolidation. Learners might complete a task during one session yet experience difficulty reproducing the same procedure later. Without a trauma-informed perspective, such inconsistency may be attributed to negligence or lack of effort rather than to stress-related neurobiological disruption.

Executive functioning is particularly sensitive to prolonged stress exposure. Skills such as planning, organising tasks, sequencing actions, and managing time may become more difficult. Within VET contexts—where practical training requires procedural precision and increasing autonomy—these challenges can have noticeable implications for performance.

Emotional regulation may also be affected. Minor mistakes can provoke disproportionately strong reactions when they resonate with earlier experiences of criticism or humiliation. Corrective feedback delivered publicly may therefore be perceived as threatening rather than constructive.

Trauma exposure may additionally influence learners' orientation toward the future. Some individuals develop difficulty imagining long-term success in education or employment. When immediate concerns dominate cognitive attention, extended training pathways or professional goals may appear distant or unrealistic.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for institutions seeking to strengthen engagement, retention, and successful completion within vocational education systems.



1.5 Trauma in Vocational Education and Training Contexts

Vocational education settings present distinctive sensory and social environments that may interact with trauma-related responses. Workshops and training laboratories often involve elevated noise levels, close physical proximity among learners, ongoing performance evaluation, structured authority hierarchies, and immediate technical correction.

Although these features are fundamental to professional training, they may inadvertently activate stress responses among learners who have experienced earlier adversity.

For instance, voices raised in order to communicate over machinery noise may be interpreted as expressions of anger. Public correction of technical mistakes may evoke strong feelings of embarrassment or shame. Sudden sounds within workshop environments may trigger pronounced startle responses. Without contextual understanding, these reactions may be interpreted as behavioural issues rather than as stress activation.



A trauma-informed framework does not imply lowering technical standards or reducing expectations regarding professional competence. Rather, it highlights the importance of predictability, clarity, and relational consistency as conditions that support learning.

Establishing structured routines, communicating expectations transparently, providing feedback respectfully, and clarifying evaluation procedures can significantly reduce perceived threat within the learning environment. As learners experience greater psychological safety, their capacity for sustained engagement increases.

Enhanced engagement, in turn, strengthens the conditions necessary for effective skill development and professional growth. By recognising these dynamics, vocational education institutions can structure learning environments that minimise avoidable stressors while reinforcing protective factors.

CHAPTER 2

Recognising Trauma in VET Students

Recognizing trauma in adolescents and young adults is less about being a clinician and more about understanding the "survival brain". For many students, the workshop is a place to build a better future, but the stress from their past often gets in the way of their success without anyone seeing it. By looking through a trauma-informed lens, we can see that what often looks like a "bad student" is actually a person whose nervous system is stuck in a state of high alert.

In a vocational setting, trauma-related behavior often presents as the "Four Fs": Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn. A student in a Fight response might be argumentative or defiant when a teacher corrects their technique. Flight looks like chronic lateness, frequently leaving the workshop for "breaks," or simply not showing up when a project feels too hard. The Freeze response is common during practical tasks: a student might stand over a machine looking completely "blank" or "lazy," but they are actually mentally paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake. Finally, Fawn appears as extreme people-pleasing or an inability to take even minor feedback because the student is terrified of "getting in trouble."



> Trauma-related behaviour often presents as the "Four Fs": Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn

Trauma creates a "cognitive fog" that makes learning new skills incredibly difficult. On an emotional level, these students might have quick mood swings or react very strongly to small problems. For example, if they mess up a piece of work or forget a tool, they might get extremely upset or angry. To an outsider, it looks like an overreaction, but for them, a small mistake feels like a huge disaster. This is often accompanied by physical signs of chronic stress, such as a heightened startle response to loud shop noises. You might also notice somatic complaints like frequent headaches, "gut issues," or a level of exhaustion that seems out of proportion to the work they've done. These are physical symptoms of a body that has spent too much time in a state of hyper-vigilance.





Educators play a key role in identifying whether challenging behaviour is a response to stress and adversity or a matter of skills and boundaries that require guidance. Traditionally, we view a student who talks back as disrespectful or a student who is always late as having a poor work ethic. However, a trauma-informed perspective asks, "What is the function of this behavior?" For a trauma survivor, "disrespect" might actually be a defensive wall built to avoid feeling vulnerable or shamed. Lateness or "zoning out" isn't a lack of interest; it's often a result of a chaotic home life or a brain that is too exhausted by survival to focus on a schedule. Trauma-informed practice doesn't mean ignoring these behaviors; it means addressing them with structure and dignity rather than just punishment.

Trauma can limit students' ability to concentrate, process information, and learn effectively. High levels of stress hormones like cortisol can physically block the hippocampus, which is responsible for forming new memories. This explains why a student might perfectly master a skill on Tuesday but have no recollection of how to do it on Wednesday. It also affects motivation; if a student has a "foreshortened sense of future"—a common trauma symptom—they may struggle to see the point of a training programme because they don't truly believe they will have a successful future. Skill acquisition is slowed because the student is so afraid of failure that they won't take the necessary risks to learn. By creating a predictable, safe environment, we can help to lower that stress so their "learning brain" can finally take over.



2.1. Behavioural Indicators of Trauma in VET Learners

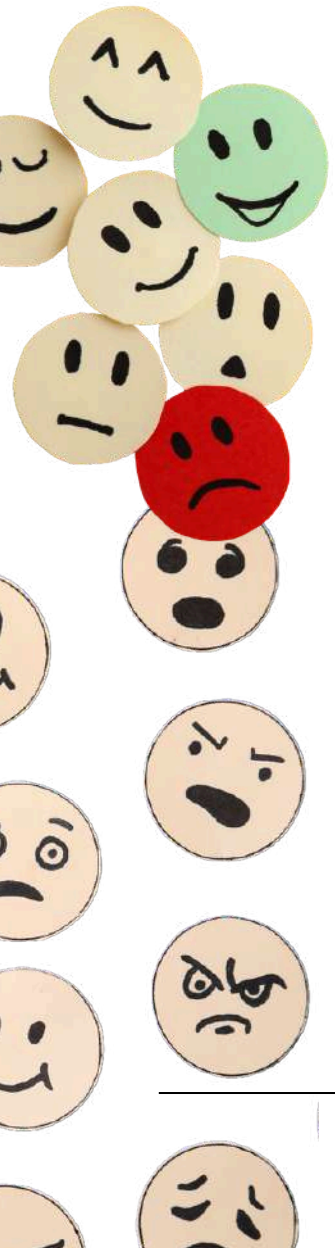
In VET environments, trauma often becomes visible through patterns of behaviour rather than explicit disclosure. Research into neurodevelopment, specifically the work of Dr. Bruce Perry, highlights that these actions represent adaptive survival mechanisms rather than intentional misconduct. While the "Four Fs" provide a core framework, recognizing them in practice requires observing how a learner's nervous system communicates distress through actions.

These behavioural patterns are frequently situational and may fluctuate based on the student's perceived level of safety in the classroom or training lab. A learner who appears cooperative in a quiet setting might become oppositional or resistant when environmental triggers, such as loud noises or sudden changes in routine, are present. Without a trauma-informed perspective, such inconsistency is easily misinterpreted as a lack of discipline. However, modern research suggests that successful educators shift their focus from "What is wrong with this student?" to "What might this behaviour be communicating about their current state of regulation?".

2.2. Emotional and Cognitive Symptoms

Trauma significantly influences emotional regulation and cognitive functioning, both of which are central to successful learning in vocational settings. Learners affected by trauma often experience heightened emotional sensitivity, meaning that minor challenges—such as a technical error or a misunderstood instruction—can trigger disproportionately intense reactions like frustration, anger, or withdrawal.

These emotional responses are deeply linked to underlying cognitive processes. Research by Jack Shonkoff and others indicates that toxic stress can impair executive function, reducing the learner's ability to concentrate, plan, and retain new information. In VET environments where learning involves multi-step technical procedures, this "cognitive fog" can make it difficult for students to follow instructions or solve problems under pressure. This often results in inconsistent performance where a student demonstrates competence one day but struggles to replicate the same task the next, reflecting stress-related interference rather than a lack of effort.



2.3. Physical Signs and Stress Responses

Trauma is a physiological experience that leaves a lasting impact on the body. In high-sensory VET settings, these physical signs often become more noticeable. As Bessel van der Kolk notes in his foundational research, a history of trauma can leave the nervous system in a state of hyper-vigilance, leading to a heightened startle response to sudden noises or movements.

Chronic activation of the stress response system also leads to somatic complaints, such as frequent headaches, stomach discomfort, or a level of exhaustion that seems out of proportion to the physical work completed. This "trauma-related fatigue" occurs because the student's body is consuming a massive amount of energy just to maintain a state of high alert. Educators may also observe physical cues such as a rigid posture, restless movement, or a student positioning themselves in a way that allows them to constantly monitor their surroundings for perceived threats.

2.4 Distinguishing Trauma Responses from Discipline Issues

Differentiating between a discipline issue and a trauma-related stress response is one of the most significant challenges in vocational education. Traditional educational models often interpret non-compliance or defiance as issues of attitude. However, a trauma-informed approach suggests looking at the function of the behaviour rather than just its form.

What looks like disrespectful communication may actually be a defensive wall built to protect the learner from feeling vulnerable or shamed. Similarly, avoidance behaviours like absenteeism or "zoning out" often reflect overwhelming anxiety rather than a lack of interest. This distinction does not mean removing boundaries or expectations. Instead, researchers like Lori Desautels emphasize combining accountability with dignity. Addressing behaviour through calm, structured dialogue rather than purely punitive measures prevents the cycle of conflict and helps maintain the student's engagement with their training.

2.5. Impact of Trauma on Attendance, Motivation, and Skill Acquisition

Trauma can have a profound and lasting impact on a student's ability to complete their VET programme. Attendance is frequently the first area affected, as learners dealing with instability or internal dysregulation may struggle with the routine of daily participation. While absences are often viewed as a lack of commitment, they are frequently a result of the student feeling too overwhelmed to face the high-pressure training environment.

Motivation is similarly influenced by a "foreshortened sense of future," a common trauma symptom identified by researchers like Eric Jensen. If a student cannot envision a successful future, they may struggle to see the point of investing in a several-year apprenticeship or training path. Furthermore, high levels of cortisol can physically interfere with the brain's ability to form new memories, slowing the process of skill acquisition. By providing a safe and predictable environment, educators can help lower these stress levels, allowing the student to move out of survival mode and finally access their "learning brain" for technical mastery.

CHAPTER 3

Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice

Recognising the impact of trauma represents an essential starting point, yet awareness alone does not constitute trauma-informed practice. Within contemporary educational research, **trauma-informed approaches** are not understood as isolated behavioural techniques or short-term classroom strategies. Rather, they **represent a broader shift in institutional perspective aimed at cultivating learning environments grounded in psychological safety, relational reliability, and respect for learner dignity**.

In VET, where instruction is frequently practice-oriented and performance standards remain high, trauma-informed practice does not imply the relaxation of expectations. Instead, it seeks to establish the relational and cognitive conditions that allow learners to meet these expectations effectively.

Five core principles guide the framework presented in this chapter:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support and Collaboration
4. Empowerment and Voice
5. Equity with Cultural Sensitivity



These principles should not be interpreted as independent techniques applied selectively. Their effectiveness depends on coherent integration within institutional culture, daily pedagogical practice, and professional collaboration among educators.

3.1. Safety: Physical and Emotional

Safety constitutes the foundation upon which trauma-informed educational environments are built. Without a sense of safety—both physical and emotional—the cognitive conditions necessary for effective learning are significantly weakened (SAMHSA, 2014).

In vocational education contexts, physical safety involves clearly defined procedures, appropriate supervision, and the regulated use of tools, equipment, and workshop facilities. These measures are essential for preventing accidents and ensuring responsible professional training.

Trauma-informed perspectives, however, extend beyond the prevention of physical harm. Emotional safety concerns the quality of relational experience within the learning environment. Learners must experience respect rather than humiliation, guidance rather than intimidation, and correction delivered in ways that preserve dignity.



For individuals who have experienced adversity, environmental unpredictability may activate heightened stress responses. Establishing **consistent routines**, clearly **articulated expectations**, and **transparent assessment criteria** therefore becomes particularly important. When learners can anticipate processes and understand how evaluation will occur, physiological stress levels decrease and attention can shift more fully toward the learning task (Brunzell et al., 2016).

Predictability, clarity, and respectful interaction thus function not only as pedagogical preferences but as structural conditions supporting cognitive engagement.

3.2. Trustworthiness and Transparency

Trust constitutes a central dimension of trauma-informed educational environments. Many individuals affected by adversity have experienced relationships characterised by inconsistency or unpredictability. Educational institutions therefore play an important role in **demonstrating reliability through transparent procedures and consistent communication**.

Transparency becomes particularly relevant in relation to assessment processes. The **use of explicit evaluation** rubrics, **clear explanations** of performance criteria, and timely communication regarding procedural changes can substantially reduce anticipatory anxiety among learners. When expectations are clearly articulated, students are better able to direct attention toward the learning process rather than toward uncertainty about evaluation.

A trauma-informed understanding of transparency also extends to the **rationale behind institutional rules**. Regulations and procedures should not be presented solely as expressions of authority. Instead, they should be explained in terms of their contribution to safety, professional standards, and mutual respect within the learning environment.

When institutional procedures are applied consistently and explained clearly, learners are more likely to internalise responsibility and less likely to respond defensively to authority structures. Over time, such transparency contributes to the development of trust and encourages students to seek support when necessary.



3.3. Peer Support and Collaboration



Experiences of adversity can influence social functioning and interpersonal trust. Learners affected by trauma may display hesitation in collaborative work, difficulty sustaining group interaction, or reluctance to rely on peers. Nevertheless, when carefully structured, **peer collaboration can function as a significant protective factor within educational environments** (Ungar, 2013).

Team-based learning is frequently integral to vocational instruction. A trauma-informed approach does not assume that effective group dynamics will emerge spontaneously. Instead, it requires deliberate structuring of interactional processes.

Clear role distribution, agreed communication norms, and structured opportunities for joint problem-solving can strengthen relational security and reduce uncertainty within group activities. Such practices support cooperative engagement while minimising potential conflict.

The principle of collaboration also extends beyond interactions among students. Trauma-informed educational environments depend on professional cooperation among educators. Effective implementation cannot rely exclusively on individual classroom initiatives. Instead, it requires sustained dialogue among staff members, opportunities for shared reflection on practice, and coordinated responses to complex situations (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017).

Institutions that cultivate professional learning communities around trauma-informed principles are better positioned to support educators, reduce professional fatigue, and strengthen collective resilience—an especially important consideration within demanding vocational training contexts.

3.4. Empowerment and Voice

Experiences of trauma are frequently associated with diminished agency and perceived loss of control. Educational environments may inadvertently reinforce this dynamic through rigid authority structures or limited opportunities for student participation. Trauma-informed practice seeks to counterbalance such patterns by integrating meaningful forms of student voice and participation.

Empowerment within VET education does not imply the absence of structure. Rather, it involves incorporating opportunities for choice and participation within clearly defined boundaries. For example, learners may be offered alternative formats for completing assignments, opportunities to contribute to classroom agreements, or structured reflection on their own learning processes. It may also involve collaborative goal-setting related to skill development, the use of self-assessment prior to instructor evaluation, and opportunities for learners to provide feedback on instructional approaches. These practices can strengthen self-efficacy and reduce apprehension in interactions with authority figures.

The dimension of voice holds particular relevance for learners from socially marginalised or underrepresented groups. Experiences of recognition and active listening are strongly associated with sustained educational engagement. Trauma-informed educators therefore prioritise attentive listening, acknowledge emotional experiences without legitimising inappropriate behaviour, and maintain accountability within a framework of relational respect.
Empowerment also contributes to the formation of professional identity. For many VET students, training involves not only the acquisition of technical competence but also the development of belonging within a professional community.

3.5. Equity, Diversity and Cultural Sensitivity

Trauma cannot be examined independently of broader social contexts. Experiences such as discrimination, migration-related pressures, socioeconomic disadvantage, or systemic marginalisation frequently intersect with personal adversity. For this reason, trauma-informed education requires a clear commitment to equity and cultural responsiveness (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2024).

Educational professionals must recognise that norms governing behaviour, communication styles, and emotional expression vary across cultural settings. When these differences are not acknowledged, culturally mediated behaviours may be misinterpreted, potentially leading to disproportionate disciplinary responses.

An equity-oriented approach also requires institutions to examine whether existing policies produce unequal outcomes for specific groups of students. Evidence from multiple educational systems suggests that rigid disciplinary models—particularly zero-tolerance policies—often contribute to exclusion without producing meaningful behavioural improvement (González, 2012).



Trauma-informed systems therefore tend to prioritise restorative approaches that maintain accountability while emphasising relational repair. Such practices aim to address conflict constructively while preserving students' sense of belonging within the learning community.

Cultural sensitivity also involves recognising the potential influence of collective or historical trauma, including displacement caused by conflict or experiences of structural discrimination. Integrating cultural awareness into trauma-informed frameworks strengthens institutional inclusivity and aligns educational practice with European principles of equality, dignity, and social cohesion (European Commission, 2020).

3.6. The Educator's Role in Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed education does not redefine educators as mental health professionals. Instead, it emphasises **professional awareness of how stress and adversity** may influence behaviour, engagement, and learning processes.



Educators play a central role in establishing predictable learning environments, responding to dysregulation with composure and structure, and recognising situations in which referral to specialised support services is necessary. The ability to collaborate effectively with counsellors, psychologists, or external agencies constitutes an important professional competence.

Equally important is educators' awareness of their own emotional and physiological responses. High-demand vocational environments can expose staff to sustained stress, conflict, and emotional strain. Over time, these conditions may lead to fatigue, reduced responsiveness, or diminished consistency in classroom management.

Institutional strategies that prioritise staff well-being therefore play a critical role in sustaining trauma-informed implementation. Professional support structures, opportunities for reflective practice, and collaborative problem-solving among colleagues contribute significantly to long-term effectiveness. Trauma-informed practice remains sustainable only when it is embedded coherently at both individual and institutional levels.



CHAPTER 4

Creating Trauma-Sensitive VET Classrooms

Trauma-informed education is grounded in the understanding that exposure to trauma and chronic stress can significantly affect learners' emotional regulation, cognition, behaviour, and capacity to engage in learning. In VET contexts, where learners often present diverse educational trajectories and life experiences, creating trauma-sensitive classrooms is essential for equity, retention, and learner success (Brunzell, Waters & Stokes, 2015; OECD, 2021).

This chapter provides evidence-based guidance for designing learning environments that prioritise **psychological safety, predictability, supportive relationships, and emotional regulation**, while maintaining high expectations and meaningful vocational learning.



4.1. Designing Psychologically Safe Learning Environments

The classroom environment should include:

- **Relational safety:** Positive, consistent relationships with educators act as protective factors that buffer the effects of trauma and stress (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

- **Clear expectations and transparency:** Explicit rules, routines, and assessment criteria reduce uncertainty, which is a known trigger for trauma-affected individuals (Brunzell et al., 2016).

- **Emotionally respectful communication:** Educators who model calm, respectful responses support students' capacity for self-regulation and learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Creating psychologically safe classrooms is not about lowering standards but about removing fear as a barrier to learning (OECD, 2021).



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4.2. Classroom Organisation That Promotes Calm and Focus

Trauma impacts the brain systems responsible for attention, memory, and executive functioning. Classroom organisation can either intensify or reduce stress responses (Shonkoff et al., 2012), using strategies like the ones listed below.

- **Predictable daily routines:** Consistent schedules help learners anticipate transitions and reduce anxiety (Brunzell et al., 2016).
- **Visual supports:** Timetables, task sequences, and clear instructions assist learners whose working memory is compromised by stress (APA, 2019).
- **Sensory-aware environments:** Minimising excessive noise, clutter, and harsh lighting supports nervous system regulation (Perry, 2006).
- **Planned movement and breaks:** Short, structured movement breaks support regulation and concentration, particularly in workshop-based VET settings (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Well-organised learning spaces promote calm alertness, a state necessary for effective vocational skill acquisition.





4.3. Implementing Supportive Behaviour Strategies

Trauma-informed behaviour support reframes challenging behaviour as a stress-based response rather than intentional defiance (Bath, 2008). There are some principles that can be taken into account:

- Function-based understanding: Behaviour is interpreted as communication of unmet needs or dysregulation (Brunzell et al., 2015).
- Proactive supports: Anticipating triggers and embedding supports reduces behavioural escalation (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014).
- Consistent, calm adult responses: Educator regulation is critical for student regulation; calm responses reduce escalation and model coping strategies (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

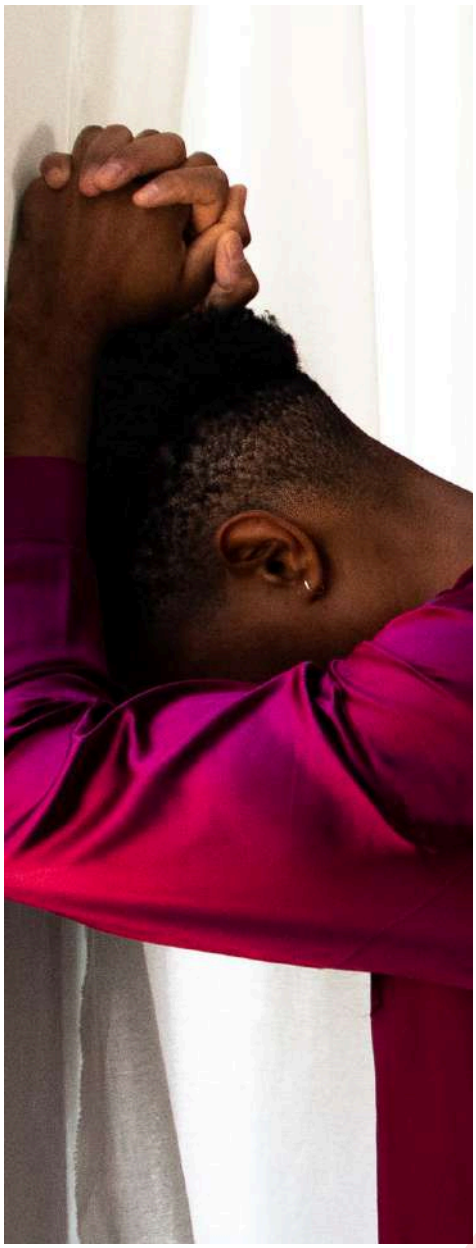
Supportive strategies are associated with improved engagement, reduced exclusions, and stronger educator-student relationships (Dorado et al., 2016).

4.4. Use of Positive Discipline and Restorative Practices

Punitive disciplinary practices have been shown to disproportionately impact trauma-affected learners and increase disengagement (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Trauma-informed alternatives include:

- **Restorative practices:** Focus on repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and fostering accountability through dialogue rather than punishment (González, 2012).
- **Positive discipline:** Emphasises skill-building, empathy, and shared responsibility for behaviour (Bear et al., 2015).
- **Community-building approaches:** Encourage belonging, peer support, and collective problem-solving (Dorado et al., 2016).

Research indicates that restorative approaches reduce conflict, improve school climate, and increase learner engagement (González, 2012).



4.5. Techniques to Promote Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is foundational to learning. Trauma-affected learners often require **co-regulation with a supportive adult** before developing independent regulation skills (Perry, 2006).

Teaching these strategies explicitly equips learners with lifelong self-management skills:

- **Grounding strategies**: Sensory grounding (e.g., noticing physical sensations, breathing exercises) helps learners return to the present moment (van der Kolk, 2014).
- **Breathing techniques**: Slow, rhythmic breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system and reduces stress responses (Porges, 2011).
- **Mindfulness-based practices:** Short, structured mindfulness activities improve attention, emotional regulation, and resilience (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).
- **Calm spaces:** Designated regulation areas allow learners to self-regulate and re-enter learning when ready (Dorado et al., 2016).

4.6. Adapting Teaching Methods for Trauma-Affected Learners

Trauma can impair concentration, memory consolidation, and information processing (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Trauma-sensitive pedagogy, therefore, prioritises flexibility and inclusion:

- **Multi-modal instruction:** Combining visual, auditory, and hands-on learning supports diverse cognitive needs (OECD, 2021).
- **Strengths-based approaches:** Emphasising resilience and competencies rather than deficits fosters motivation and self-efficacy (Ungar, 2013).
- **Flexible assessment practices:** Offering varied assessment formats and pacing reduces performance anxiety while maintaining standards (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014).

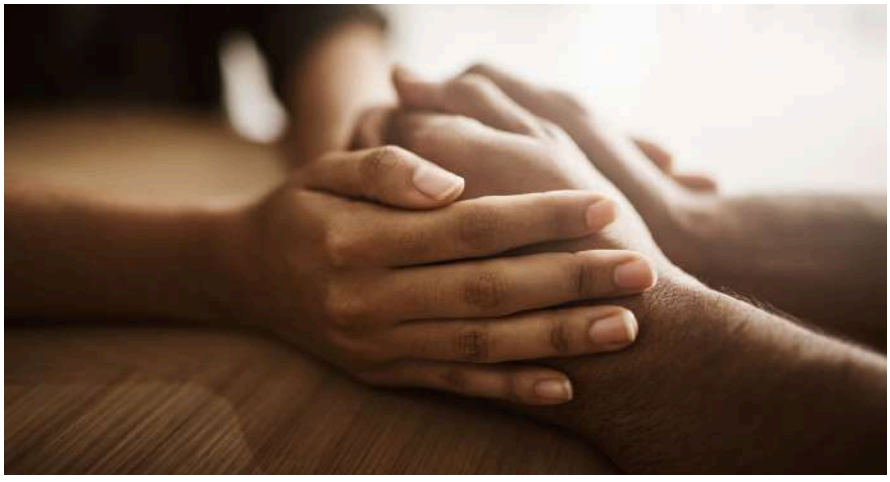
Such adaptations support persistence and success in vocational pathways without lowering expectations.

4.7. Practical tools for educators

A. Trauma-Sensitive Communication Scripts

Trauma-informed language is **non-judgmental, validating, and choice-oriented**:

- "I can see this is challenging right now. Let's work through it together."
- "You have options - would you like a short break or to continue with support?" (SAMHSA, 2014)



B. Classroom Agreements

Co-created agreements promote:

- Mutual respect
- Predictable routines
- Clear processes for support





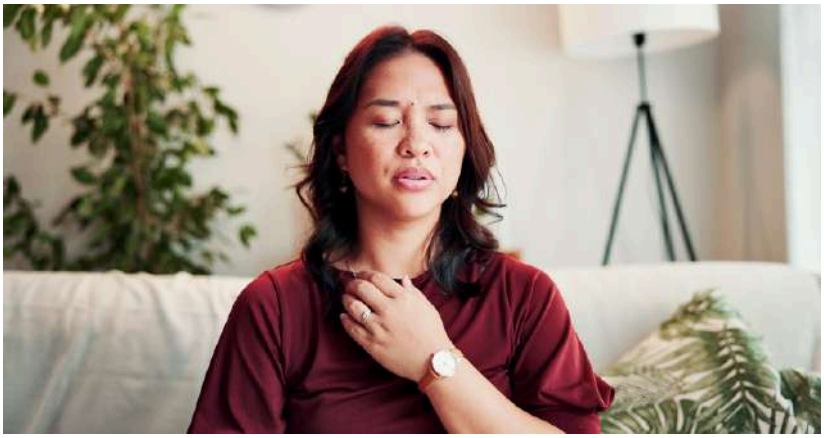
C. Routine-Building Templates

Effective routines include:

- Clear start-of-class check-ins
- Structured transitions
- Built-in regulation moments

D. De-Escalation Strategies for Crisis Moments

1. Regulate yourself first (calm voice, open posture).
2. Reduce demands temporarily.
3. Offer choices and space for regulation.
4. Re-engage through problem-solving once calm is restored.



CHAPTER 5

Practical Strategies and Case Scenarios

5.1. Responding to Behaviour Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

Behavioural incidents that disrupt learning or compromise safety are not uncommon in vocational settings. Traditional responses frequently interpret such behaviours solely through disciplinary frameworks focused on rule enforcement.
A trauma-informed perspective introduces a broader interpretive lens. Behaviour is approached not only as an action requiring correction but also as a possible form of communication reflecting underlying stress responses.

Situation 1

A **student reacts defensively** during a welding demonstration **after receiving corrective feedback**. The learner may abruptly withdraw from the task and respond with visible irritation. Within a conventional disciplinary model, this behaviour might be interpreted as resistance to instruction.
The educator should not excuse the behaviour but seek to understand its potential triggers. Public correction, particularly in skill-based environments where performance is visible to peers, may evoke prior experiences associated with embarrassment or humiliation.
The educator's response therefore shifts in tone and structure. Emotional intensity is reduced, corrective feedback may be offered privately, and the conversation is redirected toward technical improvement rather than confrontation.
Accountability remains intact. At the same time, the learner's dignity is preserved.
Over time, when such responses are applied consistently, defensive reactions tend to diminish and instructional relationships become characterised by greater trust.



5.2. Managing Emotional Escalation in Practical Lessons

Practical lessons present distinctive sensory environments. Elevated noise levels, sudden mechanical sounds, confined working areas, and continuous movement can all contribute to heightened sensory stimulation.
For some learners, these conditions may trigger stress responses. A student who appears distracted or overly reactive may, in fact, be demonstrating heightened vigilance rather than a lack of concentration.

Situation 2

Consider a **mechanical lesson in which a learner repeatedly leaves the workspace during tasks involving sustained machinery noise**. Without contextual understanding, the behaviour might be interpreted as avoidance or lack of engagement. However, when approached with inquiry rather than immediate judgment, the pattern may reveal discomfort with specific sensory stimuli. These reactions may be linked to earlier experiences associated with sudden or intense environmental stress.
Trauma-informed responses do not require significant structural change. **Educators might provide advance notice before activating loud equipment**, incorporate **short structured pauses**, or designate **quieter preparation areas** where possible.
Such adjustments maintain technical standards while reducing unnecessary stress activation. When emotional escalation occurs, the educator's first task is self-regulation. A calm tone of voice, controlled body posture, and temporary reduction of task demands often help stabilise the situation. Reflective dialogue is most productive once emotional balance has been restored.
Through consistent modelling of composed responses, educators also contribute to the gradual development of emotional regulation skills among learners.



5.3. Supporting Skill Acquisition Under Stress

Trauma-related stress can interfere with cognitive processes essential for vocational competence. Memory consolidation, attention regulation, and executive functioning are particularly vulnerable (Shonkoff et al., 2009; van der Kolk, 2014).
A learner may demonstrate successful task performance during one session yet struggle to reproduce the same sequence at a later time. Such variability is sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of effort or motivation. In many cases, however, the explanation lies in stress-related cognitive disruption.

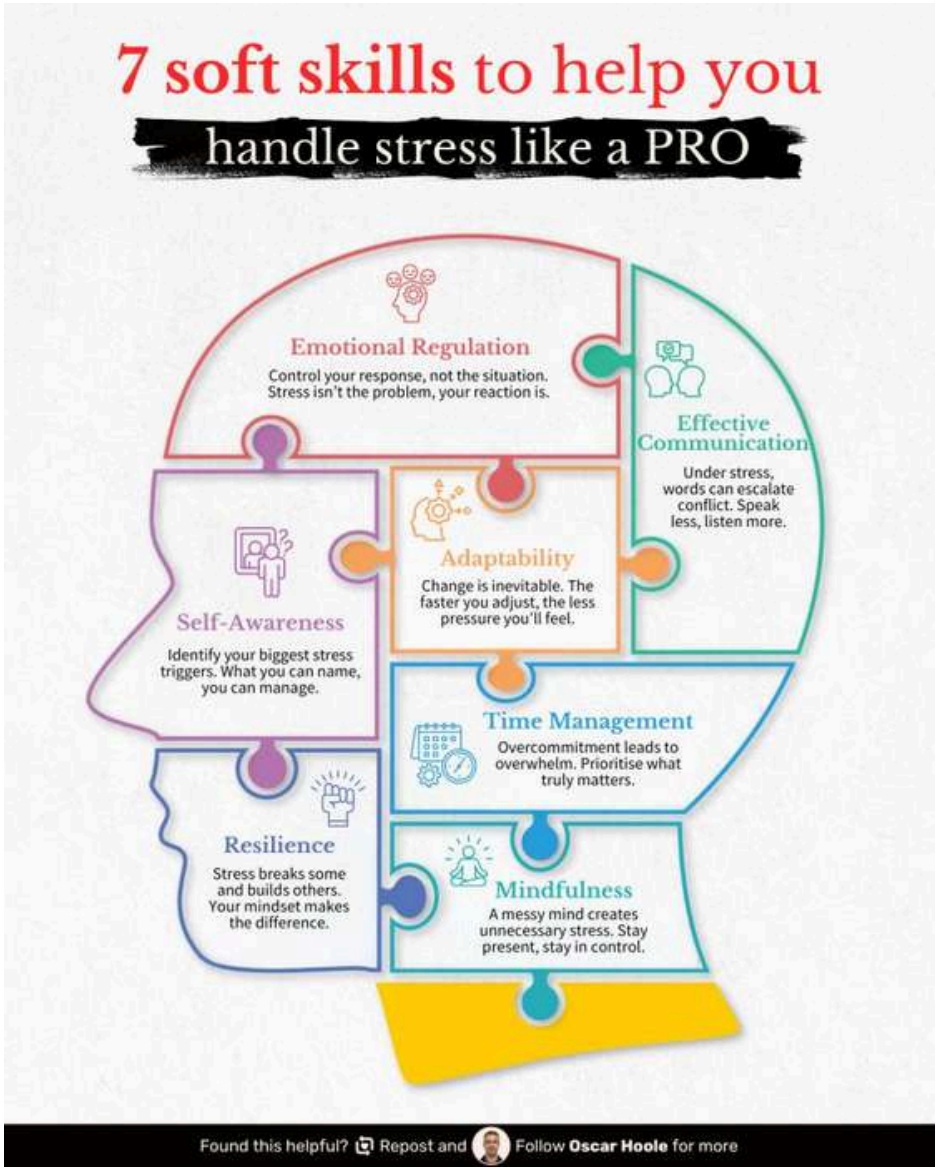
Situation 3

Structured repetition and scaffolded instruction therefore become critical components of trauma-informed teaching practice. Complex tasks should be broken into clearly defined steps, with opportunities for guided rehearsal and visual reinforcement.

For example, in **culinary training**, **a learner experiencing difficulty sequencing preparation steps may benefit from a visible checklist placed directly at the workstation**. This externalises organisational demands and reduces cognitive load.

As confidence and regulatory capacity improve, these supports can gradually be reduced without compromising skill development. Assessment practices can also influence stress levels. Where appropriate, flexible timing or formative evaluation processes may reduce performance anxiety and allow learners to demonstrate competence more effectively (Brunzell et al., 2015).



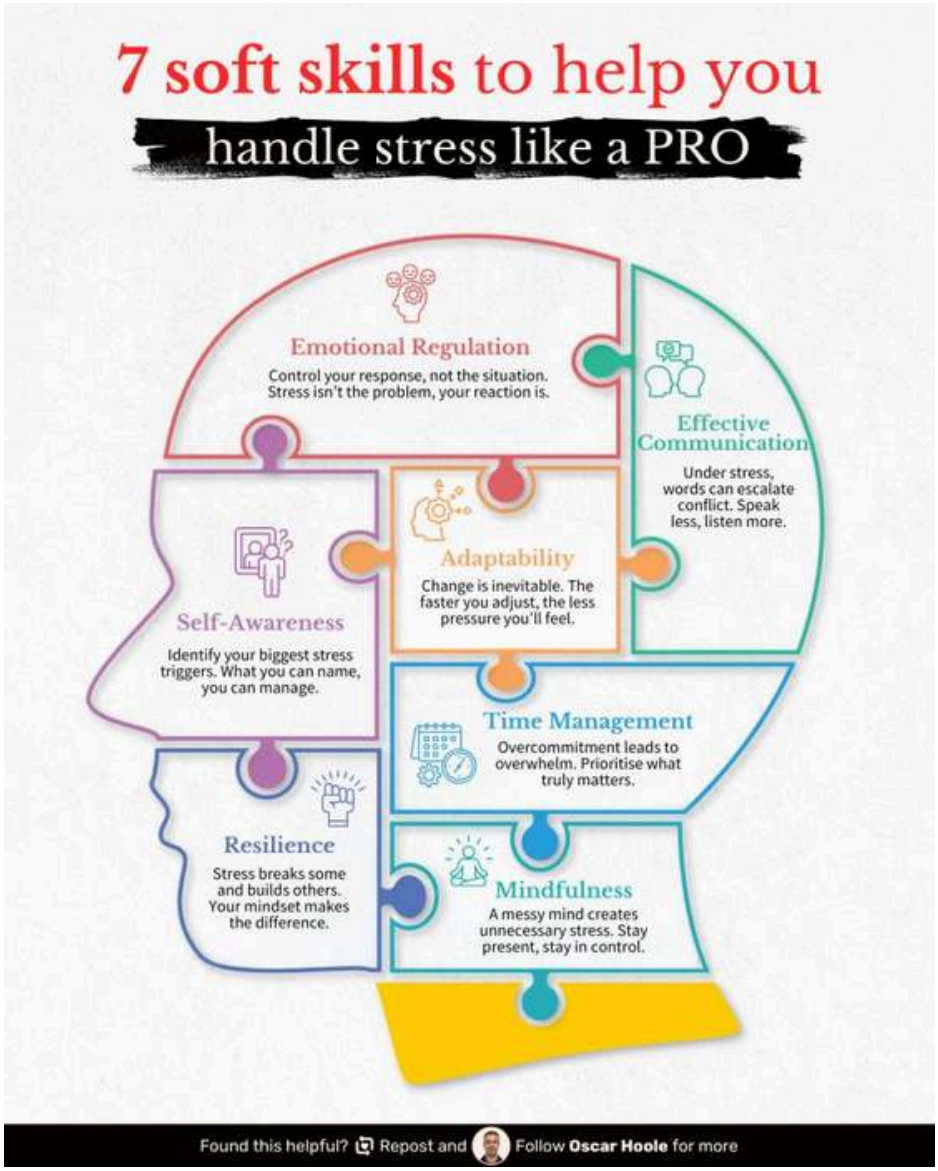


1. Emotional Regulation
↳ If you can stay calm, you can stay in control.
↳ Stressful situations aren't optional, your reaction is.

2. Self-Awareness
↳ What you can name, you can manage.
↳ Know your top stress triggers before they take control.

3. Adaptability
↳ The faster you adjust, the less pressure you feel.
↳ Change is inevitable, resisting it only adds stress.

4. Effective Communication
↳ Speak clearly, listen actively, and lower your tone.
↳ Under stress, people misinterpret even simple texts.



5. Time Management
↳ Overcommitment leads to overwhelm.
↳ Prioritize what matters, or stress will decide for you.

6. Resilience
↳ Some struggle under pressure, others grow from it.
↳ The key is how fast you recover and move forward.

7. Mindfulness
↳ Stay present. Stay focused. Stay in control.
↳ A scattered mind creates stress that isn't even real.

5.4. Restorative Approaches to Conflict

Conflict is a predictable element of collaborative vocational training environments. Group tasks, shared workspaces, and performance pressures can occasionally lead to interpersonal tension.
Trauma-informed practice addresses such situations with an emphasis on restoration rather than exclusion.

Situation 4

Consider a scenario in which **two apprentices become involved in a verbal dispute during a group assignment**. A purely disciplinary response might involve immediate removal from the classroom.

A trauma-informed response begins by **separating the individuals involved in order to allow emotional regulation**. Once composure is restored, the educator facilitates a structured discussion focused on accountability and relational repair. **Participants are encouraged to reflect on the impact of their actions, acknowledge responsibility, and identify constructive steps toward restoring collaboration**.

Such processes reinforce behavioural expectations while maintaining a sense of belonging within the learning environment. For learners whose previous educational experiences involved exclusion or marginalisation, this distinction can be particularly meaningful.



5.5. Everyday Adaptations

Trauma-informed practice must be adapted to the specific demands of different vocational disciplines. In laboratory-based training, **safety briefings** may follow a consistent structure supported by written instructions. In construction workshops, advance **clarification of procedures** involving elevated risk can reduce anticipatory anxiety. Healthcare simulations may involve emotionally intense scenarios. In such cases, **structured debriefing** sessions can provide space for cognitive processing and reflection.
Across these diverse settings, predictability remains a central organising principle.

Situation 5

A group of trainee healthcare assistants takes part in an emergency-room simulation involving a patient whose condition suddenly worsens. Because the scenario may feel emotionally intense, **the trainer begins by clearly explaining the objectives, sequence, roles, and expectations**. Learners can choose between two roles, giving them some control while maintaining the same professional standards for everyone.

After the simulation, the trainer conducts a short, structured debrief where learners review their decisions, reflect on the experience, and identify key learning points. The consistent routine, from the initial briefing to the final reflection, creates predictability, reduces uncertainty, and helps learners feel more confident and engaged in the learning process.



5.6. Micro-Practices for Immediate Application

Not all trauma-informed improvements require large institutional reforms. Small and consistent adjustments in everyday interaction can have substantial effects.

Situation 6

Examples include **greeting learners** predictably at the beginning of sessions, **addressing students respectfully** by name, providing **clear explanations** during transitions, and **avoiding sarcasm** when offering corrective feedback. Individually, such practices may appear modest. Their significance emerges through repetition.

Over time, **these predictable interaction patterns communicate reliability and relational stability**. For learners affected by trauma, consistent experiences of respectful engagement contribute gradually to the development of trust.

Importantly, trauma-informed practices benefit the educational environment as a whole. They are not designed exclusively for a narrowly defined group of students.





5.7. Balancing High Expectations with Emotional Safety

The objective is to reduce unnecessary stressors that obstruct learners' ability to meet those expectations. Transparent assessment criteria, carefully delivered feedback, opportunities for repetition, and consistent relational respect all contribute to stronger performance capacity.

Situation 7

A trainee electrician becomes anxious after making a mistake during a practical task. The trainer provides **calm guidance and reassurance** without lowering safety or performance standards. The learner is given another opportunity to complete the task, showing that emotional support and high professional expectations can be maintained together.

CHAPTER 6

Working with Families and External Support Networks

When we stop seeing a student's behavior as a "problem" and start seeing it as a survival habit that just doesn't work in a classroom, our whole approach changes: instead of trying to fix the behavior, we start focusing on making the student feel safe.

This chapter focuses on how VET educators can work effectively, ethically, and sensitively with families and external support services when students show signs of distress or ongoing difficulty. It emphasises that collaboration—when done well—strengthens student outcomes, while poorly handled communication can increase shame, resistance, and withdrawal. The goal is to make the training center a predictable "safe harbor" where they can focus on their future rather than their past.

When it comes to families, conversations are often delicate. Many parents or guardians may have their own difficult histories with education or authority, so they might be defensive or wary when they get a call from us. The best way to handle these conversations is to avoid using medical terms or complex mental health jargon. Just speak plainly about what is happening in class, instead of using technical words that might confuse or upset a family. For example, instead of saying a student is "unregulated," talk about how they seem to get overwhelmed during loud practical lessons. Focus on the fact that you both want the same thing: for the student to finish their qualification and get into the workforce. By framing it as a joint effort to help the student succeed in their chosen trade, you build a bridge instead of a wall.



6.1. Approaches to Communicating with Families Sensitively

Effective communication with families is a cornerstone of trauma-informed practice in VET. For many learners, the **family environment is the primary space where emotional regulation and stability are either reinforced or challenged.** However, entering this space requires extreme sensitivity. As recent research from CanChild (2024) emphasizes, creating emotional safety for families involves moving from a "saviour mentality" to one of "unconditional positive regard," where we value and respect the lived experiences of the parents as much as the students.

When educators reach out, they must remember that interactions between institutions and families are often colored by the parents' own negative past experiences with schooling or authority. A trauma-informed approach prioritises respect, clarity, and collaboration, treating families as partners rather than as sources of blame. This requires a non-judgmental tone and a laser focus on shared goals—specifically, the student's success in their training and their future career.

Language is our most powerful tool in building this partnership. U**sing technical or clinical terms often creates a barrier of confusion** or defensiveness. Instead, **communication should stay grounded in what is actually happening in the workshop or classroom**. As Giles et al. (2025) suggest, when we shift from reactive to proactive communication, we allow families to feel part of a "healing school" environment rather than a disciplinary one. By starting conversations with a learner's strengths before moving into challenges, educators create a balanced dialogue that feels constructive rather than attacking. When families see that you are truly invested in their child's success, trust begins to grow.

> "Authentic family engagement is not just about sharing information; it's about sharing power and moving toward a mindset where the family's insights are as vital as the educator's expertise." — Fairfax Trauma Informed Community Network (2025)

6.2. When and How to Refer Students to Specialised Services

VET **educators** are the "first responders" of the educational world, but they **are not expected to be mental health professionals**. A key professional skill is knowing when the support a student needs goes beyond what can be provided in a workshop setting. Indicators that a referral is needed include persistent emotional distress, sudden and significant changes in behavior, or a level of disengagement that suggests the student is struggling with things far outside the classroom.

The referral process itself must be handled with dignity and transparency. It should never feel like a punishment for "bad" behavior; instead, it must be framed as a positive opportunity for the student to get the "extra tools" they need to succeed. One of the most effective strategies for this is the **"warm handoff"**. Rather than simply handing a student a business card or a phone number—which often leads to the student never making the call—the educator actively facilitates the connection. Recent studies have shown a dramatic difference in success rates: patients with a "warm handoff" were much more likely to actually attend their first appointment (100% vs. 58% in traditional referrals).

This process might involve walking the student to the counselor's office or sitting with them while they make the first call. Timing is everything—these conversations are most successful when the learner is calm and "regulated". Trying to push support services during a moment of high stress or a crisis usually results in the student pulling away further. By treating the referral as a supportive transition, we keep the student's dignity intact and increase the chances they will actually get the help they need.



6.3. Building Multi-Disciplinary Collaboration

No educator is an island. Trauma-informed practice works best when there is a **coordinated network of support**, including teachers, counsellors, psychologists, and social workers. **Each professional brings a different piece of the puzzle**, and when they collaborate, they can respond much more effectively to a student's complex needs.

Without this coordination, students often receive inconsistent messages or fragmented support, which only increases their confusion and stress. Education Today (2025) highlights that "psychological safety" is not just for the students; it is also for the staff. When educators feel supported by a multi-disciplinary team, they are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to maintain the "unconditional positive regard" that trauma-affected students need.

Regular meetings and shared strategies ensure that everyone is using the same language and the same approach. This consistency is vital for trauma survivors, as it creates a predictable environment where they don't have to guess how to behave with different members of staff. Collaboration also means reaching out to community organizations before a crisis happens. Establishing these bridges early makes referring a student much smoother when the time comes.

> "Consistency in support is the antidote to the chaos many trauma-affected learners have faced. When the system is predictable, the student's nervous system can finally begin to relax." — OECD (2021)



6.4. Data Protection and Confidentiality in Practice

Handling a student's trauma history requires a high level of ethical responsibility. Mishandling this sensitive information can destroy the trust you have worked so hard to build, leading to a student feeling betrayed or withdrawing from support entirely. A trauma-informed approach to confidentiality is built on the idea of **"necessity"**—only share what is absolutely required to keep the student safe and learning.

Educators should focus their documentation on observable facts and behaviors rather than guesses or clinical labels. For example, instead of writing "the student has PTSD," a record should state "the student becomes visibly distressed and leaves the room when loud machinery is started without warning." This keeps the records professional, objective, and useful for educational planning.

Transparency with the student is also essential. They should be told what information is being shared and why. This honesty reduces the feeling that people are talking "behind their back," which is a common trigger for those with a history of betrayal. According to the **Trauma-Informed Ethical Decision-Making Model (2025)**, every choice about sharing information should be balanced against the student's autonomy and their safety. While we have a legal duty to report risks of harm, we should always do so in a way that maintains the student's dignity and explains the reasons for the disclosure clearly.



CHAPTER 7

Training in Lithuania and in Portugal - sharing experiences

The SAFELAB project developed two transnational training activities, one in Lithuania and another one in Portugal, as a progressive learning pathway for vocational education and training professionals. The two trainings were designed to move participants from a shared understanding of trauma and ACEs towards the practical application of trauma-informed approaches in everyday educational settings.

Training 1 was conceived as an introductory capacity-building activity for professionals working in or closely connected to VET. Its principal purpose was to establish a common understanding of trauma and ACEs and to introduce the principles of trauma-informed education.

Training 2 was explicitly designed as the practical continuation of Training 1. Whereas the first training established the theoretical foundations of trauma-informed education, the second focused on applying these concepts in everyday educational contexts.
Its objectives included strengthening participants' understanding of trauma-informed practice, developing strategies for emotionally safe learning environments, increasing confidence in identifying and responding to trauma-related behaviours, promoting emotional regulation, strengthening educator–learner relationships, sharing adaptable classroom resources and collecting examples of good practice for the e-Handbook.

Together, the two activities established a progression from understanding trauma ➔ recognising its manifestations ➔ reflecting on educational responses ➔ practising trauma-informed strategies ➔ developing supportive learning environments and classroom tools.

7.1. Activities and Methods Used Across the Two Trainings

The two trainings used a deliberately varied methodology. Rather than relying exclusively on presentations, the programme combined knowledge acquisition with reflection, experience, collaboration and practice.

Interactive and reflective activities

Icebreakers, warm-ups, group discussions and reflection exercises were used to build trust and encourage participants to connect the training content with their own professional experience. Examples included the "Who am I?" introductory exercise, "What I see – What I understand – What I do," "This or That," and collaborative word and acrostic activities.

Videos and short films

Short films were repeatedly used to make complex emotional, social and psychological concepts accessible and memorable. Training 1 used films such as Childhood Trauma and the Brain, How the Brain Adapts to Adversity, Snack Attack, The Present, Alike and Umbrella.
Training 2 continued this approach with films including Mr Indifferent – Give in to Giving, Ian, Inclusão Social, El Erizo, Bridge, Fragmentos, Hair Love and Pip. These were used to stimulate reflection on empathy, inclusion, relationships, courage, service and supportive behaviour.

Case studies and scenario-based learning

Case analysis was particularly important in connecting conceptual knowledge with real educational situations. Training 1 introduced participants to situations involving trauma, ACEs, emotional responses and learning difficulties. Training 2 expanded this approach by using classroom case studies and role-play to practise possible responses to challenging situations.

Role-play and experiential learning

Experiential learning became more prominent in Training 2. Participants simulated challenging classroom situations and practised trauma-sensitive responses. This represented a direct response to the need identified during Training 1 for more practical examples, role-plays and opportunities to rehearse strategies.

Peer learning and international exchange

Both trainings created space for participants from Lithuania, Portugal and Greece to share experiences and good practices. Training 1 included an institutional visit and a structured exchange of approaches, while Training 2 encouraged participants to compare responses and methodologies across educational systems.

Co-creation of resources

A central feature of the two activities was their direct contribution to the SAFELAB e-Handbook. Participants reviewed and commented on the first draft during Training 1, identified useful institutional practices, and subsequently developed and collected classroom strategies and resources during Training 2.

Training 1: Building the foundations	Training 2: Applying the foundations
Understanding trauma and ACEs	Recognising trauma manifestations in the classroom
Exploring child development and the effects of adversity	Creating emotionally safe learning environments
Understanding emotional, behavioural and cognitive effects	Supporting emotional regulation and stress management
Identifying possible meanings behind behaviour	Practising trauma-sensitive responses
Exploring institutional good practices	Developing adaptable classroom resources
Introducing trauma-informed principles	Applying trauma-informed strategies
Sharing experiences and identifying needs	Co-creating methodologies and tools
Feeding learning into the first e-Handbook draft	Contributing practical content to the e-Handbook

7.2. Key Learning Outcomes for VET Professionals

Recognising rather than simply reacting to behaviour

Participants were encouraged to look beyond observable behaviour and consider possible emotional, developmental or trauma-related factors. Training 1's work on emotions, behaviour and cognitive processes provided the foundation for this perspective, while Training 2 translated it into classroom responses.

Creating predictability and psychological safety

Training 2 particularly emphasised predictable routines, trust, clear boundaries and supportive relationships as elements of an emotionally safe learning environment.

Supporting emotional regulation

The trainings introduced practical approaches to recognising emotions and supporting regulation, including creative exercises, co-regulation, stress-management strategies and activities that can be adapted for use with learners.

Building relationship-centred practice

Empathy, active listening, positive reinforcement and trust-building emerged as central elements of supportive educational relationships. Training 2 placed particular emphasis on these skills and on recognising when learners may require additional support.

Supporting inclusion and learner empowerment

The activities connected trauma-informed practice with inclusion, diversity, collaboration and learner empowerment. The exploration of Ubuntu and project-based learning during Training 2 broadened the discussion beyond responding to difficulties towards creating learning environments in which learners can experience belonging, cooperation and support.

Recognising the importance of educator self-care

Both trainings acknowledged that supporting learners affected by trauma also requires attention to the well-being of professionals. Training 1 addressed physical and psychological self-care, while Training 2 linked self-care with empathy, Ubuntu and sustainable educational practice.

CHAPTER 8

Identifying and Responding to Challenging Situations: A Practical Guidance for Educators

When a student has experienced trauma or ACEs, challenging behaviour may be an expression of emotional distress rather than simply a lack of motivation, discipline or willingness to learn. The SAFELAB trainings emphasised the importance of looking beyond what is immediately visible and considering what the learner may be experiencing underneath the behaviour.

8.1. Step by step approach

Step 1 – Pause and observe: What do I see?

Start by describing the situation without immediately judging or interpreting it.
A student may:

- avoid or refuse a task;
- withdraw from interaction;
- become unusually quiet;
- appear anxious, angry, sad or overwhelmed;
- react very strongly to a situation;
- have difficulty concentrating or participating;
- leave the classroom or seek isolation;
- display behaviour that seems disruptive or difficult to understand.

Ask yourself:
What am I actually observing, without making assumptions about why it is happening?



Step 2 – Look underneath the behaviour: What might the student be experiencing?

Once the behaviour has been observed, consider what emotion or experience may be underneath it.



What I see → What I understand → What I do

This encourages educators to pause before reacting and consider possible emotional meanings behind behaviour. Participants explored emotions including fear or anxiety, anger, sadness, shame and withdrawal.

For example:

What I see: The student refuses to start the assignment.
What I might understand: The student may be overwhelmed or afraid of failing.
What I do: I approach calmly and explore what support might make the task manageable.

This does **not** mean assuming that every challenging behaviour is caused by trauma. Rather, it means remaining curious and avoiding premature judgement.

Step 3 – Regulate yourself first

Before supporting the student, check your own emotional response.

A stressed or frustrated educator may unintentionally increase the student's stress. Emotional awareness, self-regulation and physical and psychological self-care should be emphasised.

Take a moment to:



- slow down;
- breathe;
- use a calm tone of voice;
- avoid reacting impulsively;
- remind yourself that behaviour communicates something;
- focus on what the student needs at that moment.

Remember: the educator's calm response can help create the conditions for the student's own regulation.

Step 4 – Create safety and predictability

When a student is distressed, prioritise emotional safety before demanding performance.

There are several practical elements of an emotionally safe classroom:

- predictable routines;
- clear boundaries;
- trust;
- supportive relationships;
- emotional regulation strategies; and
- a sense of psychological safety.



In practice, this can mean giving the student **clear information about what will happen next**, reducing unnecessary pressure, offering a short break when appropriate, or calmly explaining the next step.
As possible supportive measures, there are examples such as **breakout spaces**, **sensory objects or rooms**, **soundproof devices**, and **additional breaks**.

Step 5 – Connect before correcting

When a student is distressed, begin with the relationship rather than immediately correcting the behaviour.

Use: **Empathy + active listening + positive reinforcement**

These three elements are foundations for supportive educator–student relationships.

Try to:

- approach without judgement;
- listen before giving advice;
- acknowledge the student's feelings;
- use simple and respectful language;
- reinforce positive efforts, even when they are small;
- avoid humiliating or labelling the student.



The goal is not to remove boundaries. It is to **communicate boundaries in a way that preserves trust and dignity**.

Step 6 – Help the student regulate

If the student is overwhelmed, learning may not be the immediate priority.

The trainings explored activities that help students identify emotions and practise regulation. For example, the "emotions on the body" exercise can help learners identify where and how they experience emotions, while the "Balloon of Dreams" activity can be adapted to promote empathy and self-regulation.

Depending on the situation, an educator might:

- allow a short pause or break;
- reduce stimulation;
- offer a quieter space;
- help the student name what they are feeling;
- use a familiar classroom regulation strategy;
- postpone a demanding task until the student is calmer.



The objective is to support the learner in returning to a state in which participation and learning are possible.

Step 7 – Offer a manageable next step

Once the situation has stabilised, avoid immediately returning to a large or demanding task.

Break the situation into smaller steps.



For example:

- "Let's start with the first question together."

rather than:

"You need to finish the whole assignment."

This approach is consistent with understanding how trauma can affect learning processes and recognising that behaviours such as task avoidance may sometimes reflect fear of failure or overload.

Step 8 – Decide whether additional support is needed

Educators should not be expected to manage every difficulty alone.

You should be able to recognise early signs of emotional distress,knowg when additional support may be required, and strengthen cooperation between educators and support professionals.



Consider involving the appropriate support professional when:

- distress is persistent or repeatedly interferes with learning;
- the situation is beyond the educator's role or competence;
- the learner needs support that cannot be provided in the classroom;
- there are concerns about the student's safety or well-being.

The educator's role is to **notice, respond supportively and connect the learner with appropriate support**, rather than attempting to diagnose or treat trauma.



Step 9 – Reflect after the situation

After the situation, take a moment to reflect:

What happened?
What did I observe?

What might have contributed?
What emotions, circumstances or triggers may have been involved?

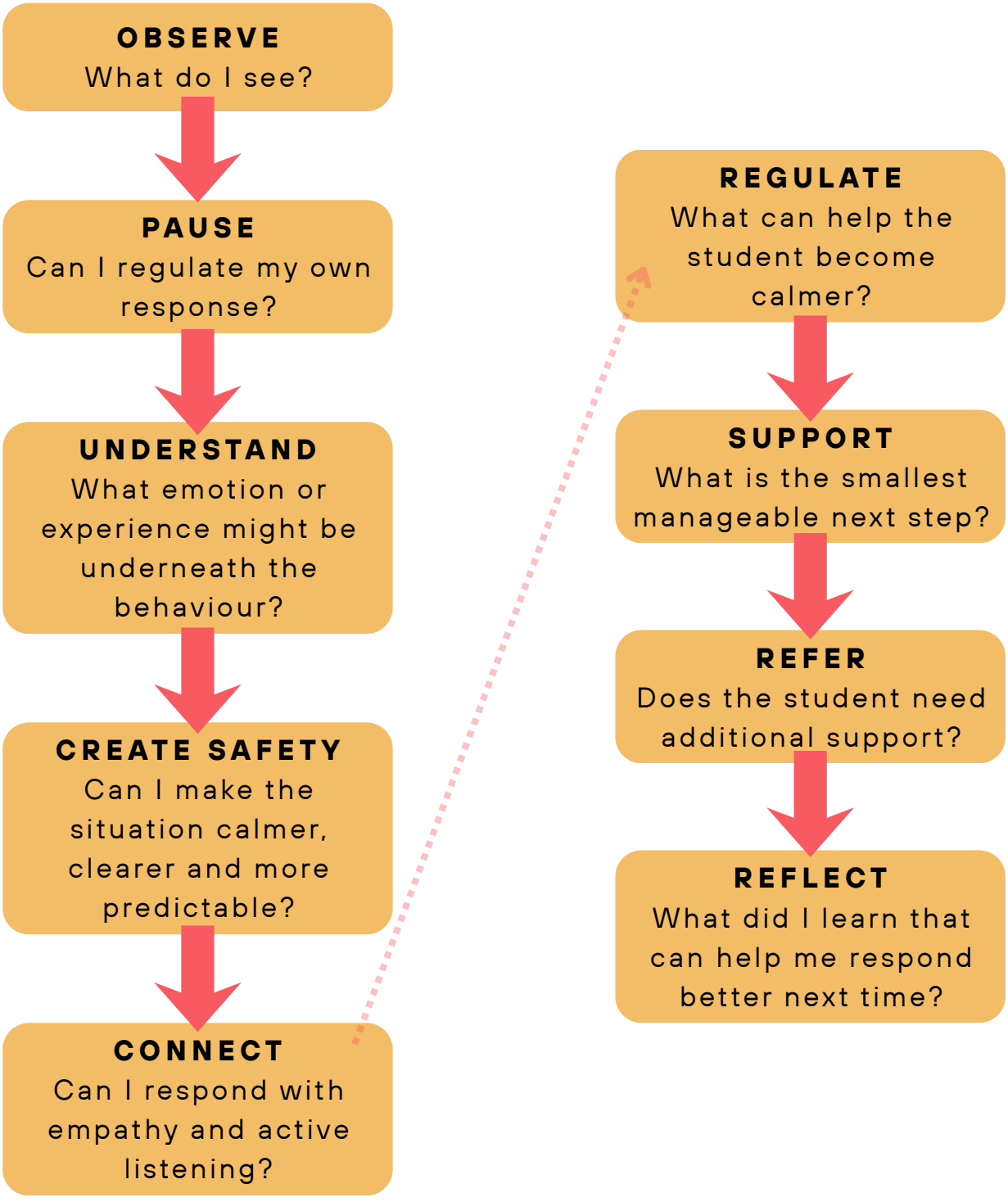
What helped?
Which response reduced distress or supported engagement?

What could I change next time?
Could I make the environment more predictable, adapt the task or provide another form of support?

Reflection and peer exchange are important learning methods. Sharing experiences with colleagues can help educators identify patterns and develop more effective responses.

8.2. Response Map

When a challenging situation occurs, remember:



A trauma-informed response does not mean accepting every behaviour without boundaries. It means responding to challenging behaviour with curiosity, empathy, consistency and appropriate support rather than immediately interpreting it as defiance or lack of motivation.

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RESOURCES

- Training 1 Report: https://drive.google.com/file/d/16n3XuiiIO2QF19yAejL4HSbDsHszHall/view?usp=sharing

- Training 2 Report: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MQFyH0rbBpQ3aoeVcA_m6p5n1OSMIn2p/view?usp=sharing

CONCLUSION



Trauma-informed practice in Vocational Education and Training represents more than a response to challenging behaviour or individual learner difficulties. As this handbook demonstrates, it involves a broader transformation in the way educational institutions understand behaviour, relationships, learning and support. Recognising that trauma and chronic stress can influence emotional regulation, cognition, motivation, attendance and skill acquisition allows educators to respond with greater awareness while maintaining clear boundaries and high professional expectations.

Throughout the handbook, one principle emerges consistently: safety is a condition for learning. Physical and emotional safety, predictable routines, transparent expectations, respectful communication and reliable relationships can reduce unnecessary stress and create conditions in which learners are better able to concentrate, participate and develop their vocational skills. Small and consistent practices—such as clear explanations, respectful feedback, structured transitions and predictable interactions—can contribute significantly to trust over time.

The handbook also emphasises the importance of looking beyond the visible behaviour. Withdrawal, avoidance, emotional escalation, difficulty concentrating or resistance may have different meanings depending on the learner and the context. A trauma-informed response therefore begins with observation, reflection and educator self-regulation before moving towards support, problem-solving and, when necessary, referral. The SAFELAB training activities reinforced this perspective by encouraging professionals to recognise rather than simply react to behaviour and to consider possible emotional, developmental or trauma-related factors.

At the same time, trauma-informed practice does not mean removing accountability or lowering educational standards. The examples throughout the handbook show that emotional support and professional expectations can coexist. Learners can be supported with calm guidance, opportunities for repetition, clear feedback and predictable structures while remaining responsible for their learning, behaviour and professional development.

Effective implementation also depends on relationships beyond the classroom. Families should be approached as partners, communication should be clear and non-judgemental, and educators should recognise when a learner requires support that goes beyond their professional role. Collaboration with counsellors, psychologists, social workers and community organisations strengthens continuity of care and reduces the risk of fragmented or inconsistent responses.

Finally, trauma-informed education must also consider the well-being of educators themselves. Sustained exposure to stress, conflict and emotionally demanding situations can affect professional responsiveness and consistency. For this reason, reflective practice, peer collaboration, professional support and institutional commitment are essential to ensuring that trauma-informed practice remains sustainable over time.

The SAFELAB project has shown the value of combining knowledge, reflection, experience and practical application. The two transnational training activities created opportunities for professionals to exchange experiences, practise trauma-sensitive responses and co-create resources for everyday educational use.

This handbook should therefore be understood not as a final set of answers, but as a practical starting point for continued reflection and development. Its central message is simple: when educational environments become safer, more predictable, respectful and inclusive, learners are given stronger conditions in which to engage, learn, develop professional competence and imagine a positive future.



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