

STRATEGIES FOR
HELPING OSY
WITH ACES





Every day, the students you work with have their own unique views of the world. OSY have particular challenges to face in life. They also can have burdens from the past that they are still dealing with. These are important to consider whenever or wherever you work with them.



When any youth has witnessed violence as a child between their adult caregivers or experienced abuse or neglect, as they grow up they can enter an instructional session and life in general, believing that the world is an unpredictable and threatening place.

Unfortunately some youth have been traumatized for years. Often without realizing it, teachers have been dealing with trauma's impact for generations.





But trauma researchers can now explain the hidden story behind many difficulties plaguing our educational system and how some of this relates to why OSY drop out of school.

Childhood trauma from exposure to family violence can diminish concentration, memory, and the organizational and language abilities that children need to function well in school and in life.



“Young children exposed to more than five adverse experiences in the first three years of life face a 75 percent likelihood of having one or more delays in language, emotional, or brain development.”

--Neena McConnico, Director of Boston Medical Center's Child Witness to Violence Project

What can be done to help OSY students struggling with the effects of adverse childhood experiences?





Youth who witnessed violence often have trouble in the instructional settings because their post-traumatic stress can manifest itself as inattention, sleep dysfunction, distractibility, hyperactivity, aggression, and angry outbursts.



Alternately, these youth may withdraw and appear to be unfazed by their trauma and thus blend in and their trauma can go unnoticed.

“These children are the children I worry about the most, the ones who sneak under the radar and don’t get the help they need.” -- Neena McConnico





It often can be a challenge to bring OSY back to a classroom of any type. Instructors can use their existing expertise more effectively when they understand that many of the academic, social, and behavioral problems of traumatized children involve such difficulties as failing to understand directions, overreacting to comments from teachers and peers, misreading context, failing to connect cause and effect, and other forms of miscommunication.

“Am I safe?”

A traumatized brain can be tired, hungry, worried, rejected, or detached, and these states are often accompanied by feelings of isolation, worry, angst, and fear.

Chronic activation of the fear response can damage those parts of the brain responsible for cognition and learning.



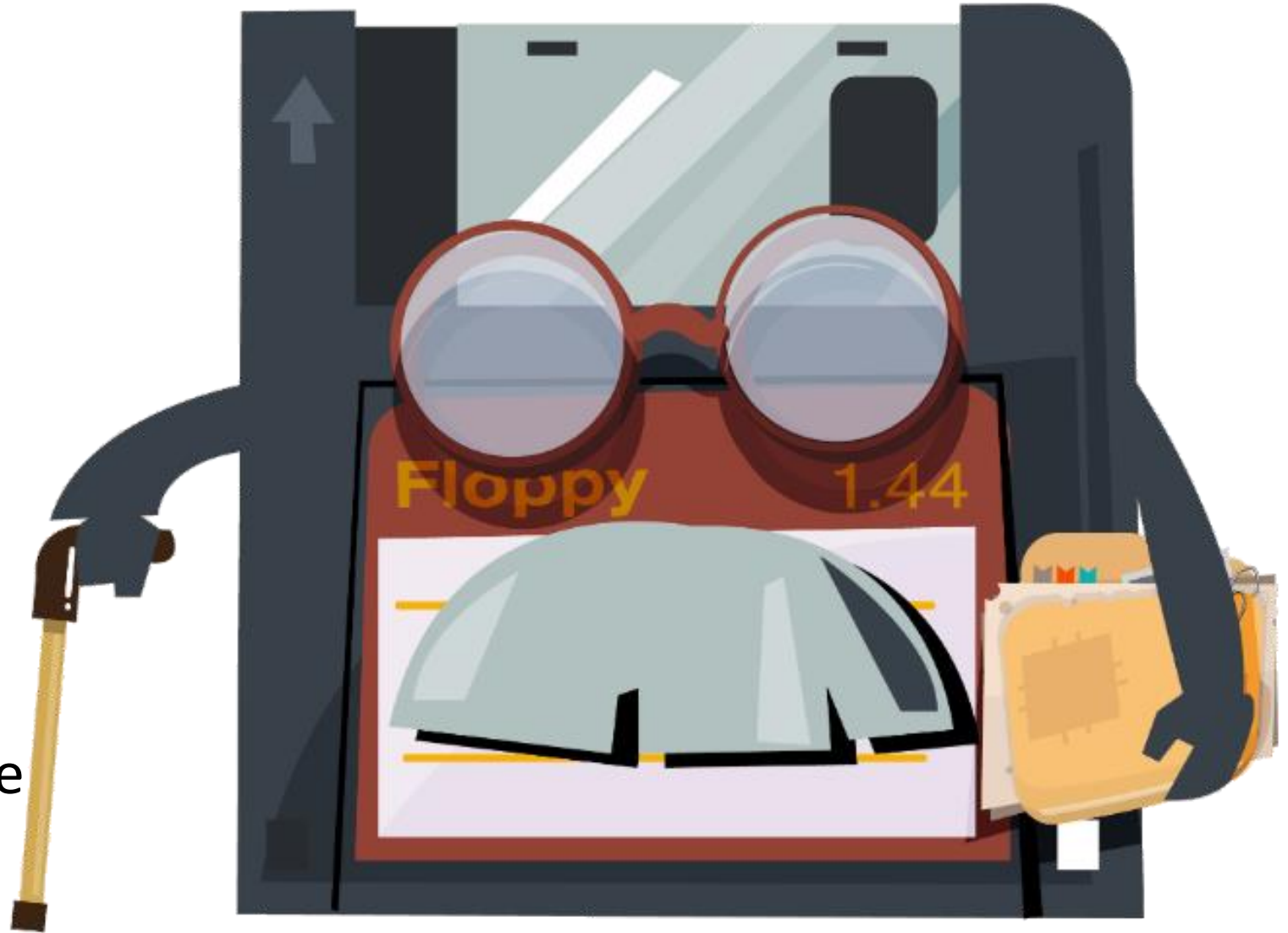


“Can I trust you?”

Youth can have a deep mistrust of adults because they have never formed healthy attachments. These young people have brains in a constant state of alarm.

Can't delete it

When the brain has experienced significant adversity, it becomes fundamentally reorganized. Past experiences can live on in the body and may be experienced again as flashbacks, memories, or repetitive thoughts about the painful event.



A silent epidemic

Childhood adversity is invisible — it usually takes place behind closed doors or within the impenetrable family bubble. But skyrocketing chronic health problems, prison populations, mental illness, high school discipline and dropout rates show clearly that most humans are suffering the short- and long-term effects of toxic stress.



Not just 'them'

It is a sickness that affects us all. Even those without ACEs are affected by health costs, prison costs, workplace costs and increasing poverty. This is an epidemic. A sickness that affects us all. The good news is that we can do something about it.

SICKNESS



For the 25 percent of American children and youth who experience trauma at home, school [and other outside programs] may be their only safe harbor from that tempest, and teachers represent so much more than purveyors of facts and figures.

To these youth, teachers offer reassurance that not all adults are harmful, that even if they are not made to feel worthy at home, there are people in the world who will value, support, and have unconditional positive regard for them.

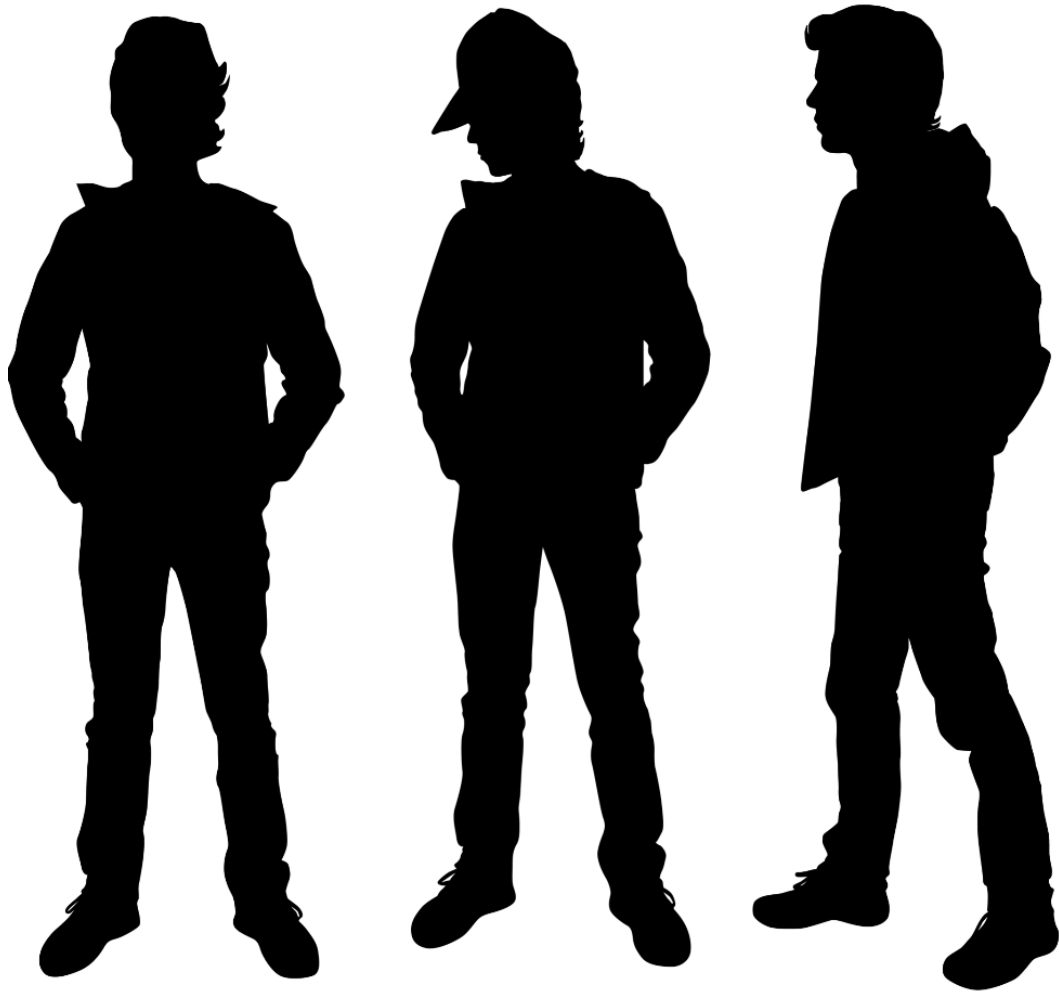




We are fundamentally emotional and social creatures. The role of emotion in education is gaining increased attention as neuroscience demonstrates what good teachers already know: emotions affect student performance.

When a youth is anxious, stressed, and emotionally reactive, the amygdala responds by blocking the absorption of sensory input. Under those circumstances, information taught cannot enter long-term memory.

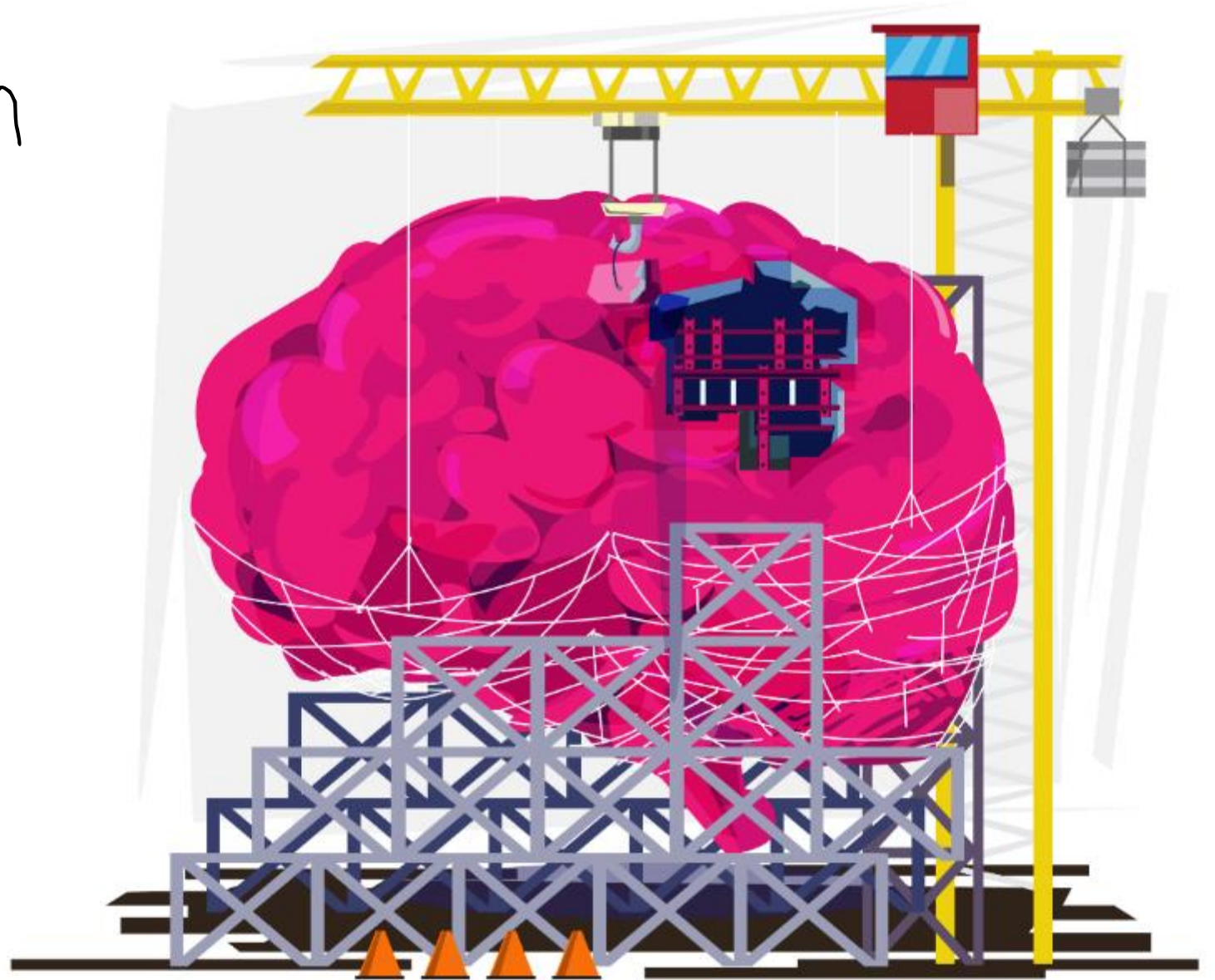




Though it seems counterintuitive, *the students who are often the least engaged are actually the ones who most need a positive and personal connection with the teacher.* Often they are seeking a positive connection with an adult authority figure. They often need that personal connection first, before they can or will focus on academic content.

No Quick Solution

It takes repeated efforts to re-wire the brain to experience and manage feelings more consciously so that the thinking part of the brain can come into play. This is a process that takes time for students to learn to manage their emotions in order to allow for higher order cognitive functioning/learning.



RESEARCH BASED STRATEGIES



Take the time

When it comes to instruction, there are no exotic new techniques that teachers can use to get students on task.

The most effective planning for instructional settings comes in the form using strategies that prevent acting out before it occurs. And those strategies arise primarily from assuming the best about our OSY students.



Assume the best about me!

Assume that our OSY want to be here, want to participate, and, specifically, want to learn good behavior. When we internalize and act from this assumption, our students will be better engaged and learn more, and it changes our interactions with them. We will be more patient in helping to provide the types of instruction that allow students to succeed at their own pace.



Two by Ten

With this strategy, teachers focus on their most difficult student. For two minutes each day, ten days in a row, teachers have a personal conversation with the student about anything in which the student is interested (as long as the conversation is appropriate for the setting). Researchers found an 85% improvement in that one student's behavior. In addition, the behavior of all the other students in group improved.





The “Invisible Contract”

“Whenever students walk into the instructional setting, assume they hold an invisible contract in their hands, which states, ‘Please teach me appropriate behavior in a safe and structured environment.’ The teacher also has a contract, which states, ‘I will do my best to teach you appropriate behavior in a safe and structured environment.’”

And walk them through it

Instead of throwing up our hands and saying, "These kids don't care" or "These kids can't succeed," we should assume they are committed to success in both content and behavior. We can then put our energy into breaking down the behaviors we want to see into simple steps so that students clearly understand what we expect of them.

Power of Positive Language

Because youth may not have experienced many positive relationships with other adults, the student-teacher bond can be the most important gift educators have to offer. Teachers who are reliable, honest, and dependable can offer the stability these students so desperately need.





Teacher language—what is said to students and how it is said—is one of the most powerful teaching tools. It permeates every aspect of teaching.

Teacher language can lift students to their highest potential or tear them down. It can help them build positive relationships or encourage discord and distrust. It shapes how students think and act and, ultimately, how they learn.

Teachers' words shape students as learners by affecting students' sense of identity.



First. Be Direct

When we say what we mean and use a kind, straightforward tone, students learn that they can trust us. They feel respected and safe, a necessary condition for developing self-discipline and taking the risks required for learning.



Sarcasm hurts

Sarcasm, another form of indirect language, is also common—and damaging—in the classroom.

Sometimes teachers use sarcasm thinking it will provide comic relief; other times out of exhaustion, and it often slips in without the teacher knowing it.

Sarcasm causes embarrassment, diminishes trust, erodes authority, and is the currency of insult.





Second: Convey Faith In Students' Abilities and Intentions

When words and tone convey faith in students' desire and ability to do well, students are more likely to live up to the teacher's expectations of them.

Take a moment to notice

Take the time to notice and comment on positive behavior, being quite specific, "You're trying lots of different ideas for solving that problem. That takes persistence." Such observations give students hard evidence for why they should believe in themselves.



Third, Focus on Actions, Not Abstractions

There is a place, of course, for such abstract terms as *respectful* and *responsible*, but we must give students plenty of opportunities to associate those words with concrete actions. Expectations such as "treat one another with kindness" will be more meaningful to students if we help them picture and practice what those expectations look like in different situations.

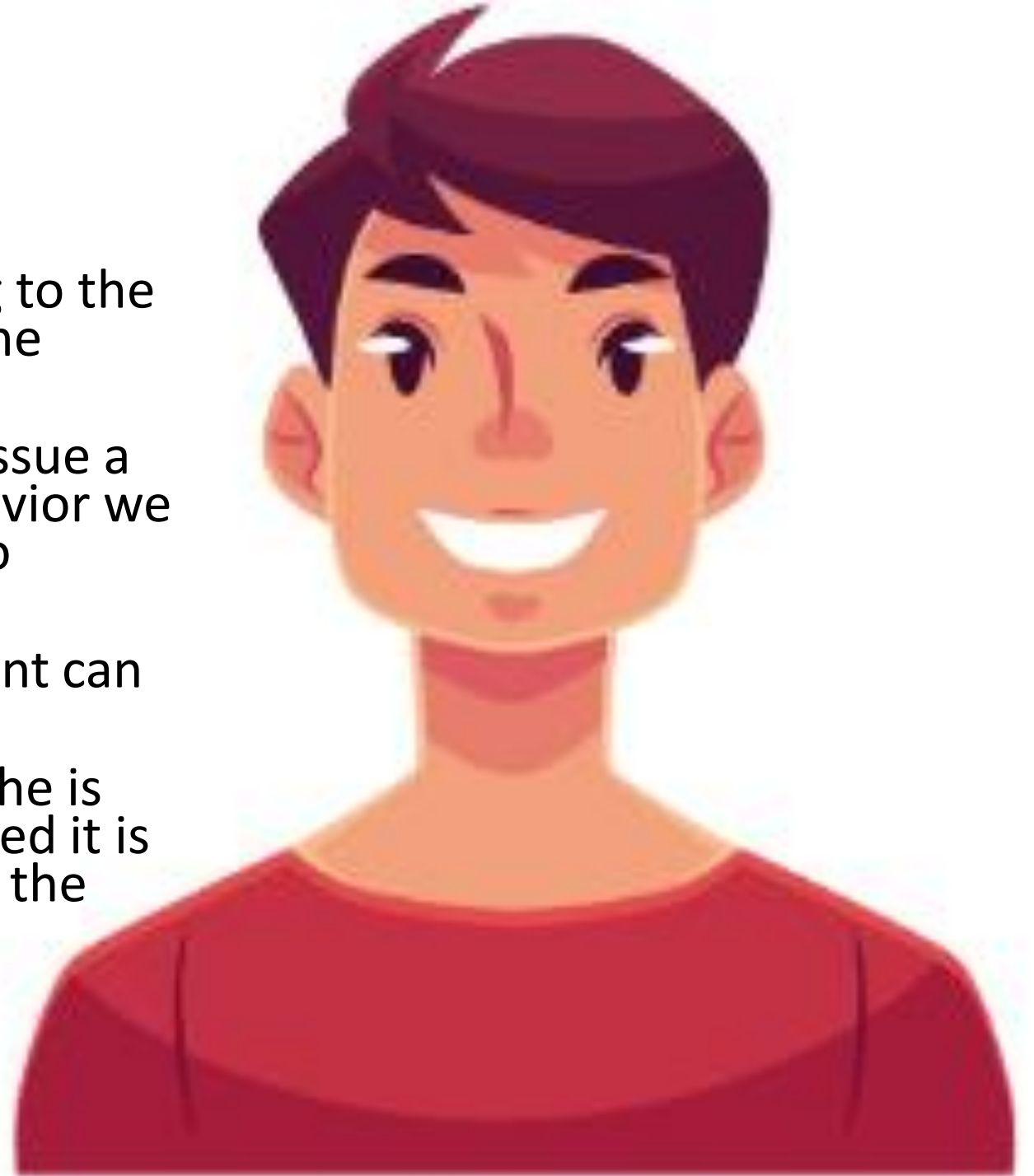
Focus on the action

Focusing on action also means pointing to the desired behavior rather than labeling the learner's character or attitude.

It is more helpful in such situations to issue a positive challenge that names the behavior we want, "Your job today is to learn how to converse in English about...."

This moves the focus to what the student can do.

Sometimes we label students and say "he is such a good boy". Although well intended it is better to focus on the action instead of the label.





Four: Keep it Brief!

Students understand more when we speak less.

Five: Know when to be silent!

The skillful use of silence can be just as powerful as the skillful use of words. When teachers use silence, we open a space for students to think, rehearse what to say, and sometimes gather the courage to speak at all.



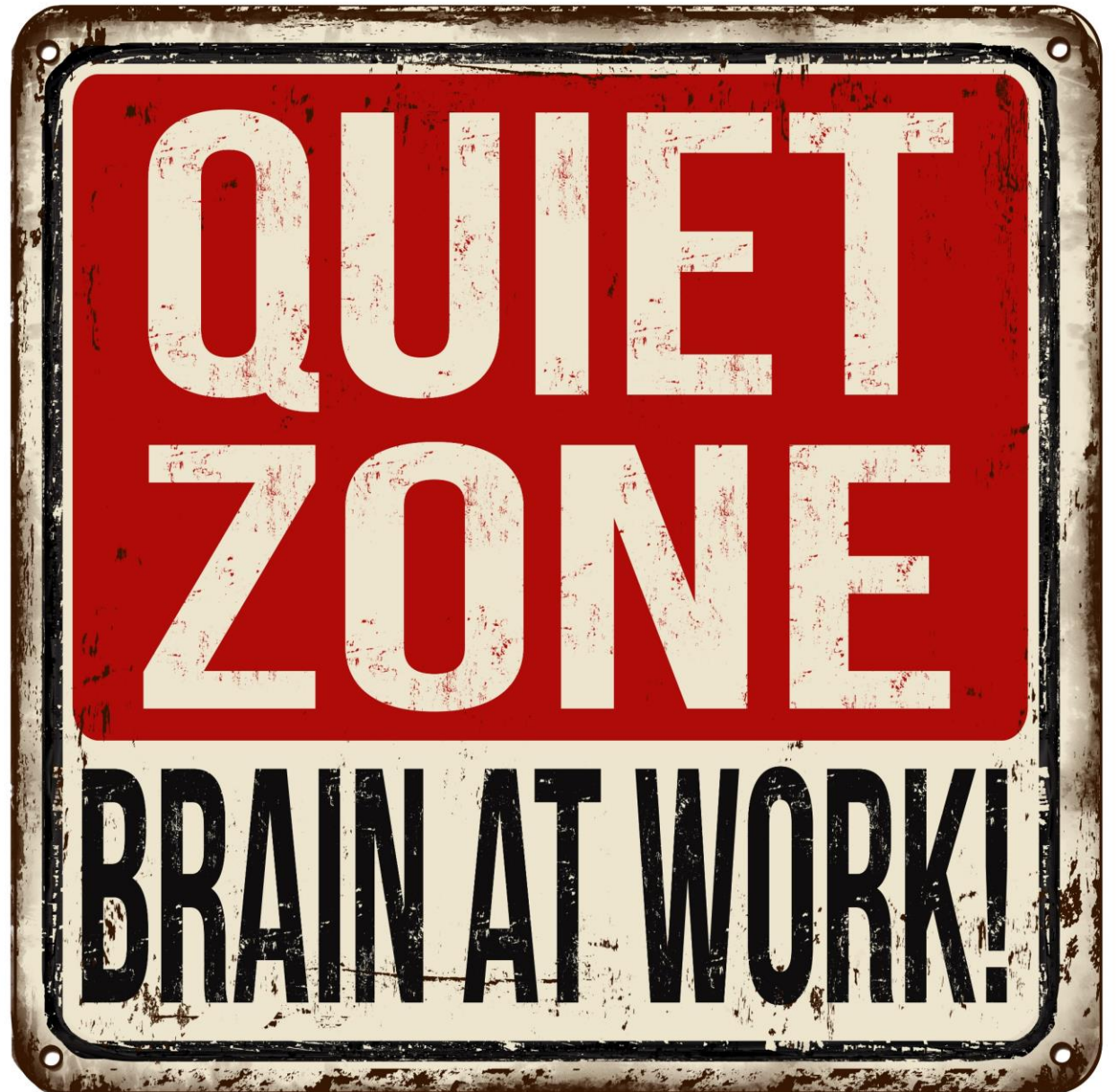
Count to Five

Researchers have found that when teachers wait three to five seconds, which can feel uncomfortably long at first, more students respond, and those responses show higher-level thinking.



Model it!

Model thoughtful pausing by waiting a few seconds to respond to students' comments. Remaining silent allows us to truly listen to students and requires us to resist the impulse to jump in and correct students' words or finish their thoughts.





Truly Listening

A true listener tries to understand a speaker's message before formulating a response. When we allow students to speak uninterrupted and unhurried, we help them learn because speaking is an important means of consolidating knowledge.

Identifying Trauma Exposure

Remember, youth will often not have the words to tell what has happened to them or how they feel. Behavior is a better gauge and sudden changes in behavior can be a sign of trauma exposure.



Recovery takes time

Some youth, if given support, will recover within a few weeks or months from the fear and anxiety caused by a traumatic experience.



However, some will need more help over a longer period of time in order to heal and may need continuing support from family, teachers, or mental health professionals.

Anniversaries of the events or media reports may act as reminders to the child, causing a recurrence of symptoms, feelings, and behaviors.



Be their Advocate!

If you feel an OSY could benefit from the help of a mental health professional, work within your program's guidelines and with your supervisor to suggest a referral.

Tips for Practitioners

Maintain usual routines. A return to “normalcy” will communicate the message that the youth is safe and life will go on.

Regaining a Sense of Control

Give OSY chances to make choices. Often traumatic events involve loss of control and/or chaos, so you can help them feel safe by providing them with some choices or control when appropriate.





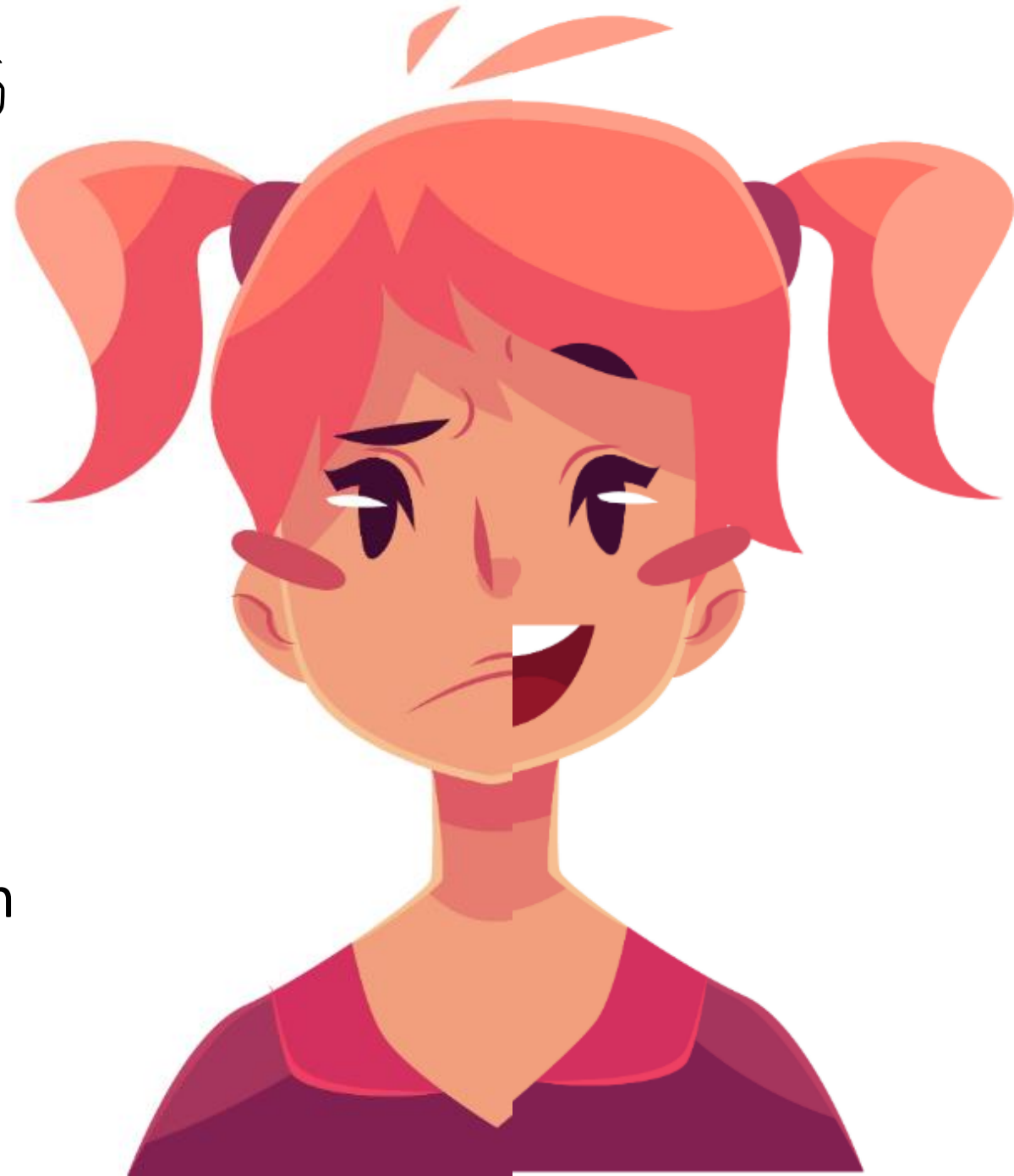
You're so good at that!

Discover their passions, strengths, talents and interests and build on those. Everyone has something that gives a sense of joy, happiness, strength, and confidence. Spend time discovering what that is for each of your students and encourage their development in that area.

Good Days and Bad Days

One of the most confusing aspects of working with youth who have undergone trauma is that their abilities vary almost daily. Some days they will seem to be doing great and understand everything you teach, but other days they will seem completely shut off, or regress years in their ability. This is normal and to be expected.

Focus on teaching to where they are at on any particular day, or moment.



Get help

When reactions are severe (such as intense hopelessness or fear) or go on for a long time (more than one month) and interfere with a youth's functioning ability, give referrals for additional help—don't feel you have to be certain before making a referral.





Use Music

The evidence to date supports music's positive role in helping traumatized youth, particularly in therapeutic and classroom settings, manage their emotions, activate brain pathways, and learn new cognitive and emotional information.

How?

Teachers are seldom music therapists, and very few of them are trained musicians. How can they add music to classroom experiences for children with PTSD?



Ideas some classrooms use

- Involve music in your instructional materials
- Practice reading with music and movement.
- Classical music such as that of Mozart, Haydn, Vivaldi, Bach, or Handel can help students concentrate.
- Debussy's or Ravel's is suggested for creative assignments.
- Popular music and jazz, as long as they possess predictable rhythms and dissonant notes are not used, can also aid attention, emotional regulation, and memory.



What other ways can I help my students with ACEs?

Encourage OSY to establishing good sleep practices. Good sleep supports good overall health. Childhood adversity is associated with changes to the brain, immune system, hormones and DNA regulation. Healthy sleep enhances the effectiveness of connections between brain cells, improves immune functioning, helps the body process and reduce stress hormones and is protective against wear and tear on our DNA. Adequate sleep leads to improved attention, behavior, learning, memory, emotional regulation, quality of life, and mental and physical health.



Get some zzzzzzzzs

Some healthy sleep habits include establishing a consistent bedtime routine, cutting down on screen time, and trying to create a cool, quiet, relaxing bedroom environment. This can be a challenge due to living conditions for many youth.



How can I help OSY relieve stress?

At the top of the list are the basics: regular sleep, nutrition and exercise. Physical activity not only helps you stay fit, but releases good chemicals in your body that can energize you and lift your moods. Other effective stress-relieving tactics include practicing mindfulness and cultivating healthy relationships and working with a therapist.

Don't forget as the teacher you also need to take care of yourself to be able to help others!



Eat Good Food!

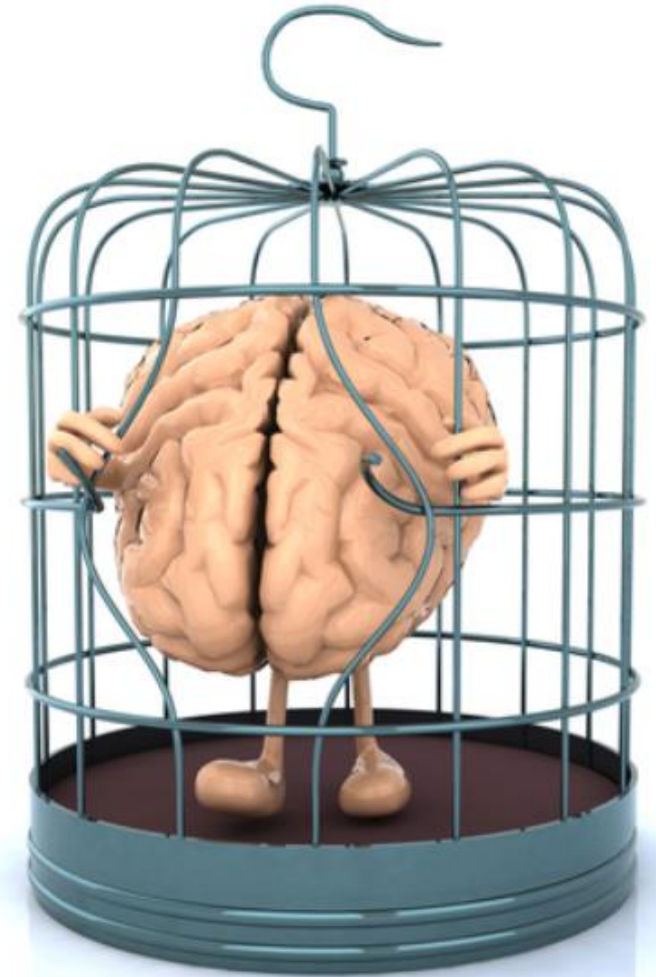
Research shows that proper nutrition can help the body's immune system better manage stress. Childhood adversity is associated with impairments in cognitive and physical development in children. Good nutrition combined with engaged, healthy relationships can mitigate risks for poor cognitive, motor, and social functioning and help youth to adapt in times of adversity.



Mindfulness

Childhood adversity can negatively impact the mind and body.

Research shows that **mindfulness** can help reduce stress hormones and feelings of stress, elevate mood, improve immune function, reduce pain, build resilience, enhance personal relationships, support brain growth and function, sharpen cognition, improve memory, and enhance learning.



Mindfulness

Mindfulness may be cultivated through proven techniques, like meditation. Meditation may involve finding a quiet place to sit comfortably, noticing how your body feels, paying attention to your breathing, and bringing your mind back to the present moment when it wanders.





“I’m here”

A simple phrase that can have a powerful impact. This is one of the most important things you can offer, yourself. But don’t just say it, do it. Be there for the child. Fully and completely. No matter what the youth throws at you, no matter how hard some days are, be there, and come back the next day ready to try again.

It’s hard, but it’s worth it.

Live it so they'll learn it

It's so important for these youth to learn who in their lives will show up. That will be there for them. That are reliable and consistent. People that believe in them and are supportive, no matter what. Adults that quite simply live the motto: I'm here."

