

Trauma-Informed Contemplative Teaching

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In my journeys with other heart-centered teachers of contemplative work some great questions about trauma-informed teaching and meditation facilitation have come up. I feel that, as leaders in our communities, we have a responsibility to do the best we can to bring carefulness to folks who have experienced trauma which, as it turns out, is many of us.

Below are some of the guidelines I follow when holding mindfulness, self-compassion and contemplative teachings in groups and with individuals:

When leading practices

- Offering choice in meditation instructions can be a welcome soothing balm for folks who have trauma in their story: inviting folks, rather than telling them, to follow particular instructions. When we suffer trauma it's because we didn't have choice, so having choice helps to avoid triggering trauma responses. An example might be to let folks know that they are invited to choose to close their eyes fully, or partially, or to leave them open during a meditation or reflection.
- Words and terms like "always," "must," "should," "have to," "need to," "required to," and "discipline" can be triggering for folks. Any word that suggests a loss of choice or the presence of an external authority that decides someones behavior can remind folks about not having a choice during a trauma experience.
- Offer alternatives to being with the breath, like being with the pulse, noticing sensation in the limbs, noticing sensation on the surface of the skin, noticing pressure, noticing something visual or something auditory. The further away our object of awareness is from our chest and neck, the safer it often feels.
- Rather than offering the regular instructions and then some explicitly identified alternatives, offer a range of choices at the start of a practice so that folks can choose the one that works for them. Rather than indicating that there is "regular" practice and "special" practice, we can make all invitations accessible from the start.
- Let folks know that if something feels at all distressing that it's an act of self-compassion to "close" and to "pull out" of a meditation. This might mean opening their eyes to help orient them, allowing their mind to go to their shopping list, grounding their awareness in something physical (like the soles of their feet or the feeling of their hands clasped together). Help folks to become empowered to make good choices for themselves when doing intimate personal work.
- Words that describe acts by others toward the body like "enter," "caress," "penetrate," and "stroke" may move someone right back to a sexual trauma

experience memory from childhood or from earlier in their life. It's safer to avoid these kinds of words. It's a common experience for the perpetrators of abuse towards children to believe that they are loving the child, so even words that suggest physical affection from one person to another (especially words that suggest physical affection toward a child) can be triggering.

- Folks can have trauma memories in any part of their body, but in particular there might be memories around their pelvic area, belly, breasts, throat and mouth. When offering a body scan, inviting folks to move to a more neutral part of the body if they feel triggered in any of these specific areas can bring an element of choice they haven't previously experienced in this part of their body.
- Inviting imagery of relationships between children and adults can be triggering for folks with a trauma story. Any kind of relationship someone was in as a child could have been one with a power imbalance that lead to abuse or betrayal of boundaries. We might be well-intentioned inviting someone to think about their grandmother, but we cannot assume that everyone had a healthy relationship with their grandmother, or with any adult figure in their childhood.
- We can be judicious with the word "safe" because it's so subjective and can conjure up the opposite in peoples' minds. As meditation teachers we might play with words like "safeness," "safety," "comfortable," "supported," "easeful" and "groundedness."
- When there are plenty of verbal prompts from teachers, folks have the opportunity to feel they have company and can anchor in the sound of the teacher's voice, helping to escort dissociation or a wandering mind influenced by the survival bias back to the present moment.
- It's important to transition in to and out of a meditation gently. We can assist transitioning in to a practice by offering plenty of space and time for folks to invite their body into a state of as much comfort, ease and support as they have access to in the moment. We might also acknowledge that we're inviting *relative* comfort, so that anyone with chronic pain or persistent unease doesn't feel left behind by the invitations. We can also briefly describe what the meditation will entail so that folks have a sense of what is coming up rather than wondering where the meditation is leading (potentially leading folks to feel that they are not in choice). We can transition out of a meditation gently through verbally joining with our participants in their experience in the moment by letting them know we will soon be transitioning out of the practice and that they might like to continue the practice a few moments longer, knowing that they will soon be transitioning. This avoids an abrupt transition and offers participants the opportunity to understand what is happening in the practice.
- It's important to maintain a consistent pace for the meditation. If folks feel you are speeding up or slowing down after they have become accustomed to the

pace, this could contribute to feeling unease around not knowing what to expect, taking away a sense of predictability, safeness and choice.

- If there is a change in the sensory environment during a practice, like the loud sound of an airplane, the entrance of a new community member, a smell from the nearby kitchen, or a change in temperature due to internal heating or cooling, acknowledge this change to help folks orient to their environment and to tend to any hypervigilance or fear of not being in choice about environmental impacts. If there is an alarming but non-harmful environment change, offer guidance on grounding and settling again after a potential disturbance in sensory experience.

When choosing practices

- Movement meditation may be more accessible than sitting meditation for people who have very busy minds or for whom sitting with the activity in the mind brings on a sense of fear, dread, or spontaneous resistance because of the memories that are waiting just under the surface when one ceases to be busy.
- Meditations that allow folks to connect visually with others might help them to feel more grounded. This doesn't mean looking into each others eyes; just being able to see other meditators alongside us can be a relief from the isolation we might feel when we close our eyes.
- Closing our eyes can be the gateway for some folks to experiencing imagery that is disturbing - when folks are instructed to close their eyes that can feel they are not in choice, and then when they close their eyes and experience unwanted, uninvited and disturbing imagery they are once again not in choice. Keeping eyes open can assist us in not experiencing imagery.
- Silence for long periods of time can be triggering for folks. Long silent retreats might not be the best experience for many people with trauma in their story. Periods of silence alternated with periods of connection and structured interactions with other practitioners might be a better way to hold a space for folks.
- Short meditations allow folks to move into their internal experience and then out again to what might be a safer way of being. Pendulating between short periods of internal work and "regular" being in the world can make meditation more accessible.
- In a group, if there are options for small discussion groups, offering the option to simply reflect alone rather than being in a group acknowledges authenticity and diversity. Offering a particular way to process alone, like journaling, sitting in silent contemplation, drawing or doodling can help folks feel that they are in the program and in the group even while choosing to process alone. Modern understandings about trauma include the damage caused to our sense of autonomy and boundaries when we are pressured into talking with others,

hugging others, and interacting with others when it doesn't feel right. Alongside the permission to not be in a small group might also be the invitation to notice feelings around connection and offering tools and skills to help folks be with any difficult feelings around connecting with others.

- In the online environment, when folks are given permission to contribute or not, that allows for more choice. When they are explicitly invited to choose to have their video cameras on or off, that contributes to an environment of permission to be authentic in the group.
- Offer predictability and structure in ongoing groups - as much as you can, have a set format for the gatherings so that folks know what to expect, and stick to that format. Trauma arises when we don't know what's going on, we don't feel we have a choice, and we feel we're just being taken along for the ride regardless of how we feel. We can avoid triggering these feelings in our participants by being clear about what is going to happen during the gathering, and offering choice to participate or not based on personal preferences.

When showing up in community

- Rather than referring to “people with trauma” or “if you have trauma” it is more inclusive to refer to “when we have trauma” in acknowledgment of the pervasive nature of trauma. In this context, the word “we” connects us in community while the words, “people” and “you” might feel isolating.
- Holding a neutral but warm facial expression during group time helps tap into the soothing system of people in the group and allows folks to feel as if they belong and are being seen and heard. A flat facial expression by a teacher can be perceived as unwelcoming and disconnecting while an overtly and unchanging happy expression might make someone feel as if their suffering is being discounted. Understanding the importance of facial expression is especially helpful during online groups where there is very little information about connection to rely on.
- Remember that meditation teachers are often seen as authority figures, even when that is not our desire or intention. We can be social justice practitioners when we use this authority and position of status and power to empower others through creating environments of choice and personal respect.
- Celebrating self-compassionate decisions and thanking participants for closing, pulling out, or moving to an activity that feels safer than being in meditation is a lovely way to honor people's choices to set boundaries.
- Ask for permission before any kind of touch, and invite group members to do the same with each other.
- If the topic is *about* trauma (eg if the group is made up of helping professionals learning about working with trauma within a contemplative context), check in with participants regularly to see how they are regulating

themselves and if they need a break for some guided grounding practice. Talking about trauma can be triggering for any of us.

- Throw out pre-planned curriculum when someone is triggered and take the time to tend to their needs rather than pushing forward with an agenda. Trust in your own internal wisdom as embodied, social practitioners of awareness and compassion and move into connection with someone who is triggered in a way that we know is meaningful to us and is informed from a place of common humanity and understanding of the human condition. Know that we are re-shaping community by tending to each other rather than hoping someone will cope on their own. Many of us are in a culture of isolation, self-criticism and shame. Teachers of mindfulness and self-compassion can be ambassadors for cultural change toward connection, inclusion, knowing each of our own rightness and blamelessness.
- Use the language a group member uses to describe their experience helps to join with them in their experience. Trauma is about not being seen, heard or understood so we can show group members that we see, hear and strive to understand them by acknowledging their language and joining with them in their choice of language. In this way we are validating their language and their experience.
- For ongoing groups, offering a sense of consistency to the environment and the format of the gathering will help support folks with trauma in their story. This might mean having the furniture arranged similarly each week, meeting at a regular time each week, and offering a predictable schedule for each gathering. When changes are unavoidable, it can help to offer a sense of safeness when we let our group members know about upcoming changes. Trauma is about lack of predictability and lack of structure, so we can help support folks on the path when we offer predictability and structure.
- For ongoing groups, spend time establishing community agreements around what participants need to feel seen, heard and safe in the group. Also create some agreements about how to navigate boundaries when members of the group are feeling uncomfortable with each other around boundary crossings. It is wise to revisit these agreements from time to time, updating them when the group has more experience of being in community together.

We are all teachers to each other, and we'd do well to remember this as we travel together. None of us can do this alone. Our trauma stories were written in relationship, and they can be edited in relationship. Our collective knowledge about trauma is growing up around us at a rapid rate. We are in a time of growing awareness, and with it we can take on a more empowered sense of responsibility for each other. Mother Theresa said that "If we have no peace it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." We get to choose which "each others" we connect to in order to move toward healing. This may be our most important work.