Bearing Witness as an Act of Love, Resistance, Hope, and Healing

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Wear gratitude like a cloak and it will feed every corner of your life.
– Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī
Intersecting Crises

COLLECTIVE
There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal. I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art.

Toni Morrison
Today, we will:

1. Reflect back on the last three years.
2. Consider how we will move forward.
3. Interrogate what centering equity-minded and collective well-being entails.

How are you? Where are you?
With your colleagues at your table, please discuss:

1. Reflect (If you have not introduced yourselves yet, please do that briefly now.)
2. What brings you here today?
3. What are your hopes for the remaining semester and next year?
With your colleagues at your table, examine the menti results and discuss:

1. What do you have in common?
2. What surprises you?

“[Higher education] expects students and professors to drop everything when in the classroom but their personal lives are a part of them because daily lives are [filled with] emotional events that represent them.”

PCC Student, 2020
1. Excessive workload.
2. Actual or perceived lack of control & agency.
3. Lack of meaningful connections & relationships.
4. Lack of recognition.
5. Lack of fairness.
6. Values & skills mismatch.
In one word, describe how you are feeling today:
What Makes the Brain Feel Overwhelmed?
We are Relational

Our Brains Evolved to Connect
Learning is Relational

We connect new information to what we know, who we are, what we value, and to the larger community and the world.
In one word, describe what you are struggling with most this year:
Persistent uncertainty can be overwhelming on the brain.

Views about the world

- "The world is a dangerous place"
- "People cannot be trusted"
- "Life is unpredictable"

Views about self

- "I am incompetent"
- "I should’ve reacted differently"
- "It is too much for me to handle"
- "I feel damaged"

Views about the future

- "Things will never be the same"
- "What is the point? I will never get over this"
- "It is hopeless"

Zoomed out: digital media use and depersonalization experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown

Anna Cianciucci, Luke McElligott, Julian Kivstein, Vittorio Gallesio, Jakob Hohwy, & Mateusz Woźniak

Depersonalisation is a common dissociative experience characterised by distressing feelings of being detached or “estranged” from one’s self and body and/or the world. The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of people to socially distance themselves from others and to change their lifestyle habits. We have conducted an online study of 862 participants worldwide to investigate the relationship between digital media-based activities, distal social interactions, and people’s sense of self during the lockdown as contrasted with before the pandemic. We found that increased use of digital media-based activities and online social e-meetings correlated with higher feelings of depersonalisation. We also found that the participants reporting higher experiences of depersonalisation also reported enhanced vividness of negative emotions (as opposed to positive emotions). Finally, participants who reported that lockdown influenced their life to a greater extent had higher occurrence of depersonalisation experiences. Our findings may help to address key questions regarding well-being during a lockdown, in the general population. Our study points to potential risks related to overly sedentary, and hyper-digitalised lifestyle habits that may induce feelings of being-in-one’s ‘head’ (mind), disconnected from one’s body, self and the world.
From this list, consider what you might do to help support your colleagues’ wellbeing?

In one word, what do you need to support your wellbeing?
[T]he politics of the classroom begins with the teacher's treatment of and regard for him or her self. A kinder, more sensitive attitude toward one's own needs as a human being, in place of a desperate striving to meet professional and institutional standards of arguable merit, can bring greater sensitivity to the needs of students and a more sympathetic understanding of their positions, both as workers in the academy and as people in the wider world.

(Jane Tompkins, Pedagogy of the Distressed, 1990, pp. 653-660)
How Do We Heal?
We don’t just “get over it” and go on as business as usual. We don’t simply turn on a “resilience” switch.
**We can choose to:**

1. Do Nothing.

**We can choose to:**

1. Do Nothing: Remain passive, ambivalent, romanticize hopelessness.
We can choose to:

1. Do Nothing: Remain passive, ambivalent, romanticize hopelessness.

2. Do Something.

We can choose to:

1. Do Nothing: Remain passive, ambivalent, romanticize hopelessness.

2. Do Something: (a) repeat what we’ve been doing
We can choose to:

1. Do Nothing: Remain passive, ambivalent, romanticize hopelessness.

2. Do Something: (a) repeat what we’ve been doing, or (b) forge a new way.

We need a paradigm shift.
Healing Through Relationships

Interdependent Relationships with the Earth & its Inhabitants

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Special issue paper

The mind in psychotherapy: An interpersonal neurobiology framework for understanding and cultivating mental health

Daniel J. Siegel
Mindsight Institute, Santa Monica, California, USA

In this brief overview, I offer a conceptual approach to the mind that can support whatever clinical, research, public policy, or other approach you may be involved with. It seeks to
Toxic Stress and Learning

Teaching as Brain Changing: Exploring Connections between Neuroscience and Innovative Teaching

Melinda T. Owens and Kimberly D. Tanner*
Science Education Partnership and Assessment Laboratory, San Francisco State University,
San Francisco, CA 94132

How do you conceptualize learning? Do you think of learning as a contractual agreement: the instructor performs certain actions to facilitate learning, and the student, in turn, explicitly or implicitly promises to behave in ways to receive that learning? Or do you think of learning in sociological terms: the learner, through what he or she learns, transforms his or her beliefs and becomes a more emancipated citizen of the world? Or perhaps you think of learning in psychological terms: learners are motivated, store facts in their minds, and create mental knowledge structures. All of these ways of conceptualizing learning can be beneficial in understanding how students learn and what makes teaching effective.
We Feel, Then We Assign Meaning, Then We Act

When stress becomes unmanageable, the brain will prioritize survival over engagement and learning.
How to Help Students Develop 'Mental Immunity'

Colleges should educate students about toxic stress, the lasting effects of the pandemic and how to ameliorate the impact of those experiences on their learning, Mays Imad and her students write.

By Mays Imad and Her Students • Published December 13, 2021

"I walk around with a constant heaviness. The headaches, sleepiness, anxiety... I don't know what to do about these or if they will go away."

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy recently issued a new report to highlight the need to address a mental health crisis among the nation's youth, adolescents and young adults. Murthy's advisory is an urgent call for a coordinated and holistic response to this crisis. The emotional and mental health of...
What are you noticing among your students with respect to their engagement and learning?
Trauma-Informed Care

This figure is adapted from: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. HHS publication no. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health.
Three preconditions are necessary for every human being to thrive in life: feeling safe, experiencing meaningful connections, and having agency, support & resources.
For you, what does safety mean? What do you need to feel safe? What does safety look like when you are feeling vulnerable?

Ask your students: “How can I help empower you to learn this term?”

Ask your students: “Describe your most supporting learning environment.”

For you, when do you feel a sense of meaningful connection? Describe a recent connection you made with another human being?

Ask your students: “Is there anything I am doing that is making you or a classmate feeling excluded?”

Ask your students: “How can we help each other learn and succeed this term?”
For you, what are you doing to take care of your wellbeing? What resources do you need to find a work-life balance?

Advocate for readily accessible, strength-aimed, culturally-grounded mental health support.

Ask your students: “What do you need this term & beyond to thrive intellectually & emotionally.”

Resources

By Mays Iread | May 20, 2021

How to Make Mental Health a Top Priority This Fall and Beyond

Your institution is failing students, a professor argues, if it isn’t helping them understand the links between stress, trauma, and learning.
What practical strategies do you utilize to foster a sense of **safety**, **connection**, and **empowerment**?
"You are More than a Number"

Biofeedback, Self-Regulation, and Intergenerational Resilience
Course Syllabus for Biological Inquiry - BIO 120K / Fall 2022
Dr. Mays Imad, Ph.D. (mimad@conncoll.edu)

Welcome
Hello, brilliant minds. Welcome to our course. I invite you to come on a learning journey with me and your classmates. We will learn about biofeedback, a mind-body technique that gives you insights and helps you develop the skills to recognize and gain control of unconscious physical reactions.

Have you ever been in a situation where the muscles in your neck are so tense it is difficult to turn your head sideways? Have you ever taken an exam and got to a question where you froze and couldn’t come up with words to answer it? Have you ever felt butterflies in your stomach?
**Your Wellbeing**

I will center your wellbeing in this course. After all, this is a course about how we can regulate and stabilize our nervous system.

I ask you to bring your own experience to enrich one another. As you read through this syllabus, think of what questions you have and bring them to class or to me. Specifically, I want to know:

- How I can help you succeed in this course? And,
- How can both you and I help our classmates succeed in this course?

Learning is social and emotional. We will learn from and with each other. Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us what it means to be human: “[M]y humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life. We say a person is a person through other persons.” In this class, we will center our collective wellbeing. Furthermore, know that in this course, I see you and you matter—and I will advocate for your success throughout the semester.

**Course Information**

**Official Course Description:** Biofeedback is a mind-body self-regulation technique through which individuals learn how to modify their physiology for the purpose of improving physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. In this course, students will encounter the theoretical and
Deadlines

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<td>Sun, 9/4</td>
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<td>Sun, 9/11</td>
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Safety

- Reduce Uncertainty
  - You are More than a Number
  - Reduce & Focus the Information
  - Create Predictable Structure

- Leverage Communication
  - Connect & Invite Regularly
  - Model Empathy & Reassure
  - Remind: Grades Don’t Define Them

You are More than a Number
ARTICLE
Teaching to Empower: Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now to Help Students Become Self-Regulated Learners

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In his book Descartes' Error, neurologist Antonio Damasio argues that humans do not make decisions by relying exclusively on the rational or reason-oriented parts of their brain (2008). Evidence from patients with brain damage reveal that our abilities to reason and make decisions are greatly influenced by our emotions (Damasio et al., 1990; Saver and Damasio, 1991). In fact, our emotions and how we feel act as a gateway to our thinking and learning by providing "the bridge between rational [prefrontal cortex] and nonrational processes" [brainstem and limbic structures]." (Damasio, 2008). Understanding the ways in which our brain processes sensory inputs and integrates those inputs into our ongoing emotional state is critical for helping students become self-regulated, sophisticated learners. In the following article, I will begin by briefly summarizing the role of emotions in learning and the impact of toxic stress on our students' ability to engage, learn, and thrive. I will then define and present a trauma-informed teaching and learning paradigm with practical strategies that empower students to continue to learn and succeed. I will address a few misconceptions about trauma-informed education. I will conclude by making a plea to you, members of the undergraduate neuroscience community, by presenting a case for the utility and moral imperative of educating our students about the basic functioning of their brains, especially as it relates to emotional regulation and learning.

Key words: toxic stress; emotional valence; trauma; trauma-informed education; amygdala hijack; limbic brake.
Ask “How is Your Heart?”

Provide & Normalize Mental Breaks

Intentionally Engage in Positive Emotions

Pause to Reflect

Why Must We Bear Witness?

Center Wellbeing

Care & Support

Desmond Tutu

“I learned to be a human from other human beings.”

– The Book of Joy
Care & Support

Center Wellbeing

Pause to Reflect

Provide & Normalize Mental Breaks

Intentionally Engage in Positive Emotions

Why Must We Bear Witness?

How to Transform Unequitable Systems?

Ask “How is Your Heart?”

“No Humans Involved”: An Open Letter to My Colleagues
By Sylvia Wynter, 1994
“How can we **marry our thoughts** so that we can now pose the questions whose answers can resolve the plight of the jobless archipelagos, the NHI categories, and the environment?”

[What we do in the classroom is our politics. No matter what we may say about Third World this or feminist that, our actions and our interactions with our students week in week out prove what we are for and what we are against in the long run. There is no substitute for practice.

"I live a hope despite my knowing better"

James Baldwin
For you, what is the purpose of higher education?

- “To do something that you love and enjoy.”
- “To innovate and leave a meaningful impact on my community.”
- “To be able to do the things I love.”
- “To develop skills that can be useful in helping my community; to give back.”
- “To stand on my own and help my community.”
- “To help myself become a better person so I can help others.”
- “[T]o find something you love to learn about and then to learn about it.”

(PCC Students, 2017-19)