



Tool 1.1.

Fostering a trauma-informed learning environment

CLARITY Competence Area:

Taking care of climate emotions and trauma

GreenComp Competence Area:

Acting for sustainability

Why use this tool?

This tool is essential for all teachers or educators who are committed to supporting their learners in dealing with climate anxiety and other climate emotions, as well as in navigating the impacts of trauma that may occur because of climate change. Some activities offer concrete methods to deal with the nervous system dysregulation of one learner or of a group of learners. Other activities focus on you, the teacher or informal educator, and introduce some critical skills you need to build, and preparatory work that you need to undertake before creating spaces to talk about climate emotions with your group of learners.

Activity 1.1.1

Creating a culture of safety and care

Overview

This activity is for teachers and educators. It is a prerequisite and a foundational activity for all other activities related to climate emotions to be effective, impactful and not lead to more traumas or re-traumatization. It involves the acquisition of knowledge regarding one's own emotional and mental wellbeing, and that of one's learners. It also entails the creation of a different culture in relation to emotions in the classroom. Last, it requires the mapping and establishment of an emotional support system for teachers and educators, as well as for their learners, to further build safety, as part of trauma-informed practices.

INFO



This activity is transversal and should be practiced early on.



Curriculum linkage

This activity is transversal and should be practiced early on.

Competences built

Emotional regulation, self-reflection, inner compass, trauma-informed leadership

Prep Work

This activity constitutes the preparatory work for all other tools and activities under competence area 5. Taking care of climate emotions and trauma.

Competences/activities to practice first by the teacher:

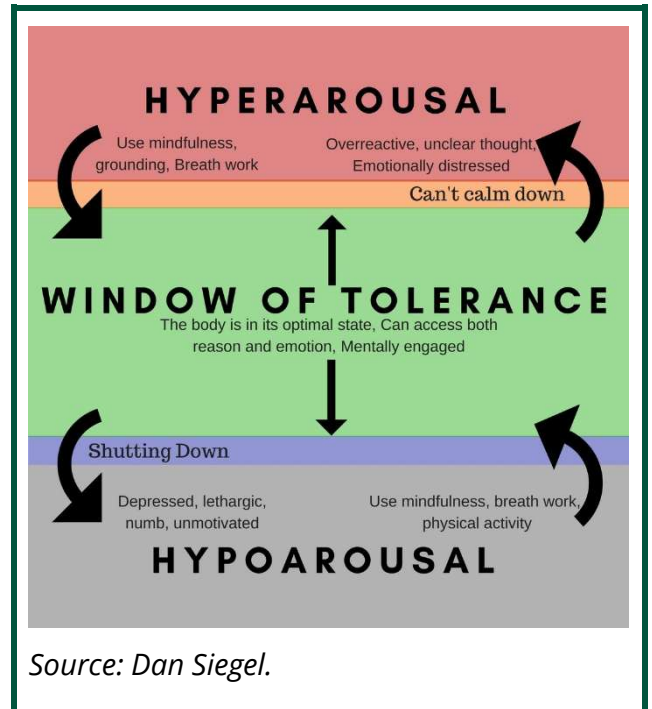
- Read the teacher's guide thoroughly in relation to climate emotions and climate trauma.
- Climate Emotions wheel 1.2.1



Step 1: Understanding how emotions affect us

1. Acknowledge that we live in societies in which very few of us are equipped to understand and respond to our emotions and that of others without guilt, shame, detachment and often involuntary violence. As a result, when a person experiences emotional overwhelm in ways or in spaces where this is not socially accepted (e.g. school) this person is likely to feel particularly isolated or could even be punished. It is critical to recognize that learners do not always choose to behave the way they do, and that there are other ways to respond to a learner's behavior than controlling it through punishment and reward.

This may however be a drastic shift from your approach and practices so far.



2. Start by practicing emotional awareness with yourself by referring to the window of tolerance, each time an opportunity arises. Ask yourself the questions: where am I right now? Am I approaching the edges of the green zone? Do I know what to do to self-regulate when I enter states of hyperarousal or hypoarousal? Please note that the window of tolerance is likely to be reduced from the start in people who have already suffered hardships like poverty, discrimination, marginalization, lack of neuroinclusion, as well as adverse childhood experiences. You can also refer to activity card 1.1.2 to work on your window of tolerance.
3. Learn to notice the states your learners are in. Crying can be a visible sign of distress, but there are other ways of expressing emotions.
 - a. Note that learners that are extremely calm and compliant could in fact be experiencing dysregulation in the form of hypoarousal, and, as a result, be shutting down.
 - b. Note that learners that are over-reactive, swearing, being late, may also be experiencing dysregulation, in the form of hyperarousal. The latter behavior can be a sign of distress, not of disobedience or oppositional defiance.



4. Learn to recognize the signs of trauma. Trauma is a one off or ongoing experience of being unsafe, without support, and feeling helpless in that situation. It is as if a part of the nervous system freezes in that experience, and this can create a stuck memory in the body. If a trigger situation happens, the person who has experienced trauma is kicked back in time to the state of survival that was experienced at the time of the initial trauma. In that altered state, the learner has no choice about the way they behave. They should not be punished for what they are doing, nor told they are doing something wrong, nor dismissed.
5. Note that neurodivergent meltdown or shutdown can look like a trauma response, but it has a different cause. Usually, sensory overload, overwhelming situations, or difficulties with emotional regulation. Treating it like a trauma response could lead to a neurodivergent child feeling misunderstood. After the episode of dysregulation, you may want to ask the student if they feel safe sharing something about what caused their response. This could help create more safety for neurodivergent children and youth in the learning environment.
6. Realise that if you don't talk about (climate) emotions, it does not mean that they are not there. It just means that they are going underground, and then you are creating the right conditions for trauma, which is a lack of support. You might also be creating conditions for bullying where if a child cries, other people are going to laugh at them because you have not laid foundations defining that it is okay to have an emotional reaction in response to distressing information. In order to limit the risk of trauma, it is critical to make the learners feel that they are safe, that they can express themselves, and that they matter.

Step 2: Creating safety for learners daily

1. Engage in small actions on a consistent basis in order to create a culture of safety in the classroom. In order to best be prepared to handle climate emotions and trauma, you need as a teacher to pay attention and acknowledge everyday non-traumatic stresses experienced by the learners. This will help build safety, belonging and dignity, as well as develop the competences and skills that are essential to addressing the impacts of climate change.
2. On a daily basis, give some acknowledgement to learners individually, including by the following actions. That will ensure that if learners are in distress, they will



know that you care and that you can help them co-regulate their nervous system:

- a. Giving them a warm greeting, no matter what they did the day before
 - b. Looking up and thanking the learners, using their first name when reading the roster
 - c. Remembering every child's name and using it to acknowledge them when you walk past them in the corridor.
3. Make it safe for learners to express their emotions in the classroom by anticipating the fact that some emotions may arise when some distressing information is being shared, and that different learners may have different emotional reactions to this information. Crying can be a very valid response to some information. When a child expresses emotions, know that the most effective thing you can do to meet any learner with any level of stress, distress or trauma is to meet them in authentic kindness. You can check the scripts (1.1.3) to help you anticipate or respond to learners' emotions. Please note however that the warmth of your presence and the tone of your voice are more important than the words you use.
4. Note that children will express emotions differently depending on their neurodiversity, as well as the previous and current levels of trauma and support they have been experiencing. And of course, the same goes for teachers. Our diversity of needs does not simply vanish in adulthood, and you may wish to consider it for you and your colleagues to adapt practices.
 - a. Some neurodivergent children are subject to extreme sensitivity around emotions and sensory experience. That often includes a very strong justice sensitivity. They can become more reactive, if they get overwhelmed by sensory or emotional input without enough support.
 - b. Children with parents who have less resources, including children from oppressed communities, are likely to struggle more with emotions.
 - c. Children of color, queer children, disabled children,... may have social and collective trauma of living in a society where you are treated with less dignity than others.



- d.** Children that live in a culture in which whole groups of people are denied access to equal resources and dignity can experience the trauma of exclusion.
- 5.** Follow up with a child that has expressed distress to you so as to further build their feeling of safety and connection. Remember that warm, friendly care is the most important environment for trauma prevention and recovery.

Step 3: Mapping and establishing an emotional support system

- 1.** Start with yourself as a teacher by a self-assessment:
 - a.** Do you know how to regulate your emotions and deal with your own distress, if any?
 - b.** Do you have the support system you need in case self-regulation does not work and/or to lower the pressure on yourself to self-regulate?
 - i) Do you participate in climate cafes, climate circles or grief circles?
 - ii) Do you have friends or family members who can help you navigate your emotions?
 - iii) Do you see a climate-aware therapist, in case you feel the need?
 - iv) Do you have other collective care practices for your emotional and mental wellbeing?
 - c.** Do you have a self-care plan in place to take care of your emotional wellbeing in the long run?
 - d.** Do you know whom to reach out to in case of an emotional or mental health crisis, whether this happens in the workplace or outside?
 - e.** Do you know if the school/organisation you work with has any policy, initiative or support in place to take care of your emotional/mental wellbeing? Are you taking advantage of it?
 - f.** How do you feel about the climate crisis?
- 2.** Map the support system you have by answering the questions above, and identify the gaps for which you need to collect information or create new resources for yourself, and probably for the other teachers in school.



3. Keep your mapping up to date and invest in your emotional support system, including by implementing your own self-care plan.
4. Map the support system currently available to your learners by answering the following questions:
 - a. What are the resources currently available for them through the school or organisation, including in terms of safe people or safe spaces for the learners to go to?
 - b. Are children and youth, particularly neurodivergent ones allowed to go to playgrounds, outside of the classroom to "run off" an emotional moment instead of being told to sit still till recess? The possibility to practice this activity is critical to support mapping for neurodivergent children.
 - c. Are the learners aware of those resources? Are they making use of them? If not, what is preventing them from using those resources?
 - d. Are there outside, free and/or easily accessible resources that learners should know of in case they are in a crisis situation? Are those resources known to the learners or easy to find in the school?
5. Let the learners know of the support system and resources currently available to them in case they need support by having the information easily available.

Dos and Don'ts



Do:

Engage in small practices daily as a means to build a new culture of safety and connection with your group of learners. It does not take a lot of time nor grand gestures but it will make a huge difference. It may also feel very strange at first if it goes against the usual culture of your school.

Don't:

- Don't underestimate the resistance you will feel from yourself, and from your colleagues when you start working with emotions.
- Don't assume that you can stop taking care of yourself when taking care of others.

Adaptations:

We invite you to adapt this activity to the specific needs of your learners, including by taking into account their neurodiversity. When adapting tools and activities for neurodivergent learners, please note it is not about treating others how you want to be treated, but how they want to be treated. Ask, listen, and stay open to different ways of learning and engaging.



References

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