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How Trauma-Informed Pedagogy Fosters Retention and Resilience in Gen Z College Students

Presented by Kelli Wallace

Assistant Dean of Students

Mississippi State University–Meridian

Background

- **B.S.- Psychology**
- **M.S. - Counseling Psychology – Children and Adolescent Therapy**
- **Ed.S. - Higher Education Administration**
- **Ed.D. - Candidate – Educational Policy and Organizational Design**
- **Experience:** mental health, K-12, and higher education
- **Motto:** "Don't be a product of your environment, be better."



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Today's Objectives

Define trauma-informed pedagogy and articulate its core principles as they apply to higher education learning environments and campus culture.

Analyze the connection between trauma-informed practices and student retention, well-being, and institutional resilience, supported by research and real-world applications.

Identify practical strategies for integrating trauma-informed care into teaching, advising, and student support services to foster a culture of inclusion, empathy, and purpose.

Evaluate the impact of emerging technologies like AI and social media on student social development and formulate approaches that use these tools to enhance—not replace—human connection and care.



Trauma + Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)



- **Violence**
- **Abuse** (sexual, physical, or emotional)
- **Neglect** (physical or emotional)
- **Loss or sudden separation**
- **Witnessing frightening or harmful events**
- **Chronic stress in unsafe, unstable, or unpredictable environments**
- **Domestic violence**
- **Substance abuse in home**
- **Mental illness in the home**
- **Parental divorce or separation**
- **Incarcerated family member**



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What Is Trauma-Informed Pedagogy?



Recognizes and responds to the impact of trauma on learning and behavior



Centers on safety, trust, empowerment, and belonging



Moves from 'What's wrong with you?' to 'What happened to you?'



Emphasizes healing-centered engagement and empathy

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Taylor

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Taylor's Background

- Grew up in a small Mississippi town and in a typical middle-class home.
- Family included mother, father, and younger sister.

Early Childhood Instability

- Home life was unstable despite appearances.
- Parents had frequent verbal and physical disputes.
- Parents divorced when Taylor was 6 years old.

Life After the Divorce

- Taylor and her sister lived with their mother.
- Mother struggled with physical and mental health issues; unable to work.
- Father lived nearby and stayed involved.
- Home life became unpredictable:
 - Food shortages
 - Electricity being cut off
 - Parent-child roles were blurred

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Teenage Years & Increased Responsibility

- By senior year, her mother gave birth to a third child.
- Taylor often stepped into a parental role due to mother's ongoing illnesses.
- Still expected to excel as a first-generation college-bound student.
- Mom's chronic financial instability left them homeless.

Living With Her Father

- Only housing option: father's two-bedroom single-wide trailer.
- Home was unfit to live in and emotionally unsafe.
- She and her sister slept on a couch for two years.

Trauma Load by the Time She Reached College

Taylor had experienced **9 of the 11 traumatic events** discussed earlier:

- Violence
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Loss or sudden separation
- Witnessing frightening or harmful events
- Chronic stress in unsafe/unstable environments
- Domestic violence
- Mental illness in the home
- Parental divorce/separation

Reflection

- Which trauma-informed principles (**safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, choice**) were missing in Taylor's early educational experiences?
- What types of behaviors might emerge in the classroom from a student who grew up in unpredictable, emotionally unsafe environments?
- In what ways might college have felt unsafe or overwhelming to Taylor, even though it is traditionally seen as a place of opportunity?



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Taylor's Introduction to College

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Introduction to College

- Learned about college through high school college & career days.
- Loved the idea, but doubted her ability to navigate the process due to lack of support and investment from high school counselors.

The Recruiter Encounter

- Senior year: met a recruiter from a college she had never considered.
- Recruiter was warm, genuine, and inviting.
- Key moment:
"If you ever need anything, give me a call. I'm here to help."

Post-High School Uncertainty

- Procrastinated during the Summer
- As fall approached, parents asked about her plans.
- Enrolled last-minute at a local community college with no clear sense of direction.

Academic Struggles

- Finished first semester with a 1.3 GPA.
- Felt unsupported and struggled with belonging and purpose.

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Reaching Back Out

- Contacted the recruiter—the one person who made her feel supported and she helped Taylor transfer to their college for a fresh start.

Academic Probation

- Due to low GPA, placed on academic probation as a transfer student.
- Required to attend academic counseling until reaching a 2.0

Discouraging Experiences

- Many program directors and advisors focused on her shortcomings rather than her potential.
- One program director told her she “was not good enough” for the program.

Financial Aid Crisis

- Received a letter stating she was on financial aid suspension.
- Given the option to appeal—added even more stress.

Turning Point Begins

- Soon after, received an email from her academic coach requesting a meeting.

Open Forum



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Reflection

- What is the impact of one discouraging comment from an educator? What is the impact of one compassionate one?
- How can educators practice self-awareness so our own stress responses don't unintentionally harm students?
- What does Taylor's story reveal about the limitations of traditional academic advising models?



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Recruiting & Advising

- First impressions shape belonging
- Gen Z value authenticity & support
- Advising becomes a lifeline, not just a requirement
- Consistent advising fosters retention and strengthens relationships
- Personalized guidance reduces overwhelm
- Trauma-informed advising increases persistence
- One meaningful connection can change a student's trajectory



Why Trauma-Informed Pedagogy Matters in situations like this...

01

Mental health challenges are on the rise amongst Gen Z

02

Lower persistence or resilience without support

03

Poor academic outcomes (low graduation rates)

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Understanding Gen Z in Higher Education



**FIRST GENERATION
SHAPED BY
TECHNOLOGY, AI, AND
SOCIAL MEDIA**



**MORE OPEN ABOUT
MENTAL HEALTH BUT
OFTEN LACK ACCESS
TO SUPPORT**



**DESIRE AUTHENTICITY,
INCLUSION, AND
MEANINGFUL
CONNECTIONS WITH
OTHERS**

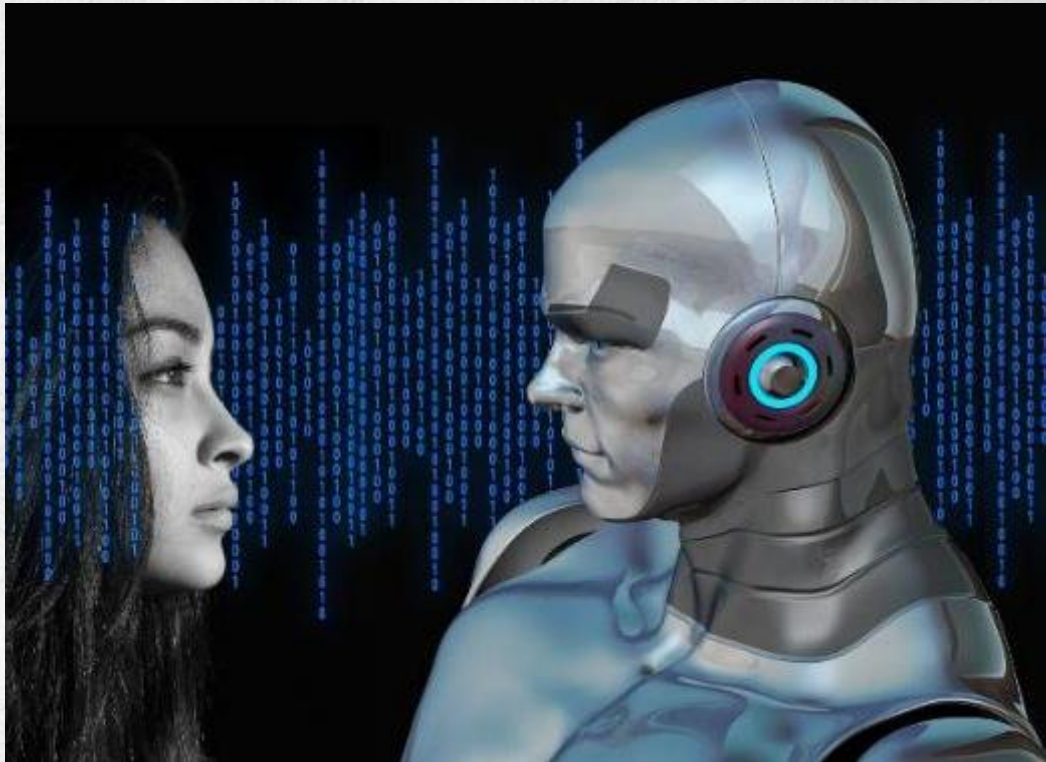


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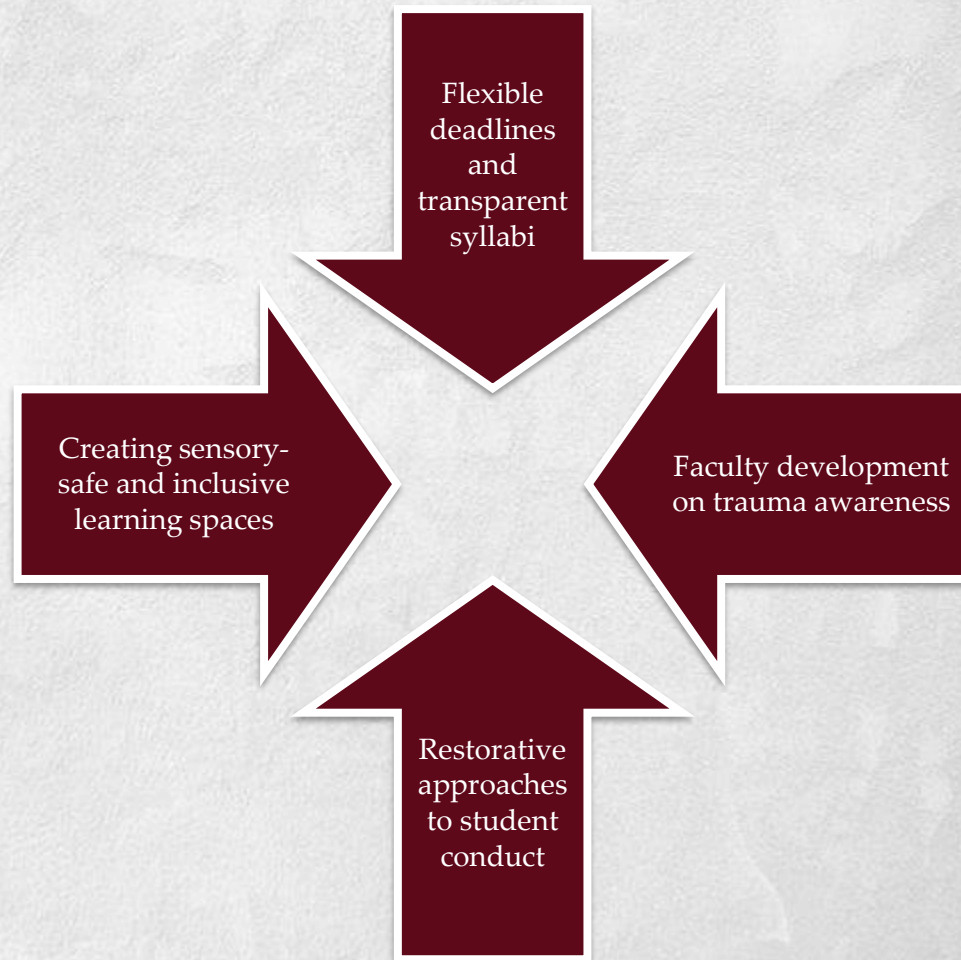
The Role of Technology and AI

AI and social media drive instant gratification and can disconnect people from direct human interactions

Human connection remains essential for development

Use technology to enhance—not replace—empathy and engagement

Examples of Trauma-Informed Practices



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Resilience Theory Framework

Resilience Theory: the ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity

Students who feel seen and supported are more likely to stay and succeed

Trauma-informed campuses build loyalty and belonging

Reduces crisis intervention needs through prevention

T.H.R.I.V.E

Teach

Help

Retain

Initiate

Validate

Elevate

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The MSU Connection: Taking Care of What Matters

MSU's core message
reflects trauma-
informed principles

'Taking Care of
What Matters' =
prioritizing people,
purpose, and
wellbeing

Aligns with
institutional goals of
retention, inclusion,
and leadership
development

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Future of Higher Education



- Trauma-informed practices as the ethical standard for 21st-century education
- Fosters sustainable, inclusive, and adaptive institutions
- Develops resilient, compassionate leaders for tomorrow



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Takeaways



Safety, trust, and inclusion drive engagement



Empathy and adaptability build resilience



Perspective matters



Small consistent actions create institutional change

Taylor

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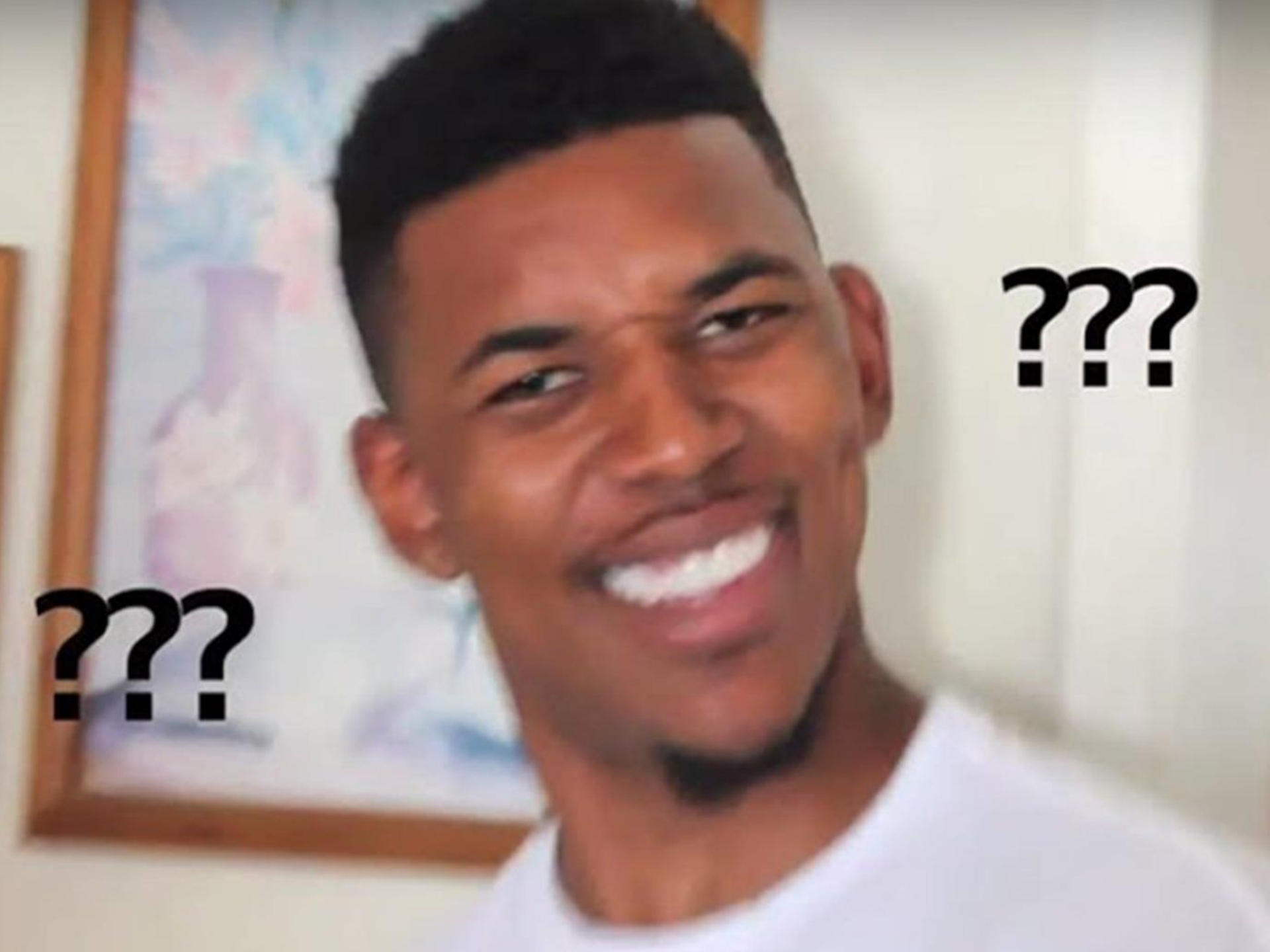
Kelli



How Trauma-informed Pedagogy Transformed My Life:

- Turning point with academic coach.
- Being connected to support: departmental collaboration
- A shift in perspective: person-centered approaches
- *Experiencing* Trauma-Informed Pedagogy vs. *understanding* it.
- **Core Message:** Trauma-informed pedagogy is not just about retention. It's about connection, collaboration, and healing students *one interaction at a time.*





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Thank You & Resources

- SAMHSA (2014) Trauma-Informed Care Framework
- Carello & Butler (2015) – Trauma-Informed Teaching
- Harris & Fallot (2001) – Using Trauma Theory in Systems
- MSU ‘Taking Care of What Matters’ Mission



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