Transcending Adversity: Trauma-Informed Educational Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the pertinence and utility of using a trauma-informed lens in educational development. A trauma-informed approach is a framework grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma. After I describe the primary source of traumatic stress many faculty members are experiencing, I offer trauma-informed suggestions for how educational developers can help mitigate the effects of that stress. Importantly, in order to do this work of supporting faculty effectively and sustainably, it is critical that educational developers continue to attend to their own well-being. The overarching theme of this article is the importance of cultivating empowering relationships to help engage faculty members in supporting and improving the design and development of inclusive and equitable student learning experiences.

Keywords: COVID-19, anxiety, traumatic stress, trauma-informed educational development

This being human is a guest house.
—Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī

When the pandemic struck and it became apparent that schools needed to go remote, I, like many of you, was playing two roles. First, as the coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Center at my

institution, I was supporting faculty with their teaching. While I generally focus on equitable critical pedagogy and evidence-informed teaching and learning, I immediately changed course to accommodate my faculty's urgent needs to learn the technologies necessary to move their courses online amid increasing worry, anxiety, and the unsettling reality. Second, as a teacher, I tried to support my students whose lives suddenly turned upside down, not just at school but also at home and work.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on how a trauma-informed lens can help inform our current and future work as educational developers. Below, I describe the primary source of traumatic stress many faculty members are experiencing and offer suggestions for how we, as educational developers, can help mitigate the effects of that stress. I use trauma-informed principles to guide my recommendations. Importantly, I also invite you to consider how you can help support yourself while doing this work. The overarching theme of this article is that a calm nervous system can help calm other people's nervous systems. And when our nervous system is calm, we are able to engage socially, be productive, and process new information in order to continue to learn and grow—and to feel we are living meaningful and fulfilled lives.¹

Emotional Contagion and Secondary Traumatic Stress

A few years ago, I walked into my physiology class ready to teach. I greeted the students, and a student in the front row asked me, "How are you?" I answered that I was fine. The student replied, "No, you're not." And he was right. I was having a tough day. I was surprised that my student recognized my distress because I had reminded myself to smile right before I entered the classroom, but clearly, I could not en-

1. This theme—calming the nervous system to connect and learn—is often reinforced by scholars of trauma-informed education. See, for example, Dr. Lori Desautels's (2020) work with K–12 teachers.

tirely mask my stress. That encounter with my student is an example of emotional contagion—a subconscious automatic neural process in which affective states are transferred among individuals (Hatfield et al., 1993). Over the years, I have become acutely aware that I can carry my anxiety or equanimity into the classroom. It is picked up immediately by many of my students, influencing their subsequent thoughts and behaviors. The opposite is also true; we as faculty can be affected by our students' emotions.

In the early weeks of the pandemic, I was keenly aware of my students' struggles. Reflecting on my own traumatic experiences as an immigrant from war-torn Iraq, I decided to write a piece for educators, "Hope Matters," inviting them to impart optimism to their students (Imad, 2020a). Shortly after that, I offered a series of webinars on "Trauma-Informed Teaching & Learning" (Imad, 2020b). Based on the attendance, it was immediately clear how much faculty across disciplines and institutional types were eager to learn about trauma-informed pedagogy. My decision to write about and present webinars on trauma-informed teaching and learning was not serendipitous (Imad, 2020c). In fact, for years, I have struggled to understand why higher education has not embraced the urgent need to incorporate a trauma-informed approach to teaching and learning.² If we are honest with ourselves, we should pause here to recognize that students were dealing with a host of adversities *before* the pandemic—from a mental health epidemic to poverty, from drug and alcohol abuse to inequality and racialized violence (ACHA, 2018; Auerbach et al., 2018; Broton, 2019; Broton et al., 2018; Freudenberg et al., 2019). In the wake of a pandemic that has served to amplify these inequities and exacerbate already existing problems, we have become substantially more aware of students' trauma and struggles.

During my webinars, it was evident that many faculty members

2. Due to its efficacy, "trauma-informed" approaches have been implemented in many fields, including K–12. For example, see Taylor et al.'s 2017 meta-study of over 97,000 K–12 students, which found that social and emotional practices boost academic success and reduce emotional distress in the long term. See <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cdev.12864>.

were themselves experiencing trauma and getting stuck in an orbit of anxiety that was causing them to feel heavy hearted, drained, and hopeless. After all, faculty members care deeply about students, work with them closely, hear and witness their stories, and are therefore often aware of the adversities they are facing. It was only a matter of time before faculty would become impacted by the traumas their students were experiencing. Secondary traumatic stress (STS)³ is a condition in which a person experiences emotional distress, exhaustion, and burnout and displays symptoms comparable to post-traumatic stress disorder without having had a direct traumatic experience (Ludick & Figley, 2017; Stamm, 1999; Walker, 2019). The pandemic likely caused many faculty members to experience traumatic stress directly, in addition to the STS they picked up from their students.

During the summer months, while supporting faculty, one question I repeatedly asked myself was this: “How can I make the transition for faculty easier?” I soon recognized that it was important not only to address the technical components of teaching online and remotely but also to be intentional and work just as hard to attempt to acknowledge and address the toxic stress instructors were undergoing. Thus, I began to employ trauma-informed strategies as part of my work with faculty. This article will share those trauma-informed educational development strategies after first presenting an overview of the basics of stress and trauma.

Why We Experience Trauma

Every aspect of our physiological state, at its basic level, is concerned with keeping us alive. Our brain is continually scanning and sampling its immediate environment, gaining access to fragments of the world to make predictions related to safety or danger, reward, or punish-

3. Sometimes STS is used interchangeably with vicarious trauma—emotional impact of exposure that therapists and counselors have from working with trauma that survivors have endured. For more, see work by Pearlman and Mac Ian (1995).

ment. In a sense, our brain acts like a sophisticated statistical program to process data and extrapolate what the greater world outside is like (Friston, 2010). When the brain encounters any changes in the external environment, it will ask the question, "What strategy should I select to protect my overall well-being?" Stress arises when the brain is uncertain about the answer to that question (Peters et al., 2017).

Encountering stress triggers our brain to activate its alarm system, its fight-or-flight or freeze response, which is an *automatic* physiological reaction to any perceived harmful or threatening situation. We need this alarm system to register danger and safeguard our future physical, mental, and social well-being. If what is causing the stress is not resolved, our alarm system continues to be active, which costs us energy and taxes us physiologically. Stress that leads the alarm system to be perpetually active is not typical but "toxic," or traumatic, stress. With typical stress, we can replenish our energy with, for instance, a good night's sleep. With traumatic stress, we do not easily go back to our resting state. Leading psychiatrist and researcher Bessel van der Kolk states that "at the core of traumatic stress is the breakdown in the capacity to regulate internal states," such as fear, anger, and anxiety (2005, p. 403). This means that we continue to spend energy trying to reach equilibrium or homeostasis—our body's ability to maintain physiological stability.⁴

It is crucial to keep in mind that trauma is very much situated in the individual experience. Trauma could be caused by a single event (e.g., a car accident), recurring events accumulated over a generation (e.g., poverty), and recurring events accumulated over generations—intergenerational (e.g., racism) (Blair & Raver, 2016; Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018; Luby et al., 2013; Sangalang & Vang, 2016; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Trauma does not have to be physically violent or overtly abusive; it can be insidious. Being in combat or getting into a car accident

4. To learn more about the neurobiology of trauma, see the chapter titled "Our Brains, Emotions, and Learning: Eight Principles of Trauma-Informed Teaching for Restorative Justice" by Mays Imad in the forthcoming book *Lessons from the Pandemic: Trauma-Informed Approaches to College, Crisis, Change*, edited by Phyllis Thompson and Janice Carello.

is traumatic, as is experiencing daily microaggressions (Nadal, 2018); in both cases, there is a physiological impact. Sue (2010) reminds us, "It is clear that racial, gender, and sexual-orientation microaggressions, far from being benign forms of small, trivial, and innocent slights and insults, represent major stressors for marginalized groups. . . . Microaggressions have been found to affect the biological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral well-being of marginalized groups" (p. 105).

Experiencing traumatic stress impacts our *biological resilience*—defined as the ability to recover from the fight-or-flight state and replenish our energy (Masten, 2001). Trauma results in an exaggerated and prolonged stress response, which not only is energetically costly for the body but also removes our agency and generates a sense of helplessness that prevents us from returning to a healthy baseline (Hanson, 2018; Levine, 1997, p. 123).⁵ Hence, it is important to not fall into the fallacy of "just be resilient," because when we experience traumatic stress, our neural networks shift and we need an intervention to re-establish equilibrium.⁶ By intervention, I mean intentionally using a trauma-informed approach to help individuals feel safe, connected, empowered, inspired, and ready to engage, learn, and thrive.

What Triggers Our Traumatic Stress?

Much of the early research and analysis related to COVID-19 focused on the mode of infection and transmission, signs and symptoms, and effects of the virus on the body. As the deaths and lockdown continued, public health experts quickly realized that the pandemic's effect on mental health may be even more profound (Manjoo, 2020; Sheridan Rains et al., 2021; Vindegaard & Eriksen Benros, 2020). Top stressors from the pandemic typically fall into one of the following three

5. To learn more about this, see work from Luthar et al. (2000), Bonanno et al. (2015), and Cai et al. (2017).

6. See Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha's (2020) article on this topic, "I'm Sick of Asking Children to Be Resilient."

main categories: uncertainty, isolation, and loss of meaning (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Rettie & Daniels, 2020; Schnell & Krampe, 2020; Smith & Lim, 2020; Smith et al., 2020; Tomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2020). The following is a quick summary of each:

1. **Uncertainty:** In 2020, we faced a host of massive COVID-19–related financial, physical, and political uncertainties. In my webinars during the summer and fall of 2020, I interacted with hundreds of faculty from across the nation. I often asked them, “What’s bothering you most about the current situation?” The most consistent and resounding answer I got was “uncertainty.” I was not surprised. Remember, whenever the brain encounters uncertainty, it initiates a stress response, and when one has a prolonged period of uncertainty, the continued stress response costs a great amount of energy. From the mode of teaching to the health and vulnerability of their family, loved ones, and themselves, the financial stability of their institutions, and even their own financial and job security, faculty members are experiencing profound and ongoing uncertainty. And, being a contingent or adjunct instructor, the largest and most precarious part of the professoriate on most campuses, amplifies this uncertainty.
2. **Isolation:** We are social creatures—we want to be with others and be connected—yet we have been profoundly powerless to meet those needs. Being social is a key part of our evolution, and the trauma of social isolation is deeply rooted in our brains. Social distancing also compounds stress for those already at the margins of isolation, such as people who live alone or people who have lost a loved one. Isolation contributes to a person’s not being able to affirm their view of the world—where we derive our meaning—and that lack of confirmation leads to even more uncertainty. Many faculty members have been working nonstop for almost a year now and are exhausted; this combination of being both overworked and isolated compounds their traumatic stress.
3. **Loss of meaning:** The brain tries to make sense of the world

around it by searching for meaning. Meaning-making gives us a sense of control and increases our sense of belonging, self-worth, and personal fulfillment. At the same time, it also helps us feel as if we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. In 2020, most people's immediate plans were suddenly upended, and the paths to their long-term goals were disrupted. This disruption created a challenge to their sense of meaning—many of us lost the sense of “why” we do what we do, and the additional absence of social support exacerbated this loss. The sudden pivot to online instruction combined with already existing pressures and scrutiny (Marcus, 2016) forced us to question the impact and relevancy of a post-COVID-19 higher education.

The combination and interdependence of uncertainty, isolation, and loss of meaning created by the pandemic impacts every aspect of our lives—the physical, the emotional, the social, and the existential. In addition, the sudden lack of routine and physical activities, as well as a general loss of agency, can cause us to become overwhelmed and even paralyzed—powerful ingredients for traumatic stress. Many of our colleagues faced a prolonged state of stress-inducing alarm activation. Think about what it is like to live with an alarm in your head that is *always* going off warning of danger. For many people, that was their 2020 experience, which profoundly interfered with being present and making use of the resources they have. Importantly, for many colleagues who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, that was their experience *before* 2020, and the pandemic has only compounded the racism, intergenerational traumas, and ongoing oppression they experience (DeGruy, 2018; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018; Zambrana, 2018).

Trauma-Sensitive Educational Development

To carry out educational development work through a trauma-sensitive lens is to recognize that our colleagues, like us, are likely to have ex-

perienced traumatic stress over the past months, over and above what they may have been carrying prior to that point. A trauma-informed approach is a framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma. The framework is centered on the reality that there are two preconditions for every human being to thrive in life: feeling safe and feeling connected (Porges, 2011). As educational developers, how can we help our colleagues feel safe and connected? We can foster a sense of safety by reducing uncertainty and leveraging communication. We can help our colleagues find meaning and community by helping them reaffirm their purpose and make intentional connections. Finally, beyond safety and connections, we must center care and well-being at the core of our practice. The following are five principles of trauma-informed educational development and strategies to accompany each.

1. Reduce uncertainty to help foster a sense of safety.

- a. *Help faculty identify what they can control.* As stated earlier, when we are faced with ongoing uncertainty, we feel less autonomous. We can reduce this stress by nurturing in our faculty a sense of control. Of course, we cannot cure all their uncertainty, but we can help faculty focus on what they have control over. Throughout your interactions with faculty, remind them that although they may not be able to have control over the conditions in which they must currently teach, they typically have a great deal of control over their course design and *how* they teach. They can still choose their assignments, day-to-day activities, and how they assess their students. For those faculty teaching at institutions where courses are highly designed, giving faculty a little leeway to inject their own decisions can help them identify within those structured courses where they can have autonomy and creativity and reveal their personality. In addition, give your faculty voice and choice in their own learning by helping them feel that they are involved in decision-making on the CTL's events. For example, consider offering a

weekly “open” session in which faculty decide what they want to discuss. A key part of resolving uncertainty is to let the people we are working with know that we support them and that we have their backs. One way to support staff and instructors who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is to go beyond statements of solidarity and learn about the historical and current struggles they face in academia and what concrete steps you can take to advocate for their success.⁷

- b. *Carefully balance information.* The brain needs information to make sensible predictions about the world. When we are under the influence of traumatic stress, we can quickly feel overwhelmed by (too much) information. It becomes increasingly difficult to decide where we look for information and what to focus on. As educational developers, we can filter and share a curated repository of information related to teaching, learning, educational scholarship, and the effective use of educational technology. Make sure this repository is representative, focused, well indexed, accessible, and easy to navigate.⁸
- c. *Balance the uncertainty of the world with predictability.* Make sure you have a clear road map for your semester’s work. Ensure that your CTL programmatic offerings have a routine to inform faculty about what’s going to happen each week and month and during the course of the semester. When you plan out your events, include a schedule showing when each event will occur and how it relates to the rhythm of the semester. For example, 2 weeks before the semester starts, you might offer a workshop about refocusing course goals and redesigning syllabi; at the beginning of the semester, you might offer a session on how to create classroom community; mid-semester, you might run a session on soliciting feedback from students, and so on. In addition to publishing your center’s scheduled events for the semester, create and publish your semester’s “faculty-

7. For example, see Bonner et al. (2015), Joseph et al. (2016), Santamaría and Santamaría (2016), and Sue (2015).

8. For more on this, see Sweller (1999).

to-faculty” informal check-in sessions. Be an anchor. Faculty will be able to predict that you will be “there” every Tuesday morning, for instance. When our brains are able to make small predictions successfully, it creates a positive reinforcement cycle that helps faculty feel a sense of control. You can also send weekly reminders or tips on the same days and time, or send a monthly newsletter that follows the same format. Although this planning requires more work for you on the front end, this early effort and structure will also enhance your level of calm and well-being.

2. Leverage communication to help forge trust.

- a. *Communicate regularly.* Part of the purpose of our communications is to (1) validate that these times are tough, (2) reassure our colleagues that their work matters, and (3) invite them to join us and other colleagues in a learning community. When communicating, keep your message targeted and concise in order to not overwhelm.
- b. *Remind them that their small actions can make a big difference.* For example, remind your faculty that building relationships with their students does not have to take years, months, days, or even hours; we can intimately connect with our students by the way we smile during a Zoom session, the way we look at a student, or how we simply reply to an email.
- c. *Communicate not just the “how” but also the “why.”* Be forthright and transparent in your communication; for example, rather than just inviting faculty to attend an event, share with them why this workshop matters to you and why it might matter to instructors and their students.

3. Reaffirm or re-establish goals to create meaning.

- a. *Reframe obstacles to reaffirm meaning and purpose.* The pandemic challenged our sense of meaning and purpose in life, creating existential anxiety—*Why does anything matter?* One antidote

to this crisis in personal meaning is to view these challenges as an opportunity to belong, to connect, and to shift our perspectives to reframe what's happening. For example, remind instructors that their students need them more than ever and this is a time when one professor can make a huge difference in a student's life.

- b. *Help your faculty identify short-term goals that connect to their long-term "why."* The brain needs a purpose to carry out a planned action. If our long-term goals have been interrupted, we can substitute shorter-term goals. For example, at the end of each event you host, ask your faculty to create a 1-day or 1-week concrete goal that is achievable. Doing so tells the brain "I can accomplish things" despite the chaos. Setting and achieving smaller goals enhances motivation, imparts purpose, and supports self-confidence and, ultimately, long-term goals.
- c. *Celebrate your faculty's work by showcasing their achievements.* For example, ask them to share what novel things they are trying in order to better connect and engage with their students. Invite faculty to create low-stakes 15-second "infomercials" about their teaching that they want others to know. These could take the form of a video, audio recording, or slideshow. Showcase their work throughout your programming. Doing so allows for humor, playfulness, and direct faculty engagement.

4. Make intentional connections to cultivate community.

- a. *Connect faculty to one another.* Help faculty cultivate social mindfulness by recognizing our interdependence. For example, designate a portion of your program to help faculty learn about one another beyond their disciplinary work.
- b. *Schedule time for group freewriting.* Use writing as a bridge to connect and heal. For example, you can schedule a monthly "musings" freewriting session in which faculty ponder and share the big questions that are important to them and record and share their internal dialogues.

c. *Help faculty recognize and leverage the power of relationships.*

Part of your CTL's program might be establishing a buddy system in which colleagues can check up on and help each other feel connected to something bigger than themselves. At the end of the semester, you can invite faculty who participated in that program to reflect on how learning about others' stories and narratives reaffirmed their own stories.

This trauma-informed approach to educational development does not require us to have any training in social work or clinical psychology; we are not diagnosing or treating our colleagues. We are revealing our humanity to our colleagues to show them that we are on their side, that we have their backs, that we see them, and that they matter. In doing so, we can help our colleagues move from a disruptive present to a future in which they are more confident and more hopeful.

Our work during this time of burnout and existential anxiety is necessarily emotional. In our society in general, and in higher education in particular, we often view emotions as the antithesis of reason. Yet the role of emotions in the human experience, including learning and healing, is indispensable (Damasio, 2000). Through our work, we want to recognize that while we are experiencing a host of negative emotions, we can still leverage our positive ones. I believe that care and well-being should be the framing principles of our work as educational developers. The following are suggestions for how we can achieve this.

5. Center well-being and care.

- a. *Make "How are you?" central to your gatherings.* Begin your workshops by asking your faculty, "How are you doing?" or "How are things going?" For anonymity, consider using a word cloud. Invite everyone to examine the word cloud and how it relates to their experience. This icebreaker activity will send four important messages. The first is that you care about the faculty's well-being. Second, they are not the only ones experiencing stress or negative

emotions. Third, while many people are feeling anxious and overwhelmed, they might also be experiencing positive emotions such as hope. Fourth, they are part of a larger community undergoing similar experiences.

- b. *Provide and normalize mental breaks.* Whether you are running a workshop in person or via Zoom, encourage and give faculty the option to take breaks. For example, during a Zoom session, when you open the breakout rooms, designate one room as a “decompress room” and invite faculty who do not feel like socializing that day to join the decompress room and turn their cameras off.⁹ They will come back after the breakout portion of your event. If you are running a longer session, build in short breaks when faculty can turn off their cameras, stretch, or get fresh air.
- c. *Intentionally and explicitly engage in positive emotions such as gratitude.* Unlike “toxic positivity,” which dismisses real concerns, gratitude works by acknowledging our concerns and working together to combat our fears related to change, conflict, and failure. For example, cultivate a culture of gratitude by starting your meeting with intentionally expressing your appreciation for the faculty who are present with you and other colleagues or by inviting faculty to share three things they feel grateful for that day in a word cloud or over chat.

I want to underscore that these five principles are not just about the current moment. Even before the pandemic, the changing landscape of higher education was a source of growing stress for many of our colleagues, which 2020 only aggravated (Butrymowicz & D’Amato, 2020). To be able to continue to make an impact in a meaningful and sustainable way, our work as educational developers needs to center the overall well-being of the people we serve—both faculty and students.

In order to be effective educational developers, we also need to center our own well-being and care. Our own work as educational

9. Educational developer Karen Costa (2020) wrote about the trauma of watching oneself on the screen and why it’s important to offer people choices regarding camera use.

developers is also rapidly changing and growing and experiencing different kinds of pressures. Using a trauma-informed approach to educational development, while it may be a current buzzword, is not merely a passing fad but a necessary enduring change.

Coping Strategies for Educational Developers

Effective educational development, like teaching, recognizes and leverages the power of relationships to help faculty and students learn and thrive. I began this article by discussing the two roles I was playing when the pandemic hit the United States. There was also a third role that for too long I had neglected—my relationship to myself and my own well-being. Just as faculty are giving emotionally to their students, and it takes a toll on them, educational developers are feeling the weight of our faculty's stress in the midst of the chaos. It is critical that we attend to our relationships with ourselves and develop coping strategies we can use to ensure our well-being and healing. The following are ten suggestions I offer for you to consider:

1. **Center care and well-being.** Begin with yourself. For example, block 15 minutes each day on your calendar to read about healing trauma or how to cope with stress.¹⁰
2. **Connect with other educational developers.** Join or start a learning community of educational developers. Ask for help, even if it's just "I need to vent" and "looking for a sounding board."¹¹
3. **Reaffirm or establish your goals.** Our brains are wired for growth. One way to promote such growth is through self-reflection. Remind yourself that the work you do will impact today and tomorrow and have a ripple effect on the future of humanity.

10. "Stress-Proof: The Scientific Solution to Protect Your Brain and Body" by Mithu Storoni (2017, 2019) is an excellent start if you wish to learn about coping with stress.

11. For example, since spring 2020 the POD Small Colleges & Centers Special Interest Group (SIG) has been hosting weekly drop-in meetings in which educational developers at smaller institutions are supporting one another.

4. **Keep a gratitude journal.** Begin by reflecting on how your presence and existence are significant and valued by others and the world. Each week, write three to five things you are grateful for. At the end of the semester, enter your entire list into a word cloud and reflect on your gratitude journey.
5. **Negotiate with your brain.** Part of centering well-being is recognizing when you get triggered and pausing to consider how you will engage with the situation at hand. One question I learned to ask myself when I am in a situation that makes me feel constricted is, "Is this worth my cortisol?"¹² For me, I began to see how the mere act of asking that question was empowering because it helped me know that I have a choice—to answer yes or no.
6. **Treat your brain with accomplishment and creativity.** Instead of making a "to-do" list, consider making a "done" list.¹³ This will help ease your anxiety about all the tasks you have yet to get to. If you have to make a "to-do" list, include values that are important to you. For example, show kindness, be creative, create connections.
7. **Anticipate, don't expect.** We can't predict everything, but we can anticipate our reaction. Have a backup plan to help your brain have the perception of control. For example, if you are going to facilitate a workshop that involves working groups, have a backup plan in the event that not many participants show up and you have to forgo group work.
8. **Detach from the outcome.** Focus on the process more than what will happen. The work we do is indispensable, yet it's not going to solve all of higher education's problems or eradicate inequality. When you don't get your desired outcomes, remember what the Persian poet Rumi says: "Keep walking" and "Let the beauty we love be what we do."

12. A stressful situation can trigger the stress response, which includes release of the stress hormone cortisol. Repeated surges of cortisol is associated with both physical and mental illness.

13. This idea was suggested to me by educational developer Dr. Gloria Niles, Director of Distance Education & Coordinator, Office of Professional Development and Academic Support at the University of Hawai'i–West O'ahu.

9. **Don't take things personally.** When conflict arises, instead of seeing offenses as deliberately aimed at us, it can be helpful to ask ourselves, "Is this person responding out of stress or desperation, a momentary lapse in control?" Take for granted that everyone is struggling.
10. **Check up on your friends.** Nurture is our nature. We feel better when we engage in random—or intentional—acts of kindness. Don't assume others are doing great just because they are not showing stress. We all cope differently.

As I close, I bring this conversation full circle with a poem by the 13th-century Persian poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, called "The Guest House":¹⁴

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

14. The poem translated by Coleman Barks (1995).

*Be grateful for whatever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

For most of 2020, few actual visitors graced our homes as we learned to shelter and distance. That dreadful isolation meant that, for many of us, we received “unexpected guests” to our inner houses. And Rumi calmly urges us to welcome and entertain them! Why? Because negative emotions serve as beacons, enabling us to march *through* our pain across the bridge of hope so we and others may begin to heal.

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Biography

Mays Imad is a neuroscientist and Professor of Pathophysiology and Biomedical Ethics at Pima Community College, the founding coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Center, and a Gardner Institute Fellow. Dr. Imad’s current research focuses on stress, self-awareness, advocacy, and classroom community and how these relate to cognition, metacognition, and, ultimately, student learning and success. Through her teaching and research, she seeks to provide her students with transformative opportunities that are grounded in the aesthetics of learning, truth-seeking, justice, and self-realization.

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