

# Working with trauma and challenging content in the tertiary classroom

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**Safer Communities, DVC (Education) Portfolio**  
**Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences**  
**Sydney Law School**  
**Educational Innovation, DVC (Education) Portfolio**



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Please get started by  
answering a few  
questions

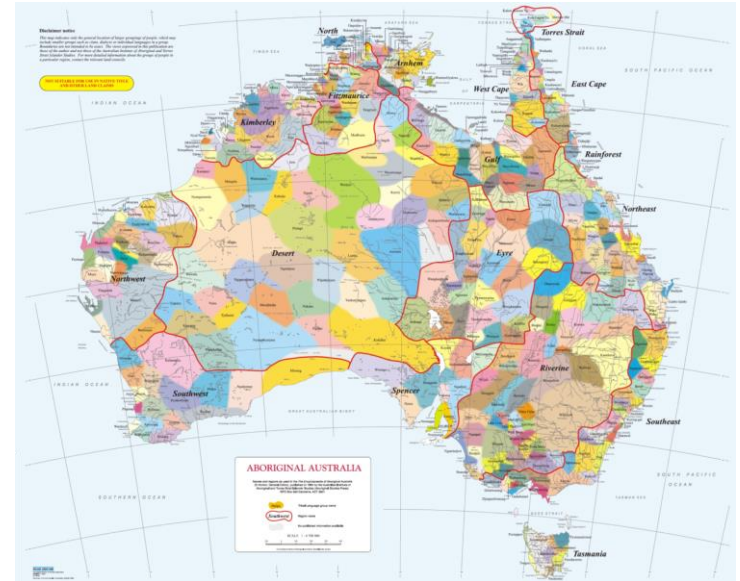


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# Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Country on which we are today, the Gadigal of the Eora Nation, and pay respects to their elders past and present.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge all the Traditional Owners of Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and culture, and pay our respects to any First Nations people joining us today.



**[Kinship Module AIATSIS Map](#)**

Map credit: David R Horton (creator), © AIATSIS, 1996.

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## Content Disclaimer

The content we will talk through today can be confronting and may trigger some emotional responses that are unexpected.

We encourage you to look out for your own emotional and mental wellbeing even if you have not directly experienced trauma.

If you experience any distress during or after the event the **Safer Communities Office** on **8627 6808** or [safer-communities.officer@sydney.edu.au](mailto:safer-communities.officer@sydney.edu.au).

**Employee Assistance Program (Benestar): 1300 360 364** or via **0480 032 310** SMS text message support service

**1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732** or via [1800respect.org.au](http://1800respect.org.au) (24/7)

**NSW Sexual Violence Helpline: 1800 424 017** or via [www.fullstop.org.au](http://www.fullstop.org.au) (24/7)

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# Safer Communities Office

- Free and confidential service providing case management support to students who have experienced **sexual misconduct, domestic/family violence, bullying and harassment and issues relating to modern slavery.**
- Developing and facilitating university-wide preventative educational initiatives for both staff and students (eg. Consent Matters, Bystander Intervention, Responding With Compassion, Higher Degree by Research Supervisor Training etc)
- Providing advice to staff to support students who **disclose.**

## CHAT WITH US

**02 8627 6808** or **safer-communities.officer@sydney.edu.au**

(MON-FRI 8:30AM - 5:30PM)

Level 5, Jane Foss Russell Building  
160 City Rd, Darlington NSW 2008



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# Associate Professor Ghena Krayem

- Convenor of Family Law - Sydney Law School
  - Teaching about Domestic, Family and Sexualised Violence
- Researching and writing about Domestic, Family and Sexualised Violence
  - especially in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities
  - recent project - James Martin Institute Grant - looking at impact of Covid Lockdown on Family Violence service delivery in Western Sydney
  - focus on lived experience
  - empirical research projects for past 20 years
- Working with NGOs in the sector - supporting victim/survivors of DFSV



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# Dr Meera Atkinson

- Writer publishing literary nonfiction, fiction, hybrid forms and poetry.
- Interdisciplinary scholar focusing on health and social justice and working primarily at the nexus of literary studies, trauma theory, and affect theory.
- Literary work includes hybrid memoir *Traumata* (2018) and publications in *Best Australian Poems*, *Best Australian Stories*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, and *Griffith Review*.
- Scholarly publications include the monograph *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (2017), co-edited volume *Traumatic Affect* (2013), 'The Case for Trauma-Informed Creative Writing Teaching' (*New Writing*, 2022) and 'Witnessing, Trans-"species" Trauma Testimony and Sticky Wounds In Contemporary Australian Poetry', forthcoming in *Angelaki*.
- Teaches creative writing in the English Discipline at the University of Sydney.



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## Other contributing authors

**Dr Elly Cowan**  
(Lecturer in Roman History)



**Dr Alix Thoeming**  
(Educational Design Manager)



# Trauma Defined

- A psychic traumatic injury occurs when an event or experience is too fast, overwhelming, or violent for the nervous system to cope; traumatic experience is not registered and processed in the usual way.
- Type 1 trauma: 'simple', 'small t' or 'acute' (generally involving a single-incident, such as an accident or environmental disaster) (Howard 2022, p. 6).
- Type 11, 'complex', 'big T' trauma, or 'developmental trauma' or 'betrayal trauma' relates to often chronic traumatic exposure involving repeated and/or relational harm, such as family violence or child sexual assault (Howard 2022, p. 6).
- Impact of traumatic injury varies depending on age, personality, and whether sufficient appropriate support was/is available; trauma is not always a result of overt injury. For example, neglect and non-physical coercive control can be highly traumatic.
- Women have two to three times the risk of developing a post-traumatic condition following a traumatic experience (van der Kolk 2000, para 3; Hu et al., 2017; Olf 2017, 1).



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## Student Perspective: Case study

- Re-traumatisation from the absence of content disclaimers on sensitive teaching content.
- Absence of trauma-informed cues in the classroom to encourage help-seeking.
- Uncertainty about in-class support to manage potential distress.
- Trauma impacts on academic performance.

## Safer Communities Response

- Offer a confidential, supportive space for student to talk about their needs.
- Offer case management including advocacy, referrals and liaison.
- Consider student feedback in developing/ approving relevant educational campaigns for staff and students.
- Liaise with relevant university departments e.g Educational Innovation to promote trauma-informed practices in teaching spaces

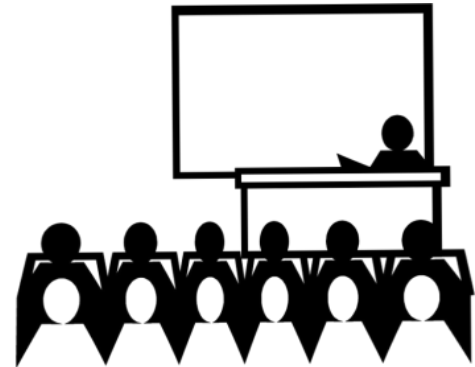
## Small group discussion (10 minutes)

- 1) Form groups of three or four
- 2) Read the statistic handed to you
- 3) Discuss the implications of this statistic for your teaching

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## A legal research and teaching perspective

- Why is understanding Lived Experience Important?
  - Students
  - Research participants
- Being interested and informed but not relying on assumptions/stereotypes
- A challenge that we cannot avoid in some subjects



# Trauma - the impact on learning

- Post-traumatic conditions that filters down to teaching and learning in a way that shapes the grassroots exchanges between teachers and students in a classroom environment and attrition rates.
- The neurobiological impacts trauma can have on learning capacity include adaptations in brain development/function, such as effects on the amygdala (involving emotions and fear response), the hippocampus (learning and memory), and the prefrontal cortex (executive functions), which can compromise emotional, behavioural, and cognitive functioning (Bick and Nelson 2017; Nemeroff 2016; Teicher et al., 2016).
- Post-traumatic conditions are closely related to emotional dysregulation and substance abuse, which can also have a detrimental effect on learning and student success (McAlaney et al., 2021; Tamrat 2018; Treatment Center 2014).
- Academic-related stress alone can negatively affect academic performance and lead to increased student attrition and decreased retention (Pascoe 2019; Shackle 2019; NUS 2016); this is compounded and complicated by post-traumatic conditions.

## Towards a Framework - individual teacher strategies (for now)

- Being trauma-aware observant and empathetic, understanding, cautiously responsive if you become aware of traumatisation.
- Consulting the students of concern page on the Staff Intranet, Safer Communities Team, undertaking professional development workshops and utilising the resources listed on slides and Insight Exchange Safety Kit.
- Being trauma-aware when developing curricula (which is not the same as censoring).
- Trigger warnings are a contested practice (Hutchful 2021; Ceci, Lilienfelt and Williams 2018) and are 'trivially helpful' at best (Kaufman 2019); well-considered and articulated course content warnings are more effective, plus encouraging students to be mindful about what they bring into the classroom and the impact it might have on others can also help to ensure collective safety.
- The recognition of the vulnerability of all students to secondary trauma and assessing course content for risk (which does not equal censorship) (Carello and Butler 2014, 163-164).

## Towards a Framework - big picture strategies (aspirational)

- Stand-alone professional development workshops or a one-off stint of staff training have limited value and are unlikely to be sufficient in isolation (Middelton et al., 2019, 238); institutional investment and top-down structural scaffolding are required that ensures workers are not unduly disadvantaged is a more winning strategy.
- As a first step: the development of a working group to create a plan of action, led by staff with expertise in trauma studies committed to leadership in championing a trauma-aware orientation.
- Priority devising and implementing trauma-aware guidelines and staff training in faculties working with the most high-risk content, e.g., trauma-related teaching materials or scenarios.
- A trauma-aware orientation should be intersectional, which means providing 'a framework to deliberately account for and examine the different ways that intersecting social dynamics affect people within and across groups' (Tefera, Powers & Fischman 2018, ix), e.g., understanding that a student of colour who has experienced sexual assault may well be affected in different ways to a white student who has had a similar experience.

In pairs or threes discuss: (5 minutes)

- 1) Can you identify a way in which you are currently working with trauma or trauma content?
- 2) What will or can you do moving forward in being responsive to this?

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# Resources to support you and your students

## USYD Support Services

**Safer Communities Office**  
(Mon-Fri, 8:30AM - 5:30PM)  
**8627 6808** OR **safer-**  
**communities.officer@sydn**  
**ey.edu.au**

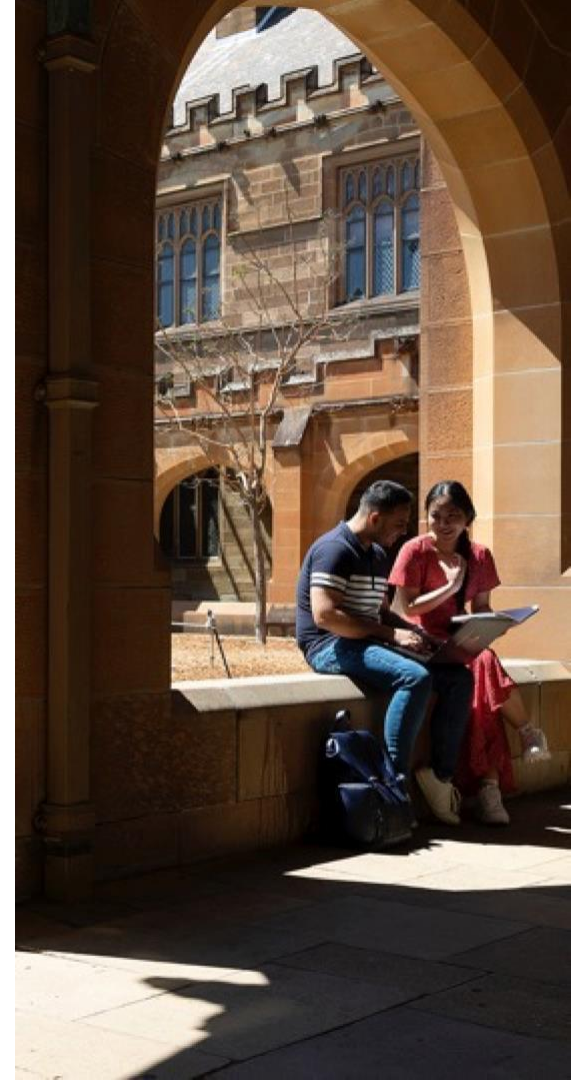
**Employee Assistance**  
**Program (Benestar)**  
**1300 360 364** or via **0480**  
**032 310** (SMS text message  
support service)

## External Support Services

**National Domestic Family Violence**  
**and Sexual Violence Helpline (24/7)**  
**1800 727 723** or **1800respect.org.au**  
(live chat)

**NSW Sexual Violence Helpline (24/7)**  
**1800 385 578** OR **fullstop.org.au**

**RPA Sexual Assault Service**  
**9515 9040** (Mon-Fri 8:30AM-5PM)  
**9525 6111** (After Hours)





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## Resources to support you and your students

### **Responding with Compassion workshops**

Monthly in person sessions delivered by Full Stop Australia. [Register via Workday.](#)

### **Responding with Compassion Online Module**

<https://usyd-fullstop.talentlms.com/index>

For advice around supporting students impacted by trauma, please contact the Safer Communities Office on **8627 6808** or via [\*\*safer-communities.office@sydney.edu.au\*\*](mailto:safer-communities.office@sydney.edu.au).

For other student wellbeing related matters please [submit a care report](#).

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## Additional resources

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/health-wellbeing/safer-communities.html>

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/all-about-consent.html>

<https://www.insightexchange.net/about/>

<https://www.monash.edu/library/inclusive-teaching>

M03 and M20 in the Modular Professional Learning Framework <https://bit.ly/ei-mp1f>

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## Contact us and join our working group

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**Please scan to leave your  
details**

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# Student Wellbeing Care Reports



The University of Sydney is committed to delivering excellence in student support. This is why anyone can notify the University about situations where a student may require support to enhance their experience and learning. You can refer a student for support to Student Wellbeing [sydney.edu.au/student-care-report](https://sydney.edu.au/student-care-report)



**You can disclose information about a person without their consent if you are concerned about them and feel that you need a professional to support you in the assessment of a health, wellbeing and/or safety need.** The University will act on the information to highlight appropriate support services if we believe it is necessary, to further assess, prevent or lessen the impact of the concern(s) on the individual or another person.



If you would like to discuss your concern prior to making a care report, please call **02 8627 8433**.



All University staff are responsible for the identification and referral of student critical incidents and should be familiar with the [Students of Concern and Student Critical Incident](#) intranet page.

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## Reasons you may refer a student for support

[sydney.edu.au/student-care-report](https://sydney.edu.au/student-care-report)

Reason(s) for referral: (Tick as many as apply)

- Health, wellbeing and / or disability
- Learning Support
- Financial Support
- Student Critical Incident
- Emergency Accommodation
- Inappropriate / unwanted behaviour (e.g., bullying, harassment, racism)
- Missing Student
- Behavioural
- Alcohol and Other Drugs
- Injury
- Liaison / Advice / Discussion
- COVID-19 Positive Case
- Other