




Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff  
Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC)

**Trauma-Responsive Tools for Interacting with Court-Involved Families**  
Rebecca Stahl, J.D., LL.M.  
Deputy Director  
Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts  
University of Baltimore School of Law



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- Website: <http://law.ubalt.edu/centers/cfcc/>
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**Tracking Exercise**



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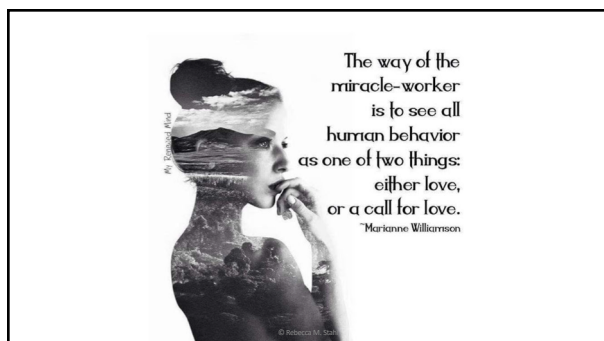
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**What are we talking about?**

- Toxic Stress/Distress
- Regulation vs. Dysregulation
- Trauma
- Trauma informed / Trauma responsive
  - Trauma informed means understanding what trauma is and how it affects you and your clients and everyone else in the system
  - Trauma responsive means doing something about that
- The spectrum of experiences

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**The spectrum**

- Emergency – need a first responder
- Harm to self/others – need an emergency response mental health team
- Crisis – When someone is entirely dysregulated but not a threat to self or others
- Dysregulation – what we deal with every day

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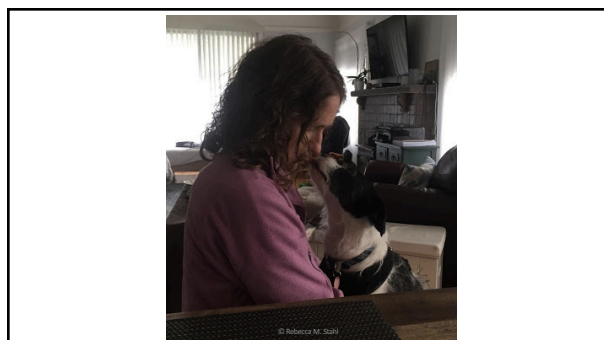
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### Trauma definitions

- Dictionary definition
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5 definition
- Broader definitions
  - Trauma is in the nervous system
  - Loss of connection
  - Loss of wholeness
- "Anything that overwhelms our capacity to cope or respond and leaves us feeling helpless, hopeless and/or out of control"

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### Types of Trauma

- Shock/acute trauma: an event that happened too fast and too soon, and overwhelms our capacity to cope and respond
- Developmental trauma: due to an ongoing misattunement between a child and the primary caretaker.
- Chronic trauma: repetitive and occurs over a long period of time
- Complex trauma: Multiple traumatic experiences without the time to heal between them.
- Systemic/ Institutionalized trauma: racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, oppression etc.

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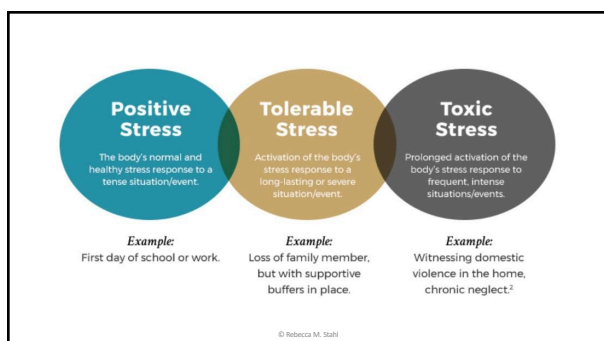
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## Trauma responses are survival responses

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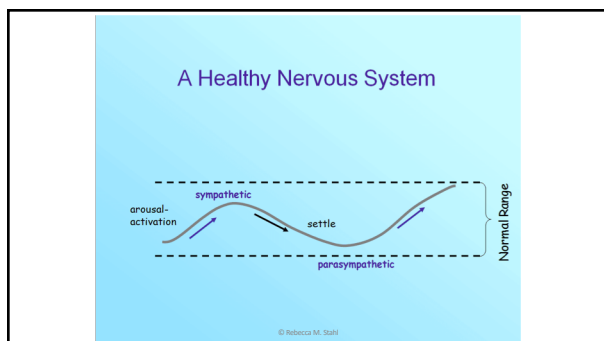
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**What to notice in healthy nervous system response**

- Sympathetic AND parasympathetic responses
- Window of tolerance
- Social engagement

The slide includes a photograph of a baby in a green patterned shirt hugging a light-colored dog. Logos for the University of Baltimore and the copyright notice "© Rebecca M. Stoltz" are visible at the bottom.

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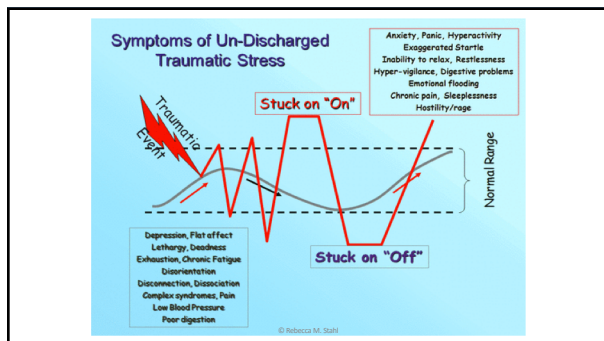
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# Orient

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### Trauma & Brain Development

Reptilian Brain  
Limbic System  
Neocortex

**Typical Development**

- Cognition
- Social/Emotional
- Regulation
- Survival

**Developmental Trauma**

- Cognition
- Social/Emotional
- Regulation
- Survival

Adapted from Holt & Jordan, Ohio Dept. of Education

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Death

Conception

Mechanisms by Which Adverse Childhood Experiences Influence Health and Well-being Throughout the Lifespan

- Early Death
- Disease, Disability, and Social Problems
- Adoption of Health-risk Behaviors
- Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Impairment
- Disrupted Neurodevelopment
- Adverse Childhood Experiences

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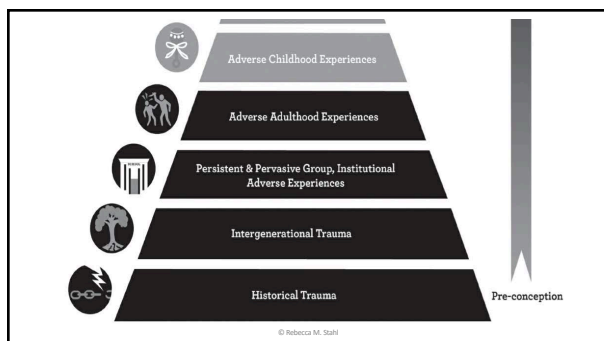
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Trauma factors internal to cases	Trauma factors external to legal cases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domestic violence</li> <li>• High familial conflict</li> <li>• Physical/Sexual/Emotional abuse</li> <li>• Neglect</li> <li>• Substance Use</li> <li>• Removal from family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familial health issues</li> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Fear about immigration</li> <li>• Community crime</li> <li>• Political climate</li> <li>• School shootings (all shootings)</li> </ul>

Removal from school/friends

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**Professional Trauma - Personal**

- Conflict between professionals
- Inappropriate emails
- Inappropriate statements about age, gender, abilities
- Attacking witnesses on the stand
- Blaming a professional for how a case (or situation) turned out
- Lack of civility

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### Professional Trauma - Vicarious

- Stems from seeing / hearing stories of trauma experienced by other people
- We cannot release the effects in the normal course, so we hold it and end up with traumatic responses
- Seeing colleagues attacked as witnesses

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### Ramifications of Trauma for Professionals

- Burnout
- Somatic Complaints
- Substance Abuse
- Closed heart / Forgetting why we entered the profession
- Exhaustion
- Short fuse
- Apathy / Disgust
- "Waiting for the other shoe to drop"

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# Notice your breath

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- **Explicit / Conscious memories**
  - Declarative – objective and devoid of feeling
  - Episodic
    - These have feelings and create a story of our lives
    - These memories can literally change with telling and enhance our future lives
- **Implicit / Unconscious memories – sensations, emotions, and behaviors**
  - Emotional – how we connect to ourselves and each other on an emotional level
  - Procedural – these are body-based memories – these encode much younger than explicit memories (from the womb)



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**Noticing trauma – Physical\*\***

- Tension / pain (headaches, back pain, chest pain)
- Hyperarousal
- DSM PTSD symptoms (flashbacks, nightmares)
- Panic attacks
- Hypersensitivity to light, sound, smell, touch, or taste
- Feeling fatigued or drained

\*\* Gina Ross – "Beyond the Trauma Vortex, Into the Healing Vortex"



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**Noticing trauma - Emotional**

- Intense, unpredictable, and irrational emotions
- Dramatic mood swings
- Uncontrollable feelings of fear and rage or terror
- Profound feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Disruption of the usual sense of safety and predictability



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### Noticing trauma - Mental

- Confusion and disorientation
- Inability to learn and concentrate
- Paranoid beliefs and obsessive negative thoughts
- Tendency to become more radical and more intolerant of differences
- Loss of ability to reason and be reasonable
- Losing interest in activities
- Self-blame
- Becoming cynical and disenfranchised



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### Noticing trauma - Behavioral

- Turning away from / cutting off from resources
- Acting out, impulsive, or risky behaviors
- Addiction/substance abuse
- Social isolation
- Depression
- Hypervigilance
- Perfectionist or OCD-like behaviors to regain sense of control



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### Noticing trauma - Social

- Feeling powerless and isolated in the social order
- Rage/anger turned against society
- Mistrust or hatred of society



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### Noticing trauma - Spiritual

- Losing a sense of humanness
- Deep feelings of shame in relation to spirit
- Disbelief or rejection of a higher power
- Misplaced feelings of pride that result in callousness and lack of compassion



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### Noticing trauma - Family and collective

- Violence and abuse
- Extreme polarization of beliefs and emotions against "groups"
- Distortion of collective narrative
- Growing intolerance of differences



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# Grounding



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TRAUMA/ TRIGGER + NO RESOURCE =  
**TRAUMA SYMPTOMS**

TRAUMA/ TRIGGER + RESOURCE =  
*HEALING*

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# Self Regulation

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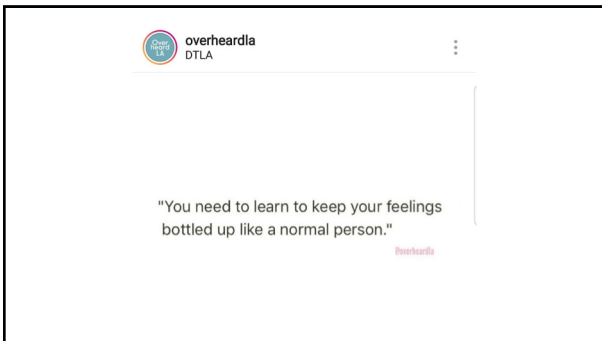
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overheardia  
DTLA

"You need to learn to keep your feelings bottled up like a normal person."

overheardia

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### Self Care

- Community Supports – TALK to people, even if not about what happened
  - The MOST important way humans heal is together, especially through laughter
- Meditation/Yoga/Breathing Be in nature (hike, beach, mountains, hug a tree)
- Exercise - get the stuck trauma energy moving
- Take a day off (assuming you get permission)
- Do one of your hobbies
- Spiritual pursuits – remember to connect to your beliefs and try to see the good in the world
- Stop watching the news / things that might trigger you

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### Additional self care

- Any touch work – massage / facial / spa day
- Take a real lunch break and eat at a restaurant or go shopping/for a walk during lunch
- Volunteer – feel good about doing something in the world
- Watch a funny movie / Listen to your favorite music
- Creative expression in whatever way you love
- Play with your pets
- Get extra sleep
- Professional help – preferably someone trained in trauma healing
- Anything that makes you happy (that is not substance abuse) can be healing, and it's better if it includes other people

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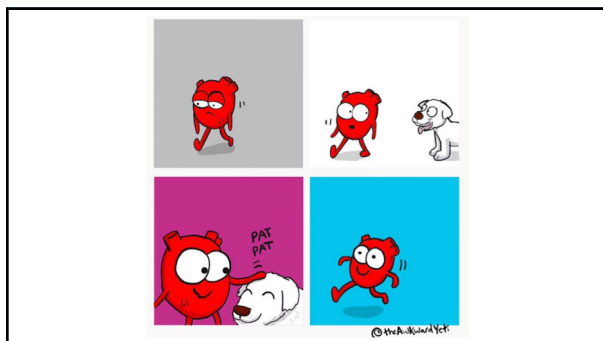
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## Responding to trauma in the moment

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## McMindfulness

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### What you might see or hear - External

- Children
  - 32.6x as likely to have behavior or learning problems
  - ADHD/ODD diagnoses
  - Failure to Thrive / Obesity
- Adults
  - Personality disorder-like behaviors
  - Behavioral signs from earlier

No diagnosis for toxic stress / complex trauma

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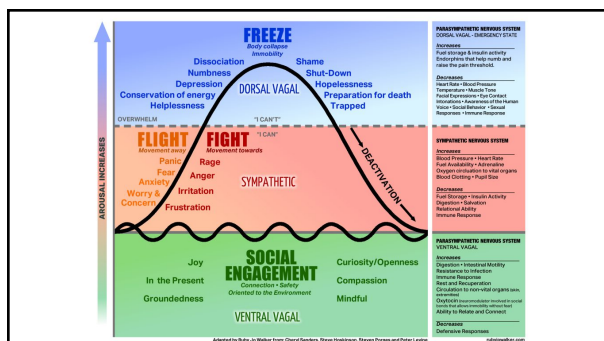
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**What you may see or hear – fight response**

- Language / emotions – Expressions of causing harm or battle and anger
- Posture – Someone looks like they are fighting (leaning forward)
- Breath is short and rapid
- This is common in adults/teenagers and less common in school-aged children / almost non-existent in infants

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**What you may see or hear – flight response**

- Language:
  - Child might say they hide in their room
  - May try to leave the conversation we are having with them
- Posture:
  - Looking for an escape route
  - Tapping feet/shaking legs\*
  - Appears antsy/ready to flee
- More common in younger children; however, many children do not want to sit still, so is it trauma manifestation or normal development?

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### What you may see or hear – freeze response

- Language:
  - Cannot feel/Numb
  - Asking you to repeat yourself
  - Reports feeling relaxed
- Minimal affect
- Posture:
  - Collapsed
  - Looks tense
- Breathing is usually shallow
- Desire to do everything on their own



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### Tension patterns

- Is there bracing in any part of the posture?
- What is happening in the throat?
- What is happening in the hands/arms?
- Does the body look/feel connected to itself?
- What about the eyes?
- What about the neck?
- Leaning forward or back?
- Is there evidence of discharge?
- Is there tension below collapse?



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### What if you see them all?

- Most common in complex trauma
- Brakes and accelerator at the same time
- This just tells us how overwhelmed the system is
- Not an easy place for us to interact with clients



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Freeze and the court system

- “Why didn’t you fight?”
- Fight, flight, and . . . What now?
- Court systems do not understand freeze
- “He is such a good baby. He never cries.”
- We attach shame to immobilization
- Helping people come out of freeze can help the court system take them more seriously

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What do we do about it?

- Many of our clients dissociate – notice where it happens
- Often what clients (children) do not say is more important than what they do say
- Facial Affect Mirroring – ask your clients to show you how they feel rather than tell you how they feel
- Let the body tell its story
- The nervous system can only take so much – our conversations with clients can overwhelm them
- Give them time

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**Avoiding retraumatization**

- Self Regulation!
- Emphasize trust / safety (this takes time)
- Non-judgmental
- Inconsistencies happen - try not to focus on them
- Be honest!
- Speak in a confidential (but safe) location
- Avoid challenging questions
- Listen!
- Notice stress responses

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**"TRAUMA IS NOT WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU, BUT WHAT WE HOLD INSIDE IN THE ABSENCE OF AN EMPATHETIC WITNESS."**

**-PETER LEVINE**



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Panel 1: "I've been feeling so lonely lately" / "Say something comforting" / "I'll try" / "Give her a chance"

Panel 2: "I'm so stressed and depressed" / "Tell her it's going to be okay" / "I just want to be happy" / "Try and do it"

Panel 3: "Thank you, I feel better" / "Say something" / "It's nice to be with someone that just listens" / "I'll try"

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Possibly, the most important technique... Pendulation

- Pendulation = Information & Safe Space
  - Pace as client engages with the emotional content of the negative event/memory
  - Titrate engagement
- Important when:
  - Client's story gets them stuck on ON - Talk about something else
  - Client's story gets them stuck on OFF - Body-based language/techniques / Sensory objects

**Why does this matter?**

- You can be one of the only places those involved in court can experience this exhalation
- This requires interrupting sometimes . . . and that is okay.

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How to Self-Regulate in the Moment

- Grounding
- Centering
- Noticing your breath
- Orienting
- Meditate (eyes open / closed)
- Sensory / fidget tools
- Tap into your senses
- Soothing movements
- Somatic hug (demonstration)

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Avoid Re-traumatizing

- Self Regulation!
- Emphasize trust / safety (takes time)
- Non-judgmental
- Inconsistencies happen – focusing on them will not lend to improved outcomes
- Be honest!
- Speak in a confidential (but safe) location
- Avoid challenging questions
- Listen!
- Notice stress responses
- Incorporate what you know about the client

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Regulating Clients During an Interview

- Obtain Information Needed Without Re-traumatizing
- Notice if client is “Stuck on ON” “Stuck on OFF”
- What helps you helps your clients
- Orienting, Grounding, Breathing

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“Trauma stewardship can be defined as a daily practice through which individuals, organizations, and societies tend to the hardship, pain or trauma experienced by humans, other living beings, or our planet itself. *Those who support trauma stewardship believe that both joy and pain are realities of life, and that suffering can be transformed into meaningful growth and healing when a quality of presence is cultivated and maintained even in the face of great suffering.*”

From *Trauma Stewardship* by L. van Dernoot Lipsky

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Trauma Stewardship in practice

- How does your body feel now
- “The court system is a damaging and destructive process and no one wants to be a part of it.”
- “Every human interaction has the potential to be therapeutic, and the court system has the potential to bring healing to some families.”

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Thank you

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