



**Achtsame
Schulen Schweiz**

Mindfulness & Trauma Pedagogy

*Resource collection for a sensitive response
to trauma in the classroom*

*“Trauma is not what happens to us,
but what we hold inside in the ab-
sence of an empathetic witness.”*

Peter Levine

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Resource collection for a sensitive response to trauma in the classroom

Achtsame Schulen Schweiz
in collaboration with
BINJA - Achtsamkeit

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Online immersion courses

[January 2023 \(German\)](#)

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[June 2023](#)

[September 2023](#)

*For teachers from Ukraine,
course participation is free
of charge.*

Achtsame Schulen Schweiz

Supports the broad promotion of life skills in schools and families through the MoMento program. The organization offers [continuing education](#) for teachers, school teams and parents.

Binja - Achtsamkeit

Mindful through the world of feelings – mindfulness training for children, accompanying persons and school classes. Offers [further training](#) in mindfulness and trauma pedagogy.

Use

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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all teachers and school professionals who give their best every day and are there for their students with head and heart! Thank you for your tireless commitment.

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1. Introduction

Sometimes we experience things that deeply shake and overwhelm us and are almost unbearable. Such experiences stand in stark contrast to our need for security, a reliable order and predictability. If we are not able to process and integrate these experiences, trauma can result, leaving deep cracks and psychological wounds. They carry with them much suffering for those affected and those around them. Trauma is an aspect of the fragility of our human existence. Trauma is widespread and none of us is immune to it.

Trauma arises most obviously from events such as natural disasters, death, divorce, war or escape from such events. But trauma also hides beneath the surface of everyday human life and occurs in relationships, families and social systems. Oppression, discriminatory acts, abuse, interpersonal violence, neglect or even accidents can have traumatic effects.

Trauma at school

There have always been traumatized children in school, only their wounds were not recognized as such. Dealing with traumatized people is now all the more important due to the war in Ukraine. The wave of refugees has sensitized society and schools to address this important issue, to recognize the “language of trauma” and to offer stabilizing environments and mindful encounters.

Potential of mindfulness

Supporting traumatized children at school requires not only knowledge about trauma but above all attentive and sensitive attention. In this way, the trauma can be recognized in the school environment and acted upon accordingly so that further psychological injuries do not occur and the child can feel at ease. Mindfulness as a personal resource enables and supports the necessary trauma-sensitive attitude.

This collection of resources, “Mindfulness & Trauma Education”, is a practical handout for teachers and professionals, which supports them in their everyday school life in providing traumatized children a place of safety. Scientific background on the emergence and impact of trauma is discussed and a wide range of concrete and helpful suggestions from the MoMento and Binja programs are presented so that islands of calm and inner peace can be created.

The resources explain how the power of mindfulness can be applied in a trauma-sensitive way so that the healing potential of mindfulness can be harnessed. The use of mindfulness promotes a sensitive approach to school children and, in addition, enables the children themselves to develop and maintain their own self-care behaviors.

May this collection of resources contribute to a mindful approach to trauma and create places of connection, safety and belonging – within ourselves and with one another.

“Mindfulness is a training of our consciousness. It trains our mind, body and heart to be fully present in life.”

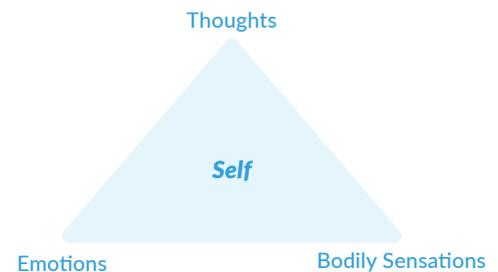
Shauna Shapiro

2. Mindfulness

Unconscious Autopilot

As human beings, we experience ourselves through our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Every moment we experience is perceived through and shaped by these three levels of experience. In everyday life, we often get caught up in the worlds of thoughts and feelings and identify strongly with them. The body’s sensations are often not perceived and paid attention to.

As a result, we often react to situations on “autopilot”: that is, we react to events in the way we learned and internalized in the past. Old patterns of thinking and habits are constantly repeated and transported into the present – even if a new, alternative course of action would be more conducive to the given situation. Normally, all of this happens unconsciously.



Mindful Observation and Practice

The practice of mindfulness can counteract the autopilot described above. We practice being more aware of thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations in order to more consistently align our behavior with our present intentions. Mindfulness, therefore, is first and foremost a practice, not a guarantee of, or control over, our actions. Like anything that must be learned, mindfulness requires intentional and regular practice.

Various mindfulness practices support us in recognizing what is happening in the worlds of thought, emotion and body. This mindful, observing attention opens up a space in which there is freedom: we can “respond” to life instead of “reacting” half-blindly to it. If we succeed in giving our unconditional attention to our experience, we can simply observe and let go of emerging sensations or give them the loving attention they need at that moment.

Bodily Sensations as a Warning System

Mindfulness allows us to pause, to come off autopilot, and then to act powerfully and consciously from the center, from our Self. Practicing stillness connects us to our Self. Noticing the sensations of the body can become a helpful “early warning system” that alerts us when we are out of balance:

What do you need now?

How can you “respond” to these bodily sensations? With a pause? Conscious breaths? A soothing touch, such as a hand on the heart or another part of the body? Removing yourself from the situation for a moment, if possible? Something else?

Identification of bodily sensations

What bodily sensations indicate to you that you are moving out of your center and, at best, entering a state of heightened activation? Where do you feel them in your body? What does it feel like? Are there other signs at the level of thoughts or emotions?

This exercise shows one of many possible applications of mindfulness practice. For people without an established practice, we recommend attending a mindfulness course to be supported in their personal learning process and to benefit from mutual exchange. See [chapter 12 “Additional Resources”](#) for related websites.

3. Trauma

*“What is past is not past
It continues to grow in your cells
A tree from tears or past happiness”*

Rose Ausländer

Mental Injury

In everyday life, we often hastily refer to challenging experiences as “trauma” but, in encounters with truly traumatized people, we are quickly overwhelmed. Reason enough to take a deeper look at the nature and effects of trauma.

The term “trauma” comes from the Greek and means “injury/wound”. In the psychological context, one speaks of a trauma when there is a mental injury.

“Trauma is a vital discrepancy experience between the experience of a threatening situation and the individual’s coping abilities, which is accompanied by feelings of helplessness and defenceless abandonment and thus leads to a permanent shaking of self- and world understanding.”

Textbook of Psychotraumatology
Fischer Riedesser
2009, Reinhart UTB

Trauma Response as a Survival Strategy

Psychotrauma therefore arises in a situation that overtaxes the soul’s ability to cope. It leaves its mark not only on the soul but also on the body. A trauma is an experience of great stress: In the midst of a traumatic situation, the brain stem selects one of three survival strategies: fight, flight or freeze. Hormones are released to provide the body with the strength to cope with the threatening experience. These mechanisms focus 80% of the energy from the frontal brain in favor of survival.

With every sensory perception that unconsciously reminds us of the trauma experience (“trigger”), the system reacts again with the same coping pattern: fight, flight or freeze. The feelings associated with the trauma experience of the past are transferred to the present; our mental coping apparatus cannot distinguish the present from the past.

Necessary Stabilization

If this happens at school, in such moments of stress it is not possible for the child to devote himself to learning or to understand how to resolve a conflict, for example. In these situations, a mindful and swift as possible stabilization has primary importance.

Not every traumatic experience leaves behind consequential disorders. Through loving and attentive support, even intense experiences can be integrated in a healing way. However, if this does not succeed, so-called post-traumatic stress disorders may develop. Such disorders can be identified and can indicate an existing trauma (see [chapter 5 “Recognizing Trauma”](#)).

“There are things we can all do to increase our resilience, but there are also things we can do to increase the resilience of others.”

Sheryl Sandberg

4. Trauma Pedagogy

Background of Trauma Pedagogy

Trauma pedagogy combines supportive approaches of pedagogy with technical knowledge of psychotraumatology. In school-based learning, the focus is on the acquisition of subject-specific as well as interdisciplinary competencies. Students are guided not to memorize subject knowledge but to internalize knowledge in the form of life skills.

This includes social learning in a multicultural context. Developing competent social participation requires a safe environment that encourages and enables self-discovery. Trauma almost always takes place in relationships and triggers inner insecurities, feelings of powerlessness, guilt and shame and the feeling of “being wrong”. Out of this fragility it is hardly possible to develop self- and social competence. Learning is also more difficult since the feelings of trauma tie up a lot of energy.

Our Intention and Attitude

The intention of trauma pedagogy is to create a mindful and professional approach to mentally-injured children and adolescents through knowledge of the development of trauma and its effects on the body, mind and soul. In this way, the school can become a space that enables new, successful experiences in the acquisition of self and social competence. This liberates pupils from feelings of powerlessness and forms the basis for the acquisition of self-efficacy.

The actions of traumatized children and adolescents often seem incomprehensible. They disrupt lessons and wear down the nerves of classmates and the energy of teachers. Developing the attitude of *wanting to understand this conspicuous behavior on a deeper level* is one of the most important foundations of trauma pedagogy.

Action for Good Reason

Knowledge of the complexity of traumatic events makes it possible not to evaluate the individual actions as destructive, but to recognize that these are the only patterns of action available to those affected. This observation leads us to treat children with mindfulness and respect, thus preventing the build-up of further feelings of guilt. It is not the child who is “wrong”, but the action that is disturbing the child.

The following three points support such a trauma-informed approach:

- Feelings have priority over thinking. They are an expression of an inner state and are to be accepted as they appear.
- Every child is at an appropriate stage of development according to his or her social experiences. The child should be given the opportunity to get to know himself or herself in a self-determined way and to develop further.
- As a trauma-sensitive trained teacher, I strive to recognize the transference and counter-transference traps (see below) and to act professionally accordingly.

Transference and Countertransference

Emotions and feelings are “passed on” from one person to another. This happens quite naturally when being together with other people. Traumatic feelings and the corresponding activation of the nervous system are also passed on in everyday school life and taken over by others. Since the traumatic experience was mostly experienced in relationship, people are also needed for reenactment of the traumatic event. In the school environment, these roles are thus passed on – mostly unconsciously – to other students and to teachers. In trauma pedagogy, one speaks of transference and countertransference feelings:

Transference

Retraumatized through a trigger, the child transfers intense emotions of a trauma experienced in the past into the present and superimposes specific roles from this past experience (such as perpetrator, victim, rescuer, etc.) on other people.

Countertransference

This behavior of the traumatized child triggers strong emotions in the teacher. The teacher thus unconsciously takes over the unresolved feelings triggered by a traumatic situation, which actually belong to the child and not to the teacher.

An Example

A 9-year-old boy is building a large castle out of Kapla building blocks in the play corner. It took him several days to build the castle and now he wants to proudly show it to the teacher. Shortly before the teacher arrives, another boy from the class, who is often conspicuous for his aggressive behavior, looks at the castle. The teacher is pleased with the work of art and praises the young builder. At that moment, the other boy looks at her with a smile and destroys the castle with one blow.

The 9-year-old boy gets angry and starts to cry. The teacher reprimands the other boy; she feels herself getting very angry and would like to slap him. Of course, she does not do that. Subsequently, in counselling, she expresses her concern that she has felt this way and that she feels powerless about not being able to protect the other children sufficiently.

Behind the Scenes

What happened here? It transpires that the second boy is often beaten at home. The mother raises him very strictly and explains that one has to teach children the difference between "right" and "wrong" by means of violence. The boy himself, who has already had some school and cultural changes, feels overwhelmed and powerless but wishes to be part of the school community.

The boy releases this inner tension by means of aggression. The feelings of anger and powerlessness are quickly transferred to the teacher and also to the other boy. They perceive these feelings in themselves as countertransference. The teacher was given the role of the mother who educates by means of beatings. The boy experiences relationship through violence at home – this is how he is perceived and seen. For the teacher, it was a relief to realize that the sudden feelings she experienced belonged to the boy's trauma experience and not to her.

This short [video](#) (5 min) shows a simple example of a transference phenomenon.

Create Awareness

By mindfully observing our own bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts, we can recognize whether the feelings we experience in stressful school situations really belong to us or whether they are transferred feelings. A personal and mindful approach thus supports us in falling back less and less into unconscious automatisms and in dealing with the actions of students in a negative way because of our own experienced injuries. This makes it possible to break the cycle of trauma.

When we caregivers stop blindly falling into the traps of trauma feelings and transference roles, we can empower children to act independently. We then have the opportunity to guide them in recognizing their difficult feelings and, instead of acting out the unconscious trauma patterns, using new forms of positive action.

Mindful Trauma Pedagogy

Knowledge of the possible causes of trauma and its effects on the still emerging Self of children and adolescents, as well as personal training in mindfulness, form the basis for a mindful trauma pedagogy. In addition, the school and, in particular, the relationship with the children should be designed in such a way that healing experiences become possible and no further retraumatization takes place. The following chapters deal with these and other central elements of a mindful trauma pedagogy.

5. Recognizing Trauma

Reasons for Mental Injuries

There are visible events that can trigger trauma but there are also causes that we, at school, may not be aware of:

Most visible events

Natural disaster, accident, death of a close person or animal, divorce, separation, war, escape from an unsafe place or situation, unemployment of a parent, etc.

Often hidden events

Neglect, overprotection, bullying, sexual assault, physical or psychological violence, mental illness of a parent, etc.

“There are more people who seek help for symptoms related to trauma and have no idea they have experienced trauma than those who specifically seek treatment for it.”

Melina Lauer Fuchs

Not every terrible experience leads to trauma and corresponding stress disorders. Factors such as the child’s age, personal resources, own perception, individual socialization experiences or a secure bond with a close caregiver are essential criteria for whether the experience can be processed and integrated or whether further symptoms develop.

Traumatic experiences experienced once are easier to process than traumas experienced multiple times. For example, sexual assault and frequent experiences of violence virtually always lead to stress disorders (although they may not be recognized as such for a long time); on the other hand, the experience of a natural disaster can often be processed with loving attention.

Symptoms and Behavior

A traumatized person who has not been able to integrate the terrible experience develops individual symptoms and behavior patterns as a protection so that the pain felt “never has to be experienced again”. Many symptoms are also fragmented physical memories that are reactivated during stress.

The following symptoms and behavior patterns may possibly indicate trauma. If such conspicuous features become apparent, it is important to take a close look and, if necessary, to seek specialist help:

Symptoms arising from overstimulation

- Irritability, aggression
- Jumpiness, excessive anxiety
- Self-injury
- High vigilance
- Sleep disorders
- (Bed)wetting, uncontrolled urination or defecation
- Tension, headache, abdominal pain
- Atypical eating behavior
- Addictive behavior

Symptoms arising from understimulation

- Go out of contact
- Lack of interest
- Fainting spells
- Paralysis symptoms
- Listlessness, apathy
- Be unresponsive

Symptoms arising from altered perception

- Concentration disorders
- Changed body perception
- No sensation of pain, warmth, coldness
- Mixing lies and truth
- Difficulty concentrating
- Aloofness
- Sexualization not appropriate for age
- Seems to have several different versions of themselves

Never ask a child directly about what he or she has experienced! This can trigger retraumatization. Rather, create spaces of trust in which the child can freely show and express what moves them.

6. School as a Safe Place

Safety as a Protective Factor

When experiencing trauma, one is struck by the feeling of being “overwhelmed”. Nothing that was once safe offers protection and security. Emotions run rampant and the body starts its emergency program: the nerves and muscles are on alert, the heart beats rapidly, blood supply is increased to mobilize the strength to flee, fight or freeze.

If such feelings resurface due to retraumatization at school, the stabilization exercises from [chapter 11 “Collection of Exercises”](#) should be used. However, everyday educational life offers traumatized children a great opportunity to learn again what safety feels like.

Food for Thought on the Design of Safe Spaces in Everyday School Life

1. Welcoming culture

- As a team, discuss the implementation of a welcoming culture towards new students, not only when taking on a new class but also when taking on new school children during the school year.
- How do you involve the existing class? When taking in refugee children, it is helpful if the whole school is aware of it.
- To build a community that cares for each other, it is helpful if teachers know the names of all school children and feel responsible for all of them.

2. Classroom

- **Seating arrangement:** a quiet place. Have the relevant child sit within sight of the teacher so that the teacher can take action if she notices that an inner restlessness arises in the child.
- **Workplace:** design personal anchor points. Provide empowering pictures and phrases and ear protectors.
- **Transparency:**
 - Make the schedule for the day visible.
 - Who is teaching? Use pictures.
 - Who will be present when the teacher is absent? Who informs the children and how?

3. Changing Room

- Label the place of each child in the changing room – take note of who is next to whom.
- Welcome the children to the changing room (a child feels seen and taken charge of this way) and be present in the changing room – this avoids conflicts.
- Require quiet in the hallways and when changing classrooms.

4. Playground

- Increase presence when a conflictual mood prevails in the school.
- Do not tolerate violence on the playground and still understand that aggression can be a trauma-consequent disorder – discuss it with the affected child when he or she is calm again.
- As a teaching team, look for solutions about where, how and with whom to calm down agitated children.
- Introduce “peacemakers”, e.g. “Chnopflösern“ → www.binja.ch
- After the break, be present again in front of the classroom.

5. School route

- Even though you, as a teacher, are not legally responsible for your students on their way to and from school, it is sometimes helpful if you notice conflicts on the way to and from school and discuss these in class.
- Especially in bullying situations, which can trigger trauma, it is important if you, as a teacher, can also look for good solutions together with the affected children and their parents.
- Refugee children often do not know the way to and from school at the beginning and their parents are also overwhelmed and unable to support their children in this regard. A schoolmate may be able to accompany the child to and from school.

“At the end of the day, it is the connections with people that gives life its value.”

Wilhelm von Humboldt

7. Reliable Relationship

Deep Human Need

Where people live and work together, “good relationships” are the magic words. People are relational beings. Everyone wants to be seen and felt in their innermost being. Then we feel good. A good relationship gives people the security to show their true selves and is the basis for their contributing their abilities for the common good.

It has long been known that, in schools, a good teacher-student relationship is an important prerequisite for good learning experiences. But how can a good relationship be built?



MoMento Relationship Model

The following tripartite relationship model is a concrete proposal for how our relationships with students can be mindfully explored and proactively shaped in response to needs. Three central dimensions provide a clear overview of what children and adolescents need from teachers and other caregivers in order to feel safe and develop healthily:

Goodwill & Care

Children need love, connection, closeness and a genuine interest in who they are. This includes sensitivity and positive, emotionally supportive communication from the teacher.

Guidance & Structure

Children need understandable structures such as fair rules and consequences, routines, clear guidelines for desired behavior and role models who effectively model this behavior.

Autonomy & Responsibility

Children need freedom in the areas of decision-making, choice and expression and co-determination as well as various forms of personal and shared responsibility. They must live their own lives.

The relationship model above advocates that all dimensions be in a healthy interplay; for example, that rules are developed together with the children and implemented lovingly. The relationship model is studied and used in the [MoMento training program](#).

Mindfulness and presence

Child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Siegel, who also studies mindfulness, has researched that the qualities of mindfulness – curiosity, openness, acceptance, and love – are the same qualities that create a sensitive relationship.

In his book “Präsente Eltern – starke Kinder” he writes (together with Tina Payne Bryson) that children do not need perfect caregivers – but people who are present. Being present, then, requires that we turn to children with genuine interest, not only taking an interest in what they know and learn at school, but also inquiring about what brings them joy and what moves them emotionally. They postulate the following four qualities to promote presence:

Presence in the School Promotes a Good Relationship

- **Feel protected**

Demand clear rules (take care of things, take care of yourself, etc.); demand respect; pay close attention in conflict situations; prevent bullying; establish rituals: morning circle, closing circle

→ see also [chapter 6 “School as a Safe Place”](#)

- **Feel seen**

Greet personally; call children by name often; be aware of the children's emotional state; be empathetic; take an interest; know strengths; integrate resources into daily school life.

- **Feel reassured**

Offer strategies for turning fears and worries into courage and strength in the classroom; have an emergency kit; have minutes of silence; conduct relaxation exercises

→ see also [chapter 11 “Collection of Exercises”](#)

- **Feel safe**

Notice when a child is suffering and address it; provide coping strategies; set up a quiet space in the classroom, for example with a sofa or mattress.

Relationship Promotes Resilience

Resilience means psychological resilience. It is understood as the ability to survive even difficult life situations without lasting impairment. Research shows that a secure attachment is the best psychological protection for good resilience. This happens when children have caregivers who are sensitive and reliable in responding to their signals and needs.



“A secure attachment is a psychological protection and a stable foundation for good personality development. Securely attached children are more resilient to stress, have more coping skills, are more likely to live in friendly relationships, are more likely to be in groups, behave more socially in conflicts, less aggressively, and find solutions that help them.”

Dr. Karl-Heinz Brisch

Resilience is also strengthened when children learn to recognize their feelings and regulate them. Only by becoming aware of one's own emotional world can empathy with fellow human beings be built, which in turn is the prerequisite for a culture of non-violent conflict resolution. Good social behavior thus presupposes empathic behavior with oneself and with others.

When a child knows his or her abilities and is allowed to show them, he or she learns to be self-efficacious. This leads to inner satisfaction, joy and the certainty that he or she has a significant place in the community. The learning of self-management and social skills has great importance in the promotion of resilience.

8. Self-Care

High Demands

Daily school life, with all its demands, requires – in an increasingly complex way – a great commitment and a very high degree of presence from teachers and educational professionals. Often, all attention and care is channeled outwards, with the risk of finding oneself always fulfilling external needs and expectations at the expense of one's own wellbeing.

However, neglecting our own needs means that we can no longer respond sensitively to others. A mindful approach to trauma is thus rendered impossible. So if one wishes to or is required to provide a high level of commitment to others, it is all the more important to cultivate a practice of self-care in one's own life as regularly as possible.

What is Self-Care?

"A loving, appreciative, mindful and compassionate approach to myself and taking my own needs seriously" is how Luise Reddemann (a specialist in psychiatry and founder of Psychodynamic Imaginative Trauma Therapy) defines self-care.

Two skills in particular help us to develop and maintain self-care. We thus experience self-efficacy and our entire being is provided with positive feedback, which significantly reduces stress.

Self-awareness (or mindfulness) means directing my attention to the present moment, without prejudice and with an open mind, in order to perceive what is happening around me and within me. Only when I perceive myself can I also take care of myself.

Self-compassion describes an inner attitude that responds openly and empathetically to what I can observe within myself so that I can attend to it in a caring, loving and attentive way as appropriate.

Self-Care on the Five Levels of Being

There are many different ways in which we can take good care of ourselves. Self-care takes place on all levels of being: the physical level, emotional level (feelings), cognitive level (thoughts, images), social level (relationships, contacts), and spiritual level (values, meaning).

Successful self-care strategies are supported by an accepting and benevolent inner attitude and are characterized by a good balance between doing and being, activity and relaxation, time with others and time for oneself.

What are your personal self-care strategies?

What levels of being do you cultivate and with what inner attitude?

Which levels of being do you cultivate less or neglect?

How can you strengthen your self-care in the longer term?

Do you need further support for this? What type of support?

"For someone to be able to truly develop compassion toward others, he or she first needs a foundation on which compassion can be cultivated. The foundation is the ability to be connected to one's own feelings and to care for one's own well-being (...). Caring for others requires caring for oneself."

Dalai Lama



9. Self-Compassion

Harsh Self-Criticism

For many people, it is natural to take care of loved ones or others in a benevolent and compassionate way when they are suffering or in trouble. But when we ourselves are not well, things look quite different. We are often convinced that something is wrong with us. We criticize ourselves harshly, feel unlovable and/or inadequate and think that we just have to try harder to make things in life work better.

These beliefs and our efforts usually do not really help us. On the contrary, they can drain our vitality and zest for life in the longer term and keep us trapped in a frustrating and exhausting cycle. Self-compassion is an inner attitude that helps us to get out of this cycle.

“Self-compassion is a gift available to all who are willing to open up to themselves. When we develop the habit of self-compassion, suffering becomes an opportunity to experience love and tenderness from within ourselves.”

Kristin Neff

What is self-compassion?

By self-compassion, we mean the ability to give ourselves the care we need when we are not feeling well. This means that we actively soothe, comfort and care for ourselves when we experience painful moments, perhaps in much the same way as we would do with a good friend who is suffering or in trouble.

How does self-compassion work?

Not only are protection and survival strategies, such as the fight, flight and freeze pattern, part of our biological human heritage but also the so-called “care system”. When we are able to relieve our own pain, we tap into this system. The hormone oxytocin is released and feelings of calm, soothing, warmth, safety and well-being set in.

The three pillars of self-compassion

- 1 The basis of self-compassion is the attentive perception of one's own state of being in the present moment*
= Mindfulness.
- 2 Coupled with the realization that all human beings experience painful and difficult moments and that this is part of the human experience that unites us*
= Common humanity.
- 3 Followed by the intention and effort to lovingly care for and comfort ourselves when we are not well*
= Self-kindness.

Self-compassion can be learned

So, with the help of the capacity for caring that is inherent in all of us, we can always begin to cultivate that part of ourselves that provides understanding and comfort when we are not well.

The 8-week training programs in “Mindful Self-Compassion” provide valuable knowledge, core principles and practical exercises. Participants learn to build a kind, encouraging and supportive relationship with themselves. See [chapter 12 “Additional Resources”](#) for related websites.

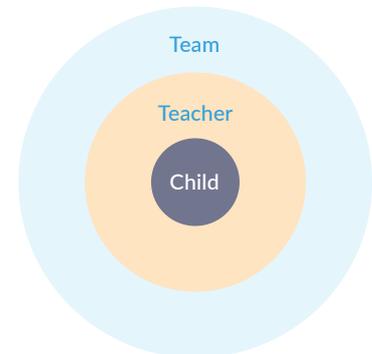
10. Caring in the Team

Dealing with trauma in the classroom demands extraordinary things from the teachers involved. There is a danger that these challenges can also lead to divisions within the team. Therefore, support and care within the team are all the more important.

Child: The child's well-being depends on the well-being of the child's teacher and the supporting team.

Teacher: Trauma sensitivity requires personal commitment, presence and own well-being.

Team: A team can support this by looking out for each other.



Support in the team room

- Beautiful design – corners to relax
- Resource board – who can do what particularly well?
- Emotional barometer – am I allowed to show that I am not feeling well?
- Celebrate positive, successful moments
- Recognize: do I share “negatives” from the classroom as mental hygiene or do I/we as a team tend to focus on “difficult” experiences more than successful experiences?
- Offer meditation times for the team
- Sending loving kindness to difficult children together
- Develop a culture that sees positives and solutions

Form crisis tandem teams

Purpose: • To make specific arrangements for crisis intervention in the event of retraumatization.

Objectives: • Prevent overload
• Ensure space for dialogue in support of mental hygiene
• Recognize in good time when specialist support is needed

Rules: • Ensure accessibility
• Who provides support in an acute crisis situation in the classroom?
• In an emotional situation: ask, after certain intervals, how the teacher involved is doing

Concrete support in the situation

- Takeover of the school class – the main teacher should take care of the traumatized child to ensure relationship security
- Remember the stabilization exercises

Support according to the situation

1. Ask the involved teacher about her state of mind
2. Describe the situation: what exactly happened?
3. Identify triggers of the trauma response
4. Ask the teacher about any feelings of stress: physical, mental, emotional
5. Reflect on reaction/action in the moment
6. Decide together: does a supervisor, school social worker or specialized agency need to be involved?
7. What actions can be taken NOW to stabilize the teacher?
8. In the evening or the next school day, ask again about any feelings of stress.

11. Collection of Exercises

Exercises For and with the Children

This collection of resources has shown different approaches with which teachers and professionals can sensitively respond to the needs of children with trauma. The focus has always been on the teacher's (and the team's) own actions and the required inner attitude to support those actions. In this chapter, concrete exercises are presented which are done together with the children. A central distinction is made:

Stabilization exercises

In the context of trauma, we speak of stabilization exercises when we refer to specific exercises and strategies that are used in the context of an acute incident of retraumatization. They thus support a child, who is flooded with stress due to the retraumatization and is in emergency mode, to get out of the trauma track and back into the here and now.

Mindfulness exercises

Mindfulness exercises also have a stabilizing effect. However, they are applied preventively, i.e. for the general training of awareness in quiet moments. In these exercises, our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations triggered by external stimuli are lovingly observed. This promotes presence and, above all, the ability to self-regulate in the here and now.

Stabilization exercises

When a child or adolescent is retraumatized by a trigger, it is important that they are taken out of this traumatic state as quickly as possible. This is exactly what stabilization exercises are designed to do.

It is important to keep in mind that a child in a trauma state can hardly understand what you say to them! They do not hear your words but they feel your attention. The sound of your voice can calm them. Your gaze and your bodily gestures should be as benevolent as possible. This conveys security.

A trauma event always has physical effects. Therefore, the first thing to do is to calm the body and the nerves:

Exercises and strategies

- Offer a glass of water
- Offer a smelling bottle
- Gently splash water on the face
- Ask for name, birthday, address or time of year
- Remove from the situation
- Count down from 10 to 0
- Offer a clapping pattern
- If previously agreed: offer physical contact – place a hand reassuringly, e.g. on the shoulder or forearm
- Offer a stress ball
- Move the toes, step in place – this allows the escape movement to complete.

Personal emergency kit

For children who often fall into trauma states, it pays to take a moment to create a personal emergency kit.

Together with the affected child, determine what will best support him or her to come out of the trauma state when stressed. Together, determine the sequence of exercises and how you will do them and then stick to this.

You might also make a very specific emergency box with the child.

Mindfulness exercises

A lived practice of mindfulness is taking place in more and more classrooms. This is invaluable for the growing children and adolescents. Thanks to these practices, children get to know themselves and their inner physical and mental reactions. This promotes self-knowledge, which is a key prerequisite for building good self- and social skills.

Teaching these exercises requires our own self-awareness. It is our own regular mindfulness practice that serves as an important template for the children. Authentic self-experience also protects against possibly detrimental ways of implementing the exercises (such as teaching them too hurriedly). Always allow enough time to start and engage in the exercises and to come out of them again as well as the exchange afterwards, which is central!

Trauma-sensitive Mindfulness

There are traumatized children in every class. So, when doing mindfulness exercises with the whole class, it is important to be aware that, under certain circumstances, they can reinforce trauma or trigger the traumatic stress itself.

The reason: in a trauma event, a child is overwhelmed by his or her feelings. From then on, the subconscious tries to protect the child in such a way that he or she never again has to perceive the painful feelings and bodily sensations. Often a disconnection of feeling, sensing and remembering takes place.

During mindfulness exercises, however, we guide the children to become aware of their feelings and bodily sensations, as presence requires a conscious perception of one's inner processes. This can be too much for a traumatized child, as they can then also get in touch with their painful feelings. To prevent this from happening, the mindfulness exercises should be carried out in a trauma-sensitive manner:

Trauma-sensitive implementation

In summary, the goal is to create conditions that allow children and adolescents to have the greatest possible sense of well-being, security and stability:

- The exercises should not be too long, rather short and often. Short pauses for reflection can always be spontaneously incorporated into the school day.
- Make sure that the exercises are comfortable for the students. Speak slowly, gently and as sympathetically as possible.
- In each case, formulate the instructions as invitations and never as demands, e.g.:
- "If you like, you can close your eyes now. If this is uncomfortable, keep them slightly open and focus on an external place." or "If you are uncomfortable sitting, perhaps you can change your position so that you are comfortable again. You can also stand or lie down."
- Children and young people should only do what makes them feel good. They should be encouraged to speak up if something makes them uncomfortable. They should not do an exercise that makes them feel really uncomfortable.
- Observe and "feel" the class with your eyes closed but try not to play policeman or control everything.
- Try to notice as soon as a child feels uncomfortable. This way you can address the discomfort in the moment or after the exercise and look for solutions that are appropriate.
- Offer alternative options if children do not want to participate at the beginning (e.g., they could instead read quietly or draw).

Encouraging children and young people that they are allowed to take care of their personal well-being makes them feel important and right. They feel taken seriously. By working together to find solutions to make practicing as comfortable as possible, you help them open up to the practice. In this way, mindfulness practice can successfully take its place in the daily school routine.

A) Reorientation exercises

Conscious guidance via the senses

- List five things you see in this room right now. Where are they? What shapes do they have? What colors do they have? How big are they?
- List five things that you can touch right now. What do you feel? Touch them gently and feel the touch on your hand. How does the touch feel? Sharp? Dry? Hard or soft? Warm or cold? Pleasant or unpleasant?
- List five sounds that you hear right now? Can you identify the sounds? Are they loud or soft? Are they coming from far away or close by?
- List all the smells you smell right now? Are the smells pleasant or unpleasant for you?

Here and now exercise

- Name objects you see around you with their colors and names. Make sure you list one item after another as quickly as possible, without pausing.
- For example: "green plant, blue book, white eraser, silver ballpoint pen, gray floor, purple t-shirt, black chalkboard, red magnet, etc."
- Do that until you are naming objects really fast, then you will be present for sure.
- What do you feel in your body now?

B) Stabilization exercises

Tree meditation ([audio](#) – in German)

- Sit down comfortably. If you like, close your eyes or look in front of you. Now imagine your favorite tree or a tree as you see it right now.
- Do you see the tree trunk? It is upright and quite stable. How thick is the trunk? How high is the tree? Imagine yourself walking up to this tree and leaning against it. Sit upright and feel the strength of the tree trunk in your spine.
- Then move your attention to the soles of your feet. Imagine roots forming at the bottom of the soles of your feet. How big are your roots? How deep do they go down into the earth? Can you feel their strength and stability? Feel how firmly you are rooted. Your feet are holding you.
- Now move your attention to the roots at your feet, slowly up your legs and then your back and notice how your head rises – like the crown of the tree. Perhaps you can see the image of your tree inside your mind. Look at its crown. What kind of leaves does it have? How far does it spread out? Now feel this tree crown within you. You too are erect and occupy your space. Enjoy this stability and size.
- *(For smaller children, you can finish the exercise here.)*
- Now focus your attention on your breath. Let your breath flow in finely through your nose and notice how your breath spreads in your brain and gently moves down your spine and flows over your legs, feet and roots into the earth.
- When you inhale, imagine how the power of the earth moves up through your feet, legs and spine and flows out through the top of your tree into the sky. The next time you inhale, you take in the power of the sky, fill your body with it, and exhale back into the earth through your spine, legs and feet.
- Breathe in and out independently with this method and in your own rhythm (give the children about 2-4 minutes).

This exercise is also very suitable for a forest morning – with real trees around.

Together with the school children, take a few conscious and deep breaths every now and then during the school day and/or build in silence exercises together. Never require the children to close their eyes.

Feet in the sand ([audio](#) – in German)

- Take off your shoes or house shoes and find a place in the room where you feel comfortable... knees slightly bent, shoulders and arms relaxed, eyes open.
- If you like, you can imagine that you are standing barefoot on a beautiful beach. The sand under your feet is pleasantly warm and you can feel the contact of your feet with the ground. How does that feel?
- Now shift your weight to one foot and start digging the other foot into the sand with rotating movements. You can try this by first pressing the whole sole of your foot into the ground with circular movements, like digging a hole in the sand at the beach with your foot.
- Then, one by one, begin to dig each area of your foot into the sand so that the entire bottom of your foot is massaged by the ground: the balls of your feet, your toes, your heel. As you do this, feel well into your feet. Let the pressure be strong enough that your feet are massaged nicely. If it is uncomfortable or painful, change the pressure: just rub your foot gently on the floor so that it is comfortable.
- Then stop the movements and bring your weight back to both feet. Feel. If you like, you can close your eyes; if not, keep them slightly open. For the foot that you dug into the sand: how does it feel? Do you feel a difference from the other foot?
- Then do the same exercise with the other foot (repeat the instructions). Again, do what feels good for you including in terms of the amount of pressure.
- Then bring your weight evenly back onto both feet. What do you perceive? How do your feet feel now? Are they warm? Do they tingle? How is the contact of the soles of your feet with the floor?
- Then detach from the exercise, bring your attention back to the room you are in. Orient yourself in the room, look around. Perhaps now after the exercise you may like to move a little, stretch your body a little.

C) Exercises to promote body awareness

Shaking like a polar bear (by Peter Levine, *Somatic Experiencing*)

- Polar bears resolve the shock and trauma caused by an injection to insert a transmitter by shaking their bodies intensely for 2 minutes and then taking two deep breaths.
- Stand upright. Notice how your feet are securely planted on the floor. Now begin to shake yourself. Shake your legs, your hips, your upper body, your arms and now also your head. Shake your whole body strongly – but keep your feet firmly planted. Shake yourself, let go of everything!
- After a while, slowly let the shaking subside. The movements become softer and smaller until you stand still. If it feels right for you, close your eyes for a moment. You may want to place one hand or both hands on your heart. Can you feel the heart beating? Take three deep but calm breaths... in – out, in – out, in – out... and observe how the beating of your heart slowly calms down again.

Greeting the body with self-massage ([audio](#) – in German)

- Greet your body by giving yourself a soothing massage. Start with your head and massage your scalp with your fingertips. Then you can gently stroke your forehead with flat hands, then your eyes, further to the cheeks, massage the jaw a little. Feel free to “make a face” as you do this so that your jaw can loosen up. Massage and knead your ears so that they become nice and warm.
- Continue moving your hands to your chest, letting your hands dance on your chest like pleasant drums. Then move your hands further to the side, to your arm, and tap it with your flat hands, starting from the shoulder down to the hands. Then do the same with the other arm, from the shoulder down to the hands.
- Now move your hands to your belly and stroke it with slow, gentle and circular movements. Continue to your lower back and buttocks, tapping this area with your flat hands. Continue down with your two hands tapping all around, first one leg, down to the foot, then again down the other leg.
- Then stroke your whole body. Do this by stroking both hands slowly and with gentle pressure from your head to your face, chest, abdomen, one arm and the other, hips, legs and feet.
- Take a moment to reflect. If you like, you can close your eyes. What can you perceive in your body? Are there warm spots or does it tingle somewhere? What do you notice? You can simply observe your bodily sensations.
- Then disengage from the exercise by gently opening your eyes and orienting back.

D) Exercises for the awareness of feelings

Sensitivity round with glitter bottle

- **Preparation:** in advance, fill an empty PET bottle (0.5 liter) with water, pour in glitter and close tightly. Depending on the glitter, it may first form lumps and partially float on top. After 1-2 weeks, the lumps will dissolve on their own. The glitter bottle represents the spectrum of different states of one's state of mind:
 - *Calm and serene* = the glitter is at the bottom of the bottle, the water is clear
 - *Joyfully excited, slightly nervous, somewhat stimulated* = the glitter moves quietly in the bottle
 - *Stressed, overwhelmed, sad, angry...* = the glitter swirls and the water is "murky"
- Before commencing the exercise, the different states of the glitter bottle are shown and explained to the children. The teacher can lead with their own example, then the children are invited to share their feelings. How are you feeling right now? Can you show how you are feeling using the bottle? More calm and relaxed, more jumbled and with lots of thoughts racing around in your head, or somewhere in between?
- The glitter bottle moves from one child to another. Each child gets time to show and describe his or her current state of mind (feelings and thoughts) with the help of the glitter bottle. The other children listen attentively.

Feeling happy – Inner journey to feeling good (audio – in German)

- In the group, work out what experiences made the students feel really good in the past. These experiences may have been on vacation, at school, on a birthday... if necessary, give ideas. Make sure each child has found an event. Perhaps explain the process to the children in advance and let them choose a comfortable position for this exercise themselves. Also eyes open/closed depending on preference.
- Invite the children to feel their bodies. Are you sitting or lying comfortably? Do you feel a hard spot anywhere? You can still change your position so that you can listen comfortably for a few minutes.
- Remember the experience we talked about before. That was an experience where you felt really good. It was so beautiful that you wish it would happen again.
- **Place (see):** remember where you experienced this moment. What did this place look like? Was it in a house or in nature? Were you alone or with other people? What colors did you see? Do you remember what kind of clothes you were wearing at that time? What season was it? See the place as clearly as you can remember it.
- **Action:** remember what you did at that time. Did you stand? Where? Or were you sitting? Or were you in motion? If so, how were you moving? What happened at that moment when you were doing so well? Did you receive something? Did you do anything in particular?
- **Feeling (sense):** what did you feel at that moment? Where in your body did you perceive that feeling? Can you feel it again now? Hold your hand at the place where you perceive it and enjoy the beautiful feeling.
- **Sounds (listen):** remember what you heard at that time. Did you perceive a sound? Or was someone speaking to you? What was being spoken? Was there music in the background? If so, what kind? Or did you hear birds chirping? Or was it quiet? Etc.
- **Smells (smell):** remember what smells you noticed back when you were feeling so well. Were there flowers that gave off a certain scent? Did you smell something cooking? Did the room smell around you? Etc.
- **Taste (taste):** did you eat something at that time? If so, do you remember what?
- What taste did it have in your mouth? Can you still perceive it? Etc.
- Enjoy the situation in which you were feeling so well again to the fullest. Notice how it feels in your body. Where in the body do you perceive the good feeling? Do you want to give this event an appropriate name?

E) Exercises for becoming aware of thoughts (from 4th grade)

Stillness exercise: breathing and catching thoughts

- Before doing this, explain to the students that this exercise is about discovering one or more thoughts that are buzzing through the mind. To do this, you will interrupt normal breath observation – or another mindfulness practice that the children already know well – three times with a gong. Depending on the age of the children, the thoughts can be noted or, afterwards, the children can share whether they caught a thought or not.
- Depending on the time, the quality of the thought can be examined. Is it a supportive thought? (e.g. I am looking forward to the break, I like doing this, I am fine...) or a difficult thought (this is stupid, now I have an exam, this scares me...). There is no right or wrong. We are merely researchers of the world of thoughts.
- Instructions: choose a position and posture that is comfortable for you. If you like, close your eyes or direct them, slightly closed, towards a point in front of you. Now observe the inflow and outflow of your breath. Each time you hear the gong, try to catch the thought that is going through your mind at that moment.

F) Exercises to promote the community

Game: “Welcome!”

- Stand in a large circle. The teacher (A) looks at a child (B) and says his or her name, to which the child responds with “Welcome!”. Only then does the teacher (A) walk over to the child (B) and stand behind him/her. The child (B) looks at another child (C) and says his or her name. This child (C) also answers with “Welcome!”, whereupon (B) can run over to (C). Now (C) chooses a new child (D), and so on. The idea is to make sure that everyone gets a turn.
- Variations of the game: you can also answer with the name of the child (instead of “Welcome!”); say “Welcome!” in your own native language; only respond with looks and gestures (in which case the whole exercise is conducted without speaking); start several strands at the same time (for large groups); etc.

This and many more community-building games can be found in the [MoMento playing card set](#).

Hand out compliments

- This exercise can be used to strengthen self-confidence as well as to direct awareness to what is successful and beautiful in everyday togetherness. It also promotes class cohesion and a sense of community. The prerequisite of the exercise is that the students know how to give compliments and what comprises a good compliment.
- Implementation of the exercise: every morning, the name of a classmate is on the desk of each child. The assignment is for the child to give out a compliment to that classmate during the course of the day. When the children have completed the assignment, the name slip is placed back in a box provided for this purpose. The next day, there is a new name on the desk.
- After a certain time, the exercise can be reflected on by the whole class. What has changed in the class atmosphere?

The website and free app [Insight Timer](#) has more audio recordings of mindfulness exercises for children and younger adolescents. See playlists from [MoMento | Achtsame Schulen Schweiz](#) (in German), as well as many audio practices from other contributors in English.

12. Additional Resources

Managing the school day and meeting all students with all their different needs is challenging. Traumatized children can overwhelm school staff and also other schoolchildren. The following links to training courses, further resources and relevant contact points can provide additional support:

Training Courses on this Resource Collection

- Mindfulness & Trauma Pedagogy – Courses in January, March, June, September 2023 – DE/EN ([Link](#))

Further Reading

- Swiss Institute of Psychotraumatology – Brochures in Ukrainian & Russian ([Link](#))
- UNHCR – Guidance for teachers on stress and trauma – EN ([Link](#))
- Refuge & Resilience – Assistance in Emergencies, Information for Teachers, Bibliography – DE ([Link](#))

Support Services

The cantons offer support services for dealing with refugees on their elementary school websites or at the colleges of education. Some examples (all in German):

- Bern: Flüchtlingskinder aus der Ukraine – Infos, Materialien, Schulungen ([Link](#))
- St. Gallen: Zusammenstellung von Links, Kontaktadressen und Materialien ([Link](#))
- Zürich: Informationen zur Einschulung von geflüchteten Kindern & Jugendlichen ([Link](#))
- Zürich: Materialien, Veranstaltungen und Beratung für Schulen, PH Zürich ([Link](#))

Other points of contact

- School psychology service of the respective cantons/communities
- In case of experience of violence: Victim Support Switzerland – EN ([Link](#))
- Advice and Reporting Offices – Child Protection Switzerland – DE/FR/IT ([Link](#))

Local Organizations & Trainings

- Swiss Institute for Psychotraumatology – DE ([Link](#))
- Swiss Professional Association for Trauma Pedagogy – DE ([Link](#))
- Trauma Pedagogy Working Group – DE ([Link](#))
- Association in:Relation – DE ([Link](#))

Mindfulness & Self-Compassion

- BINJA – Achtsamkeit – DE ([Link](#))
- MoMento – Programm – DE ([Link](#))
- MBSR Courses – Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction – DE/FR ([Link](#))
- MSC Courses – Mindful Self-Compassion – DE ([Link](#)) as well as [here – EN](#)

Think about *your own personal experiences* in contact with traumatized children and possibly seek counseling or supervision. Many school communities offer a counseling center for teachers.

Taking advantage of a consultation is not a weakness but proves you are a professional who takes responsibility for your professional actions in everyday school life!

Achtsame Schulen Schweiz

*“Transformation begins with each individual.
By practicing mindfulness regularly, we begin to
realize that we are not victims of circumstance
but that we have the power to change ourselves
and our classrooms and schools for the better.”*

Patricia Jennings