

# Trauma-Informed Tutoring

Self-Paced Module  
Winter 2024



WASHTENAW  
LITERACY



# Training Guidelines self paced



- **Put questions in an email and send to Alison Austin, Program Director ([austin@washtenawliteracy.org](mailto:austin@washtenawliteracy.org)).**
- Limit distractions (turn off devices, email notifications, don't engage in side conversations).
- **Respect your own time by being a fully engaged, active learner! This is your time.**
- Take care of your own needs. If you need to pause to refill your water, it's ok.
- **Trust the process and plunge into activities as though you were in a classroom with others.**



## **Washtenaw Literacy's Mission:**

Believing that literacy is the foundation for a sustainable community, Washtenaw Literacy provides literacy support, free of charge, to adults through a network of trained tutors.

It is our **Vision** to eliminate illiteracy in Washtenaw County.



PASSION



DIVERSITY  
EQUITY  
INCLUSION



INTEGRITY

[www.washtenawliteracy.org](http://www.washtenawliteracy.org)

734-337-3338

# Tutor Objective



To partner with an adult in pursuing their personal goals by improving their ability to understand, speak, read, and write basic English and do math through customized, research and evidence-based tutoring.

# Training Objectives



## 1. Develop skills needed for tutoring adults

- Gain knowledge:
  - Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences
  - Trauma and the tutor/ learner experience
  - Brain Science- How can trauma affect learning?
  - Understand Asset versus deficit thinking
- Learn strategies for trauma-informed tutoring
- Develop your own strategy for a trauma-informed tutoring practice.

## 2. Build knowledge needed to engage with agency

- Setting healthy boundaries
- Seeking help when (or before! ) you are overwhelmed

## 3. Align your perspective and expectations with the needs of adult learner

# This training

1. Thanks so much for volunteering to tutor and engaged with the training on trauma-informed tutoring.
2. You will need paper/pencil or an electronic document for answering questions and completing activities to fill out the google form that you complete at the end of the module.
3. Throughout the training there are five suggested sections of **Background information** and four **Activities**. These are necessary for completing training. There are also optional resources throughout the training for further exploration but the information is not required.



# This training cont.

## 4. Video link troubleshooting

The video links throughout are good but sometimes links fail to load from the slide deck for many reasons.

If you have troubles

- Click the copy link option you will see when clicking the hyperlink
- Paste the address into the browser and view the video.
- Reach out to [Syndallas@washtenawliteracy.org](mailto:Syndallas@washtenawliteracy.org) if you have any problems.

## 5. Take a Break

Occasionally you will be asked to take a break and experiment with short de-stressing exercises.

**Please give them a try. Notice how they feel.** You don't need to take any notes.

Many trauma informed tutoring practices are universally helpful practices for effective learning— especially the taking of breaks and checking in with ourselves. Consider how you will incorporate the option for breaks in a tutoring session. Tutors are learning during sessions too and taking breaks will benefit everyone.



# This training cont.



6. Please take care of yourself during this training session. Some content is distressing as we engage in the impacts of traumatic life events. If you want to check in feel free to reach out to Alison (Program Director) or Syndallas (AmeriCorps Member and module author).

[austin@washtenawliteracy.org](mailto:austin@washtenawliteracy.org)

[syndallas@washtenawliteracy.org](mailto:syndallas@washtenawliteracy.org)





# What is trauma/A.C.E.s?

**Trauma** is a deeply distressing experience. It could be

- **A single overwhelming event**
- **A distressing event that has life-long impacts**
- **Extended exposure to distressing events**

**Traumatization** occurs when internal and external resources are inadequate for coping with distressing events.

**Background information #1** This is content that will be useful for understanding the topic. Engage before moving on to the next few slides.

[Understanding ACEs with Dr. Nadine Burke Harris](#)



# What are A.C.E.s?



## **Adverse Childhood Experiences**

This label comes from an important study by Kaiser Permanente that was designed to understand how traumatic experiences in childhood affect adults. The study found that some common adverse (potentially traumatic) childhood experiences are associated with negative outcomes in adulthood. A.C.E.s are common across all populations. Two thirds of the 17,000 people surveyed experienced at least one as a child. Many tutors and learners will have experienced one or more of A.C.E.s.

If you want to dive deeper explore this interactive summary of the CDC/Kaiser Study [Understanding ACEs: What are Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)?](#)

# What are A.C.E.s?

**Background information #2** Engage before moving on to the next few slides.

- 1) Explore the resource [Why should I care about my Number Story](https://numberstory.org/). If engaging with learning about trauma brings up distressing events in your past this resource provides support for you.  
<https://numberstory.org/>
- 2) Explore [THE PAIR OF ACEs](#)



# Take a break

**Try sitting still for one minute and just checking in with how you are feeling physically and emotionally.**

**Direct your attention entirely to noticing those feelings for one full minute.**

**What did you notice?  
Is this a hard topic for you?**

**How do you feel now?  
Do you want to go ahead or take a longer break?**

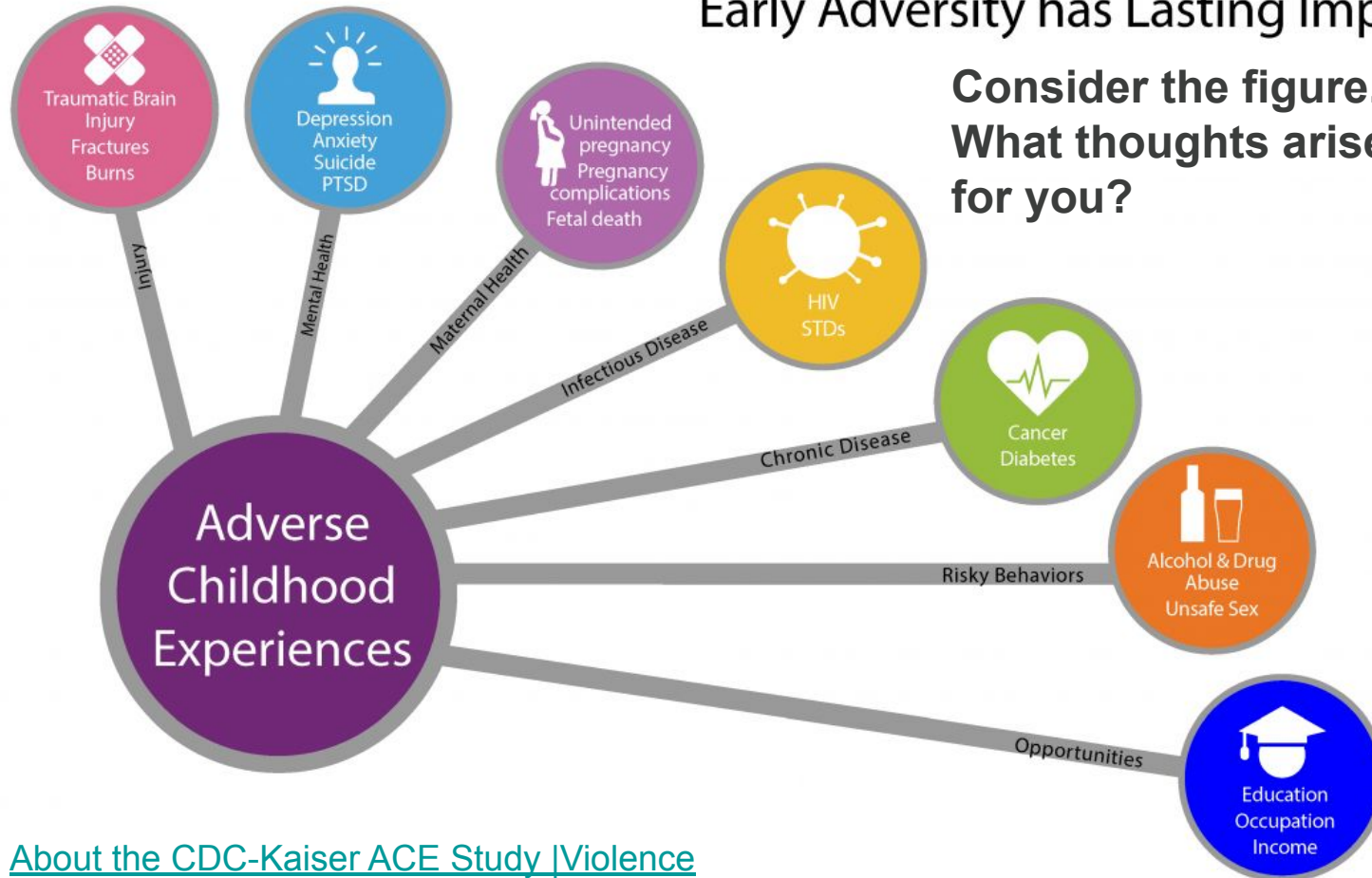
**When you feel tense or anxious what helps you?  
What are your strategies?**



# What are A.C.E.s?

## Early Adversity has Lasting Impacts

Consider the figure.  
What thoughts arise  
for you?



[About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study | Violence Prevention | Injury Center](#)

# What are A.C.E.s?

Consider the figure.  
What thoughts arise  
for you?

## Adverse Childhood Experiences



Ellis, W., Dietz, W. (2017) A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience (BCR) Model. *Academic Pediatrics*. 17 (2017) pp. 586-593. DOI information: 10.1016/j.acap.2016.12.011

# Activity #1

**Write your answers.**

- 1. Consider the background info and the figures from the past two slides. What thoughts arise for you?**
- 2. How could an adverse experience like mental illness have a different impact depending on the supports available in a community?**
- 3. How can our roles as tutors be a part of creating supportive community environments for learners and tutors?**
- 4. How could you partner with a learner so they are empowered to tell you what they need to feel supported at a tutoring session without asking invasive questions? What questions could you ask?**

# Trauma the learner/tutor experiences



A.C.E.'s are common events. Tutors won't know a learner's adverse experiences unless the learner **chooses** to share. In Wash Lit's tutors' experiences...

**Basic Literacy Learners often have (*but not all*)**

- Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Adverse Community Environments
- Ongoing adult challenges

**Incarcerated Learners/Returning Citizens often have**

- Pair of A.C.E.s + ongoing traumatic adult experiences

**English Language Learners often have (*but not all*)**

- Adverse experiences stemming from culture change, racism, language barriers, isolation, loss of family connections, ongoing difficulties in home country, immigration hardships.



# Trauma the learner/tutor experience

**We should not ask learners to share their traumatic experiences.**

*For instance, while jail tutoring, don't ask a learner about how they came to be in the jail.*



- Talking about our worst experiences can be **retraumatizing**.
- People who have experienced trauma may be wary of being defined by their worst experiences.

**Sometimes as learners become comfortable they choose to share traumatic experiences.**

**Avoid becoming the injured party:** Don't create a situation where the person sharing a traumatic experience is now in the position of caring for the shock or distressed feelings of the listener.

# Trauma the learner/tutor experience

## Background information #3 Engage before moving on.

Watch the first part of [ACEs Storytelling: A Parent's Story with Linda Baggio and Dr. Nadine Burke Harris](#). Dr. Harris listens intently and acknowledges Linda Baggio as she relates traumatic events from her past without expressing shock or asking probing questions.



In engaging with tutoring learners are showing strength and resilience. They have taken steps to heal and create connection by reaching out for a tutor. Like Dr. Harris, tutors might consider affirming the strength they see in the learner while acknowledging the difficulty of traumatic experiences.

# Trauma the learner/tutor experience



## SET BOUNDARIES!

Sometimes a learner's traumatic experiences can be hard for tutors to hear, especially if the tutor has had similar traumatic experiences or the experiences are unfamiliar and distressing.

A defined expectation of your role as a tutor helps maintain a supportive but not overwhelming relationship. While supportive relationships between tutors and learners are healing and beneficial to both people, we are literacy tutors— not social workers or mental health care professionals.

### Signs that you need to define your boundaries

- You are finding hearing a learner's traumatic experiences overwhelming
- You are alarmed about the well being of a learner (Seek help!)

# Trauma the learner/tutor experience

## SET BOUNDARIES cont.

Figuring out your boundaries is an ongoing process.  
It's totally okay to be unsure. Consider:

- What support can and can't you offer? Be clear with yourself first!
- What other resources are available to the learner?
- Don't be alone in figuring this out. Reach out to Wash Lit and other supportive people in your life for help.

For some ideas about setting boundaries check out this article by an adult educator/tutor [I'm not a counsellor. What can I do? | Working in Adult Literacy](#)

**Please reach out to Wash Lit when you feel a need.**

**We are here for each other!**



## Activity #2

**Write your answers.**

**At this point you should be able to answer the following questions**

**What is trauma and what can cause it?**

**What are adverse childhood experiences and what impact can they have on adult outcomes?**

**What are adverse community environments and how do they interact with adverse childhood experiences?**

**Why shouldn't we ask people to share about their traumatizing experiences?**

**Who can you reach out to if you are feeling overwhelmed by a tutoring experience?**

**If you are unsure of any answers go back and review the prior slides.**

# Take a break

How are you feeling?  
Move somehow for a full minute.

Walk. Stretch. Water a plant. Say hi to a pet or housemate.  
Say hi to yourself.

How do you feel now?  
Do you want to go ahead or take a longer break?



# Trauma the learner/tutor experience



**Background Information # 4** Engage before moving on. This content will be useful for understanding the relationship between trauma, anxiety and learning in the tutor/learner experience.

Skim the following article **and/or** watch the video before moving on to the next few slides.

[Fear and Learning: Trauma-Related Factors in the Adult Education Process](#) (It's a great article to read carefully if you have the time. It's a little jargony.)

[How can stress affect learning? | Dr. Lara Boyd | TEDxSurrey](#)

# Trauma the learner/tutor experience



*The major challenge to the educator working with highly stressed or traumatized adults is to furnish the structure, predictability, and sense of safety that can help them... feel safe enough to learn.*

[Fear and Learning: Trauma-Related Factors in the Adult Education Process, Perry, Bruce D. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, n110 p21-27 Sum 2006](#)

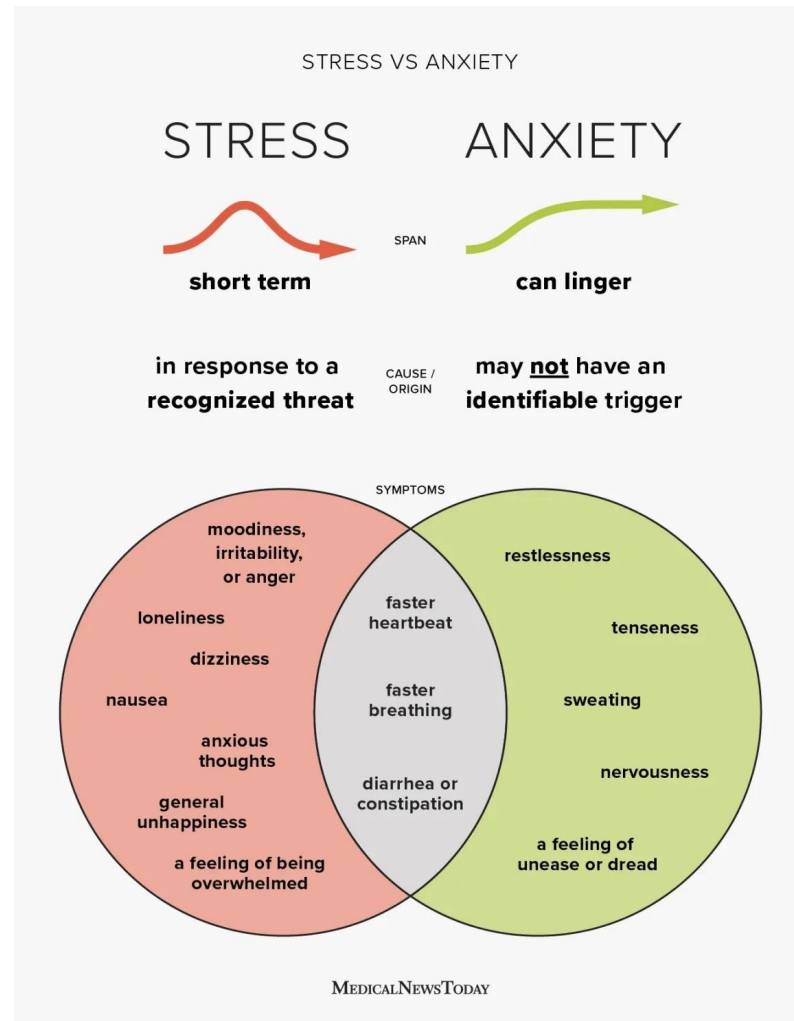
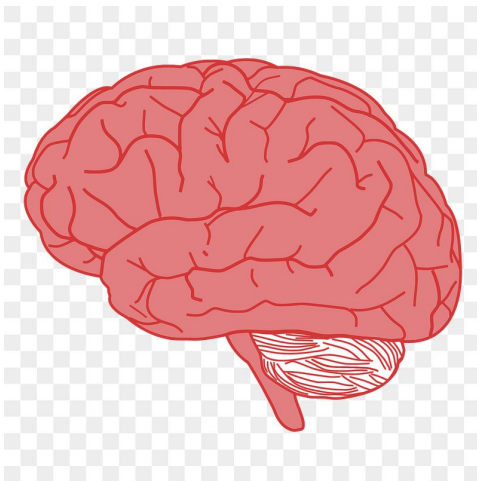
## Consider:

- What does the quote above suggest about your role? How can you support the learner through structure? Predictability? A sense of safety?
- How will you bring the learner into the lead for creating strategies for your sessions together?
- What aspects of trauma-informed tutoring are you unsure of? What are you feeling confident about?



# Brain Science: How can trauma affect learning?

People with multiple experiences of trauma are more likely to experience a baseline of persistent anxiety or toxic stress.



# Brain Science: How can trauma affect learning?

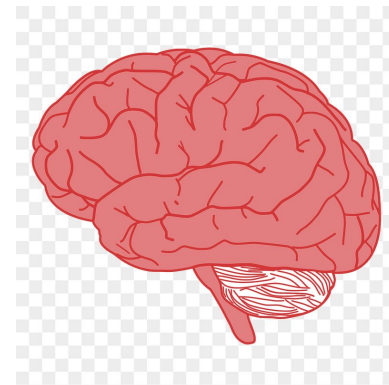
## Anxious learners may

### Be hyper-vigilant to surroundings

- More attentive to non-verbal cues
- More likely to misinterpret all cues negatively

### Have difficulty accessing the cortex of the brain

The cortex is important for learning literacy skills: concentrating, creative problem solving, accessing knowledge, risk taking, starting new tasks, answering questions



# Brain Science: How can trauma affect learning?



## Anxiety/fear coping mechanisms

**Dissociation**– Feeling disconnected from the world around you. Tutor may misinterpret this fear response as the learner being calm and inattentive.

**Avoidance**- A tutor may interpret this as lack of commitment.

- Missed sessions because anxiety is too high (Remember complicated barrier filled lives cause missed sessions too)
- Avoiding a particular type of learning (ex., no fractions).

**Consider that in the face of overwhelming anxiety both responses protect the body. Remember, trauma and toxic stress can harm our bodies and cause chronic health conditions and early death.**



Example of the function of disassociation [Fiona Apple - Across the Universe \(Official HD Video\)](#)

**Anxiety resulting from traumatic experiences can be an additional barrier to learning literacy skills for adult learners in many ways.**

# Strategies for trauma-informed tutoring



**Background information #5** Engage before moving on.

Watch this beautifully made video about practices for working with adults who have suffered trauma.

**\*Warning–** the beginning of the video discusses childhood traumatic experiences that are distressing\*

[Opening Doors Trauma Informed Practice for the Workforce on1080, Mp4](#)

Or

For a less emotionally challenging but a still informative dive into trauma-informed strategies explore the web based info:

[Infographic: 6 Guiding Principles To A Trauma-Informed Approach | CDC](#)  
[Building Trauma-Informed Communities | Blogs | CDC](#)

# Take a break

How do you feel?

## Try a 3's practice:

Name

- Three things you see.
- Three sounds you hear.
- Three things you smell.
- Three things you touch.
- Move three parts of your body.

How do you feel now?



## Relationships and Safety

The invisible yet powerful web of relationships that effective [tutors] create between themselves and learners, and between and among learners, is crucial to an optimal learning environment

.... The necessary sense of safety to encourage adult learning comes from consistent, nurturing, and sensitive attention to the learner's state of mind.

[Fear and Learning: Trauma-Related Factors in the Adult Education Process, Perry, Bruce D. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, n110 p21-27 Sum 2006](#)

# Strategies for trauma-informed tutoring



## **Asset Versus Deficit Thinking Focus on the Learner's Strengths**

“Many of our students come to us with unresolved adverse childhood experiences (A.C.E.s), in addition to the adult trauma they may have experienced, or are experiencing. When we focus on our students' strengths we build their confidence and their resiliency, along with their academic and work skills. When these students leave us ...they have gained the self-determination and self-advocacy to rely on their strengths to help them to continue to be successful!”

**Jeri Gue - adult educator. This quote comes from [A great LINCS discussion about asset based learning in adult education with tutors.](#)**

# Reducing stress during tutoring



## Pro-tips from experienced Wash Lit tutors

**Be regular and on time.** (Though life happens for tutors too) This pattern communicates to the learner that you value them. You are glad to be their tutor.

### A consistently positive welcome

**Especially if they are late!** If you are annoyed, let your annoyance go at this moment. What is the welcome ritual that works best for the learner?

### Pick a good moment to talk about harder issues

If you need to talk about lateness or missed sessions with the learner consider having this conversation later when you have reaffirmed how you value the learner and their anxiety has dipped. Try to frame the conversation as collaborating with the learner to improve tutoring/learning support. What are their ideas? What works for them? Accept the validity of any barriers that the learner shares with you without judgement. Tutors and learners may live very different lives. We are learning from each other. A learner might not want to share something embarrassing to them.



# Reducing stress during tutoring

## Pro-tips from experienced Wash Lit tutors

**Relationship building over time creates safety and belonging that makes us resilient to anxiety and stress.**

### Connecting conversations

- How are you doing?
- Find a shared interest to talk about (the fall leaves, tattoos, cars, etc.)
- Find out: What is the learner good at? What are they proud of?
- Share a connecting story from your own life.
- Just listen...Think about a time when you felt completely heard and the listener didn't offer any problem solving. How did it feel? It feels good doesn't it? Being fully listened to can reduce stress.



# Reducing stress during tutoring



## Pro-tips from experienced Wash Lit tutors

**Relationship building over time creates safety and belonging that makes us resilient to anxiety and stress.**

### **Be curious– What creates ease for the learner?**

Ask them! Do they need a chance to settle after arrival to organize materials and thoughts before beginning literacy work? Work with the learner to figure this out. They are the expert on what works for them. For instance, the Jail can be a stressful environment and the learner may prefer to talk or process their day's events before tackling fractions.

### **Learner's Strengths**

Find a topic the learner feels confident about and learn from them. Try switching to this topic for a micro-break when your learner seems like they are getting overwhelmed.

# Reducing stress during tutoring



## Pro-tips from experienced Wash Lit tutors

### The Environment

#### Give the learner control- *Where should we sit?*

- Does the learner prefer to meet in a meeting room at the library or in the middle of everything?
- Do they prefer sitting side by side or across the table?
- Do they like to be near a window with a view of nature?
- Do they like quiet or background noise? One tutor shares a story of a learner who startled at unfamiliar sounds and playing music during the session helped.

### Materials

Be careful about materials and writing prompts for exercises. Photos of traumatic events can be triggering. One tutor had a learner where all the usual prompts for an LEA (learners write about their lives) resulted in tears— so they started using interesting pictures and the learner dictated stories about those.

# Reducing stress during tutoring



## Pro-tips from experienced Wash Lit tutors

### Diffusing Anxiety

**Build in predictable breaks!** Normalize taking breaks at the beginning of the session by setting a plan with the learner. *When should we take a break? How about if we plan on taking a little break in 20 minutes? I like to stand up and stretch when I've been sitting.* Learning is big cognitive work. In a 1 ½ hour session all learners will benefit from breaks. Anxious learners might need more. Remember effective learning doesn't happen when someone is anxious.

Ask the learner what helps them when they start to feel overwhelmed. How will they let you know?

Watch for signs that learner is feeling anxious. Pull away from the task. **You can take a break for both of you.** Go get a drink of water or take a lap around the room to stretch your legs. Standing up and walking reduces anxiety.

# Reducing stress during tutoring



## Pro-tips from experienced Wash Lit tutors

### Mind/Body Connection

If the learner is open to it, suggest a body-awareness practice that helps diffuse stress. For example:

- **Deep breathing**
- **Taking a walk**
- **A moment of mindfulness. Sit still and notice feelings**
- **Stretching**
- **3's practice:** Name three things you see. Three sounds you hear. Move three parts of your body - Whenever you feel your brain going 100 miles per hour, this mental trick can help center your mind, bringing you back to the present moment

Check out [The California Surgeon General's Playbook for Stress](#) for more ideas.

# Putting it all together!

**Good job!**

**Thanks for making your way through the information and taking time to reflect.**

**Now it's time to try developing your own strategies for trauma-informed tutoring using a case study.**





## Activity #3

### Putting it all together!

**Write your answers.**

**#1 Read the following case study keeping in mind that as a tutor you would not know much of what you learn in the case study.**

**#2 Perform the activities on the slides that follow.**

# Case Study: Camila's Story



Camila is a 23 year old Nicaraguan immigrant who uses they/them pronouns. They understand and speak conversational English and Spanish very well and have limited abilities to read and write in either language. They work at the Coney Island and cut hair on the side. Their goal is to cut hair in a high end salon and they need a cosmetology license that requires passing an exam. They came to the United States as an unaccompanied minor at the age of 15. Their family “*sent me away*” because of “*how messed up it is*” in Nicaragua (violence and poverty). Migrating was a hard journey with many difficulties and also there were some “*really good*” people that helped each other. Camila has experienced personal violence. Contact with their family back in Nicaragua is difficult. They are not sure how they are doing. Over 6 years in the U.S. they lived in multiple foster homes, attended 6 different schools, and a chaotic group home of foster teens. During this time they felt lonely, anxious, depressed, disliked and unloved. U.S. schools did not “*help very much... some people meant well but I was too much. Other people are mean and don't like Latinos.*” At 18 they left the group home, dropped out of school and moved into an apartment with 4 friends. They are “*happier in life*”, but it's hard to live on their wages. They don't have a car and rely on the bus and rides from friends to get places they can't walk to.



# What is trauma?



## Activity #3 cont.

**Consider Camila's story.**

*What are some potentially traumatizing events to Camilla?*

*What are some internal and external resources that were available to them?*

*What are some internal and external resources that were inadequate?*

# What is trauma?



## Activity #3 cont.

### Reflection

#### ***What are some internal and external resources available to Camilla?***

Ex: Good people who helped on their journey, shelter, food/water, and support when first arriving in the U.S., job, friends that they live with, ability to learn English, ability to make choices to increase their happiness, ability to make a plan and work.

#### ***What are some internal and external resources that were inadequate?***

People to protect them from harm as a child, connection to family, stable housing, education, adequate income and transportation, support in school for learning to read and write.

## Activity #4

**Write your answers.**

**Using Camila's story as a starting point and the information learned in this training consider how adverse experiences and community environments affect a learner's prior education and the new experience of working with a tutor.**

- 1) What are some practices you might use while tutoring that will create a sense of safety and empowerment with Camila?
- 1) How could you respond if you noticed Camila seemed anxious during a session? How could you respond in a way that empowers Camila?
- 1) What are some strategies you might use if the learner is missing sessions? What conversations could you have that empower the learner while reducing any a sense of being judged? How will you set your boundaries? How might you adjust your expectations?

# Tutor Oaths



## As a Washtenaw Literacy Designer-Tutor\*, I will:

1. Keep in touch with Washtenaw Literacy
2. Tutor to my learner's goals
3. Prioritize time based on goals
4. Balance the skills areas
5. Activate prior knowledge
6. Respect differences
7. Dream small
8. Provide repetition without boredom
9. Create session plans for my learner

*You are on the path to becoming a design-tutor! Through training, you will learn how to design session plans and select materials specifically designed for the needs of learners with whom you partner. For more on how you can keep these oaths, engage in training!*

# Training Objectives (Review)



## 1. Develop skills needed for tutoring adults

- Gain knowledge:
  - Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences
  - Trauma and the tutor/ learner experience
  - Brain Science- How can trauma affect learning?
  - Understand Asset versus deficit thinking
- Learn strategies for trauma-informed tutoring
- Develop your own strategy for a trauma-informed tutoring practice.

## 2. Build knowledge needed to engage with agency

- Setting healthy boundaries
- Seeking help when (or before! ) you are overwhelmed

## 3. Align your perspective and expectations with the needs of adult learner

# Next Steps



## 1. Today

- Complete the *required* Trauma-Informed Tutoring form ([click here](#)).
  - Once you submit this form, you will be marked as “completed” for this module.

## 2. Within a week

- Attend your next session to continue training. ([Click here](#) to see a description of the modules and their scheduled dates.)

## 3. As needed

- Contact Alison ([austin@washtenawliteracy.org](mailto:austin@washtenawliteracy.org)) if you have questions or need information about your next session.

# General Agency Contact



## **Agency Contact Information:**

Washtenaw Literacy  
5577 Whittaker Road  
Ypsilanti, MI 48197  
(734) 337-3338

info@WashtenawLiteracy.org  
[www.WashtenawLiteracy.org](http://www.WashtenawLiteracy.org)

# References



- [Fear and Learning: Trauma-Related Factors in the Adult Education Process.](#)
- [About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study |Violence Prevention|Injury Center](#)
- [What's the difference between stress and anxiety?.](#)
- [Fiona Apple - Across the Universe \(Official HD Video an example of the function of dissociation\)](#)
- [A great LINCS discussion about asset based learning in adult education with tutors.](#)