



# Beyond the Bias Lens: Intersections in Trauma, Race, and Privilege that Impact Student Success in Higher Education

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# Learning Objectives

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## **Participants should leave here today with:**

- ☐ understanding of how trauma impacts the brain, perceptions, and behavior;
- ☐ awareness of how privilege, racial bias, and cognitive filters impact students and those who work with them;
- ☐ communication skills and knowledge that promotes resiliency and hope.

# Creating a Safe Space

- **Be Open**—We all have some form of bias influencing us.
- **Be Forgiving**—Life is an experience full of wrong turns we can learn from.
- **Be Willing**—Change does not happen overnight; small steps will get you where you need to be, but you must take that first step.





# MY STORY OF INTERSECTIONS



# privilege

*noun*

a special advantage or authority possessed by a particular person or group.

Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, Cambridge University Press

*Note:* It is hard to see our own privilege, as most of us don't think about what we already have in power, advantage, or authority. Instead, we notice what we don't have. Those with the least privilege do notice what they do not have, but unfortunately, they are often demonized for speaking up about the inequities they experience.

# Types of Privilege (Abridged)

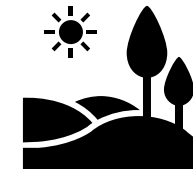
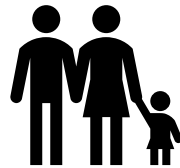
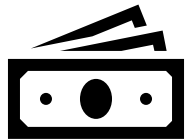
**Safety and Survival**

**Connection and Support**

**Health & Leisure**

**Education & Technology**

Privilege is more than  
**Fiscal Wealth**





## 1-MIN SELF-REFLECTION

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**My own privilege shows up in how  
I...**

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# trauma

*noun*

a deeply disturbing or distressful experience, or set of experiences, commonly involving physical and/or emotional harm that activates the stress response and produces lasting adverse effects on the individual's sense of well-being.



# Trauma Expanded

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Trauma can be:

- Primary—happened to you;
- Secondary—happened to someone else, but you witnessed or heard graphic details;
- Complex—multiple or chronic or prolonged developmentally adverse events;
- Re-triggered by encountering associated stimuli or focusing on memories of the event.

# Early Experiences Matter

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- ❖ Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) or Early-Life Adversity (ELA) are childhood events that result in high levels of stress-related hormones. Examples include:
  - abuse and neglect
  - exposure to domestic violence
  - extreme poverty
  - living with a family member that has severe mental health issues or drug and alcohol abuse problems
- ❖ Outcome:
  - increase the risk of physical and mental health problems in adulthood, e.g. cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and depression.

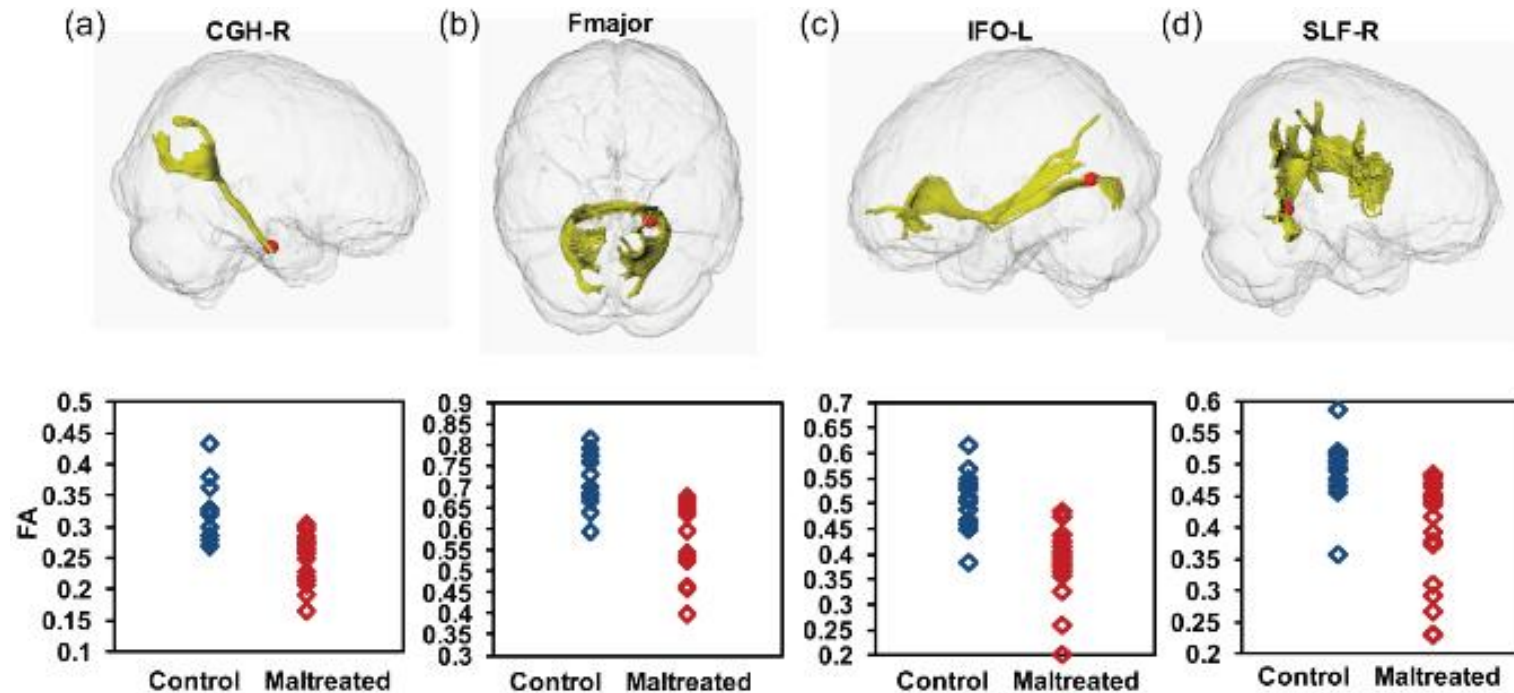
# ACEs Impact Brain Areas

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- ❖ Many brain areas are impacted by ACEs, especially the fronto-limbic brain areas that mediate behavioral and affect control, including:
  - Prefrontal cortex: involved in working memory and executive functioning, i.e. directed attention, response inhibition, and decision making
  - Cingulate cortex: involved in emotional regulation and attentional focus
  - Amygdala: involved in fear and aggression
  - Hippocampus: involved in long-term memory

# ADOLESCENTS MALTREATED AS CHILDREN SHOW ALTERATIONS IN BRAIN WHITE MATTER (FA SCORES) AND HIGHER RATES OF DEPRESSION DURING 5 YEAR FOLLOW-UP WHEN COMPARED TO CONTROLS.



Diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) was used to examine changes in white matter (i.e. fiber density, axonal diameter, and myelination) in the brains of maltreated children versus controls. Fractional anisotropy (FA) scores indicate that adolescents who were maltreated as children had changes in projections from the (a) cingulate cortex (CGH-R) to the hippocampus; (b) splenium of the corpus callosum (F-major); (c) left inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus (IFO-L); (d) left or right superior longitudinal fasciculus (SLF-R/SLF-L).

Trauma impacts  
how we perceive  
and respond to  
the world.





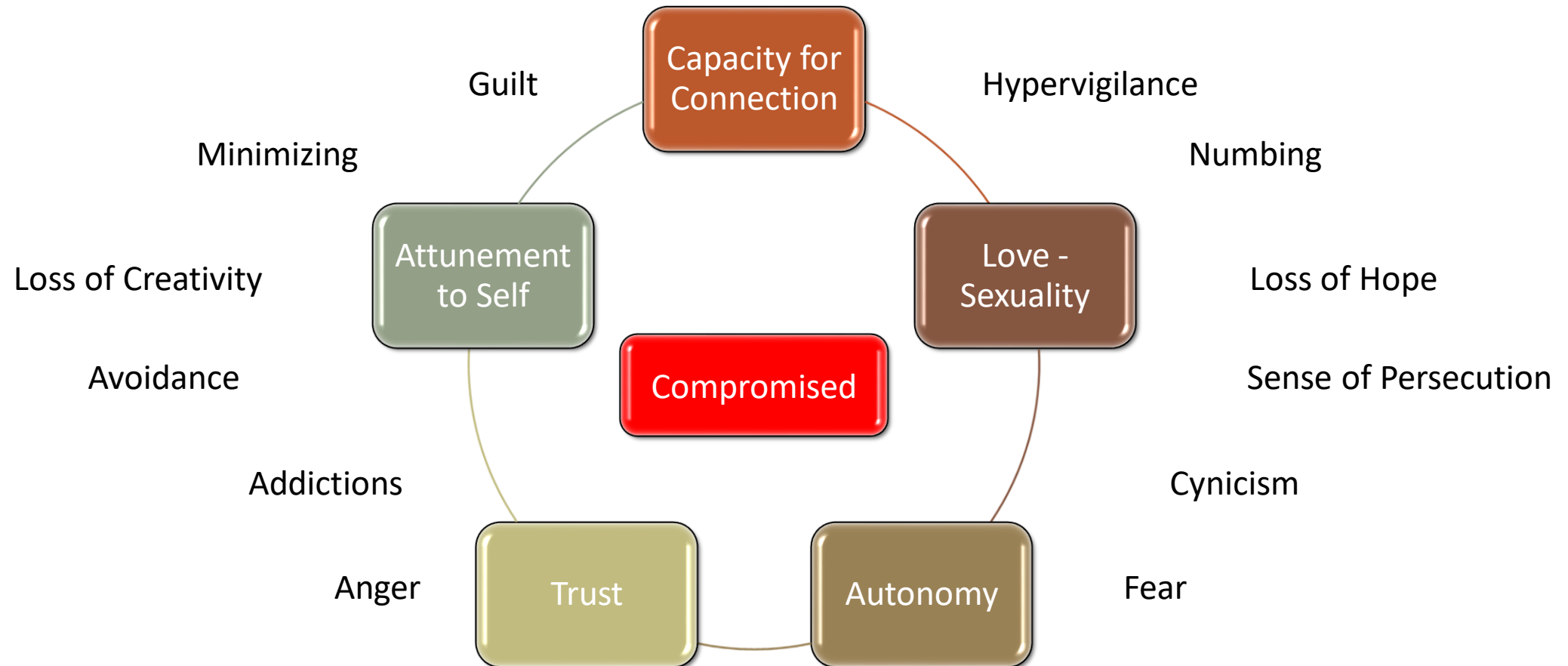
## 2-MIN SELF-REFLECTION & SHARE

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**I perceived “Lost Robot” to mean...**

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# Impacts of Trauma on the Self



# How Trauma Shows Up in the Classroom

- Altered Brain Development
- Developmental Delay, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, etc.
- Lack of Prep Due to Focus Challenges
- Self-Esteem Issues
- Competing Life Concerns
  - Housing-and Food-Insecurity
  - Siblings Unsafe

**Attentional  
Challenges/  
Learning  
Disabilities**

**Altered  
Emotional  
Reactivity**

- Inappropriate or blunted emotions
- Anger, Anxiety, Sadness, Fear
- Low Distress Tolerance
- Difficulty Controlling Emotions

- Depression/Anxiety
- Somatization & Physical Illness
- Unhealthy Coping (e.g. drugs & alcohol)
- Frequent Absences

**Physical/  
Mental  
Health  
Problems**

**Conduct  
Issues/  
Poor Self-  
Advocacy/  
Self-Care**

- Fearful Self-Protection
  - Verbal or Physical Aggression
  - Avoidance
- Self-Handicapping
- Learned-Helplessness

# Cognition and Trauma

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❖ Individuals who have experienced extreme or complex trauma (especially developmental trauma) are primed for survival—they expect bad things to happen—both physiologically and cognitively.



❖ This can lead to errors in processing perceptual experiences and non-adaptive thinking patterns such as cognitive distortion.

## Negative Head-Tapes

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**Cognitive Distortion** is a tendency to engage thoughts (usually negative) that are inaccurate and do not reflect reality for the given context.

- ❖ These distortions can lead to misunderstandings and maladaptive behavior.
  - ❖ **Example:** having a distorted belief that others cannot be trusted, makes it more likely you will interpret neutral facial cues as negative or threatening.
- ❖ If someone has experienced trauma, this style of thinking can happen almost automatically as a **survival tool**.
- ❖ Educators can also have negative head-tapes/cognitive distortion—these tapes can show up in how students are perceived.

# **Cognitive Distortion: Polarized Thinking**

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## **Polarized Thinking**

- ❖ We see ourselves (or others) in extreme ways. We use may use descriptors that are overly negative such as terrible/hopeless/failure.
- ❖ There is no grey or middle ground—it's either all bad or all good.

(See handout on your table regarding other types of distortions)



# Notes From the Field

## Polarized Thinking

*I have a few students that really frustrate me. It's hard not to view them negatively. There are situations where I see their choices and I think that they are never going to get it together. Seriously, there is no way in my mind that they are going to get through school—they're not willing to work, they're rude, and they don't appreciate everything I do to support them.*



## 2-MIN SELF-REFLECTION & SHARE

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**Trauma shows up personally and professionally in my life as...**

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# race

*noun*



3c: a category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits.

2b: a class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits, or characteristics.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

**Note: Race is a social construct**—one commonly used to maintain in-group and out-group hierarchies involving power and privilege.

There is no genetic basis for the concept of “race.” All humans are incredibly similar genetically, and changes in skin pigmentation (gene mutations) are highly variable across all groups around the world.



**Is it really about race?**



## 1-MIN SELF-REFLECTION

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**Has anyone ever said  
these words to you?**

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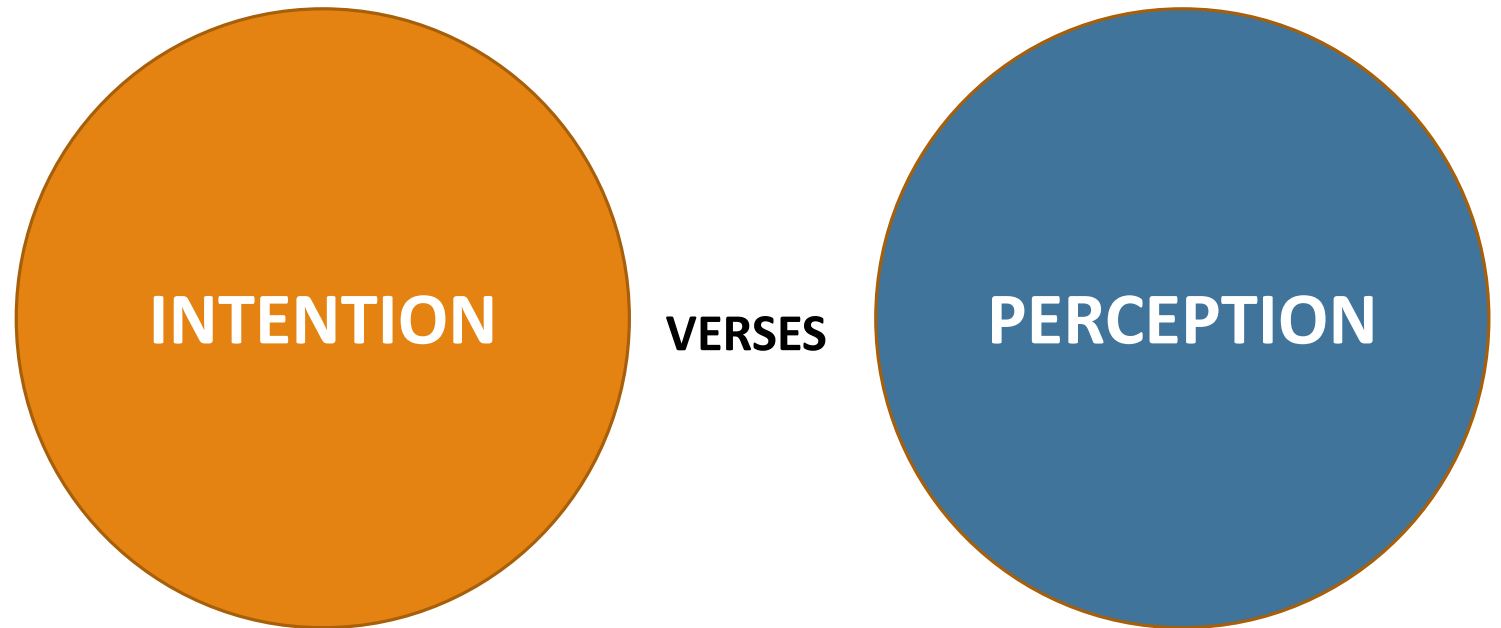
# Is it really about race?

Lacking privilege and experiencing trauma impacts the development of the self, but even if neither of those issues exist, being a person of color in the US leads to unique challenges (racism) that whites do not experience.

Might  
=

Cognitive Distortions  
(Sometimes)

**2 white UConn students  
arrested after video showed  
them shouting racial slurs**



**A white colleague asks black  
colleague 11 times about their  
feelings on the film Green Book**



# Overt Racism On the Rise

It's always been here, but whites get to see it via the new video/social media age.

## BREAKING NEWS

**Hamden school officials say secretary resigned after video showed racist tirade**

By JESSE LEAVENWORTH  
HARTFORD COURANT  
MAR 16, 2019 | 12:33 PM

**Teenagers charged with urinating on black classmate and shouting racist abuse**

 INDEPENDENT • October 21, 2019, 8:43 AM PDT

## U.S.

**FLORIDA POLICE AIDE ACCUSED OF SAYING BLACK WOMAN COP 'LOOKS LIKE A MONKEY'**

BY SCOTT MCDONALD ON 10/14/19 AT 11:01 PM EDT

***BUT LET'S NOT FORGET: COVERT RACISM OR UNCONSCIOUS BIAS***

## NEWS

**Sheriff's office employee fired after going on racist rant at McDonald's**

By Ben Feuerherd  
September 25, 2019 | 9:06pm

**'It's got to stop': Superintendent condemns teacher's racist rant in school parking lot**

JORDAN CULVER | USA TODAY | 12 hours ago

## U.S.

**VIDEO SHOWS WHITE MAN'S RACIST RANT TOWARDS BLACK POSTAL EMPLOYEE IN DALLAS**

By Isobel van Hagen On 8/22/19 at 4:21 PM EDT

# Higher Ed and Students of Color— Their Words

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## STUDENT PERCEPTION

- ❖ Low expectations of us
- ❖ Faculty think all students of color are alike
- ❖ Don't get that we are different from white students
- ❖ No inclusion in classroom

## FACULTY BEHAVIOR

- ❖ Grading easy; overly permissive on deadlines; giving alternate assignments instead of offering support; not asking challenging questions; doing it for student
- ❖ Making assumptions about a student's history, culture, or needs; grouping students of color into a single "minority" category and assuming shared experience
- ❖ Showing no understanding of cultural differences in communication, body language, or learning styles; presuming code-switching is required for success
- ❖ Using examples or books that are white/Eurocentric; avoiding or limiting participation of students of color; ignoring student experience and narratives that do not conform to text or materials

# Higher Ed and Students of Color— Their Words

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## STUDENT PERCEPTION

- ❖ Singled out as experts or spokesperson on every race issue
- ❖ Not seeing issues/conflict other students in the classroom
- ❖ Being uncomfortable or afraid of us

## FACULTY BEHAVIOR

- ❖ Assuming student has experiences or expertise they do not have; asking student's thoughts on race- or culture- issues
- ❖ Ignoring overt or covert racism; failing to take control in heated classroom discussions; ignoring or minimizing student concerns about racism
- ❖ Acting overly cautious, or avoiding student; moving quickly to punitive actions or calling campus police if student shows frustration or anger



## 2-MIN SELF-REFLECTION & SHARE

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**When I engage students or co-workers whose race or background does not match my own, my culture/race/history shows up in how, I...**

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# Intersections Related to Success in Higher Education

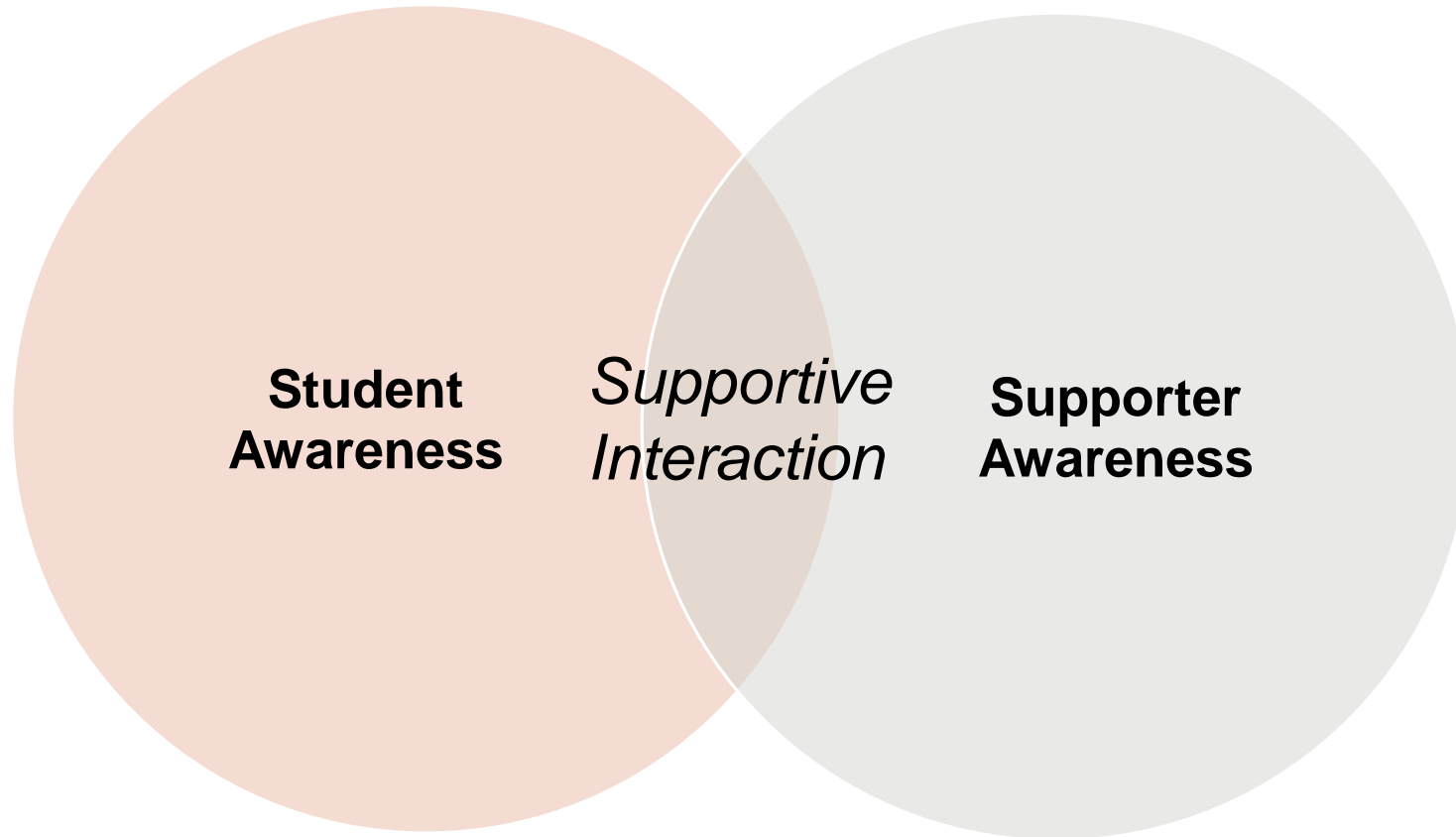
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A student who has a history of trauma, lacks in privilege, and who faces the many forms of racial discrimination existing in the US, is may need more support to build resiliency than a student facing only one of those issues.

# Improving Supportive Interactions

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# Engaging with Empathy

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- ❖ Many problems are complex and cannot be solved easily. Even if you cannot help the student solve the problem in the time you have, you can help them feel heard—which can be healing. Remember, being empathetic does not mean giving up your boundaries.
- ❖ Active listening is a key part of showing empathy:
  - Be present
  - Position body in direction of the student
  - You don't have to agree or disagree, but you can focus on how the student is feeling. Example, "I can hear how stressed and angry you are you are." Or, "I can understand why you are feeling overwhelmed?"
  - Focus on their feelings, not your own.

# Exercise—Engaging Students

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## Instructions:

- ❖ Find a partner
- ❖ Decide who will be the student and who will be the supportive faculty or staff person
- ❖ Each person read the sheet with their role (don't show or discuss it with the other person)
- ❖ The student should discuss the problem listed on their sheet. When you are told to stop, the supportive staff person should respond as described on their sheet.
- ❖ Group discuss

# Practice Recommendation

## Assess Your Own “Stuff”

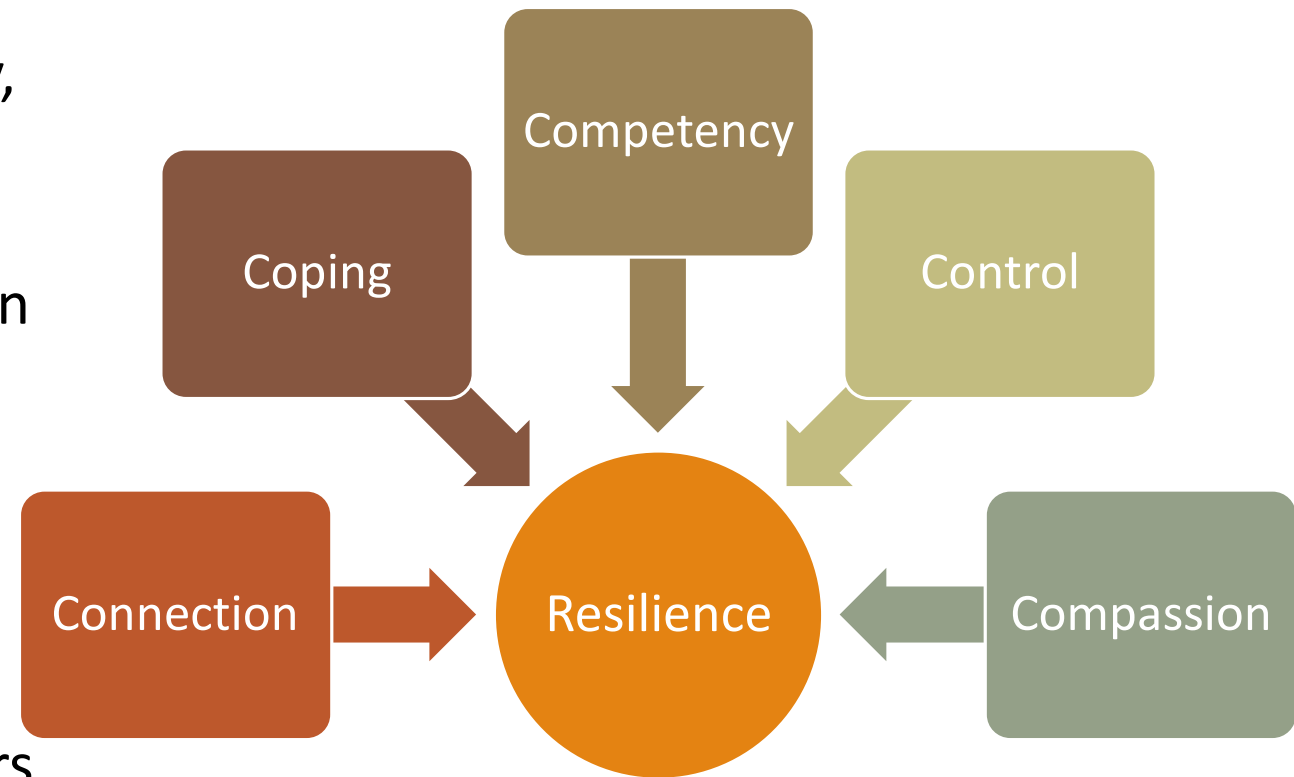
- ❖ **Check Yourself for Disproportionate Emotions** such as pity, fear, or anger
- ❖ **Challenge Your Own Cultural Expectations** of appropriate student behavior
- ❖ **Examine the Impact of Trauma, Privilege, and Race** on your own emotions and reactions
- ❖ **Seek Support** from those with dissimilar backgrounds to gain perspective
- ❖ **Learn More** about trauma, racism, and privilege



# Practice Recommendation

## Promote Student Assets & Awareness to Build Resilience

- ❖ **Engage relationship skills** such as empathy, communication, conflict management
- ❖ **Engage coping skills** such as breathing techniques, mindfulness, and self-reflection activities
- ❖ **Engage healthy exploration** of strengths and opportunities for growth
- ❖ **Increase awareness** of control and letting go of control
- ❖ **Engage compassion** towards self and others





*The highest result of education is tolerance.*

–Helen Keller



# Contact Information

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