



What Happened to You?

Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing

By Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. and Oprah Winfrey (Flatiron Books, 2021)

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What are the main ideas?

~ **When people experience traumatizing events, there are both emotional and biological responses – actual changes in our brain architecture.**

“Understanding how the brain reacts to stress or early trauma helps clarify how what has happened to us in the past shapes who we are, how we behave, and why we do the things we do.” -Dr. Perry

~ **The organization of the brain dictates that we often act and feel before we think.**

Our previous life experiences are stored in our brains as patterns of sensory input and young children lack narrative memories explaining why they have such strong reactions to certain stimuli. What seem like inexplicable or disturbing behaviors can make sense in the context of that person’s life experience. Cutting, head-banging, self-harm, drug use, aggression, defiance, dissociation, all have roots in the person’s childhood experiences.

~ **Investing in developing self-regulation skills and opportunities for connection can help move students out of the reactive mode, and into the calm state needed for learning.**

Schools have the opportunity to help in several ways: A) by providing access to connections including to loving adults who can help the child process and begin to overcome adverse childhood experiences, B) by teaching activities that foster self-regulation in response to mild stressors, and C) by offering access to counseling and therapy.

Why would a school leader want to read this?

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. I read it on a cruise through the Greek islands, and it fully captivated my attention despite the amazing scenery! It is written as a conversation between Oprah Winfrey, renowned talk show host and one-woman phenomenon, and Dr. Bruce Perry, a child psychiatrist and neuroscientist.

The format makes it extremely readable, as Oprah shares personal experiences, Bruce shares case studies, and then Bruce illuminates the concepts with research-based explanations. The stories help bring the subject matter to life, and demonstrate the application of the theory to practice. There is also a question-and-answer format that really worked for me as well, making the information easy to ponder and digest. Excellent choice for administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and anyone else! 😊

Overview

School leaders are often expected to resolve problematic behaviors. Developing an understanding of trauma and resilience is essential to problem solving these highly charged conflicts. This book is about identifying the origins of our behaviors in our pasts, but it is not about using one's past as an excuse. It is about confronting our actions and exploring the trauma people have experienced in order to begin to heal.

“A child with traumatic experiences will often have difficulty learning – and also be overreactive to the feedback and criticisms that come with struggling in school. This can lead to behavior problems. The behaviors are often misunderstood. So many of the things that people and systems do with good intentions actually cause additional pain for the families and children they're supposed to be serving.” – Dr. Perry, pg. 221

Furthermore, many of us are familiar with the “school to prison pipeline” and want to work effectively to dismantle this pattern. Making sense of behavior helps us develop empathy for what *happened* to the student, rather than judging or punishing them for their maladaptive responses. Dr. Perry clarifies the current dysfunction:

1. A child who has experienced trauma and distress will likely have language and self-regulation delays and an over-reactive stress response.
2. This student will often encounter a mismatch between their capabilities and the school's expectations, leading to frustration and either blow-ups or shut-downs.
3. The vigilance traumatized youth have had to cultivate to survive their chaotic home lives may be interpreted as distractibility or hyperactivity. Their avoidance of an unpleasant experience (school itself) can be labeled as truancy, and their flight response to extreme stress can result in assault charges.

This pattern plays out in various forms in schools all across the country, and educating ourselves about possible origins allows us more options in supporting students to develop new responses.

Application Suggestions

“Schools tend to minimize powerful healing and resilience-building activities like sports, music, and art. These are often viewed as elective or enrichment activities, when in fact they can be the very bedrock of academic learning, thanks to their regulatory and relational elements.” (pg. 227)

Concrete ways schools can help traumatized students:

1. Offer Opportunities for Regulation:

- Movement, large – walking dancing, playing sports
- Movement, small – fidget toys, doodling, chewing gum, rocking, tapping
- Arts – playing music, listening to music, drawing, building
- Mindfulness activities

2. Offer Opportunities for Connection:

- Synchronized movement with others – dance, sports, stretching
- Opportunities to participate in celebrations
- Opportunities to share your thoughts
- Relationships with school staff
- Relationships with peers

3. Therapy / therapeutic techniques

- Mental health counseling, following “sequence of engagement”
- Problems of regulating have to be addressed before you can get results with relational or cognitive therapies

This book encourages us to look past a one-size-fits-all response to stress, and start with understanding and empathy to help children grow and succeed.