

The Uneducated Mental Illness: Advocating for Trauma-informed Education

When someone hears the words “mental illness,” preconceived notions often spring to mind: anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder. Yet the illness that rarely tops the list but affects us all is trauma. Over 70% of Americans will experience a traumatic event, and more than 60% of them are under the age of eighteen. I was one of those individuals, and I am committed to advocating for others like me. To effectively enhance the mental well-being of our community, we must begin with our future leaders, cultivating a foundation that fosters education and open communication - creating an environment where everyone can thrive. This starts with you.

First, I want you to reframe your understanding of trauma. Once referred to as “shell shock,” trauma was thought to be a condition limited to veterans returning from war. However, the developments from society including but not limited to the #MeToo movement, COVID-19, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina have expanded our understanding of trauma. We now recognize sexual abuse, isolation, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks as considerable forms of trauma. Yet trauma extends beyond these high-profile events into outside of what I call “textbook trauma” and into experiences that may not fit our traditional perceptions of trauma.

To understand this better, let’s apply a formal definition: trauma is “an emotional response to a distressing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, resulting in feelings of helplessness, fear, and anxiety.” This definition encompasses a range of experiences that can alter how individuals perceive the world. If it hasn’t happened to you, it’s affected someone you know.

The effects of trauma are particularly pronounced in children, shaping their emotional ability as well as their ability to learn. Traumatized children can struggle with concentration, exhibit behavioral issues, or withdraw from social interaction - all of which hinders their educational development. Research shows that trauma can impact brain development, affecting cognitive functions and emotional regulation. Without proper communication and support from educators, these children are at risk of falling behind academically and socially. They will develop mental traits that will follow them the rest of their life as well as generations to come.

The crucial step that you must take is educating yourself as well as those around you.

Understanding trauma and its effects allows us to deepen relationships, define experiences, and support one another in community. Starting this process within our education system will allow the next generation to develop the capacity to see how experiences shape and define who we are. Equipping our educators with trauma-informed strategies that recognize the signs of trauma and knowledge to respond effectively will create this communication skill within our students. This looks like trauma-based training for educators, integrating mental health resources into the educational framework, and encouraging open dialog within your household.

To address the impact of trauma and to support those affected, we must advocate for our children in the classroom including legislative changes that prioritize mental health within our education system. Implementing trauma-informed training programs for educators and school staff ensures that they are equipped to best communicate with their students who have or will experience trauma. Establishing state-wide initiatives that promote mental health awareness and foster safe

environments for open discussion about trauma can further destigmatize these conversations. We need to create a resilient framework that addresses the needs of trauma impacted individuals while also adopting a culture of empathy and understanding.

I want you to do something for me. Take out a piece of paper and fold it repeatedly. As you fold it, think of the events in your life that have shaped who you are - losing a loved one, a painful divorce, a teacher who belittled you, a friendship that ended poorly, or being hurt by someone you trusted, fold it until it's crumbled into a ball. Now, I want you to try and unfold it; see if you can restore it to its original state. You can't. The same way that the paper was changed because of its folds, as we are changed by the events that happen in our lives. Trauma is all around us, we might as well talk about it.

Mary-Coker Green has dedicated her life to trauma advocacy by founding ENGAGE: Building Health and Resilient Minds, writing children's books to communicate with young minds how to process grief, shares her story internationally, and has worked with Trauma Free World to compile free resources for educators with students who experience trauma that can be accessed [here](#).

News Outlets:

1. Psychology Today

Word Count Limit: The only word count I could find was for submitting an article, more along the lines of an academic article than an opinion but those requirements were 2000-3000.

Submission Process: Using this link <https://psychologytoday.submittable.com/submit> you must describe your proposal, why you want to write about this now, what qualifies you to write it as well as submit 1-3 samples of previously published writing.

Contact Information: psychologytoday.submittable.com

Reason for choosing: Because this piece is related to trauma, I wanted the first place I would send this to be mental health related but not confined. Sending it to Psychology Today, rather than the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) allows for this piece to reach those who are interested in reframing how they view trauma instead of readers who already have a sense of what I'd be writing. In full transparency, NAMI is also closed for submissions at this time and has no information disclosed or else they might have been on this list.

2. Education Week

Word Count Limit: 600-1000

Submission Process: Send all pieces with a short bio via email, it is most helpful if you indicate your topic within the subject line.

Contact Information: opinion@educationweek.org

Reason for choosing: I want to send this to an education specific News Outlet because of the resource that is linked at the bottom. I want as many educators as possible to see this resource that is available and free to them that I have created and the best way to do that is find a News Outlet specific to educators.

3. The Hill

Word Count Limit: 600-900 Words

Submission Process: Send submissions within the text of an email to

Contact Information: opinion@thehill.com or dallott@thehill.com

Reason for choosing: One of my goals within my lifetime is to create legislation that requires trauma-informed training for educators and have been in conversations with Alabama Legislatures to start this within our state beginning with a mental health version of a "Red Ribbon Week." Sending this to The Hill would allow for Legislatures nationally to see the work happening here, allowing it to expand faster.