



Crisis – For Teachers

For you and for your students, life outside the classroom continues while we are engaged in teaching and learning in our courses and programs. Things come up unexpectedly, things get messy, and things fall apart. Maybe learners you work with have experienced crisis - financial, emotional, and spiritual emergencies—and breakdowns in relationships, health, and mental well being—while in your class. Maybe even things happening IN your class put someone in a place where they could not cope well, or perhaps "being there" for learners has put YOU in a similar place.

Teaching and learning in the aftermath of—or the current presence of—violence is hard work. It is possible to help others keep learning, and learn better, during these very rough times; acknowledging and addressing the violence in people's lives—naming it—is at the heart of this work. We cannot ignore it. If we do, people in crisis—ourselves included—are far more likely to just do what they have always done, and respond to the crisis in the same ways: "Oh this always happens to me", "It's all my fault", "There's no use".... and especially in adult learning environments, "I might as well quit". If we bring out into the open how violence impacts learning, the possibility of not giving up increases.

It's hard to support people in crisis. Regularly bearing witness to violence is draining and can make us feel like giving up on our work, or even on humanity as a whole. We need to pay attention first to safety: that of learners in crisis, other students in the classroom, and our own—which includes setting and honouring boundaries, and taking good care of ourselves. These are resources to help with this valuable work.

Students in crisis may:

- Be being abused and threatened at home. It is useful to keep in mind that if there is abuse happening at home, it often gets worse—sometimes to the point of crisis—when a student starts in a program and looks as if they might be able to improve self esteem or gain employment in order to escape the control.

- Be triggered by material and relationships in class. Many students may find memories of childhood abuse return with the pressures involved in adult education. When the violence was in school itself, especially in residential and institutional schools, returning to school as an adult may be a terrifying experience that brings back personal, family, and/or community memories of threat and humiliation.
- Disappear without informing you, leaving the program or course abruptly, perhaps without even providing contact information... as if they fell off the face of the earth.
- Tell you too much, too suddenly, either in person or in writing assignments; they may make disclosures in the classroom that make you or other people uncomfortable.

What can I do to help everybody learn?

1. Help them find the resources they need

- Provide contact information for the local resources—including counsellors, indigenous elders, shelters, abusers' courses, addictions and substance abuse programs, survivors' groups, and other support groups.
- Display posters and brochures from agencies that make it clear that no one has to endure being treated badly, or memories of bad experiences, alone. Show where to go for help. Some programs display this information in the washroom so people can take the information privately.
- Bring counsellors and local agency staff you respect into class at the beginning of a group. Assume all groups will include students who are familiar with violence (both victims and perpetrators)—make sure people know the resources in case they want to use them.
- Try not to say “You should...” and suggest we know what another person needs, or judge them for not leaving a violent situation. It is important to remember we never know the risks and losses someone else will have to face if they stay or leave. But if we are afraid for their safety in the choice they are making, we can warn them.

2. Prepare ourselves and our programs

- Figure out our own limits. We do not have to listen to details of violence; instead we can help someone understand they need a good listener and that we can not fill that role for whatever reason. We can help them find the support they need.
- Become a good “side support.” Don’t **just** pass a student on to a counsellor, or support service—ask how it’s going and whether the counsellor or service is helpful. Help them find another resource person or organization if the first is not a good match.
- Learn about our program’s confidentiality policy. If there isn’t one, think through issues of confidentiality before students confide in us. Make sure that we are clear when we would need to break confidentiality, why, and with whom.

3. Keep our focus on teaching and learning

- Make it clear that there is never an expectation that anyone reveals their own experiences with hardship and violence. Never pressure anyone to disclose, or ask for details.
- When a person does tell some of their story try to be careful not to shame, or suggest that it was wrong to tell, or that it is too overwhelming to hear. Help the person find good supports, and don’t treat them differently, as if they are fragile or superhuman. Remember there may be more still unsaid.
- Carefully introduce any class content which may remind of harsh experiences. Describe the material beforehand so that students can make their own choice whether to participate or not. Make it OK for a student to say that they prefer to opt out of reading a particular book, for example, or watching a video, or writing an assignment. Try not to press for reasons, but be sensitive, and check whether they have the supports they need.
- Address shame and affirm often that violence is not the fault of the person who is hurt.

4. Help learners to take on their own self-care

- Make it okay to take a break.
- Include self-care as part of the curriculum. Help students to learn to take care of themselves when they feel bad or overwhelmed. Encourage them to think about how to set their own boundaries and take care of themselves at home too.
- Take care of yourself: set your own boundaries, honour them, and model patience and compassion for yourself, along with curiosity about your imperfections.
- Provide conditions for self-care. Where possible, include healthy snacks and drinking water for everyone in the program. Be familiar with local resources that connect people to food banks, emergency clothing and furniture, etc.
- Create a learning environment which nurtures all parts of the self. For example think about sounds, sights, physical comfort, emotional safety, and ways to provide inspiration and nurture the spirit. Play.

Where can I find more information and ideas?

On www.learningandviolence.net:

In Helping Others Learn,

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm>

Check out many parts especially “working with counsellors” on the notice board, “anti-violence posters” on the wall, “stories and self-help” on the bookshelf, and “acknowledge violence” in the book on the table.

In Violence, “Making Changes”, “Personal Safety”

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence/safety.htm>

“Violence in Your Learning Space”

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence/learningspace.htm>

“Making Stories of Violence Known”

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence/makingstories.htm>

The Poster in the Teachers’ Room: of this Student Kit “Helping Myself Learn” at

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/changing.htm>