

# Navigating Stress and Uncertainty

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**ACTIVATING THE POWER  
OF AFTERSCHOOL**



**PASE ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

# Navigating Stress and Uncertainty

## Community Support in the Current Political Climate

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School & Community Programs  
Katie Peinovich, LCSW





Dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive.

We operate three mission areas that work together for greater impact...



**Care**



**Science**



**Education**

# School & Community Programs

Breaking down barriers to care and **making preventative mental health skills accessible to every family.**

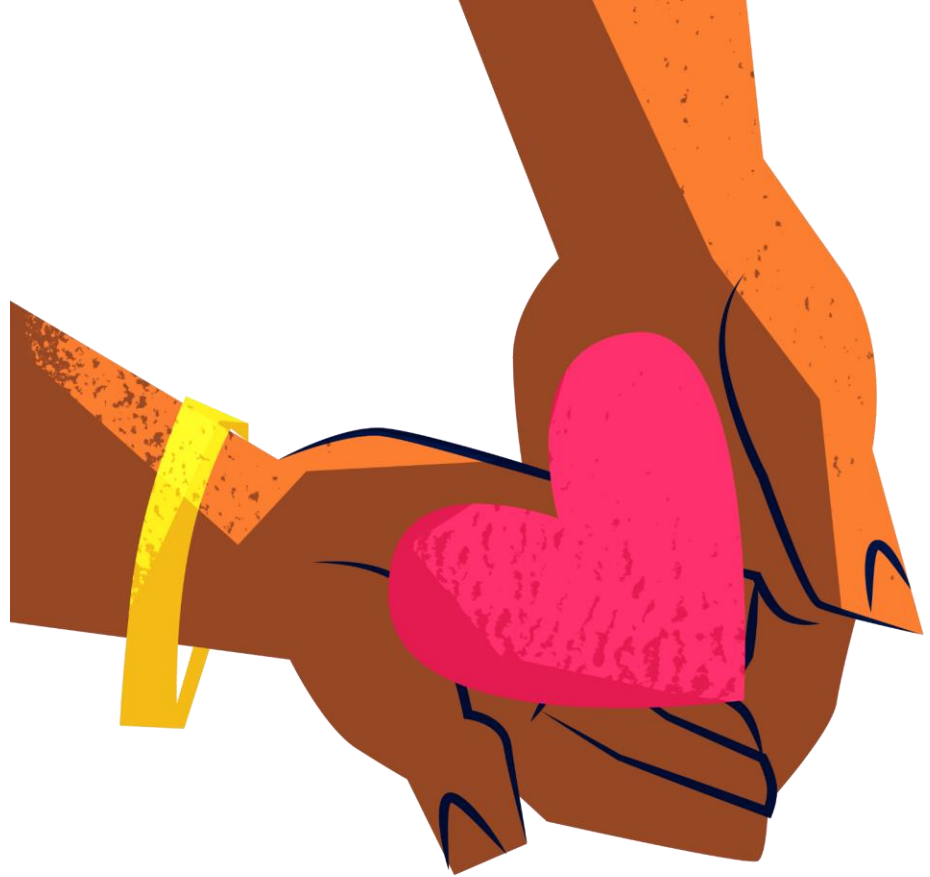


Since 2012, our programs have reached an estimated  
**1.9 million students, educators, and caregivers in over 9,000 schools**

# Welcome!

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



# Community Agreements



## 1. **Make Space, Take Space**

Help balance the perspectives in the room.

## 1. **Privacy and Respect**

You get to choose what and how much information you feel comfortable sharing about yourself. Respect each other's right to privacy.

## 1. **Understand and Attend to the Impact**

Sometimes we say something that was unintentionally harmful to an individual or group. Regardless of intention, it's important to attend to the impact.

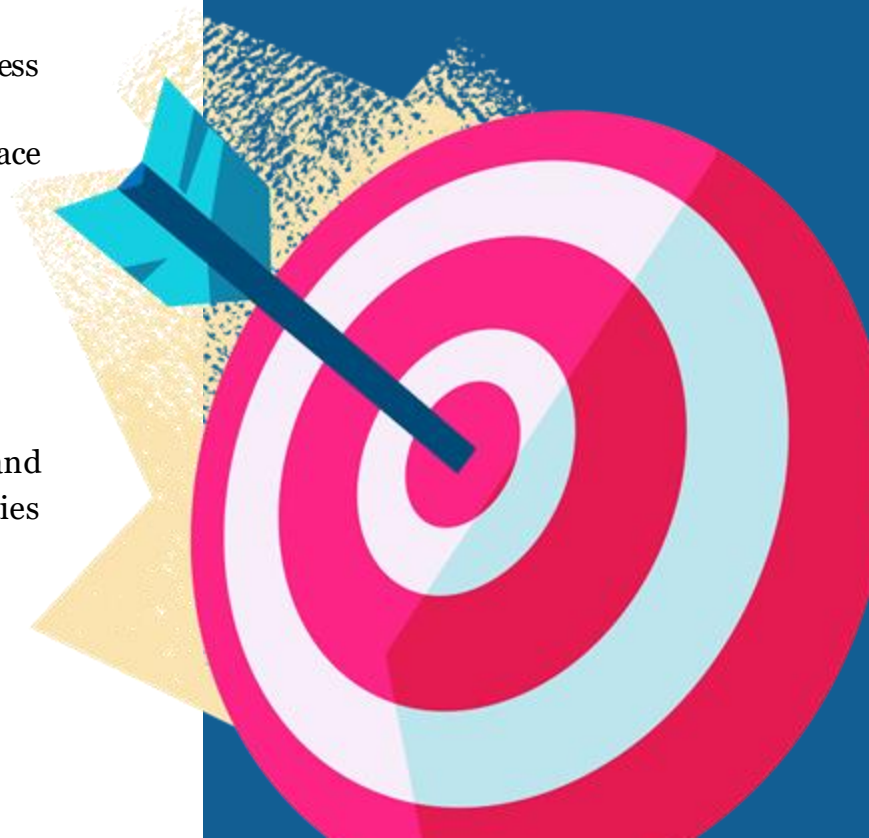
## 1. **Be Open to Engaging with New Ideas**

You and your colleagues will get as much out of this workshop as you put in. We encourage you show up as fully as possible with an understanding of your needs and limitations.



# Workshop Learning Objectives

1. Program staff will identify the brain's and body's response to stress
2. Program staff will reflect on what they have control over in the face of new federal government policies and actions
3. Program staff will identify communication strategies to help students and families understand and respond to federal government practices
4. Program staff will learn the principles of psychological first aid and community care to support their school and program communities
5. Program staff will engage with each other in productive struggle and draw on their own experiences and knowledge of their communities to support each other



# What is Stress?

**Stress** is the response that we have to the demands of life. Stress is our body's signal that keeps us aware of and able to respond to danger.

Stress is characterized not necessarily by an event or situation, but by how it effects our bodies, and how much relational and environmental support we have to **manage it**. (UCLA Prevention Center of Excellence)



# Positive Stress

**Positive stress** occurs as part of everyday life. It can be helpful or motivating to get tasks completed, and it can lead to growth and positive changes. Physical symptoms are present, but we are able to return to calm or neutral baseline.



## Examples:

- Starting a new job
- Welcoming a new baby
- Working on a personal project
- Learning something new or challenging

# Tolerable Stress

**Tolerable Stress** is more intense, longer lasting, can be due to situational stressors, and has a felt impact on the body. What makes it tolerable is that it is ameliorated by supportive environments and relationships



## Examples:

- Moving
- Losing a job
- Grief and loss
- Illness or injury

# Toxic Stress

**Toxic Stress** is prolonged exposure to stressors that has a profound impact on the body that does not allow a return to a calm or neutral baseline. Toxic stress is often chronic and occurs in the absence of supportive relationships and environments.



## Examples:

- Abuse and violence
- Poverty
- Housing or food insecurity

# Stress and the Body

**Fight**

Facing a perceived threat with aggression

**Flight**

Facing a perceived threat with escape or avoidance

**Freeze**

Facing a perceived threat by shutting down or numbing

**Fawn**

Facing a perceived threat by trying to appease or pacify the aggressor

# Stress and the Brain

The pre-frontal cortex is the cognitive center of the brain

- Responsible for planning, reasoning, organization (executive function)
- Once stress or danger has passed it helps return our brains and bodies to calm, neutral baseline

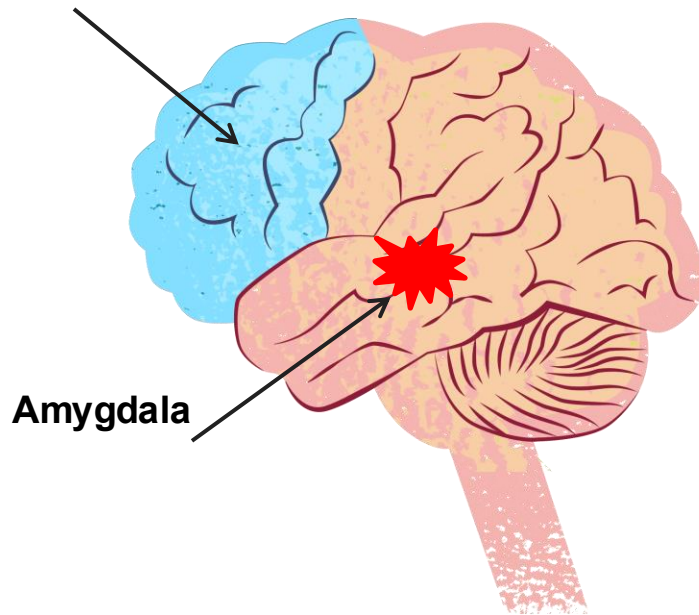
The amygdala is the fear center of the brain

- Triggers the fight/flight/freeze response

When the amygdala is triggered, the pre-frontal cortex takes a back seat to prioritize survival

- Everyday functioning is more difficult
- In moments of stress or danger it is difficult to make decisions or communicate important information
- If stress is chronic, it is difficult to return to a calm, neutral baseline

Pre-frontal cortex



# Stress & the current climate

**What have you seen from the families and students that you work with?**

- **How have they been affected?**
- **How have they coped?**
- **What support have you provided?**

**What have you seen from your program staff?**

- **How have they been affected?**
- **How have they coped?**
- **What support have you provided?**

# When the Going Gets Tough...

- Focus on what you can control
- Cope ahead
- Prioritize communication
- Provide psychological first aid
- Maintain connections and relationships
- What could taking action look like?



# Three Components of Stress Management

## Calm Down Strategies

- To counteract the body's stress response
- To help return to calm, neutral baseline
- Breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, distraction

Psychological First Aid

## Activation Strategies

- To engage the pre-frontal cortex to notice when danger has passed, and signal the body's stress response to calm down

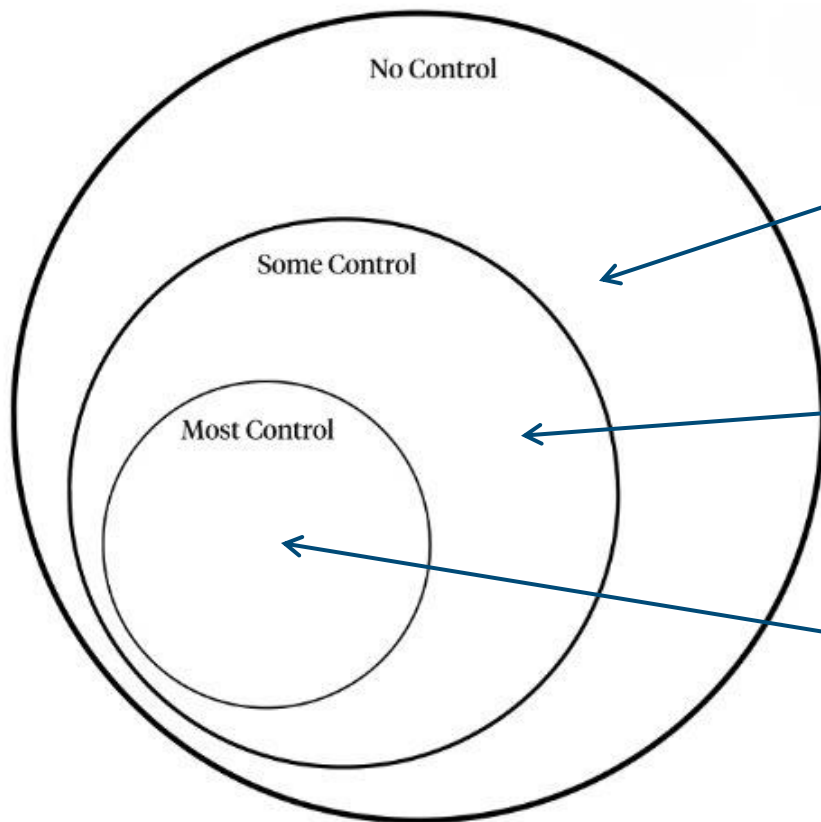
Coping ahead,  
communication

## Supportive Relationships

- A key difference between tolerable and toxic stress is not the situation, but the support or lack of support

Community care

# Concentric Circles of Control



The weather  
The news  
Other people's actions

How I make  
someone else feel  
My emotions

What I say and do  
My choices  
My thoughts

# What Do I Have Control Over?

**Federal Government  
Policy and Practices?**



**My Organization's Policy  
and Practices?**



**My Interactions with  
Students and Co-  
workers?**



## Key Principles of Psychological First Aid

- Safety
- Calming
- Connection
- Hope
- Self-Efficacy

<https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/psychological-first-aid-and-skills-for-psychological-recovery/about-pfa>

# Psychological First Aid

An evidence-informed approach to help students cope in the aftermath of trauma, disaster or crisis



# Psychological First Aid

## Focus on concrete needs

- Some families may be less likely to use community resources right now
- Can the school assist in getting those needs met?

## Ground in the Present

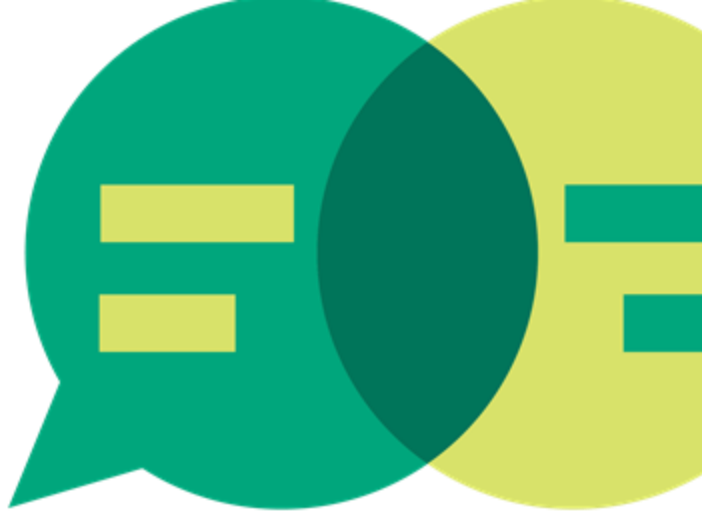
- How are students doing right now?
- Listen
  - Validate
  - Reflect back
- Provide support
  - Coping skills
  - What does this look like in your school community?



# Coping Ahead

## Concrete Planning

- What will happen if ICE shows up at my program site?
- What plans can be put in place if families are unable or scared to come pick up their children?
- Who is in charge of getting information out to families?
- Who is the point person for families to reach out to?



# Communication

## **Accurate information is the best way to dispel rumors and combat uncertainty**

- What is school/DOE policy?
- What is the same as before the executive orders and what has changed?
- What trusted organizations or people can families go to for accurate information?

## **What should be shared?**

- Students and caregivers don't need the same information
- Caregivers need information that will help them make decisions for their families and know where to seek support
- Students need information that will help them to feel safe in school



# Communication

**Communicating information is important**

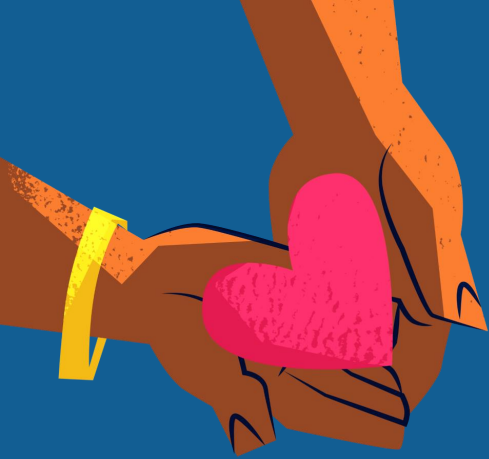
**And so is communicating explicit support for affected communities**



**Who is most affected by new federal administration policies?**

- Immigrant youth and families
- LGBTQ+ youth and families
- Who else?

**How do we communicate support to those most affected?**



**A key difference  
between tolerable and  
toxic stress is supportive  
relationships and  
environments**

**How do we support students?**

**How do we support families?**

**How do we support each other?**

# Maintain Connection and Relationships

## **The causes of stress are almost never individual**

- Many systemic factors come into play
- The burden of managing stress almost always falls on the individual
- Practice both giving and receiving help and support





# Community Care

## What do school and program staff need?

- Clear expectations of roles and responsibilities
- Time and space to connect with each other
- Information about resources for families and themselves

## Ground in the Present

- How are staff doing right now?
- What does this look like in your school right now?



# Taking Action

## **Do I want to try to make a change?**

- Political advocacy or community work

## **Do I want to cope with the present?**

- Coping skills
- Who do I reach out for support and assistance

## **Do I want to support others?**

- What does that look like?
- Being the one others reach out to

## **Other choices?**

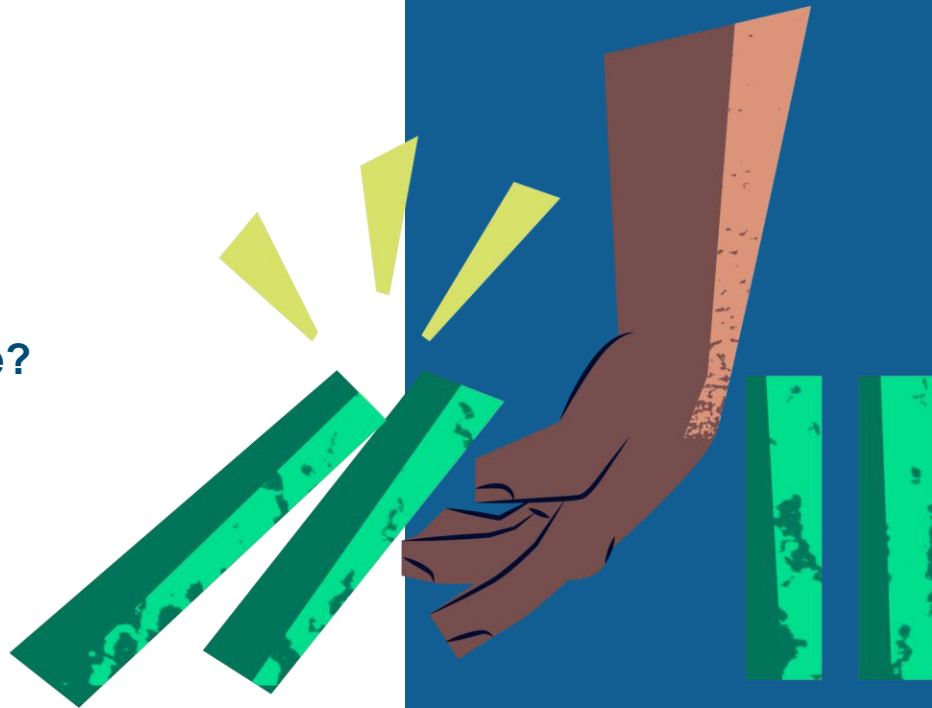
# When this all feels inadequate

## How do we sit with it?

- Radical acceptance
- Lean into the dialectic

## How do we know our role?

## What coping strategies can we use?



## Thriving Kids Video Series





- Comments?
- Questions?
- Feedback?
- Ideas?

