



# Developing Proactive Supports to Prevent Secondary Traumatic Stress and Re-Traumatization for Students in Higher Education

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## Introduction

- There appears to be little evidence of trauma-informed teaching in the occupational therapy profession. A study by Wells and colleagues (2021) found that 100% of graduate Occupational Therapy Students stated that they had experienced some form of trauma, significantly affecting their education and daily functioning.
- Trauma-informed pedagogy is crucial for mitigating negative emotional impacts on students (Harrison et al., 2023).
- Despite rising trauma-related disorders in college students, mental health practices are often neglected in higher education programs including Occupational Therapy (Chelton, 2022).
- The high pervasiveness of trauma is well documented in the research, but the knowledge and information of trauma has not yet fully integrated into the standards of care in any profession, including occupational therapy (Classen & Clark, 2017).
- Health care professionals practicing in all specialty areas, including occupational therapy, are often exposed to the traumatic experiences of their clients. The empathic relationship these professionals routinely have with traumatized individuals may result in emotional experiences of traumatic stress, including burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious trauma (Kanno & Giddings, 2017).

### Purpose:

- This project will attempt to bridge the gap of research that exists by providing trauma-informed care approaches using safety plans that advocate for emotional and physical safety and appropriate academic accommodations to students in the university environment.
- The purpose of this project is to utilize the concepts and principles of trauma-informed care to create a safety plan protocol that will promote student and educator health and well-being and will be appropriate for use with college courses for teaching pedagogy and universal teaching, student counseling, guidelines for projects, and student experiences and fieldwork.
- The primary purpose of this Capstone project is to collect and analyze OTD student and faculty responses to determine their experiences, knowledge, and attitudes regarding trauma and the extent of exposure of traumatic content in didactic, community, fieldwork, and Capstone activities.

## Methods

**Design:** This research used a quantitative approach using a web based Qualtrics software survey format developed with both multiple choice and Likert-scale questions. The protocol for this Capstone research project included a pre-test survey to gather demographic information and each participant's personal experiences, knowledge, and attitudes regarding trauma. After analyzing and evaluating the information from the pre-test survey responses, the researcher developed an appropriate framework for the development of a trauma-informed safety plan proposal. This framework was provided to each participant for review for feedback and recommendations prior to completing the post-test survey. Both surveys were created and administered by the researcher to all participants in this study. The two surveys included identical questions with one open-ended question on the post-test survey to determine the usefulness of the trauma-informed content in the proposed safety plan, and the need for additional efforts that may be necessary to achieve an educational environment that is trauma-sensitive to student and educator health, safety, and learning.

**Recruitment Process:** Recruitment for this project was primarily by email and word of mouth. Informational recruitment flyers posted throughout the OT department were also utilized. There was no exclusions for participation in this project based on age, gender/sex, race, religion, or marital status. English as a primary language, and access to the internet are the only participation qualifiers for this project.

**Population:** The population for this research project was UAB's OT doctoral students and their faculty. A total of 196 OTD students and OT faculty were recruited for this study. The OT faculty consists of 16 highly trained educators (12 females and 4 males). The 2024 graduating class has 62 students (57 females and 5 males), the 2025 cohort has 58 students (56 females and 2 males), and the 2026 class consists of 58 students (54 females and 4 males).

**Site:** This Capstone project was conducted within the Occupational Therapy Department of the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

## Results

### Participants:

**Pre-Test Survey:** 127 Participants (117 OTD Students & 10 Faculty)  
**Post-Test Survey:** 85 Participants ( 79 OTD Students & 6 Faculty)

### Pre-Test Data:

- 86% of participants stated that they believe students are exposed to traumatic content in didactic, community, fieldwork, and capstone experiences.
- 94% of participants stated that they felt like students need support to cope with increased capacity while working with individuals with traumatic experiences.
- 96% of participants stated that they felt like students needed help with mental health.
- 96% of participants believe a safety plan protocol would benefit students.
  - Of that total 96%, 69% feel 51-100% confident to implement the safety plan protocol in coursework.

### Post-Test Data:

- 95% of participants stated that they believe students are exposed to traumatic content in didactic, community, fieldwork, and capstone experiences.
- 96% of participants stated that they felt like students need support to cope with increased capacity while working with individuals with traumatic experiences.
- 99% of participants stated that they felt like students needed help with mental health.
- 98% of participants believe a safety plan protocol would benefit students.
  - Of that total 98%, 86% feel 51-100% confident to implement the safety plan protocol in coursework.

Figure 1

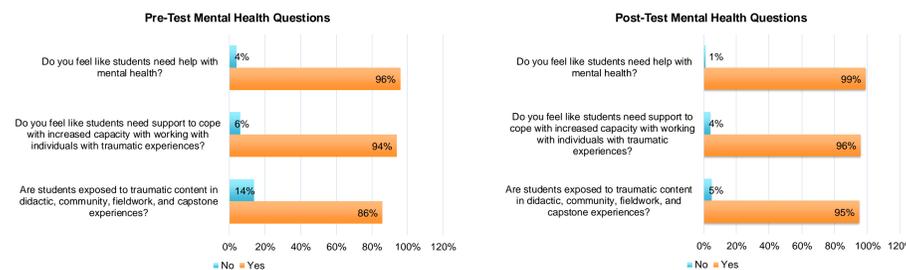


Figure 2

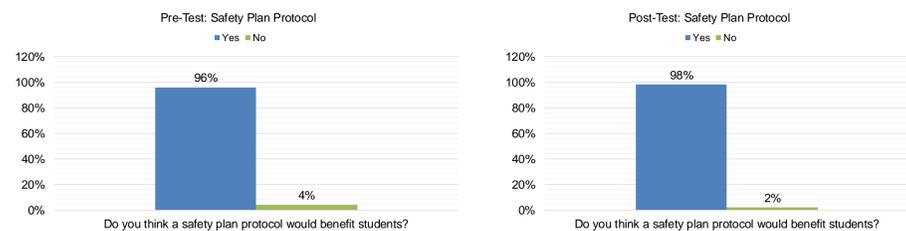
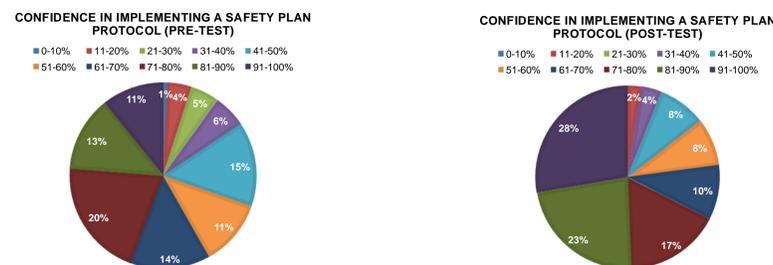


Figure 3



## Discussion

- Participants reported that it was important to implement a safety plan protocol within the OT program of study to limit secondary traumatic stress and re-traumatization. Addressing student mental health and safety is essential, and the development of a universal trauma-informed teaching strategy (such as a safety plan) is needed to benefit students' safety in learning.
- Conducting this research provided OT professionals and educators with a framework for implementing efforts to reduce mental health trauma through a holistic approach to address the adverse effects of trauma. A trauma-informed approach integrates knowledge of trauma in all aspects of the organization's services and trains all providers to recognize the visible signs and symptoms of trauma to reduce the possibility of re-traumatization
- Limitations of the study include limited time for data collection, uneven participation from Pre-Test Survey compared to Post-Test Survey, and the specific requirement of UAB OTD Student or Faculty.

## Conclusion

Almost all people experience some type of trauma at some point in their lives, and that includes graduate students preparing for a profession in occupational therapy. There is a gap in the literature that identifies teaching strategies that reduce the potential for adverse consequences caused by trauma content in higher education programs of study, including occupational therapy. Additional information is necessary to provide guidance to educators that results in the mastery of trauma-related material and creates a safe and productive learning environment. This Capstone project not only added to the body of literature on this topic but also served as an advocate for additional research in this important area. If higher education students in occupational therapy and other helping professions are at risk of secondary traumatic stress or re-traumatization, and if educators have course content that includes traumatic topics, then the development of a universal trauma-informed teaching strategy (such as a safety plan) is needed to benefit students' safety in learning.

## References

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