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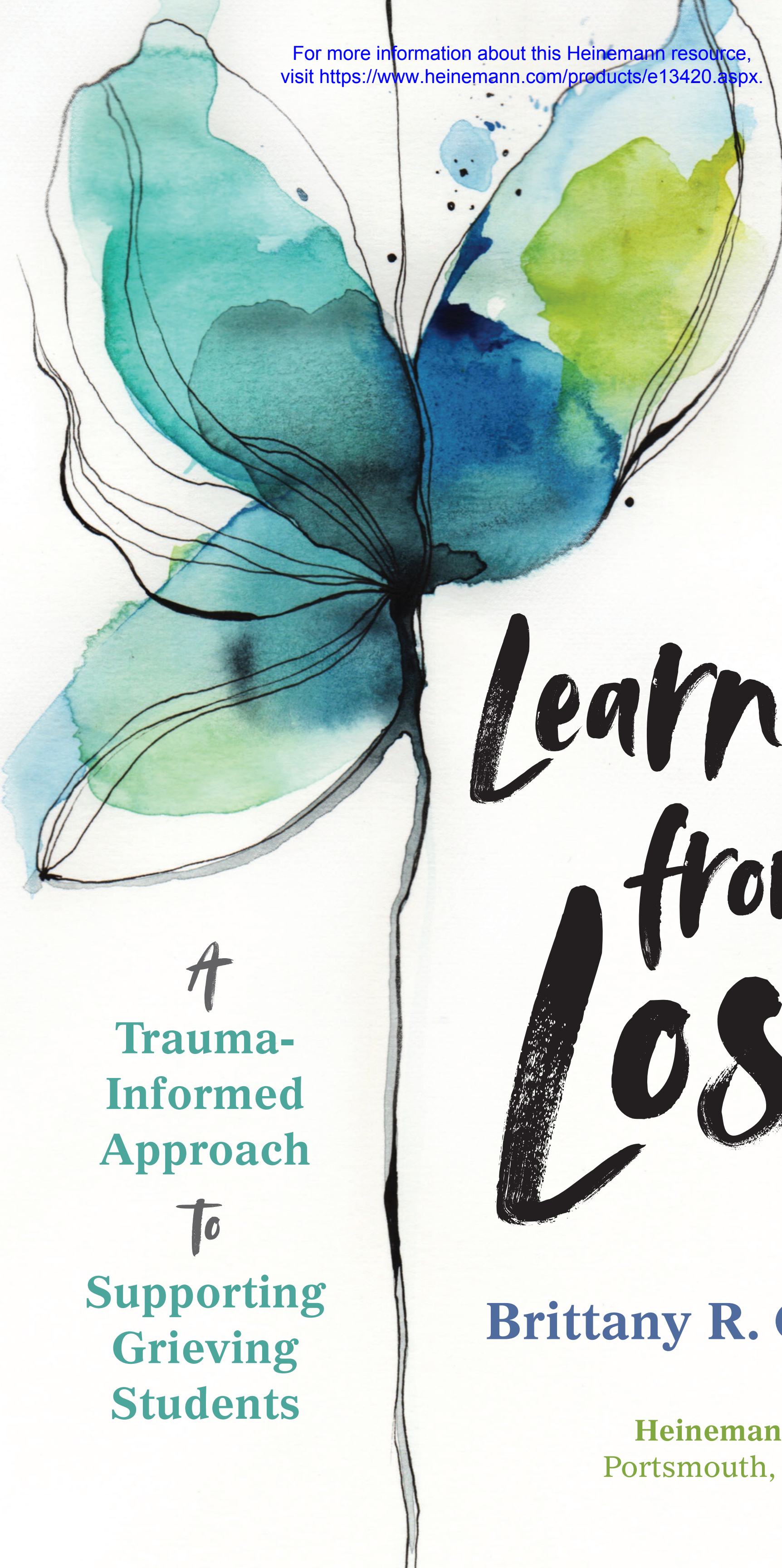

Learning from Loss

A Trauma-Informed Approach to Supporting Grieving Students

Brittany R. Collins

Heinemann
Portsmouth, NH

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For Dad, in memory, and Mom, in honor.

And for Stan Samuelson, who would have met this book with a happy dance and high five and whose presence is deeply missed —by me and students everywhere.

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Acknowledgments

Look how far we've come.

—CHARLIE MACKESY, *THE BOY, THE MOLE, THE FOX AND THE HORSE*

Gratitude is my favorite thing. In many ways, this text is one long thank-you note—to the educators, mentors, family, and friends who have helped me learn from loss; the teachers and young people who entrusted me with their stories; and the readers whom I have yet to meet. My work is a collective effort, a product of the many communities I have been privileged to learn with and from and to whom I hope this resource offers support and salve.

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Finally, my family: to Grammy and in memory of Tom, to Grandma and in memory of Boppa, to Mom and in memory of Dad, thank you for raising me with strength, courage, and a wellspring of love.

Carpe Diem.

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Introduction

Given this diagnosis, I find many people ask me how I am when actually they are asking, "How do you deal with it?" or "How hard is it?" Because cancer is such a difficult topic to discuss, and because many people have difficulty simply approaching difficult subjects, I use the catch phrase Carpe Diem as a small, impactful, motivational way for people to change their focus from the problem and associated difficulties of the disease, to something a bit more productive and positive. Carpe Diem, or Seize the Day, reminds us that tomorrow is not a guarantee, and that we should live in the present and be thankful and productive for who we are and what we are today.

—JEFF COLLINS

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A Poem, a Teacher, a Parent

At the age of fifteen, as a sophomore in high school, I sat in English class on the third floor of a tall brick schoolhouse, looking through the window at a mountain range in the distance. During the class periods that fell before lunch, when my stomach was grumbling and the haze of morning sleepiness was just starting to lift, I often found myself imagining that Victor Frankenstein's monster roamed those very mountains, so similar were their clouded crags to the cover image on Mary Shelley's book, Caspar David Friedrich's romantic painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*.

One morning in spring, my soon-to-retire English teacher, Mr. Latham, passed warm photocopies of beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "The World Is a Beautiful Place" around our classroom—a piece featured in his 1958 collection *A Coney Island of the Mind*. From his wooden podium at the front of our desks, he read aloud the verse in a slow, measured tone:

> The world is a beautiful place
> to be born into
> if you don't mind some people dying
> all the time. (93)

It was a dark poem, yet witty in its solemnity, and I reveled in Ferlinghetti's attention to the particular. I smiled at the conclusion of the verse, albeit an arguably somber meditation on mortality, and Mr. Latham asked me why.

"Brittany, you smiled! What made you smile?!" he said in what seemed a tone of both shock and relief.

I could not answer his question. I merely knew that something inside of me felt seen and understood. I feigned some response about sentence structure and tone, but the real impact of the poem remained inarticulable for years.

The summer before I entered Mr. Latham's classroom, I lost my father to breast cancer while my mother endured her own chemotherapy. I was fourteen at the time of my father's death, and I spent my summer days intentionally distracted, poring over pages of *The Catcher in the Rye* while at my father's bedside. My dad was a reader. As a child, we spent rainy afternoons bonding amid

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the stacks at Barnes and Noble. At his bedside, there were always biographies heavy as bricks and beside them piles of his own scrawled journals—letters to me and my mom that he wrote every night after his stage IV diagnosis.

Should teachers address students' social-emotional concerns and, if so, how? To what extent? Will those concerns take time and energy away from curricular content? In an era when teachers already face a plethora of demands and challenges—standards to meet, tests to plan for, scores to compare, time limitations to work around—do topics like grief really belong on teachers' plates? Should schools seek to cordon those facets of students' experiences in the offices of school psychologists and external therapists? Should the social-emotional and intellectual cohere in the classroom—and, if so, how much?

These questions grew out of my experiences sitting in Mr. Latham's classroom, reading Ferlinghetti. Or perhaps they grew out of an experience I had months earlier, when I told my father that I loved him and set a bookmark amid Mr. Antolini's words in Salinger's text. Or maybe they started to simmer because I remember how it felt to be a sixth grader whose father had just been diagnosed with an anomalous disease that teachers wanted to talk about and friends (and I) did not. I'm not sure.

I do know, however, that my experiences as a student sparked a lifelong fascination with identity development, the ways in which the stories of lives both fictional and real shape and define our reality, provide catharsis, or provoke conversation. They drove my interests in social-emotional learning and interdisciplinary writing curricula, which led me into my first undergraduate education program out of high school. They brought me home to my dad, into the pages of the stories that he read and wrote. And they set pen to paper, inspiring me to scratch out some stories of my own.

When I sat in Mr. Latham's class on that foggy spring morning, pink backpack by my feet, I could not know that the reading of one poem would steer my path beyond those walls. As I folded my photocopied poem hamburger style and tucked it into my three-ring binder, the metal rings snapping shut their teeth, I could not know that I carried a center point of my future scholarship, my future career.

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Today, I look back at Ferlinghetti's words and hear Mr. Latham's in my mind—urging me to explain my reaction, to delve into the effect and affect of language. I remember him nudging me to take Advanced Placement English in the coming years and how meaningful it was that someone believed in my abilities. I sit humbled by the power of a poem, the power of a teacher, and the power of a parent to inform and transform the life of a young learner. And I sit with the truth that the thread of mortality that was woven throughout my language arts education was, for me, not an inappropriately morose focus of my adolescent learning, as critics of "death education" may suggest, but rather an invitation to explore and make meaning of that which comprises a life well lived.

Love and loss are two sides of a quarter—oppositional, yet inseparable—and they strike at the core of what it means to be alive. I am able to recognize the coexistence of tragedy and meaning because teachers and authors lifted those topics up to the light, in their own ways, throughout my time in school. They reified Walt Whitman's (1891) quote, "That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse," written in *Leaves of Grass* and later popularized through the teachings of fictional English teacher Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society*.

Learning from Loss is my verse.

In the United States, seven out of ten teachers have a student in their classroom who is grieving (Nadworny 2015), and loss is the most frequently reported category of trauma experienced by young people (Pynoos et al. 2014, 11–12). It is unlikely that any educator, whether a preservice elementary teacher or a tenured college professor, will complete an academic year—let alone a career—without the heavy coat of loss making its way into the classroom, on the back of a student if not on their own shoulders. I suspect you're picking up this book because you are one such educator, teaching one or more students who are muddling through the throes of grief as I was at fourteen. For you, the reality of loss is all too real; perhaps you are sad, scared, unsure of where to begin.

This book is here for you. As you approach and engage with this text, I hope that you come to treat it as your space—a safe space—within which to grapple, question, breathe, and prepare for the challenges and rewards of supporting grieving students in times of need. I

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know firsthand the longitudinal power and potential of an educator's empathic efforts; it is because of such efforts that I am writing this book today. Yet so, too, do I appreciate the seeming impossibility of tackling the topic of grief with students, and welcome ambivalence as a reaction to this work. It is these three entities—power, potential, and (im)possibility—that we will explore together in the pages that follow.

At first glance, this may seem to be a book about death. But I contend that it is equally a book about life—and the light of it. So often, times of sorrow bring into sharp focus what we value most in this world: connection, laughter, learning—all of which comprise classroom life. When grief disrupts this energy, in whatever form, we ache. Simultaneously, the most valuable tenets of our lives—the delight, the meaning—become richer and more necessary.

I believe that together we have the power to persist through the challenges posed by the presence of grief in schools and to do so mindfully, with compassion, while supporting our own needs, too. We owe this to ourselves as well as our students—for school may be all they have.

The following chapters will guide you through the balance that is the what, why, and how of grief support in a schooling context, from the logistical to the interpersonal and curricular. You will engage in writing exercises geared toward self-exploration and social-emotional awareness to better understand how loss impacts your teaching. We will look at lesson plans, activities, and teaching strategies for creating grief-responsive classrooms and pedagogies across grade levels, from action protocols for the days after a loss occurs; conversational strategies with which to approach parents, guardians, students, and colleagues; resources for cultivating resiliency and social-emotional well-being in all students, including those who are grieving; to wellness strategies that seek to protect and replenish teachers' hearts. This volume—grounded in extensive reading, research, interviews, as well as my own experience—will provide you with the tools you need to approach the tender work of teaching about and around loss, no matter its form.

Before we begin, it is relevant to inquire about the teacher's role regarding grief in the school system. In 1999, two armed teenagers opened fire at a high school in Littleton, Colorado, committing the deadliest high school shooting in history up to that point (History.com

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editors 2009). In the era that has since ensued, we have seen more than 141 children, educators, and staff members killed; 287 injured; and 215,000 students at 217 schools "subject[ed] to active shooter violence" (Coleman 2018, 6). On September 11, 2001, parents, teachers, nurses, and guidance counselors walked into classrooms with the impossible task of telling students that an act of terror had occurred in New York. Life was irreparably altered—a void rang loud.

I wrote most of this book nineteen years later, in 2020, amid a global pandemic and racial justice movement that continue to impact not only the ways we teach, learn, and build supportive relationships with young people but also force us all to reckon with loss in new and piercing ways. It is a dire but crucial fact that loss is not only an entity that students and teachers carry with them into school but now, also, an entity that can and does occur *at* school. By virus or violence, the past year alone has changed our communities and caused us to pause.

A study conducted by the American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation in July and August 2020, for example, revealed that 26 percent of surveyed teachers had already lost someone in their school community to COVID-19. Ninety-three percent expected the pandemic would have long-term traumatic impacts on students—an instinct confirmed by leading trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk, who shared on New Hampshire Public Radio that the isolation and perceived immobility incited by the pandemic created "'pre-traumatic conditions' in the brain" (McOwen 2020). Ninety-five percent of teachers said that they—like you—would like to do more to support their grieving students. Yet only 15 percent felt prepared to do so (AFT and New York Life Foundation 2020).

This discomfort is understandable. The topic of grief support remains absent in most teacher preparation programs, with fewer than 1 percent of teachers reporting grief-related training in their undergraduate or graduate education courses (AFT and New York Life Foundation 2012, 4). Amid the demands of standards, test scores, performance reports, and the countless other commitments that tug on teachers' time, it can feel daunting to address the topic of loss in schools. But teachers realize that the issue of managing grief in the classroom seems no longer a question of *if* or *should* but *when* and *how*: How can teachers best scaffold the topic and

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experience of loss to support young learners in the face of fear and sadness? When a student loses a parent, or a faculty loses a colleague, or a school shooting occurs too close to home, what should we do? What should we say? How can classroom teachers and administrators collaborate most effectively with trained psychologists, counselors, or crisis response teams so that a school's support efforts are successful?

Teachers need opportunities to commune, collaborate, and communicate about the challenges and rewards of encountering and addressing loss with their students if we are ever to work toward the creation of schools in which grieving students feel safe, welcomed, and respected. Your selecting this book makes me think that I am in like-minded company and that your seeking out resources on this topic means you already have the tools you need—the sincerity, the motivation—to succeed in supporting grieving students no matter any hesitations you may feel.

To ground our time together, I've written some guiding beliefs and intentions that center me as I approach grief work. As the teaching and learning coordinator at Write the World, an online writing education platform, I engage middle and high school students and teachers in synchronous and asynchronous educational programming. Though I do not teach students in a traditional classroom or work as a psychologist, I bring to this text an awareness of the ways in which teaching transcends the classroom: Whether you are a coach, advisor, dorm parent, online educator, curriculum writer, school bus driver, teacher, or administrator, your work is valid. Your support of grieving students is necessary. And you have the power to make a difference in the lives of young people. Your role will be different from that of a school counselor or psychologist but no less important; I use the proverbial "we" in these pages to encompass the many roles education professionals take, all of them relevant in the discussion we are about to have.

I invite you to dip into this practice by creating bulleted lists of your own—which may add onto or look quite different from those that follow. Return to them throughout your reading and teaching experiences for a reminder—especially in the face of a critical decision—of your *why* in relation to this work.

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GUIDING BELIEFS

- Grief work is essential in a classroom context; we have a responsibility to pay attention to the presence and impact of loss in our learning environments.
- Grief is not a problem to be fixed or avoided, but a reality to embrace and approach.
- Teachers and students engaging in grief work deserve to feel validated and valued.
- Teachers and students engaging in grief work need room to make and repair mistakes.
- Grief-responsive classroom practices benefit all students, regardless of whether they're enduring a loss.
- Grief is a challenging topic. It's natural for students and teachers to feel nervous.
- Avoidance is a natural coping mechanism that often perpetuates pain.
- When we lose the ones we love, they're not wholly gone; their gifts are siphoned through us, out into the world.

INTENTIONS

- I intend to approach grief work openly and honestly.
- I intend to welcome all experiences and perspectives, especially those that contradict or challenge my own.
- I intend to ask not "How did I do?" but "What can I learn from this?"*
- I intend to extend my comfort zone through sharing experiences.
- I intend to honor my own and others' limits.

*In college, a mentor and teacher extraordinaire shared this piece of wisdom as I prepared for a challenging presentation. It's since guided my approach to teaching and learning and to life.

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Pause and Ponder

What are your guiding beliefs when you consider the topic of grief in the classroom? Based on your own loss experiences and those of your students, what truths do you hold? What intentions do you hope to set as you reflect upon and look toward opportunities to work with students who are grieving? Make your own bulleted lists. Return to these points as guiding pillars throughout this book or when grief work in your classroom feels tenuous or overwhelming.

Grief Work: A Gordian Knot**

Though much of American education is standardized, there is no prescriptive way to support grieving students in any classroom or learning community. It would be reductive to condense the nuance and granularity of grief to step-by-step strategies or social-emotional edicts, given its contextual and interpersonal variations. But this should not preclude our exploring or promote our ignoring general principles and strategies that can support our approaches to grief work. Research shows, for example, that all children need safe places and people with whom to investigate these topics, and school is one such constant amid chaos where young people may find safety. "Limiting discussion about death will only hinder children's understanding of the loss and interfere with their ability to cope with it," writes David J. Schonfeld (1993, 269), pediatrician and founder of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. "Children need caring and knowledgeable adults with whom they can discuss death, both in a general context before a loss and specifically in response to a significant death" (269).

***Gordian knot* is a term used to describe a complex situation. Stemming from the story of Alexander the Great, it is a metaphor for seemingly unsolvable problems, or knots that only become more tangled as one tries to loosen them (Andrews 2018).

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Many times, in the writing of this book, I found myself surveying research and reaching toward suggested strategies that my adolescent, grieving self would not have found helpful. I am humbled by how quickly my adult mind lets go of the intense reservations and hesitations that I felt in my core as a kid. Had you met me at ten years old, when my father was diagnosed, or at fifteen, after he passed, and attempted to initiate any kind of check-in, you would've found yourself immersed in a conversation that went something like this:

Caring adult: So, how are you doing?

Me: Good.

Caring adult: But how are you really doing? [*Drawn-out pause.*]

Me [*Blushing*]: Good.

Caring adult: And how's your mom?

Me [*Blushing, fidgeting*]: She's good.

We're really getting somewhere, aren't we?

I'm sure that all of us, if we think reflectively, can identify ways in which our relationships with loss have shifted across time and contexts. A coping strategy that may have worked once may prove unhelpful, even harmful, years later. Sometimes, we may feel best left alone, processing and persisting on our own; other times, we may crave connection. Every loss is different, and as we navigate the progression from immediate grief to eventual acceptance and adaptation (though it's important to note—and we'll explore this later—that the five stages of grief are no longer considered an accurate framework, because grief is more cyclical and continual than their confines imply), we'll find ourselves, as well as our students, undulating between emotions, coping mechanisms, and outlooks.

Because grief is such a complex process, bereaved students may send mixed signals in the classroom—moving, like centripetal and centrifugal forces, toward and away from intimate honesty and avoidant denial. When we witness such a shifting inner landscape, it can feel hard to know which tendency to cater to, especially when we may move toward and away from grief ourselves, our own comfort zones and receptivity fluctuating in patterns that may not always align with those of our students.

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Having grown up a dancer, I'm reminded of a contemporary contact improv class that I took as a freshman in college, which was—let me tell you—out of my comfort zone. My classmates and I bustled into a boathouse overlooking a pond both murky and smooth, stepping barefoot out of winter boots and onto the wooden floor. A pianist sat perched in the corner, each day his tempo and tone manifesting in the moment. We created accompanying movement, responding to one another's kinesthetic choices to create story lines both subjective and cohesive. It felt intimidating, in the first weeks of class, to take up space in this way—to become comfortable with stillness, to resist filler movements and to view each pause as a tool. Integrating the contact nature of the course posed an even greater challenge, requiring me to not only reckon with my vulnerability but become open and responsive to that of others. Yet by the end of the term, my classmates and I were tackling lifts without language.

There seems some parallel between this class and the Gordian knot of grief support: neither allows for foolproof planning nor scripted participation or conversation, but both operate around a certain set of rules (or, better to say, suggestions)—a subliminal choreography that informs execution. As we shift toward the *why* and *how* of grief work in the coming pages, I encourage you to return to your intents and your beliefs as a dancer might a lunge or leap. This work requires a delicate calibration between strength and softness, intellect and emotion, movement and stillness, proximity and space. So, too, does it necessitate organic collaboration. Practice supports performance, as well as process, and it is the latter that is our goal.

Laurel Boyd, a dance teacher whom I interviewed for this book and who helped me through my own grief in high school, offered a resonant frame with which to begin our work. "I think collaboration is the essence of education," she told me, seated in an office tucked toward the back of her studio. She continued:

> It has to be that way; otherwise it just feels like an imposition, like stuff is just cut and pasted or imposed or pushed on [students].
>
> Sometimes we focus so much on the content that we forget about the humanity that's supposed to be absorbing it. I never wanted to lose the dancer for the dance. I never

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wanted to place the work as more important than the person, the human in front of me who is also in development, also in process. . . . I can't do what I do unless there are humans who are meeting me in that field.

Write and Reflect

Take five minutes to think about someone close to you who is no longer with us—a teacher, student, parent, partner, friend. What is your favorite memory of this person? What is the most powerful lesson this person taught you? How have you passed this person's legacy on through your own work and life?

Next, consider this: What strengths do you bring to your work with grieving students? What about this work proves most challenging or daunting for you and why? What about your life and loss experiences informs these strengths and challenges?

Grief Glossary: Some Notes on Terminology

Throughout this book, I use a few key terms. You can find out more about them here.

GRIEVING VERSUS BEREAVED

I use the terms *grieving* and *bereaved* somewhat interchangeably throughout the text. Bereavement is typically used to describe someone who has lost a family member (e.g., a bereaved student might be one whose mother recently died). Grief—and grieving—apply more broadly to anyone experiencing loss, even if that loss is not tied to a death. Following are three types of non-death-related losses that you might recognize from your own life or

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learning environment; the teaching strategies we explore in this book are relevant for supporting students dealing with these and other types of loss, too.

Living Losses

Living losses encompass those departures, absences, or separations that create a grief response in our brains and bodies even though they do not involve the death of a person. For example, a student whose mother is serving in the military, whose sibling is incarcerated, whose parents are getting divorced, who is estranged from a relative, or who is disconnected from key caretakers because of COVID-19 may experience grief and trauma responses that are as legitimate as those experienced after the death of a loved one (Harris and Winokuer 2019, 121–37).

Secondary Losses

Secondary losses occur as collateral damage in the wake of an overarching death, tragedy, or loss, and, similar to living losses, do not always involve the absence of a person. For example, after a parent dies, a student may be forced to contend with a change in housing or schooling, a familial falling out that leaves relatives and support systems astray, or a shift in socioeconomic status that disrupts that student's home environment. These layers of loss are connected to but separate from the primary loss. They complexify the social-emotional and potentially traumatic effects of that loss and may position students for increased behavioral or cognitive challenges in the classroom (Williams 2013).

Disenfranchised Grief

The term *disenfranchised grief* describes forms of grief and loss that are not socially or societally acknowledged. One might experience disenfranchised grief over a miscarriage, a move, a breakup, a loss of health or ability, or even a loss that one is not directly connected to—for example, one that occurs within one's schooling community. Because these types of losses are societally silenced and often stigmatized, they typically involve added stress and social discomfort (Thelen 2007).

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GRIEF WORK

I use the term *grief work* to refer to the practice of implementing trauma-informed, grief-responsive strategies in the classroom. This term is meant to emphasize the active, evolving nature of engaging with and learning from loss in a learning community. Notably, the term *grief work* was once adapted from Freud's 1917 phrase "the work of mourning," to imply that all bereaved people endure a laborious process of working through and recovering from loss—a notion that gave way to Kübler-Ross' grief stages in the twentieth century. Modern grief science has largely disproved this notion of progressive work, realizing that grief is more fluid and evolving and that the majority of people experience healthy adaptation, therefore delegitimizing the term *grief work* in psychological and medical spheres (Bonanno 2009, 14–15).

When I use it in this book, I do not mean the Freudian notion of personal progression through grief, but instead the much simpler notion that teachers are pursuing active pedagogical work when they choose to implement grief-responsive strategies in the classroom.

TRAUMA-INFORMED VERSUS GRIEF-RESPONSIVE

I use the terms *trauma-informed* and *grief-responsive* interchangeably. This is to emphasize that not all grief is traumatic, and not all trauma involves grief, yet trauma-informed and grief-responsive pedagogies are adaptable to both populations of students. Throughout grief literature, the term *grief-sensitive* is used in relation to school districts and teaching pedagogies, but I instead offer *grief-responsive* as a term to imply more active and intentional engagement by the teacher-practitioner (i.e., we are not merely being sensitive to the presence of grief in the classroom, but are actively responding to our awareness of that grief by making the decision to shape our learning environments accordingly).

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CHAPTER 1

When a Student Is Grieving, What's Going On?

A Look Inside the Bereaved Brain

You never completely get over the loss. . . . It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp.

—ANNE LAMOTT, "AN HOMAGE TO AGE AND FEMININITY"

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"It was around 1998," began Priscilla Kane Hellweg, educator and executive director of Enchanted Circle Theater, a nonprofit, multi-service arts organization based in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

I was a teaching artist at the Morgan School here in the flats in Holyoke. It was the second day of an artist-in-residence program. I was in first grade, and the day before I was to arrive for the second day, I got a call from the teacher to say that there was a terrible tragedy and Jonathan had been killed. He was sleigh riding and got hit by a car.

I said, "Well, I'm happy to come in if you would like me there, and I'm happy to not come in if you would like to have the class to yourself," and her voice quivered.

She said, "I would love for you to be there. I'm really afraid of facing the class. I think I'm just going to fall apart."

So, I came in, and they all sat down on the rug, and I said, "I understand that there's been a terrible tragedy, and that your friend Jonathan has been killed in an accident. I didn't get a chance to know him." I asked them all if they would tell me things about him. "Think about your friend Jonathan. What would you like me to know?"

The first person said he was a really great soccer player, and he could hit the ball faster than anybody. Somebody else said, "He was my best friend, and he made me laugh."

Somebody else said, "He was really good at math. Anytime I needed help, I would go to Jonathan, and he would help."

We went around the circle, and everybody had something to say, and everybody was really listening. There [were] probably twenty-eight kids in the class, and [their] teacher was in the circle. She was listening, tears streaming down her face, and she said, "He was a tender soul, and I will hold him in my heart."

And then the last child said something like, "He had the best sense of humor of anybody I knew," and then she said, "So, can we play ball now?" referring to the day before, [when] I taught them a game of imaginary ball.

My takeaway was they were really interested in talking about [the loss] and sharing with me, a stranger, about their friend. But then they also didn't want to get lost in that. They

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didn't want to get stuck in it. They had an experience of sharing. There would be more sharing. There were counselors in the room, and the nurse was there, so [the teacher] had her supports, but I think it helped to have an outside voice. I think it was helpful for them each to have a little bit to say. And then that was it.

I wasn't sure how to bridge it. You talk about a child "passing" a lot. It felt very important to me to actually, without a lot of my own sort of stuff around it, to be able to say, "I understand there was a tragedy, and Jonathan died," and they didn't bat an eyelash.

That was important for me.

Priscilla's story offers a snapshot of the ways in which a community of learners can grapple with grief together. Her words demonstrate how an attentive team of caring professionals can support the regulation and processing of young people. But what exactly happens in those moments when a death is announced and the mind begins to process the meanings of *before* and *after*, *here* and *not here*? What can we learn from that first grader who asked, "So, can we play ball now?" Was she being dismissive? Resilient? Or was her question representative of more complex neural and developmental processes going on beneath the surface? And what does all of this have to do with adolescence? How can secondary school teachers apply knowledge of neurobiology to best support students who are experiencing grief and trauma in the teenage years?

Grief and Bereavement: The Basics

In this chapter, we'll take a look inside the grieving brain to better understand the biological and behavioral responses the body experiences after loss. We'll consider the intersections of trauma, grief, and toxic stress, and we'll weave our knowledge together to explore practical applications and activities for creating classroom environments supportive of all students, including those who are grieving. Let's begin with some background info.

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Grief is a Natural Response to Many Kinds of Losses

Grief does not, in itself, constitute trauma or pathology. Humans are relational creatures: a held hand, a burst of laughter, a knowing glance—these are the things that let us know we are alive. From our earliest days, our brains are shaped by the people and environments around us (Center on the Developing Child n.d.). As we grow, we form attachments with caregivers, friends, and romantic partners; we shape and are shaped by others' behaviors; and we respond, inevitably, to stress, loss, and pain.

The bonds we forge with others not only promote or negate healthy development but are also encoded in our brains. Studies conducted using fMRI scans show that social attachments involve neural mechanisms in the reward center of the brain (Shulman 2018, 97). When we lose someone to whom we are attached, we feel that loss in part because of alterations in this wiring; we go through a kind of visceral relational withdrawal.

We may also experience grief in response to other kinds of losses and life transitions: graduating from school, moving to a new city, leaving a job. Such a response is, again, valid, natural, and often based in neurology.

Loss Changes Our Environments Which Compounds Grief

In the wake of a death, we often experience secondary losses—changes in our surroundings and routines that reflect the absence of the person we have lost. We no longer hear the sound of a parent's car pulling into the driveway after work; smell a grandmother's perfume; feel the surety of a sister checking homework before bed. There's a change in housing or school or even a familial falling out. We do not often recognize the sensory components of our relationships until they are removed, nor how these cues—sounds, sights, smells, tastes—make us feel. When a student is grieving, they are not only mourning the person who has died but adjusting to disrupted routines that lack these "hidden

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regulators" (Di Ciacco 2008, 25) that—in the context of positive relationships—once helped them maintain their emotional well-being, if subconsciously.

Grief Does Not Follow Five Stages

In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—marking a pivotal moment in the normalization and study of grief (2014, 34); however, further research disproved her theory, revealing that the human brain oscillates between all stages of grief in a nonlinear pattern. We mourn and make meaning of our losses in bursts, especially at a young age (Bonanno 2009, 39), and these bursts allow us to move between confrontation and avoidance, grappling with the depths of loss one moment, then asking, in our own ways: "So, can we play ball now?" Our brains have evolved to self-protect in this way, immersing us incrementally in the reality of loss until we can see, to quote the poem "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye, "the size of the cloth" (1995, 42).

There is no timeline for when these bursts recede, nor should we impart or imply a timeline regarding students' expressions of grief at school. Humans re-grieve on occasions of significance (the anniversary of a loved one's death, parents' day at school, holiday vacation, graduation, etc.), and young people often experience exacerbated grief during developmental milestones to which a loved one would have borne witness. Grief, then, is a lifelong process. Its intensity dulls, and the majority of us integrate loss experiences and past memories into the narratives of our lives; adapt to an altered reality; make meaning of losses and relationships through storytelling; and move forward without suffering psychological harm. But this does not mean that we emerge unchanged or even that we emerge at all. Rather, we learn to live an altered reality. To "dance with the limp." To re-story our lives.

Grief Impacts the Brain and Body

Grief activates the same brain regions as physical pain (Shulman 2018, 94) and impacts the body in two ways: a fight-or-flight response involving the endocrine, immune, and autonomic nervous

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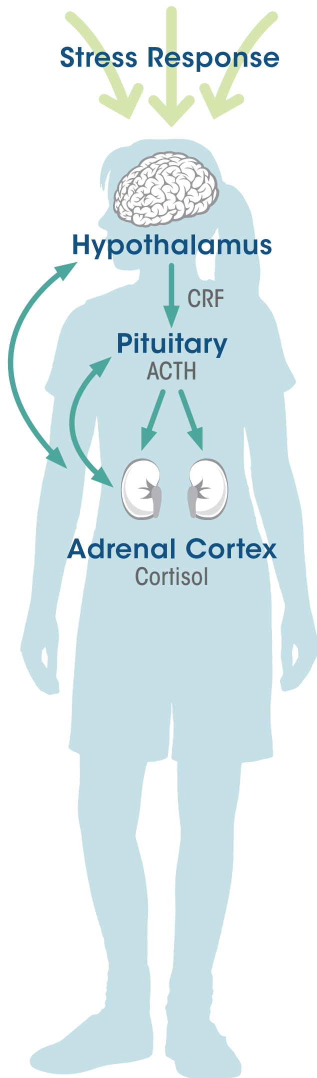

Figure 1–1 The HPA Axis

systems; and a depressive response involving memory, sleep, attention, self-regulation, and executive functioning (NBC News 2018; Low 2020). It is not only emotional but physical.

We have known for a long time that the HPA axis, which connects our central nervous and endocrine systems, as pictured in Figure 1–1, is central to our stress response as well as its hormonal and immune-related implications (Tough 2012, 12; Alschuler 2016). Another part of our nervous system, the vagus nerve, which connects our brain, lungs, heart, stomach, and intestines, is thought to also play an important role in our response to stress (Wagner 2016). We physically feel grief and pain in our mind, heart, and gut, because they quite literally impact these areas of the body by way of our vagus nerve (Porges 2009, 86; van der Kolk 2014, 80).

Loss Can Have a Lifelong Impact on Teens

When teens lose people they love, the impact can pose a special threat to their development and lifelong health, especially when paired with chronic stress or adversity (Tough 2012, 13; van der Kolk 2014, 242; Burke Harris 2018, 73; Shulman 2018, 98). To better understand teens' responses to loss and trauma, it is important to know about adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs: The ACE survey, developed in 1990, is now a leading tool in scientists' efforts to understand how "environments,"

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rather than "experiences," may preclude healthy development. One's "ACE score," essentially the number of childhood traumatic experiences one has endured, increases the risk of developing later-life illness—cancer, heart disease, diabetes, depression, and substance abuse, among other conditions (Starecheski 2015). Nearly two-thirds of adults surveyed had experienced at least one ACE, and more than one in five participants had experienced three ACEs or more (Centers for Disease Control 2020). The aftereffects of loss can linger in the body for a lifetime, especially when paired with additional or persistent trauma. We'll return to this idea—as well as explore the shortcomings of the ACE model—in chapters to come.

Grief Can Be Traumatic

Trauma is determined, not by a specific type of event or experience, but by the nervous system's response to an event or experience (Souers & Hall 2016, 15-16). The American Psychological Association defines *trauma* as "an emotional response to a terrible event" (2021); and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration defines it as "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (2019).

Our understandings of trauma are changing alongside lexical evolution. In the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the *DSM-5*, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has its own category (Pai, Suris, and North 2017, 7). Its clinical definitions, once subjective, now contain specific criteria psychologists can use to make diagnoses, including "exposure to actual or threatened death" (Forman-Hoffman et al. 2016).

Socially, our perceptions are changing, too. We no longer regard trauma as something reserved for those who have fought in combat. We know that quotidian routines can comprise their own battles, and it no longer seems far-fetched that grief could qualify as, or lead to, "an emotional response to a terrible event."

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In other words, yes, grief can be traumatic.

But because trauma is a response to an *event*, one student may find loss traumatic while a classmate does not. Diverse responses to loss experiences are normal and not within students' control. If a student is traumatized by a loss, it does not mean that they are weaker or less resilient than their peer, but rather that a combination of factors (genetics, presence of a support system, contextual challenges and inequities, prior losses or traumas) predispose certain populations to the privilege of resolution and recalibration and others to prolonged, even chronic, grief and trauma.

Grief Changes Behavior

Students with grieving brains have different neurological landscapes than their non-grieving selves and non-grieving peers, and they may exhibit a number of behavioral changes—and challenges—in the classroom (see Figure 1–2). Because of the fight-flight-or-freeze response, students will have a much harder time with higher-

Emotional and Behavioral Responses to Grief or Trauma

- anger
- avoidance
- guilt
- anxiety
- fear
- sadness
- numbness
- denial
- attention seeking
- connection seeking
- impaired sense of future
- physical health complaints (headaches, nausea)
- helplessness
- hopelessness
- desire for control (can manifest in myriad ways; some, such as perfectionism, might be reinforced within an academic context)
- self-destructive behaviors
- apathy
- catastrophizing
- people pleasing

(Adapted from Ehmke n.d.; Fernández-Alcántara et al. 2016, 1; NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee 2015; Jacobs n.d.)

Figure 1–2 Responses to Grief and Trauma

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functioning processes like thinking, reasoning, managing emotions, and reining in their impulses. Similar to students experiencing trauma, they might feel an impaired sense of physical and emotional safety; a loss or lack of connection and trust in their relationships; and an impaired ability to manage or regulate their emotions (Shear 2012, 119–28; Shulman 2018; Di Ciacco 2008).

Teaching Strategies to Enact Right Away

With time and consistency, teachers can support grieving students as they make their way back to higher functioning. Schools have the opportunity to intervene in loss processes by creating spaces that are supportive of students' adaptation and offer stability amid a new and swirling world. The pedagogical practices presented throughout this book promote the well-being of all learners, regardless of whether they have a history of loss or trauma, validating the implementation of trauma-informed, grief-responsive approaches on a broad scale. Here are some strategies that are readily implementable in classrooms; we will explore more in chapters to come.

Apply an Asset-Based Lens to Challenging Behaviors

Rather than punish or judge the behaviors depicted in Figure 1–2, recognize that they are adaptive coping mechanisms meant to serve a purpose: dulling pain, fulfilling an unmet need, reclaiming control in the face of instability. Maxwell's temper might serve him well when he is protecting his cousin from an abusive partner, just as Miranda's attention seeking might eke out the focus of her recently widowed mother who works two jobs to keep their family together in a one-bedroom apartment. We have all lived through hard things, and in the face of hard things, we do our best. Teens, too, are doing their best. We can help them by creating supportive environments, teaching and modeling healthy coping mechanisms, and respecting their own efforts to seek salve and survival. Challenging behaviors are almost always creative solutions; they just become maladaptive outside of the contexts for which they were developed.

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Consider Context

Although we will investigate strategies that fall within the realm of trauma-informed, grief-responsive teaching, we must not oversimplify or turn away from the complexity, nuance, and pervasiveness of those factors that lead to grief and trauma in the first place. "We are in a tremendously tumultuous time in education," shared Priscilla. She continued:

> In every single classroom we go to, there is trauma. It's not just urban—it is urban, rural, suburban. Sometimes it is pervasive. Sometimes trauma is event-based, and sometimes it is environment-based. The ongoing level of trauma really impacts the way students learn.

The ACE study revealed that regardless of racial identity, socioeconomic standing, or gender, childhood trauma poses a serious threat to the entire US population, but some people are more prone to toxic stress because of structural inequities that may also beget loss—racism, racial violence, and poverty posing just a few examples (Burke Harris 2018, 193).

When the context of bereavement intersects with further trauma, one's ACE score skyrockets. If a student's mother dies as a result of domestic violence, their ACE score will rise. If that student is also a victim of verbal or physical abuse, their number will continue to ascend. In communities where violence is rife, traumatic losses can occur on a daily basis, flicking students' fight-flight-or-freeze response on and into survival mode for indefinite amounts of time. For many, survival mode is not a euphemism: in the United States alone, an estimated three million children witness gun violence every year, and over eighteen thousand children are shot, experiencing injury or death (Everytown Research and Policy 2019). We cannot underestimate the prevalence, nor the gravity, of this crisis. And we cannot excuse ourselves from the work of fighting for a solution.

While public awareness of trauma's ubiquity grows, there is also increasing recognition that the ACE survey, though helpful, has its limitations. Chronic stress that does not check the ACE score boxes, like "racism, homophobia or other systemic injustices,"

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can still dampen the immune system or impact mental well-being beyond childhood, leading to the behavioral challenges and later-life health issues that we previously explored (Gaffney 2019). Skepticism surrounding the oversimplification of trauma is not limited to ACE metrics but extends to interventional teaching strategies born out of them, like character development centered on "grit," which we will explore in chapters to come. For our purposes, ACEs offer a starting point; we realize that they are not comprehensive but represent some of the circumstances that lead to students' losses, that manifest as behavioral challenges in our classrooms and caring relationships, and that require our consideration when working to reach bereaved students at school. We recognize that adversities not included in ACE metrics are equally urgent and valid, and that their health implications are profound. And we are mindful that students who come from circumstances that induce chronic stress before or after a loss are at a higher risk for suffering long-term physical and psychological implications. Scientists use the term *high allostatic load* to refer to this cumulative impact of chronic or repeating stressors across the lifespan, and loss certainly contributes to an elevated load (Guidi et al. 2020).

Considering the contexts in which students' losses occur reminds us to take a step back and appreciate the complexity behind any behavioral changes we see in the classroom. We can then respond to those changes more compassionately while remaining mindful of students' unique needs, too.

Promote Safety, Connection, and Emotional Regulation

Because students' losses are often born out of difficulties beyond teachers' control, it is critical to note that grief is not a problem that teachers should try to fix for their students, but rather a reality to embrace and work through with them. Knowing this, we can take an additive approach to curricular and cocurricular work, asking ourselves, "If we cannot get rid of students' grief or trauma, how—instead—can we supplement and counteract it? What can we facilitate for grieving students? How can we make classroom communities oppositional to the stressful environments

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that many students—not only those who are grieving—endure beyond school (and, in many cases, at school)? How can we sooth and steady students in times of stress, without pity or placation, while recognizing the systemic intricacies (violence, poverty, inequity, injustice) that may undergird their losses? Can we cultivate resilience rather than teach grit?"

These questions can feel overwhelming for their importance. But we can find tangible strategies by grounding our solution seeking in the three pillars of trauma-informed care: safety, connection, and emotional regulation (Bath 2008). The following definitions offer reference points; you might add on to or alter them yourself.

Safety

Safety is a sense of physical and emotional well-being in which one's basal needs are met or transcended; one has the freedom to express one's identity, experiences, and perspective; and one has the space to take healthy risks, to grow and improve through setbacks.

Connection

Connection is a bond that one has with another person, place, object, or idea; a sense of inclusion and belonging in which one's individuality is both celebrated and meaningfully enmeshed within a larger whole; a reciprocal, attuned energetic exchange that fuels one's sense of well-being.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to recognize, reflect on, and process one's internal thoughts and feelings while maintaining mindful control over one's outward actions and reactions.

Leading trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk, founder of the Trauma Research Foundation and author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, notes that it is only when we immerse our nervous systems in experiences oppositional to trauma that our physiology and psychology can begin to recalibrate and recuperate (2014, 87). A traumatized nervous system, a grieving nervous system, will likely have difficulty learning in any substantive way. We cannot—and

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should not—remove students' grief, nor imply that they must leave their emotions and experiences in the proverbial hallway. Instead, by supplementing and structuring our classrooms, curricula, and interpersonal relationships with tools for supporting students' sense of safety and connection, and their ability to regulate their emotions, we can create environments supportive of all students' development and learning.

Redirect Risk-Taking Behaviors

The teenage brain is especially vulnerable to the effects of grief and trauma. Because the prefrontal cortex, which controls complex thinking and executive functioning, is still in development, teens' "emotional brains," regulated in part by the amygdala, continue to run the show (Azab 2018). Even though teens lead with their emotional brains, they may become less expressive about their emotional lives. Whereas a five-year-old might experience grief bursts by way of tantrums, meltdowns, or clinginess, teens are more likely to turn to numbing or avoidance mechanisms, suppressing their feelings or channeling them into other outlets (Di Ciacco 2008, 127).

Even without considering for trauma, adolescents are prone to risk-taking; their brains are not fully capable of forethought or impulse control, and these abilities are further diminished in states of grief, stress, and trauma (American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation 2012, 4; Magliano 2015). This means that the outlets teens turn to for relief may involve risk: substance (ab)use, unsafe driving, precarious sexual behaviors, self-harm, and eating disorders, to name a few examples (Nakkula and Toshalis 2006, 42).

But this doesn't have to be the case. School is a critical environment in which students might find a plethora of alternative coping mechanisms and positive risk-taking opportunities that provide control, relief, and community—what students are likely seeking (if subconsciously) when engaging in potentially harmful activities. Grief outlets might look like rugby, rap, meditation, or the debate team. In the chapters to come, activities integrating mindfulness, writing, art, connections with nature, and positive psychology will offer starting points for introducing students to pro-social alternatives to risk-taking behaviors and for building a classroom culture that is supportive of everyone's regulation, teachers' included.

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It's particularly important to introduce these alternative behaviors during adolescence because the teenage brain undergoes a period of immense neural development comparable only to that which occurs in the first year and a half of life (Spinks 2002). The brain begins "pruning," or eliminating extra synapses, and the activities and habits of mind teens most frequently engage in determine which synapses remain strong into adulthood (Di Ciacco 2008, 114). The malleability of our brains and our ability to form new neural connections throughout life by changing our behaviors is called *neuroplasticity*, and it is key in our ability to adapt to, and even recover from, early-life adversity.

In a developmental moment when healthy coping mechanisms might restore the body to a state of physiological equilibrium and provide psychological aid throughout the life span, teachers should be on the lookout for students who might benefit from extra encouragement and connect them with new opportunities, redirecting challenging emotions in developmentally appropriate ways.

Empower Students' Awareness of Emotional Regulation

Trauma-informed educators Kristen Souers and Pete Hall write in their book *Fostering Resilient Learners* that students who present challenging behaviors in the classroom (like those listed in Figure 1–2) "are, in essence, having normal responses to not-OK things." "To climb out of survival mode," they tell us, "it is helpful for students to identify the feelings, name the function of their brain, and attune to their biology" (2016, 31).

Teach students about the impact stress has on their brains and bodies by giving them language for the *why* behind their feelings: Introduce the terms *sympathetic nervous system* and *parasympathetic nervous system*, and discuss how both systems influence the way we feel.

1. The sympathetic nervous system controls our fight-or-flight response. When this part of the nervous system is engaged, we feel a fast heartbeat, sweaty palms, tense muscles, quickened breathing. We're ramped up and ready to go or to run away,

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depending on our perceived threat. It's hard for our brains to think clearly, let alone learn, while in this state (Harvard Health Publishing 2011).

2. The parasympathetic nervous system is our "rest and digest" system, responsible for making us feel calm and at peace. This is the system we tap into during meditation, yoga, deep breathing, and other relaxation exercises. When we engage our parasympathetic nervous system, we lower our blood pressure, slow our breathing, and create physiological conditions that promote higher cognitive functioning (van der Kolk 2014, 79; Shulman 2018, 95).

A common metaphor for understanding the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems comes from trauma scientist Dan Siegel, who describes the former as the "downstairs brain" and the latter as "the upstairs brain" (Souers and Hall 2016, 31). In our upstairs brain, we engage in executive functioning—reasoning, analyzing, thinking, learning, planning, dreaming, imagining, inhibiting impulses. But grief, stress, and trauma throw us into our downstairs brain, which makes it quite challenging to achieve any of these tasks.

Both our upstairs and downstairs brains are crucial to survival. They carry their own unique wisdom, alerting us to situations that are, in Souers and Hall's words, "not-OK." When working with teens, it's important to emphasize that the downstairs brain is not bad, nor is the upstairs brain ideal. We need to listen to and integrate both.

Sometimes, though, the downstairs brain overdoes it. It can be perfectionistic and doesn't always know when it's time to leave the party. When this happens, and the sympathetic nervous system is stuck in overdrive, students might exhibit the behaviors outlined in Figure 1–2. In such moments, it's helpful for both students and teachers to have strategies on hand to promote self-regulation and de-escalation. These strategies might look different for every student, especially because the behaviors born out of the downstairs brain occur on a broad spectrum, but there are a number of ways we can all work to access our upstairs brain when we're feeling stuck in our brain basement, each strategy a rung of the ladder.

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To help students identify ways they can access their upstairs brain, even in times of stress, ask them to create three columns on a piece of paper and label the columns “Upstairs Brain,” “Downstairs Brain,” and “Tool Kit.” In the first two columns, invite students to list bullet points describing how their minds and bodies feel in these states. In the final column, ask them to reflect on activities they find relaxing—things they can turn to the next time they need to access their upstairs brain. With a younger group (grades 6–9), you might invite students to draw a diagram of a “brain building,” such as the one in Figure 1–3, to further reinforce Siegel’s metaphor.

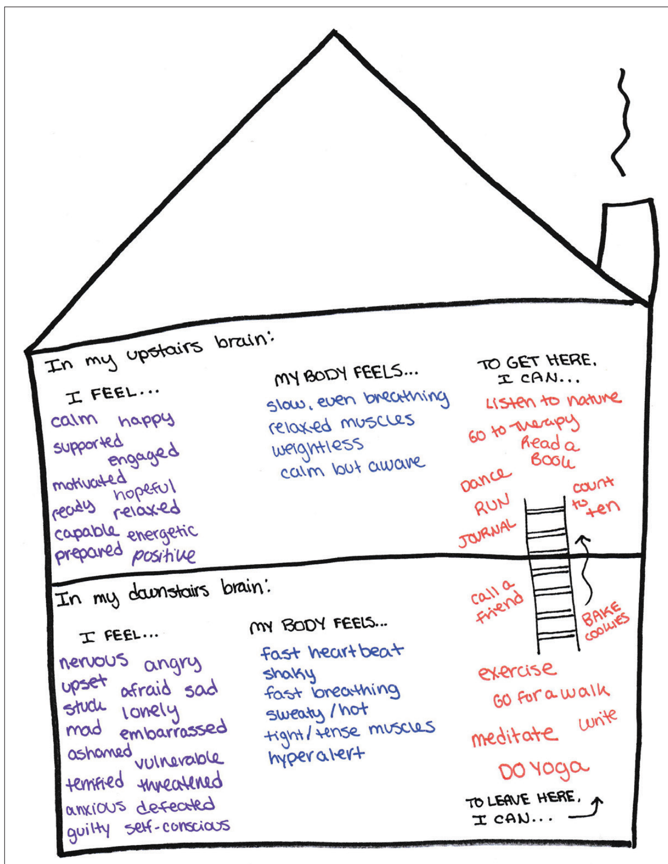

Figure 1–3 Brain Building Drawing

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Write and Reflect

Write about a time when you were teaching from your upstairs brain—tuned in, focused, immersed in the moment of learning. Re-create that scene on the page using sensory details, dialogue, description; immerse yourself in that memory.

Next, write about a time when you were teaching from your downstairs brain—perhaps distracted by a personal loss or conflict or struggling to calibrate to a student's challenging behaviors. Re-create the scene, using vivid details in vignette form.

Now, take a few minutes to complete these exercises again with students in mind. When in your career has a student notably and noticeably come into class using their downstairs brain? How about upstairs? What did those interactions sound, look, and feel like?

Compare the scenes you've created. What do they teach you? How can you gain greater distance from students' downstairs brain behaviors? What helps you take a responsive rather than reactive approach? If you were to create your own brain building diagram, what strategies would you list as helpful regulators? Where do you turn in times of stress? List five examples.