

# ESL as a Mental Health Intervention

Spring Institute and Rocky Mountain  
Survivor's Center Collaboration

# Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights

- ▶ July 2009 Newsletter

- Honoring the community as a vehicle of healing and recovery

# Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning


- ▶ ORR Technical Assistance Provider
- ▶ Community ESL Programs



▶ Every student should leave every class using English to be able to do something that they couldn't before.

- Autumn Keltner
- And that is a mental health intervention....

[www.springinstitute.org/publications](http://www.springinstitute.org/publications)

- ▶ Mental Health of Refugee Children
  - ▶ Refugee Children with Low Literacy Skills or Interrupted Education
  - ▶ Cultural Adjustment, Mental Health, and ESL: The Role of the Teacher
- 

# Autonomic Nervous System

## AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (smooth muscles) (involuntary)

### SYMPATHETIC BRANCH

Activates during stress states including, but not only, traumatic events

#### Noticeable signs:

Faster respiration  
Quicker heart rate (pulse)  
Increased blood pressure  
Pupils dilate  
Pale skin color  
Increased sweating  
Skin cold (possibly clammy) to touch  
Digestion (and peristalsis) decreases

**During actual traumatic event OR with flashback (visual, auditory and/or sensory):**

Preparation for quick movement, leading to possible fight reflex or flight reflex

### PARASYMPATHETIC BRANCH

Activates during states of rest and relaxation

#### Noticeable signs:

Slower, deeper respiration  
Slower heart rate (pulse)  
Decreased blood pressure  
Pupils constrict  
Blushed/flushed skin color  
Skin warm (usually dry) to touch  
Digestion (and peristalsis) increases

**During actual traumatic event OR with flashback (visual, auditory and/or sensory):**

Can also activate concurrently, while **masking** sympathetic activation, leading to tonic immobility: freezing reflex (like a mouse, caught by a cat, going dead). Marked by simultaneous signs of high sympathetic and parasympathetic activation.

# Window of Tolerance

The optimal Arousal Zone



# Bi Phasic Trauma Responses

Sympathetic Hyperarousal:

Freeze & Hyperarousal

Window of Tolerance

Parasympathetic Hypoarousal:

"Death feigning"





# Bottom-Up Hijacking

- Refers to neuro pathway processing that often becomes habitual in the traumatized person.



# At the mercy of the limbic system

- Confidence to cope with daily life is greatly diminished.
- Participants frequently view this as coming from their own psychological inadequacy, rather than in the function of the brain.

# Fighting the dragon

When you are fighting the dragon, can you stop right there and learn a foreign language?



# Affective Dysregulation

- The sensitive ESL teacher allows the student to experience dysregulating affect in affectively tolerable doses, in the context of safe environment.

# Mindfulness





Honor DIGNITY  
Respect  
STRENGTH  
PLOVE Pride  
O HOPE JOY  
W Peace LIFE  
E  
R



# The pilot project: ESL as a mental health intervention within a torture treatment center

- Presented by ESL teachers,
- Brandy Kramer and Sarah Schoentgen





# Who were the 23 students in the pilot program?

- Torture survivors
- Receiving services at RMSC
- Education ranged from preliterate (no formal schooling) to multiple graduate degrees
- In the U.S. less than 6 months
- Seeking asylum

# How was the program organized?

- 3 ten-week sessions
- Participants needing interpreters recommended by RMSC providers and recruited by the teacher
- Eligibility not limited to those receiving Mental Health
- Registration re-opened every 5 weeks to accommodate new RMSC intakes
- Registration included participant's education history and a pre-test
- Classes met 2 times/week from 10 to 12:30 - 5 hours per week
- Teaching team - certified esl instructors with experience in multi-level classrooms of refugees and asylum seekers
- Volunteers and interns assisted in the classroom

# Sample activities to build readiness to learn



- Crazy 8's brain gym
- Cross-overs brain gym
- De-stressor materials
- Art
- Music



ALBERT

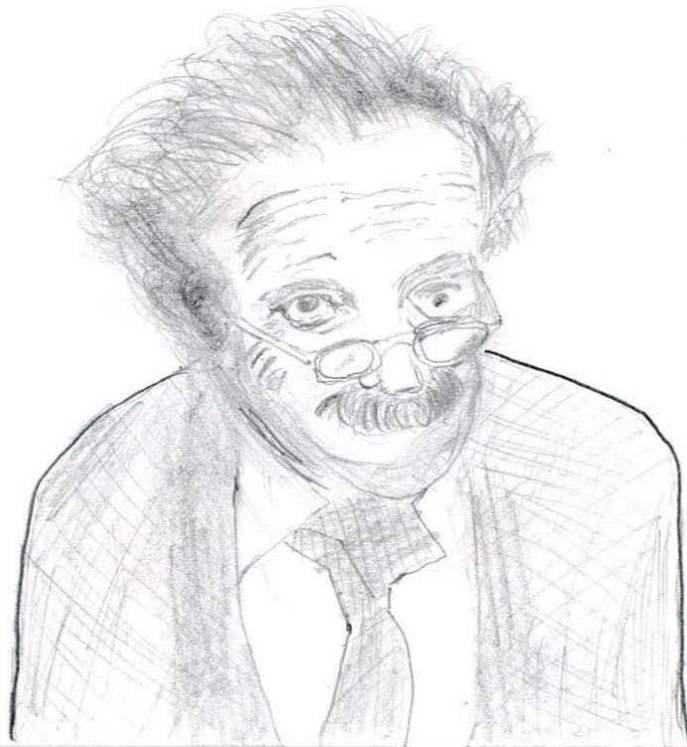
EINSTEIN

WAS

A

Re fu

Ge ee.



Androm H



# Examples of accommodations

- Frequent interaction with RMSC staff
- More time for socializing
- Frequent celebrations
- Relaxation activities
- Sharing food (long breaks for snack each class)
- Bus passes provided
- Class schedule
- Curriculum topics - evolved from student's everyday struggles
- More time spent on each competency
- More repetition and recycling of lessons



# ■ Building community



# Frequent celebrations







The  
perpetual  
problem  
of  
communicating  
instructions

# Curriculum development



- Sample multi-level activities
- “What happened?” interviews
  - Medicine labels
  - Snacks
  - Sounds
- Answering machines & voice mail

# Understanding interview questions

- Tell me what happened.
- What happened next?
- And then what happened?
- What was the last thing that happened?



# Using authentic materials to practice understanding medicine labels



▪ Find the answers from the label:

- 1. What is the name of the medicine? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. What is the form of the medicine (pills/drops/syrup/inhaler/ointment)? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Is it for internal or external use? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Is it oral \_\_\_\_\_ topical \_\_\_\_\_ inhaled \_\_\_\_\_?
- 5. How much do I take at one time? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. How often do I take this medicine? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. How many times do I take it in one day (24 hours)? \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. Do I take this medicine with food or on an empty stomach? \_\_\_\_\_
- 9. What are the side effects? \_\_\_\_\_
- 10. Are there any warnings on this label? \_\_\_\_\_
- 11. Are there foods and drinks I cannot have while taking this medicine? \_\_\_\_\_
- 12. Can I drink alcohol while taking this medicine? \_\_\_\_\_
- 13. Are there activities I cannot do while taking this medicine? \_\_\_\_\_
- 14. What is the expiration date? \_\_\_\_\_
- 15. Can I get a refill? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_



# Learning the snack procedures

- Yesterday I went to King Soopers.
- I needed to buy snacks for class the next day.
- I only had \$5 to spend.
- I bought two pineapples and a bag of peanuts.
- The total was \$4.29.
- I had .71 left.

▪ \_\_\_\_\_

- 1. Yesterday I \_\_\_\_\_ to King Soopers.
- 2. I needed to \_\_\_\_\_ snacks for \_\_\_\_\_ the next \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3. I only had \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4. I bought \_\_\_\_\_ pineapples and a \_\_\_\_\_ of peanuts.



# Recognizing sound effects

- ◆ Lower level students listen to recorded sounds and choose the correct strip sentence
  - -The train is coming
  - -The fire truck is going to a fire
  - - The doorbell is ringing
  - -The alarm clock is beeping
  - -The smoke alarm is sounding
  - -A car horn is honking
- ◆ Higher level students listen to sounds and choose the correct modal response with “should”
  - -You should not honk your horn in an apartment parking lot at night
  - -You should exit the building by the stairs if the smoke alarm sounds
  - -You should look out the peephole on your door before answering the doorbell



# Modal “should” conversation practice for advanced level

- Students pick a random strip from a grab bag and ask each partner the question.
- Examples:
- I’m going to be 30 minutes late to class. What should I do?
- It’s going to snow today. What should I wear?
- I don’t know how to get to the clinic by bus. What should I do?
- I don’t understand the teacher. What should I do?
- I can’t read the writing on this pill bottle. What should I do?





# Practicing comprehension of answering machine messages

## ▪ Safeway Pharmacy

▪ 1) The store is located at Corona Street and

- A - 1st Avenue
- B - 6th Avenue
- C - 3rd Avenue

A B C

▪ 2) To continue in English, what do you do?

- A - Press 6
- B - Press 1
- C - Do nothing

A B C

▪ 3) To refill a prescription, you must

- A - Press 2
- B - Press 1
- C - Speak to a pharmacy staff member

A B C



# Milestones achieved

- Friendships/connections/community
- Increased utilization of mental health services
- Transitioning into community classes
- Increase self confidence and pride
- Increase self efficacy
- Hope and motivation



# Further positive outcomes

- Increased "presence" in the classroom
- Improved punctuality
- Improved attendance
- New student-organized group activities
- Increased sharing with teacher about personal challenges and needs

# Challenges

- Evaluation methodology, especially re MH changes
- Extreme multi-level student population
- Helping students with social/cultural competencies
- Encouraging students to speak up for their needs to providers other than esl teachers
- Boundary issues
- Vicarious trauma