Rest Between Contractions:

Trauma-Informed Approaches for Professors Teaching in Turbulent Times

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Introduction

By now, we're all familiar with the instruction repeated by flight attendants everywhere: "Put your oxygen mask on first before assisting others." This phrase has become so ubiquitous that it's nearly impossible to discuss mental health without invoking it. The only advice that might be more overused is the ever-present call to "practice self-care."

For professors navigating the unrelenting demands of supporting students amid today's political and social upheaval, the oxygen mask metaphor falls short. It works well for singular, short-term crises but fails when applied to the ongoing, compounding stressors we experience today—what experts call *complex trauma*.

In this essay, I offer a new metaphor and a pragmatic, trauma-informed perspective for navigating these times. Drawing on my research in trauma and my experience as a law professor, I'll share strategies for sustaining ourselves while supporting others in the midst of crisis.

Why the Oxygen Mask Metaphor Falls Short

Since I'm apparently contractually obligated to talk about oxygen masks, let's get it out of the way.

The logic is simple: if you don't help yourself first, you won't be able to help anyone else. Makes sense, right? The only problem is that in times of crisis, logic tends to fly out the window.

Law professors love a good hypothetical, so here's one for you:

> *You're on a plane seated next to a young child. Suddenly, the cabin jolts, the lights flicker, and oxygen masks drop from above. The child panics, screaming and gasping for air, their small hands desperately reaching for the life-giving mask hanging so far out of reach.*
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> *What do you do? Do you calmly secure your own mask while they scream in terror? Or do you jump at the chance to help a terrified, vulnerable child?*

I don't know about you, but I can feel my blood pressure rise at the very thought of leaving that child to her fate—even for a moment. I can almost hear myself thinking, "It'll only take a second. My mask can wait."

Do you know why airlines repeat the oxygen mask instruction so often? There are two reasons, actually.

The first is that we are notoriously bad at following directions in high-stress situations. When panic sets in, the brain's executive function—the part responsible for logical thinking and decision-making—often goes offline. Instead, we default to instinct.

The second reason is even more revealing: In a crisis, we instinctively prioritize helping others, often at great personal cost.

A study on survivors of a 2016 Italian earthquake highlights this deeply ingrained tendency.[1] Over 64% of participants reported providing practical or emotional support to others despite experiencing significant distress themselves. Their actions ranged from offering food, water, and other essentials to personally rescuing survivors from the rubble.

When chaos strikes, our first impulse isn't to look inward—it's to focus outward, attending to the needs of those around us.

That is precisely why flight attendants repeat the oxygen mask instruction so often. The industry understands that, in a moment of crisis, our instincts can work against us.

The repetitive reminder is designed to override our natural urge to help others first—just long enough to prevent us from succumbing to hypoxia. After all, if we suffocate to death, we won't be able to offer the support we instinctively want to give.

But what works for a singular shock event—the sudden loss of cabin pressure in an airplane, for example—falls apart when applied to the ongoing, compounding stresses of long-term trauma.

How long can we put off our deeply human need to help others?

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[1] [1] Massazza, A., Joffe, H., & Brewin, C. R. (2021). Feelings, thoughts, and behaviors during disaster. Qualitative Health Research, 31(2), 323–337. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732320968791

Imagine sitting on that same airplane while the child next to you screams in terror for hours, days, or even a semester. Could you truly sit there, ignoring their cries?

For most of us, the answer is no. We can't override our empathy indefinitely, and when we try, we end up in a vicious cycle. We berate ourselves for failing to follow advice like "put your mask on first" or practice "self-care," convinced we lack the willpower to prioritize ourselves. At the same time, we burn out because we keep giving and giving, attending to others' needs without pause.

Our students, scared, disoriented, and overwhelmed by the instability of the world around them, turn to us for guidance and support. How do we continue to meet their needs without exhausting ourselves in the process?

We need a better metaphor.

Rest Between Contractions: *In Theory*

The oxygen mask metaphor works well for acute, singular events—a sudden loss of cabin pressure, for example. If we ignore our instinctive reaction to help others, and instead focus on helping ourselves first, we actually stand a better chance of being *more* useful to others.

But this metaphor falls apart with the prolonged and persistent demands of ongoing trauma—the kind our students are likely to experience amid the political upheaval in the U.S. These times are nothing short of a seismic shift: a political, social, and cultural shakeup that feels as disruptive as any earthquake.

The challenges we are currently experiencing are more akin to *complex trauma*, a term that describes the psychological toll of prolonged exposure to pervasive and inescapable stressors. Unlike a singular shock event, complex trauma involves a relentless cycle of stress with few opportunities for recovery.

By its nature, complex trauma is destabilizing. For many students, especially those from marginalized communities, the political and cultural upheaval in the U.S. feels like an unending storm. Racism, sexism, economic instability, and threats to fundamental rights erode their sense of safety and belonging.

As professors, we become their anchor, holding space for their fear and uncertainty. Yet, this ongoing emotional labor—while necessary—creates its own strain. We are expected to support our students, manage institutional pressures, and confront the same external crises ourselves.

Our instinct, unsurprisingly, is to put others first.

It feels almost impossible to ignore the needs of students who are scared, disoriented, and overwhelmed. And so we tell ourselves we'll attend to our own needs "later." But "later" never comes. Instead, this cycle of self-sacrifice leads to burnout and emotional depletion, leaving us unable to support anyone—including ourselves.

For professors, navigating this turmoil demands a new metaphor that reflects the cyclical and enduring nature of this challenge. Here, the childbirth community offers a powerful alternative: *rest between contractions*.

In labor, contractions come in waves, each bringing its own intensity and pain. Between contractions, however brief the interval, rest is not just encouraged—it is essential.

This pause allows the woman or birthing person to preserve strength, regulate their breathing, and prepare for the next wave. It is not about avoidance or indulgence; it is a pragmatic response to a process that demands resilience.

The same principle applies to navigating the emotional labor of complex trauma. When the demands feel unrelenting, the key is to create intentional moments to pause, regroup, and replenish. This rest doesn't eliminate the challenges, but it enables us to endure them.

By embracing the principle of resting between contractions, we can sustain ourselves through the ongoing waves of challenge and strain. This is not about giving less to our students; it's about ensuring we remain present and capable—not just for a single moment, but for the long haul.

Rest Between Contractions: *In Practice*

How do we implement this strategy? Resting between contractions requires small and large acts of self-regulation, woven into our daily lives.

On a micro level, this might mean stepping away after an emotionally charged class, pausing for a few deep breaths before diving into a difficult conversation, or finding stillness between back-to-back meetings.

On a medium scale, it could involve cultivating mindfulness practices, establishing an exercise routine, or engaging in activities that help us to become more embodied.

On a larger scale, it might mean intentionally carving out time for joy and renewal—a long-overdue vacation, moments of shared laughter, or the simple pleasure of doing something that makes you feel alive. These pauses are not indulgences; they are lifelines.

The truth is, this isn't groundbreaking information—you already knew it. So why is it so hard to put it into practice? What gets in our way?

Why Is It So Hard to Care for Ourselves?

If "rest between contractions" is such an essential human need, why is it so difficult to implement?

Part of the answer lies in the deeply human instinct to care for others. But this instinct can also function as a defense mechanism, allowing us to avoid confronting our own pain.

In real life, people help each other even when it means putting their own lives at risk. Why? The Italian earthquake study offers some answers. Participants said helping others gave them purpose. It made them feel useful. It gave shape to the chaos, and allowed them a small sense of control in a world turned upside down.

But that instinct to rush in and save others comes at a cost.

Long after the rubble had cleared, survivors continued to bury their pain and numb their emotions.

Many described feeling detached, moving through their days on autopilot. One woman put it simply: “I felt like an emptied carcass. Only bones.”

Psychologists call this *emotional blunting*. In this state, the nervous system dials down our capacity to feel or express emotion. Joy, sadness, and even anger can feel very far away.

It’s not a conscious choice but a survival response that helps the body function under unrelenting stress.

Emotional blunting is just one end of the spectrum. Survivors of crisis can also experience *emotional flooding*. Where blunting leaves us numb, flooding overwhelms us.

The nervous system can become dysregulated by the smallest trigger—a comment, a memory, a moment of stillness—unleashing a tidal wave of emotion.

Tears come without warning. Rage erupts out of nowhere. Panic floods the body before the mind can catch up.

It can feel like we’re being hijacked by our own emotions.

The Italian study underscores something we intuitively know: when disaster strikes, our first impulse is often to care for others, not ourselves.

It’s an admirable trait. It might even be evolutionarily sound because it increases the chance of group survival.

But when the instinct to keep moving and tend to others becomes a long-term pattern—when we habitually show up for everyone else while neglecting ourselves—that’s when burnout rears its head.

Get Your Nervous System In Order: The Science of Rest and Regulation

When our nervous systems are dysregulated, rest can feel out of reach, leaving us trapped in a cycle of exhaustion, overwork, and burnout. To break this cycle, we must first understand what's holding us back.

Dr. Stephen Porges, a neuroscientist best known for developing Polyvagal Theory, describes the nervous system as a kind of detector. It constantly scans the environment for cues of safety or threat.

When we feel safe, we can access what Porges calls the *ventral vagal state*—a condition that supports connection, learning, and restoration. But when the nervous system perceives danger, including overwhelming stress, it shifts into survival mode. This activated state mobilizes our fight-or-flight responses or freeze states, and we lose access to the calm, restorative conditions necessary for recovery.

Getting our nervous systems back into balance requires that we first recognize when we are dysregulated. Then, we must take deliberate steps to restore equilibrium. At the level of the physical, this might involve grounding techniques such as focusing on the breath, reconnecting with the body through movement, or seeking co-regulation with trusted colleagues or friends. At the level of the psychological, it may involve addressing the deeper wounds that keep us locked in patterns of overwork and avoidance.

Dr. Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion adds an important dimension to this discussion. Self-compassion, in the form of small, intentional acts of care, can restore emotional resources and reduce burnout. As Neff argues, self-compassion is not indulgent—it is pragmatic. By caring for ourselves, we create the capacity to show up for others. Thus, rest is not a luxury but the foundation of our capacity to be available to those who depend on us.

Conclusion

As professors, our work is deeply intertwined with the lives and well-being of our students. To show up fully for them, we must first learn to show up for ourselves. By embracing the principle of “rest between contractions,” and learning to regulate our nervous system, we can find balance amid the demands of academic life.

About the Author

Marjorie Florestal, JD, MA, PhD(c), is the CEO and principal consultant of Blackbird Trauma Training Company. She brings a unique interdisciplinary perspective to her work, combining over 25 years of experience in legal education and practice with advanced degrees in psychology and human development, as well as specialized training in several trauma healing modalities.

Marjorie earned a JD from New York University School of Law, where she was a Root-Tilden-Snow Scholar, an International Law Fellow, and a staff editor for the *Journal of International Law and Politics*. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to France, where she studied comparative immigration law and policy.

Marjorie also holds an MA in Jungian Psychology from Sonoma State University, an MA in Human Development from Fielding Graduate University, and is completing a PhD in Human Development with a concentration in coaching at Fielding.

She is trained in several trauma-healing modalities, including: NeuroAffective Relational Model (NARM), a somatic-based approach to addressing developmental trauma; Healing the Wounds of History, a drama therapy process that catalyzes collective healing; and Pure Belonging, a somatic process aimed at restoring nervous system capacity.

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A former tenured professor at the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law, and a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, and UC Davis, Marjorie has taught courses in the fields of international trade and commercial law, as well as the first year contracts offering. She developed and taught the first course on trauma-informed lawyering at UC Davis Law School.

An award-winning writer, Marjorie is co-author of *The Trauma-Informed Lawyer* (ABA, 2023) and has published on cross-cultural pedagogy, race, and the transformative power of narrative, as well as on issues of international trade law.

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