

## Content Advisory:

Please note that the following article will reference situations and personal reactions that may be sensitive for some readers.

# MOMENTS COUNT

by

**Rochelle Morandini**

**Director, Member Health & Well-Being  
BCPVPA**

The outcome of a day is the sum of its moments.

A year is then the aggregate of those days.

We have many moments that bring us joy.

*That young Grade 2 student who struggles to regulate in class, and was opposed to your efforts at the start of the year. Now, she occasionally joins you in your office where she feels safe. She arrives today to present you with a picture she painted of the two of you reading together.*

*That high school student whose attendance at school was rare, but with whom you*

*have worked to develop a relationship and build trust. He approaches you on a Friday afternoon and, with a wink and a grin, says, "Hey, Principal: that's five days in a row I have showed up!"*

*Your small town's school basketball team wins the Provincials!*

These are heart-filling moments.

Ideally, we pause to be present in these pleasure-filled moments and allow ourselves to feel the sense of gratification and purpose they bring to our day. It is the sum of these moments that remind us of why we chose educational leadership.

On occasion, there are moments in our work that result in sadness, despair, even pain.

*That same Grade 2 student now clings to your hug as summer vacation approaches; you know that she feels safer at school than at home.*

*That same high school student gets in a fight in the school parking lot and is injured; you call 911 and comfort him until help arrives. He is now hospitalized.*

*Your small town experiences a significant flood, damaging homes, and requiring your school to function as the emergency hub.*

These are heavy moments. If you are exposed to many, the impact can add up over time. School administrators, teachers, and support staff are in a unique societal position that results in exposure to the daily realities – both happy, and difficult – in the lives of students, their families, and their communities. You develop relationships and connections with your “clientele” in deeper ways than employees do in other sectors. The support those students and families need may not be readily available, yet when these children arrive at school you welcome them and accept them as they are on that day.

We are in a time when society’s mood can be fractious, and our members are reporting that their exposure to trauma and other difficult moments has increased.

## **MOMENTS COUNT AFTER TRAUMA EXPOSURE**

In the heat of the moment, during and after a traumatic event, educational leaders jump into action to do what needs to be done.

However, when the dust settles in the immediate aftermath of an incident, there may be a perceived expectation that leaders can shake it off and carry on.

Heavy emotions can get buried, and may accumulate over time which can have an impact on health.

Mitigating the impact of primary or even secondary trauma begins in the critical moments that follow the events and/or exposure. Research on mitigating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after a traumatic event has provided valuable insights into effective prevention and treatment strategies. Not everyone who experiences trauma will develop an adjustment disorder or PTSD. However, certain interventions can significantly reduce the risk of long-term psychological distress.

One of those interventions is Psychological First Aid (PFA). Research suggests that early intervention is crucial in preventing the development of PTSD. PFA, which focuses on providing immediate emotional support and practical assistance, has been shown to be effective in the immediate aftermath of trauma. It involves:

- **Safety and comfort:** Helping individuals feel safe and providing reassurance.
- **Stabilization:** Assisting people in managing emotional distress (for example, offering grounding techniques).
- **Connection to support:** Encouraging individuals to seek help from loved ones or professionals.
- **Practical assistance:** Helping access basic needs (for example, food or shelter).

PFA is designed to prevent the escalation of stress responses into long-term mental health issues, although it does not necessarily involve detailed discussions about the traumatic event itself.

There are many strategies that can be employed to assist in recovery from the trauma that someone has experienced. Whether they lived through the event itself, witnessed it, acted in the role of an emergency responder, or experienced traumatic stress in the aftermath, there are a number of ways to calm the nervous system and regain emotional balance.

When something traumatic happens, how an individual reacts in the days that follow can either help or delay their recovery. Coping after a traumatic event can be a challenging process, as that person may experience a range of emotional, mental, and physical responses. However, there are several strategies that can help individuals manage their reactions and begin the healing process:

- Acknowledging their feelings and understanding that they are valid. Feelings such as confusion, anxiety, or detachment are common after trauma. Allowing themselves to grieve, and to “be” with the variety of emotions, without judgement.
- Allowing time to recover by asking or making space and time to process the events, helping enable the individual to recoup at their own pace.
- Talking with others about how they feel; seeking support, and not isolating themselves.
- Calming and grounding through meditation, mindfulness, deep breathing exercises, or progressive muscle relaxation which help to calm the nervous system.
- Engaging in physical activity to help reduce stress and improve mood by releasing endorphins (the body’s natural mood boosters).
- Taking care of themselves by ensuring plenty of sleep, eating a healthy diet, and drinking enough water.
- Resting and recovering, as trauma can be physically hard on the body.
- Avoiding the use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco.
- Getting back into a daily routine. Doing the things they would normally do, even if they don’t feel like it. This enables them to feel a sense of normalcy and control.
- Setting small goals. If the event has left the individual feeling overwhelmed, they can break

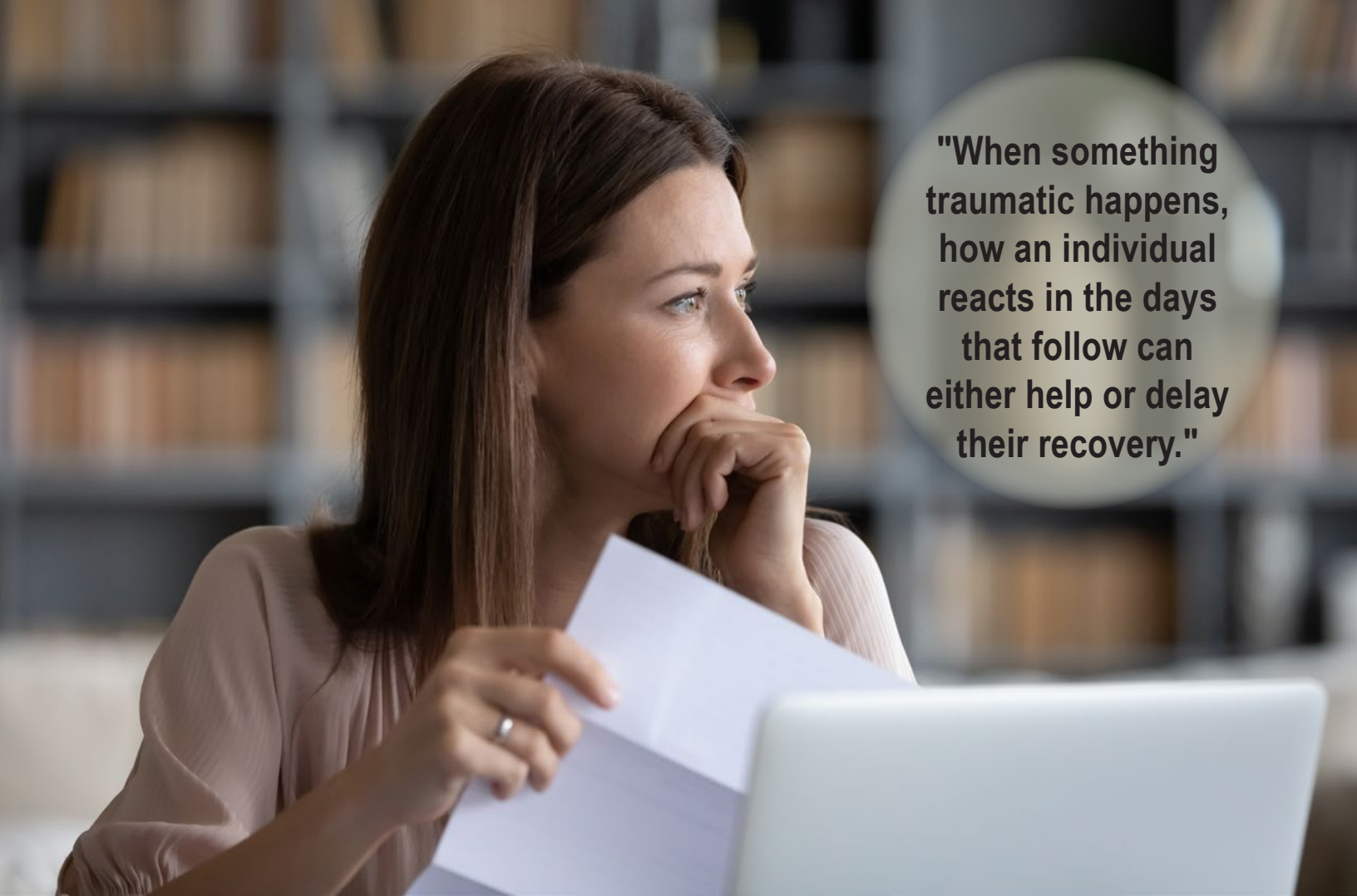
tasks into smaller, manageable steps, and celebrate small accomplishments.

- Limiting exposure to stressful triggers. Minimizing their media consumption, where exposure to the news or images related to the traumatic event can exacerbate feelings of distress. If certain places, people, or activities trigger intense emotional reactions, they should give themselves space and time before facing them again.
- Focusing on what they can control. Trauma often leads to feelings of helplessness. Therefore, the focus should be on the aspects of their life they can control, such as self-care routines, their responses to situations, and reaching out for support when needed. This may include engaging in activities that give them a sense of agency and empowerment, whether it is helping others, setting boundaries, or taking time for themselves.
- When trying to help a colleague, listening to find out where they are in the coping process.
- Most of all, it is important that people are patient with themselves, taking the time it takes to feel better. Experiencing the emotions and taking the time to heal without forcing the healing process. This often involves learning to reconnect with uncomfortable emotions without becoming overwhelmed.

How an individual reacts when something traumatic happens, and shortly after the event, can help or delay recovery. Coping with trauma is a unique and personal experience, and there is no right or wrong way to heal. Everyone’s journey will look different. Over time, with the right support and coping strategies, individuals can heal and regain a sense of safety and normalcy in their lives.

## ***MOMENTS ADD UP***

Educational leaders are in a role that is at risk for trauma exposure, whether a single significant event,



**"When something traumatic happens, how an individual reacts in the days that follow can either help or delay their recovery."**



**"Mitigating the Impact of  
Vicarious Trauma"**

**Rochelle Morandini**

**BCPVPA Principl(ed)  
November 2023**

or the accumulation of vicarious trauma over time. The response of your nervous system to vicarious trauma, over time, can have a health impact. (See *"Mitigating the Impact of Vicarious Trauma"*, above)

While the symptoms of traumatic stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) look very similar in the wake of a disaster or disturbing event, they progress very differently. As unpleasant as the symptoms of traumatic stress can be, they tend to gradually improve over time, especially if the impacted individual takes steps to care for their

emotional health. However, if traumatic stress symptoms do not abate and the nervous system remains "stuck," unable to move on from the event for a prolonged period of time, an individual may be experiencing PTSD.

The indicators that someone may be struggling with traumatic stress symptoms include:

- They are not feeling better after six weeks.
- They are having trouble functioning at home and work.
- They are experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks.
- They are having an increasingly difficult time connecting and relating to others.
- They are experiencing suicidal thoughts or feelings.

- They are avoiding the places or people that remind them of the disaster or traumatic event.

If any of these signs are present, it is important for that individual to reach out to a mental health professional for further evaluation and support.

### ***GETTING HELP IN THE MOMENT***

Mitigating the impact of trauma is strongly linked to accessing early and appropriate treatment that helps to process, rather than shield, the body's and mind's response to trauma.

Coping and recovery are enhanced when individuals access treatment specifically for trauma. These treatments include:

#### **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) that is specifically tailored for trauma is one of the most researched and effective treatments for PTSD. CBT helps individuals understand and change negative

thought patterns and behaviours that are contributing to their distress. Different CBT therapies include:

- Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), which involves challenging your perspective about the traumatic event and related unhelpful thoughts (such as self-blame, guilt, or catastrophic thinking) and replacing them with more balanced and realistic thoughts. This form of therapy can be performed in an individual or group setting.
- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), which helps address inaccurate beliefs and unhealthy behaviour patterns stemming from trauma.
- Prolonged Exposure (PE), a component of CBT that involves gradual, controlled exposure to trauma-related memories or situations. This helps individuals process the traumatic event and reduce avoidance behaviours, a key feature of PTSD.

**"Social support plays a significant role in mitigating PTSD. "**



## Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)



"EMDR – A Growing  
Treatment for Mental Health"

Rochelle Morandini

BCPVPA ReFresh  
October 2024

EMDR is another effective treatment for PTSD. It involves bilateral stimulation (usually through guided eye movements) while the individual recalls traumatic memories. (See *"EMDR - A Growing Treatment for Mental Health"*, above)

### Medication

Medication is often used as part of the treatment for PTSD, particularly when combined with psychotherapy.

### Social Support and Peer Support

Social support plays a significant role in mitigating PTSD. Research consistently shows that individuals with strong social networks and supportive relationships are less likely to develop PTSD following a traumatic event.

## AVOIDING AVOIDANCE

Avoidance, including burying emotions and reactions, is often a concerning symptom of PTSD where individuals actively avoid thoughts, places, or people that remind them of the trauma. Research has found an individual's effort to avoid feeling their emotions may make some PTSD symptoms worse, or even contribute to the development of PTSD symptoms after experiencing a traumatic event. Also of note: if someone is determined to avoid feeling their emotions, they may eventually turn to more drastic and unhealthy ways to avoid them, such as substance use.

Avoiding emotions takes considerable effort and energy. As the emotions being avoided grow stronger, it takes more and more "brain space" to keep them at bay. As a result, little energy may be left for the important things in that person's life, such as family and friends.

Trauma denial may serve as a shield, or defense mechanism, that emotionally and mentally disconnects the person from the traumatic event in an effort to protect them. Sadly, this may not be an aid in healing the pain when, in fact, healing may be on the other side of that pain.

Avoidance behaviour can keep the emotional pain active and at the front of the mind. This results in the brain continuing to think there is an active threat, and not processing and filing these old experiences into the memory banks. The brain may recognize the effort of avoidance, and then will keep the experience "active". By desperately trying not to have emotional pain, we may invite longer-term suffering.

## ADDRESSING UNRESOLVED TRAUMA

Unresolved trauma is often an invisible illness. To the outside world, someone may seem fine, but the reality is that they are stuck in the past, battling emotional and physical symptoms that are impacting the quality of both their life and their work. Unresolved trauma causes a person to experience disruptive physical and emotional reactions in the present as their body and mind continue to defend against a threat that belongs in the past. These reactions can include:

- Hypervigilance and the inability to relax and let their guard down
- Lack of trust and difficulty in being open with other people
- Dissociation and a persistent feeling of numbness
- Control issues, and overcompensation for feeling helpless during the traumatic incident

- Low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness
- Anger issues and difficulty regulating emotions
- High blood pressure and cortisol levels
- Sleep difficulties, including insomnia and nightmares
- Headaches, nausea, sweating, or digestive issues
- Tightness in the chest or the pit of the stomach
- Somatic preoccupation (excessive focus and extreme distress about physical symptoms)
- Bodily memories that cause physical flashbacks of the sensations, including smell, taste, pain, and pressure of the traumatic experience

- Mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, substance use disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

## ***THE HEALING JOURNEY***

The good news is that healing from trauma is possible, even if it takes time. Confronting the thoughts and feelings of the traumatic event may be hurtful, yet research indicates that confronting these fears in a gradual, controlled manner — such as through exposure therapy or other forms of processing — can help mitigate the impact of PTSD.

This underscores the importance of early intervention and accessing the right treatment to process these challenging emotions. Early intervention, particularly through methods like PFA, CBT, EMDR, and



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social support, can significantly reduce the risk of developing PTSD following a traumatic event.

## ***LIVING IN THE MOMENT***

There are difficult and challenging situations that arise in the working life of Principals and Vice-Principals, and it is important to recognize these moments and to access the many tools and strategies that will support and enhance your health and well-being.

While our brains are still primitively wired to focus on our reaction to danger in order to survive, there are amazing moments in our days, weeks, and years that fill us up, bring us joy, and provide a feeling of accomplishment. It is important to develop a habit to notice, embrace, and “be” in those positive moments. The simple act of an intentional pause to celebrate helps our nervous system build resilience, putting us in a better place to cope and recover when exposed to those the occasional, traumatic moments.

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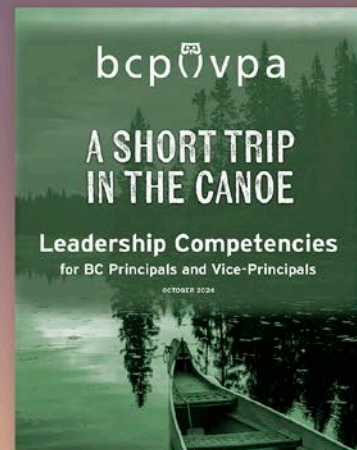
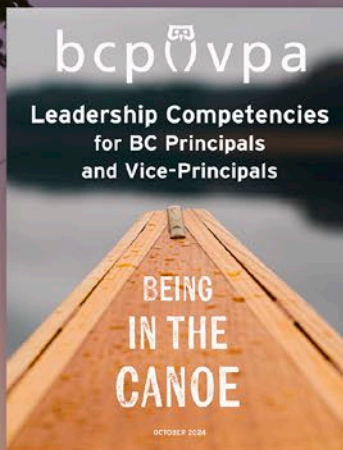
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