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# Trauma-Informed Coaching:

**Practical Approaches for Supporting  
Students through Academic and Life  
Coaching**

**JENNIFER MURCHISON**

MURCHISON CONSULTING

**ALEJANDRO SALINAS**

THE LIGHT INSTITUTE,  
MEMPHIS ALLIES-  
YOUTH VILLAGES

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# Who are we?

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## Jennifer Murchison

former ADA Coordinator, Disability Services professional

Almost 25 years in disability services/justice work

## Alejandro Salinas

Bilingual Family/Individual Intervention Specialist (Life Coach) for young adults in Memphis, TN, The Light Institute

Case Manager with Memphis Allies, a Youth Villages program

Over 10 years' experience, working with at-risk youth and adults

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# What do we do?

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## Jennifer –

Met with students weekly to discuss academic progress and help them learn how to navigate school

Set-up regular meetings to discuss academic progress, often veer into “counseling light” as that’s how students considered me and our meetings – a lot of heavy stuff was discussed, and students were referred to counselors

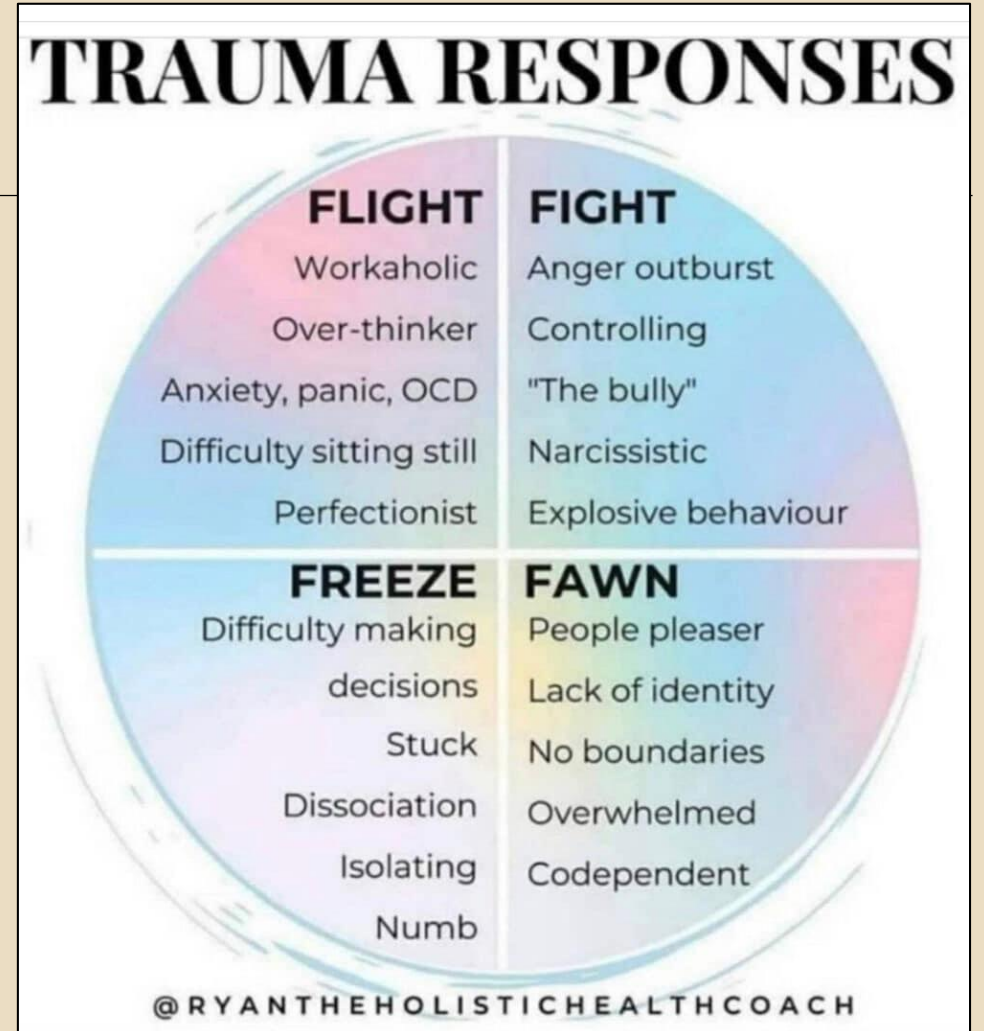
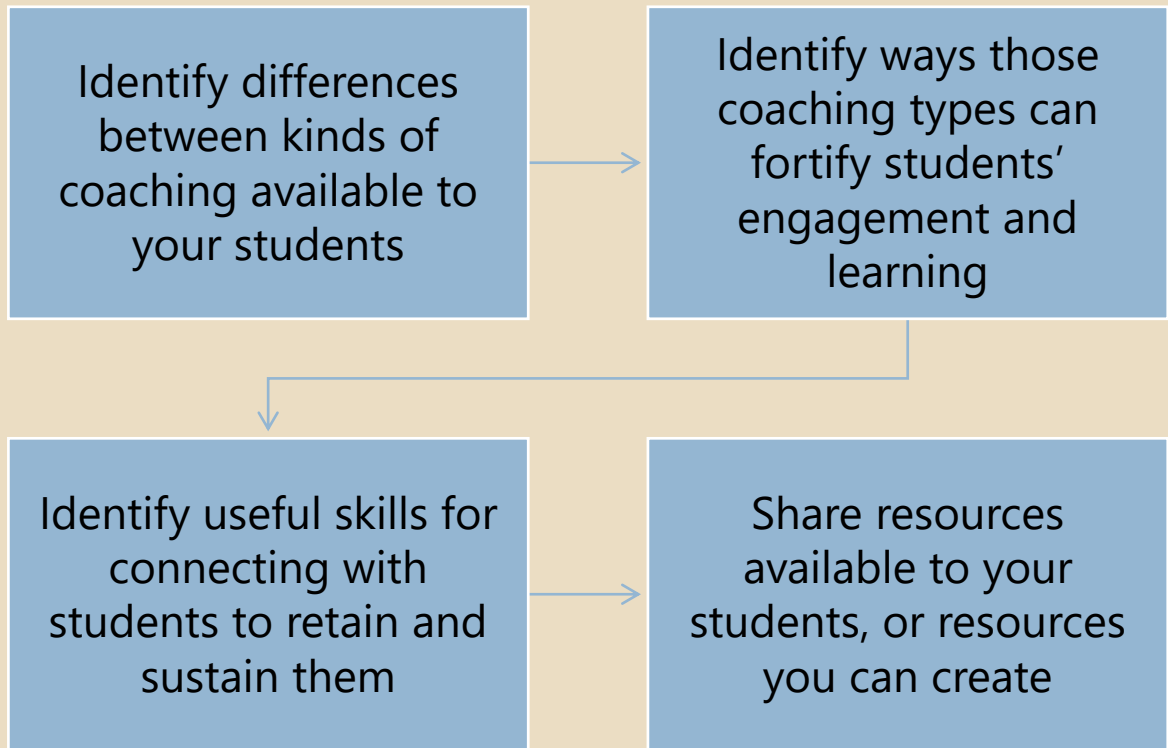
## Alejandro –

Meet with individuals regularly to access resources in the community and navigate “the real world” while also connecting them with support as a result of witnessing, being impacted by traumatic events

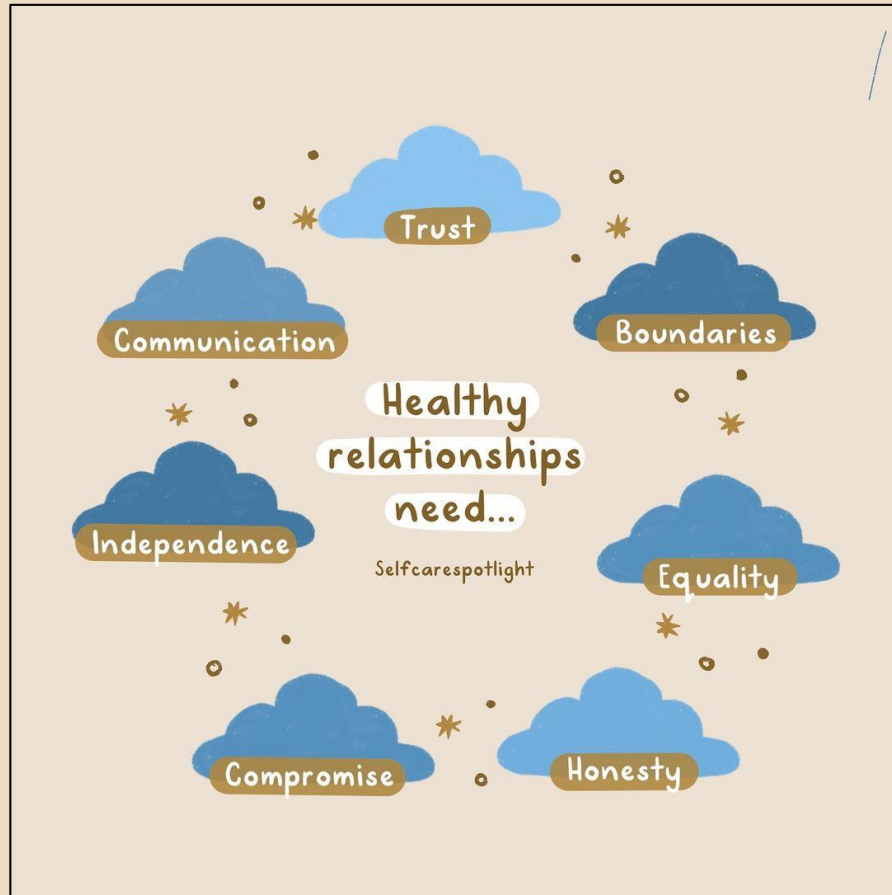
Check-in with individuals regularly, sometimes to build enough trust to engage in more meaningful conversations

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# Objectives for this Session



# The relationships we build are important

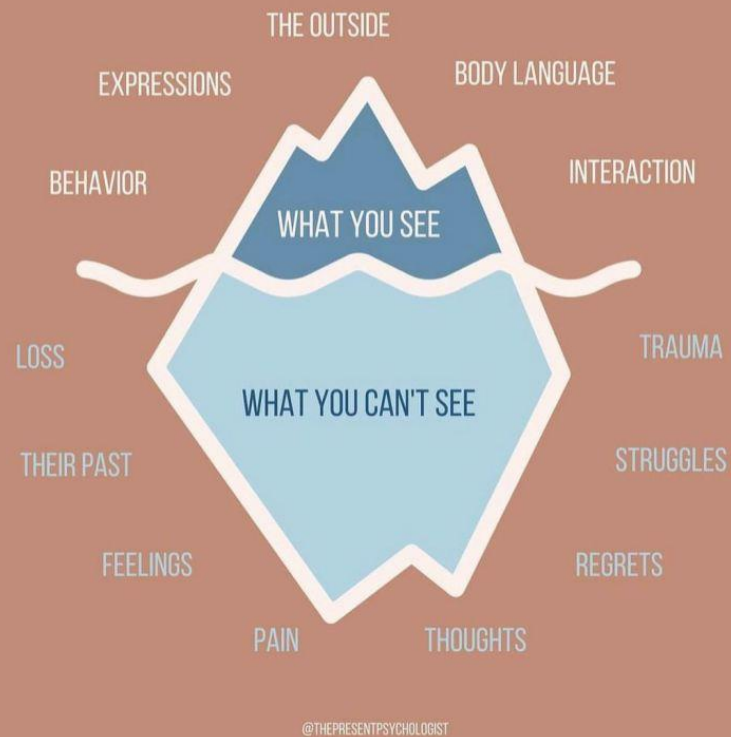


**“Relationships are built at the speed of trust, and social change happens at the speed of relationships.”**

**- Rev. Jennifer Bailey**

# Coaching We Will Focus On

## WHY EMPATHY IS IMPORTANT



- **Academic coaching** – can assist with executive functioning, “learning how to play school”
  - Really helpful for neurodivergent students
  - Helpful for those who need practical guidance in college
  - Being the “me” I needed in college
- **Life coaching** – can assist with transitioning, accountability, support
  - Helpful for getting to know themselves with coping skills, body cues
  - Helpful for those still trying to figure out what they want
  - Helpful for those who do not have emotional support

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# When students are overloaded --

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**ed garcia**  
@\_edgarcia

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Had a student who was always barely making it on time for clinicals and always tired. Later on, found out his parents had lost their jobs, and he was the only one sustaining the family working over 40 hrs and full class load. We ended up hiring him after graduation!

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# Why a “trauma-informed” approach is important

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Students often come to us with a history of trauma:

- **Sexual and physical abuse**
  - Preferential seating
  - Excusing self from class periodically
  - Title IX accommodations may be needed
- **Emotional and verbal abuse**
  - Trigger warnings are important
  - Extended time on tests could be needed, particularly with some topics of courses
- **A system which mandates one needs to ‘prove’ they’re disabled enough for needed access**
  - Medical trauma can be a barrier when gathering documentation

Something as simple as “I’m asking questions to understand, I’m not questioning you” can be affirming and change how a student relates to you or relays information to you

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# Things to keep in mind --

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- Judgment-free zone!! Come from a stance of belief, not justification for needing support
  - Meet the students where they are and create a safe space for students to be themselves
  - Keep communication open and objective, while caring and empathetic
  - Let the student lead the conversation (with your guidance, of course)
  - Keep lists of resources on-hand from the community (housing, food bank, counseling, etc)
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# Things students may not share --

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- Sexual trauma, including assault and harassment
  - Emotional trauma, including neglect/abandonment or mental abuse
  - Citizenship status, including forced migration as a child or “undocumented status” as an adult
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# When I say I'm masking, I'm

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- Trying to fit in
- Burying my head
- Trying to be like everyone else
- Hiding parts of myself
- Suppressing my struggles
- Pretending I'm okay
- Hoping to distract
- Holding back
- Hiding my emotions
- Burning energy
- Following social scripts
- Trying to survive



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# Potential barriers --

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- Students are often seeking assistance on their own for the first time
  - “Veterans talk to veterans”
    - Some folks only share with those who have a similar identities or experiences
  - Asking for help in and of itself can be difficult to navigate
    - Especially for first-gen students or students who’ve never sought out support before
  - Your own trauma – reliving through a student’s experience can take its toll on you, too
    - Take care of yourself! You can’t pour from an empty cup.
    - Recognize your own boundaries here.
    - Step back when and where needed.
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# Helpful (and necessary) phrasing --

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- "I may need to contact (proper authorities). Would you like me to join you in that first meeting?"
  - This is important to communicate for those of us who are mandatory reporters
- "You're here now and together we can figure out support which could help you"
  - often in answer to: "I should have come in here sooner"

- "How can I support you?" may be better than "How can I help you?" because that could have a connotation of giving you something, or support is something that can be earned.
  - "Can I share some resources?"
  - "May I share your contact information with counseling services?"
  - "Together, let's come up with a plan that will work for you."
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# We never know what someone is dealing with

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**Heather Thompson Day**

@HeatherTDay

Follow



I had a student who was late to class come up to me afterward.

“I’m sorry I was late.” He said. “My mom died this morning & I didn’t know where to go, so I came here.”

& that was the day I decided to treat every single student as if I have no idea what they’re going through.

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# Academic Coaching

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Go over syllabus, course expectations</li><li>• Go over weekly assignments, exams</li><li>• Regular check-ins for the semester<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Grades at mid-terms and going into the final</li><li>- Keeping track of absences (and extensions?)</li><li>- Are access needs being met?</li><li>- Do we need to revisit any?</li></ul></li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Get to know the student<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- You'll become their "person"</li><li>- They're more likely to return</li><li>- They're more likely to seek support</li></ul></li><li>• Figure out better recommendations for help, a better way to support them</li><li>• Refer to campus and community resources</li></ul> |
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# Potential Barriers during Academic Coaching --

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- A disorganized student will lose their syllabus or forget to bring it.
  - Many students don't know where to start
    - someone handled that for them in high school
    - there is no one to guide them because that support doesn't exist
  - Some students have no idea how to schedule their time. Patience and grace are key!
  - Some students have had it drilled into them that they will not make it
    - Self-fulfilling prophecies become a real thing for many students surviving trauma
  - If they miss meetings, they could be in trouble. Check on them!
    - I've had to invoke potential "harm to self" clauses of FERPA – not an easy call, but absolutely the right one.
  - Staffing is always a challenge. Figure out what works on your campus. Students persist through to graduation with these meetings, so make the case for more support!
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# Leniency and Understanding from a Professor

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**Dr. Marlene Walk (marle...**

**Follow**



@marlene\_walk

I caught a student plagiarizing. We talked yesterday. She's a single mom, her kid was sick and she ran out of time for the assignment. She had no idea she could ask for an extension. In an email afterwards she said: "today meant more to me than you know"

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# Life Coaching

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- Build rapport with the student, and they're more likely to ask for more help
  - Discuss adjustments from being a kid to being responsible for...everything!
    - Changing dynamics within the family regarding educational responsibilities as well as those of being an adult, keeping self safe, and making smart choices
  - Review goals
    - School, home, work, personal
    - All areas of life, really
  - Review potential barriers they could be facing
    - Follow up a week or two later
    - "Where are you? Are you on track? Did your plan work?"
  - Supporting student through challenges college students face, and refer them to resources (doesn't quite get to the level of counseling/therapy, but could)
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# Potential Barriers during Life Coaching --

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- Setting boundaries for oneself is tough, especially in “give-back” cultures
  - Sometimes overlook self trying to “do it all”
  - Student needs to be willing to accept responsibility for actions and unlearn bad habits
  - Figure out how to prioritize self and self-care while also prioritizing what needs to get done
  - Learning how to be responsible while also letting others know when we are overwhelmed
  - Learning that “No,” is a complete sentence. We don’t always need to justify our “No.”
  - Creating a common language or phrase for when someone has hit their peak, something that means “I need to go” or “I’m tapped out” or even “I need help in a different way.”
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# Helpful phrasing --

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- "What does it look like for me to support you?"
- "What boundaries can you set with (family/co-workers)?"
- "What reminders should you set for yourself?"
  - Important dates
  - Meetings/appointments
- "Have you thought about this...?"
- "Help me understand something..."

- What we are capable of doing is not always the same as what we are willing to do.
  - Have the student/client take agency/ownership for their own solutions
  - Checking-in with student/client is important!
  - Checking-in with self is important, too...
    - Do I have the energy to be most effective?
    - Is there something keeping me from being the kind of help the student/client needs?
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# The things we don't know about...

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**jill evans**

@jillevans55

Follow



I've spent time this semester with a student I was sort of writing off - missing assignments, skipping class. Now I find out the issue is debilitating depression. The first appointment with a therapist is coming up next week. We don't know what people carry. We just don't know.

# Invalidated Trauma

- Bullying
- Infertility
- Chronic Illness
- Emotional abuse
- Burnout
- Multiple losses
- Financial insecurity
- Witnessing violence
- Infidelity
- Being unemployed
- Abuse from authority figures
- Breakup or divorce
- Forced migration
- Undiagnosed mental health problems



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# Resources

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  - Pokornowski, E. & Begian-Lewis, K.M. (2023, September 25). *Accessibility and Disability Services in Postsecondary Education in Prison Programming*. Ithaka S+R website. <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/accessibility-and-disability-services-in-postsecondary-education-in-prison-programming/>
  - Van Der Kolk, B., MD. (2014). *The Body Keeps Score*. New York. Penguin Random House.
  - Winfrey, O. & Perry, B. D. (2021) *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*. New York City, NY. MacMillan Audio.
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# Questions?

**Thank you for your  
attendance, engagement,  
and participation!!**





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# Contact Info

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**Jennifer Murchison**

[jenn\\_murch9403@yahoo.com](mailto:jenn_murch9403@yahoo.com)



**Alejandro Salinas**

[Alejandro.Salinas@TheLightInstituteExperience.com](mailto:Alejandro.Salinas@TheLightInstituteExperience.com)



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# Future AHEAD Conferences

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## **2026 Conference**

Rhode Island  
Convention Center  
Providence, RI  
July 20 –24, 2026

## **2027 Conference**

The Wisconsin Center  
Milwaukee, WI  
July 12-16, 2027



**AHEAD 2025**  
**The 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**

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