De-Escalation Strategies

from a Trauma-Informed Lens

Strategy	Brain Science
Maintain a calm and reassuring presence	When a person experiences heightened stress, their amygdala becomes highly active. This can lead to a fight-or-flight response, which impairs rational thinking. A calm adult can help regulate the amygdala's activity, signaling safety and promoting a return to a calmer state.
Use a gentle and respectful tone of voice	Harsh or raised voices can further trigger the stress response system, reinforcing a sense of threat and escalating the situation. A gentle and respectful tone, conversely, activates the parasympathetic nervous system (the "rest and digest" system), helping to de-escalate the heightened emotional state.
Validate the student's feelings and experiences	Acknowledging and validating a student's emotions, even if their behavior is challenging, communicates understanding and respect. This validation can help decrease feelings of isolation and activate the prefrontal cortex, enabling more rational thinking and problem-solving.
Offer choices and a sense of control	Trauma often involves a loss of control. Providing choices empowers the student and activates the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making. This can help shift the brain from a reactive state to a more regulated one, where the student feels capable of influencing their situation.
Provide a safe and quiet space if needed	A chaotic environment can overwhelm the nervous system. Offering a safe and quiet space allows the student to retreat from triggers and engage their parasympathetic nervous system (body at rest).
Use grounding techniques	Techniques like deep breathing or focusing on sensory details can help bring the student back to the present moment. This shifts attention away from distressing thoughts or memories and engages the prefrontal cortex, enabling better emotional regulation.