

# Is Trauma at the Root of Some Learning Problems?

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For more than thirty years, I have been guided by one central question: *Is trauma at the root of some learning problems?* That question launched a long-term research project that is now fully described in my book, *Transcending Childhood Trauma through Somatic Therapy* (Schumaker, 2026).

To carry out this research, I invited volunteers who had experienced traumatic events to work with me using a relatively new trauma therapy called Somatic Experiencing™ (Levine, 2008). Participants agreed to meet with me weekly for at least six months, to work with me individually, and to allow me to write about their experiences if I ever chose to publish a book. There was no exchange of money; neither I nor the participants were paid. Over the past 32 years, this work has allowed me to collaborate with many children, adolescents, and adults who experienced trauma during childhood. This book represents the culmination of that deeply personal and professional journey.

## Why I Began This Project

Although I was very satisfied with the outcomes of my earlier research on learning strategies and content enhancement instruction, I continued to observe a group of students who were not engaging in learning at all. Some did not come to class, choosing instead to wander the hallways or stay home. Others came to class but failed to complete assignments, even when teachers implemented instructional strategies with fidelity. Some disrupted other students, while others slept at their desks.

These persistent patterns concerned me deeply. I began reading the professional literature in earnest, trying to understand why these students were so disengaged from learning despite well-designed instruction.

As a result of that reading, I began to hypothesize that trauma might be at the root of these difficulties. I learned that trauma occurs when an individual experiences an event involving death, threat of death, bodily injury, or bodily invasion. Dr. Peter Levine's book *Waking the Tiger* profoundly shaped my thinking, and his training programs were strongly recommended to me as a way to learn how trauma can be treated effectively.

I made the decision to enroll in a five-year training program to become a certified Somatic Experiencing Practitioner (SEP). Shortly after earning that certification, I began offering trauma therapy sessions to individuals who had experienced traumatic events. From that point forward, I embarked on what became a 30-year research project, working

one-on-one with individuals while continuing my primary role as a researcher at the University of Kansas.

## **How This Research Was Different From My Previous Work**

Very quickly, I learned that this research project would look nothing like the studies I had conducted before. It was not possible to gather a large group of individuals who had experienced the same traumatic events or who shared identical symptoms. Each person was profoundly different from every other person.

Not only did their traumatic experiences vary widely, but most individuals had long and complex histories involving multiple traumatic events. Their symptoms also differed substantially. Some experienced nightmares, digestive issues, sleep disturbances, or difficulty concentrating and completing tasks. Others were hyperalert, extremely fearful, or physically uncoordinated.

I realized that the only research design capable of capturing this complexity was case-study research. In this approach, a single therapist works individually with each person, maintains detailed records, and looks for patterns and themes that emerge over time. The case studies presented in *Transcending Childhood Trauma* are the result of years of careful observation of what happens when individuals are treated for childhood trauma using the same therapeutic framework.

## **Why Educators Will Relate to This Book**

At the heart of this book are thirty individual stories of people who volunteered to work with me, some over a period as long as sixteen years. These stories will feel familiar to educators because they reflect the lived experiences of children seen in today's schools.

The individuals in the book are real people with real challenges, all of which continue to affect students today. Their childhood traumas include events that are unfortunately common in modern life: injuries, falls, vehicle accidents, medical procedures, abuse, inescapable attacks, and significant losses.

Each story includes background information about how the individual came into my life, a description of the traumatic events they experienced, and the symptoms they reported at the beginning of therapy. Those symptoms typically fall into multiple categories, including disruptions in cognitive functioning, problems with involuntary bodily processes, poor physical coordination, social difficulties, physical illnesses, and symptoms commonly associated with mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and distorted thinking. Each narrative also chronicles at least one treatment session and describes the overall outcomes of the therapeutic work we completed together.

## How This Book Can Help Educators

First, *Transcending Childhood Trauma* offers educators a new set of lenses through which to understand trauma. The opening chapters provide a “Primer on Trauma,” including an extended analogy with illustrations that explains how trauma is created in the body and how it can be healed.

Once educators understand this perspective, they can apply that knowledge to create more successful learning experiences for children. A later chapter presents practical recommendations specifically designed for teachers. These recommendations are aligned with the types of symptoms teachers are most likely to observe in students who have experienced trauma.

I believe these ideas will also be useful for schools and districts that want to move beyond being merely trauma-informed and toward becoming trauma-responsive learning environments.

## Additional Features of the Book

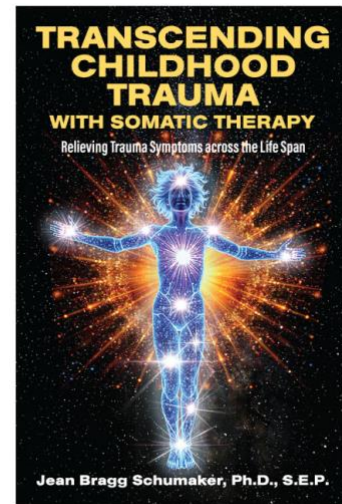
In addition to the main text, the book includes interactive workbook pages scattered throughout. These pages invite readers to engage directly with the material. For example, readers may be asked to list traumatic events they have experienced themselves or observed in others, or to identify symptoms they recognize in their own lives or in someone they know.

Another feature of the book is a set of conclusions drawn across all the case studies, along with a clear summary of those conclusions. The final section of the book is designed for readers who want deeper information about the biological systems of the human body and how those systems respond to traumatic events.

## Returning to the Original Question

**So, is trauma at the root of some learning problems?**

Based on experiences presented in *Transcending Childhood Trauma*, the answer is **yes**. Trauma is clearly at the root of some students’ learning difficulties. The book shows that, once trauma is healed, individuals are able to learn—and often learn well—without the need for specialized academic remediation.



At the same time, this work makes clear that trauma lies at the root of many other symptoms people experience following traumatic events. Understanding and addressing trauma, therefore, is essential not only for learning, but for overall well-being.

## **Learn More**

You can visit my website at: [www.transcending-trauma.org](http://www.transcending-trauma.org)

## **Get the Book**

*Transcending Childhood Trauma* is available on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com) as a print book for \$19.99 and as an e-book for \$7.99. It is also available through [Barnes & Noble](https://www.barnesandnoble.com) online.

## **How the SIM Community Can Help in This Work**

Members of the SIM community can help spread the word via email, social media, and direct readers to the website. I hope to develop presentations, activities, workshops, and courses for the SIM network for future update sessions. I'm happy to collaborate in these activities and am particularly interested in working with a group of educators and developers who are willing to try out activities and assignments from the book and report back on their experiences. Anyone interested in participating is welcome to contact me at [jschumak@ku.edu](mailto:jschumak@ku.edu).

Levine, P. A. (1997). *Waking the tiger: Healing trauma*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Levine, P. A. (2008). *Healing trauma: A pioneering program for restoring the wisdom of your body*. Boulder, CO: Sounds true.

Schumaker, J. B. (2026). *Transcending childhood trauma with somatic therapy: Relieving trauma symptoms across the life span*. Folsom, CA: Authority Publishing.