



CHAPTER 8

Mindfulness-Based Mini-Modules

While I was working with Mike, Martin, Joaquin, and Jeannette I went over psychoeducative material about both mindfulness and trauma that aided in their treatment process. With Mike, for example, we discussed at length the contextual factors that led to the police officer's comment about shooting him. These led to conversations about poverty and oppression and ultimately to a discussion about complex and developmental trauma.

With Joaquin, we focused heavily on the cues that triggered him to become aggressive so that he could learn to identify them and intervene prior to triggering out of the window of tolerance. Jeannette's treatment plan involved psychoeducation about the window of tolerance, given her propensity to hypo-arouse and dissociate. And Martin's involved a mix of learning about triggers and the window of tolerance.

I presented this material to each of the above clients mainly via informal dialogue, with some activities being more formalized than others. In this chapter, I present what I like to call *mini-modules*. These are short lessons that can be presented either with youth informally via discussion in an individual setting or as a formalized curriculum in a group setting. They are nonexhaustive; they are simply the highlighted bits of curriculum I find myself regularly teaching to trauma-impacted youth. Some of the lessons are adapted from the MBSAT program (Himelstein & Saul, 2015) to cater specifically to the trauma experience.

The five modules I use most often with trauma-impacted youth are: (1) Defining Mindfulness, (2) Reacting versus Responding, (3) The Window of

Tolerance, (4) Identifying Triggers, and (5) Influences on Behavior. Please don't simply read these scripts to your clients; they are merely examples of how I tend to present the material. Each time I present them I adapt, cater, and make them relevant to particular youth, and I urge you to do the same.

Mini Module 1: Defining Mindfulness

As I have conveyed via many different experiences thus far in this book, mindfulness is the practice of being present to one's mental, emotional, and physical experience, and even external surroundings, with an attitude of nonreactivity. When presenting mindfulness to youth, it's best to draw information, knowledge, and wisdom out from them as much as possible prior to presenting your experiences or information (i.e., "What do you think mindfulness means?" or "What does mindfulness mean to you in your life?"). When appropriate, the lion mind versus dog mind metaphor is a great way to present the state of mind to be cultivated when practicing mindfulness.

Lion Mind versus Dog Mind Metaphor

The "lion mind versus dog mind" metaphor is the metaphor I described in Chapter 2. It's an adapted metaphor from Larry Rosenberg's (1998) book, *Breath by Breath*, and as previously mentioned I first learned about it with my work in the MBA Project. The metaphor compares the state of mind between a dog and a lion in relation to how a bone is perceived when waved in each of their faces. Make sure you have a meditation bell striker, pen, pencil, or some object to represent a bone as a prop, and rely on your enthusiasm and excitement to be a passionate storyteller.

The following talking points describe the metaphor and will aid in your presentation of it:

- Ask: "What would a *dog* do if you waved a bone in its face and threw the bone 5 yards away?"
- Ask: "What would a *lion* do if you waved a bone in its face and threw the bone 5 yards away?"
- Explain that the dog's reality is consumed by the bone, and that it, therefore, has little to no autonomy.

- Explain that the lion's reality is the opposite. The lion has more choice and autonomy because the bone is viewed as a small part of reality, not the whole of reality.
- Make an analogy of the bone with strong emotions as the bone and the lion mind as mindful, nonreactive awareness.

Example Script

FACILITATOR: "What does the word mindfulness mean? (*Pause and field any answers if necessary.*) I like to start by defining mindfulness with a metaphor. This one's called the 'lion versus dog mind' metaphor and it will explain what the state of mindfulness is. Let's say that this is a bone (*wave the meditation stick or pen around briefly*) and let's say I'm standing in front of a dog. If I wave the bone from left to right, what do you think the dog will do? (*Wait for responses.*) Right, probably the dog's eyes will follow the bone. And let's say I throw the bone 5 yards over there to the right. What do you think the dog will do? . . . ("*He's gonna chase the bone!*") . . . Right; 9 times out of 10, the dog is going to go after that bone. That's what dogs do.

"Now, let's say that, for some reason—I have no idea why I'd ever be in this situation—but let's say that, for some reason, I'm standing in front of a lion. And I wave this bone from left to right and then I throw it over there 5 yards to the right. What do you all think will happen? . . . ("*He's gonna eat you!*") . . . Right. The lion could eat me. The lion might eat me.

"The point is that there's a fundamental difference between the states of mind of the dog and of the lion. When I wave this bone in the dog's face, the dog can't see anything besides the bone. When I wave it to the right, the dog's eyes go to the right. When I wave it to the left, the dog's eyes go left. When I throw it over there, the dog goes after it. The bone is the whole of the dog's reality. So if I control the bone, I control the dog's reality. But, with the lion, it's different.

"When I wave the bone to the left and to the right, the lion's eyes don't track the bone. They stay glued right on me. When I

throw the bone 5 yards to the right, the lion doesn't move, and its eyes stay glued on me. I imagine that if the lion thought like a human being, it would think, 'Doesn't this stupid person know that I can just eat him?' The point is that the lion isn't fooled by the bone. It can see that the bone is being held by a hand that's connected to a person. The bone isn't the whole of the lion's reality! It's just a small object within the lion's reality. And because of that, the lion has much more choice in how to respond. It could go after the bone, or it could go after me, but that's its choice. That's the difference between the lion and the dog. The dog just reacts and has no choice."

After the initial presentation of the difference between the lion and dog's state of mind, finish the metaphor by connecting the bone to emotions and the lion mind to that of mindful nonreactive awareness.

FACILITATOR: "So, if you think of the bone as a metaphor for something like anger, or stress, or any strong emotion, when the bone, 'anger,' is tossed into your reality, if you react with the dog mind, all of your reality is consumed by the anger. All you know is anger and, in turn, you become its puppet. It controls you, rather than you controlling it.

"But with the lion mind, you'd become aware of the anger as it arises, and your attitude would be much different. You might think, 'Oh, this is anger,' or, 'this is what it feels like to be angry,' knowing that this bone will not last forever and that you have a choice in how to respond to it. That's the lion mind, and that's why there's so much power in the practice of mindfulness."

Depending on when you present this metaphor it will inform if and how much you discuss trauma. For example, if you discern that it's too soon to talk explicitly about trauma because of the youth's propensity for getting triggered, or because they may not feel comfortable discussing trauma, you may not add anything in about trauma specifically. However, if you have

a preexisting relationship with the young person or feel it wouldn't trigger them in any negative way, you could add that trauma symptoms influence how that "bone" arises, how it operates, and how many "bones" may be waved at once.

FACILITATOR: "Think of all the things that happen when you get really triggered. When your traumas get activated. Sometimes it might be rage. Other times you might have flashbacks. Other times you may not trust people. Think of all of those as different 'bones' that get waved in front of you. Some are more difficult than others to respond to with the lion mind. Those 'bones' are influenced by the experiences we've had, traumatic and otherwise, and are different for different people. It's the consistent practice of the lion mind, of mindfulness, that will ultimately help you regulate your response to those bones so they don't control you."

After presenting the lion mind metaphor, consider following up with a simple, standard definition of mindfulness: present-moment awareness with an attitude of nonreactivity (or whatever your personal definition is). This helps contextualize the practice further and is a great lead in to further discussion of the applicability of mindfulness and explicit mindfulness practices. Use the following discussion questions as a possible guide to enrich conversation, adding to this list as you see fit:

- How can self-awareness benefit you?
- How can being nonreactive benefit your life?
- Describe a time when you've responded with the lion mind and a time when you've responded with the dog mind.
- How do you calm yourself down when you get angry or agitated? How might the lion mind practice help?

During this discussion, your skillful self-disclosure and mindfulness *pitch* will be important. Sometimes, even after explaining mindfulness in clear terms, it doesn't land with youth until you've described how it has impacted

you in your life (as a frame of reference for them). Make sure to contemplate how mindfulness has benefitted you; come up with clear examples from your life that explain its power, and self-disclose as you see appropriate.

Mini-Module 2: Reacting versus Responding

A core tenet of both mindfulness practice and the experience of dysregulation (from trauma trigger) is the difference between reacting and responding. In the practice of mindfulness, we want as much as possible to teach youth to learn to pause, think mindfully, and consciously choose behavior rather than reacting from emotion. A *reaction* is blindly and immediately acting because of an internal or external stimulus (e.g., the dog mind). A *response* is taking time to process the stimulus and *choosing* how to respond (e.g., the lion mind).

The simple definitions I use when presenting this concept to youth are:

Reaction: *Act before you think*

Response: *Think before you act*

I find these one-liners easy to remember, and they encapsulate the core essence of responding versus reacting. Feel free to edit to your liking; however, simplicity often helps young people remember concepts.

Defining Reacting and Responding

The following talking points describe reacting and responding and will help you present these concepts:

- Ask the question: What's the difference between a reaction and a response?
- Reaction: act before you think.
- Response: think before you act.

Example Script

FACILITATOR: "What's the difference between a reaction and a response? (*Get youth response*) . . . Yes. A reaction is when you just react without thinking—like if I was disrespected and just hit

the person who disrespected me. That's a reaction. A response is when there is time and space in between the stimulus—the thing that happens and causes us to react—and the behavioral action I choose and do. I have time to choose whether it's a good idea to hit the other person. I have time to think about how I could get in trouble. That's a response. A simpler way to think about it is, when you react, you don't think at all: 'You act before you think.' When you respond, you think about what you're about to do: 'You think before you act.'

The Copy Machine Metaphor

After defining the difference between a reaction and response, consider presenting the copy machine metaphor to contribute to further understanding. When one presses "copy" on the copy machine, it simply copies whatever document is in its feeder. When one is in a reactive mode, one acts like a copy machine. Once somebody's button gets pushed, they simply act out a certain unconsidered behavior. This is another way to convey the differences between reactions and responses and the role mental power has in both. Use the talking points below to guide this presentation:

- Ask, "How do you make a copy with a copy machine?"
- State that, as a machine, the copy machine only reacts. When its button is pushed, it behaves the same way, every time. It makes a copy.
- Relate the metaphor to the initial skit above.

Example Script

FACILITATOR: "Do you know how a copy machine works? . . . It's simple. All I have to do is put in whatever I want copied and push a button, and a copy comes out the other side. A copy machine doesn't think, "Oh, I need to make this copy." It simply makes the copy without thinking. So, when I'm in a reactive mode, as when I get so triggered that I can't think straight, I'm acting like a copy machine: My button gets pushed by the trigger, and I don't think, I just react. And that ultimately takes my power away."

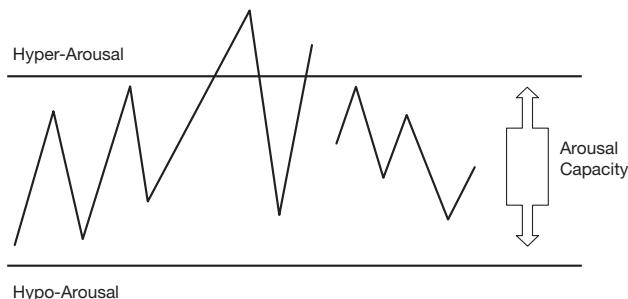
Feel free to experiment with other metaphors you think may be useful with the youth you serve. Metaphors are great ways to symbolize concepts that youth often have an easier time internalizing. The following possible discussion questions can also be helpful:

- Why might the skill of responding be so beneficial?
- When in your life have you reacted and regretted it? Reacted and not regretted it?
- Are there any times when reacting without thinking is a good thing? If so, explain.
- How much practice might it take to get really good at responding instead of reacting? Is it an inherent skill or can it be trained?

Mini-Module 3: The Window of Tolerance

The window of tolerance is the concept discussed initially in Chapter 2 (the fifth guideline presented), as pioneered by Dan Siegel. It is a great way to discuss the *tipping point* when a person *loses it*—which many trauma-impacted youth have experienced. The window of tolerance is best presented as a picture, either handed out to youth individually or drawn on a large piece of poster paper or a whiteboard. Consult Figure 8.1, based on the work of Siegel (2012):

FIGURE 8.1: The Window of Tolerance



Source: Adapted from "Figure 2.1 Window of Tolerance", TRAUMA AND THE BODY: A SENSORIMOTOR APPROACH TO PSYCHOTHERAPY by Pat Ogden, Kekuni Minton, Clare Pain. Copyright © 2006 by Pat Ogden. Copyright © 2006 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Presenting the Window of Tolerance

After drawing the image from Figure 8.1 on a large piece of poster paper or handing out a copy of it, present the concept of the window of tolerance using the talking points below:

- Present the idea of a “zone” or “window” where if one shifts out of it, one is out of control.
- Define hyper-arousal: Nervous system so activated that one has difficulty thinking, talking, learning, and so on coherently.
- Define hypo-arousal: Nervous system is so depressed (physically) that one has difficulty thinking, talking, learning, and so on coherently.
- Discuss how the fight, flight, and freeze process can get triggered when someone is out of the window of tolerance.

Example Script

FACILITATOR: “This image that I drew on the board here is something called the window of tolerance. These two lines represent the edges of our ability to tolerate our own experiences, like emotions, thoughts, and even sensations. Has anyone ever experienced an emotion that can be tolerated versus one that can’t be tolerated? . . . (*It’s okay if youth don’t respond verbally here; they may simply nod in agreement.*) Basically, when it can be tolerated it’d go in between these lines (*point to middle of the window of tolerance*). Let’s take anger for example. Has anyone ever been angry but still able to control themselves? Still able to think about that anger and not just react to it? . . . That experience of anger, since you can still think about it and not blindly react, would go within the window of tolerance because you can still tolerate it.

Now, think about blind rage. Has anyone ever had that experience? Has anyone ever been so mad they had what many people call tunnel vision? . . . That’s basically when, no matter what, you’re so angry you can’t think straight and you just do whatever

it is you do when you get angry. Like the dog in the 'lion versus dog' metaphor, that rage is a big bone. That type of experience would be represented up here (*point above window of tolerance hyper-arousal line*) on the window of tolerance map. You can't tolerate it."

Following the initial presentation of the window of tolerance, you may or may not choose to define hyper- and hypo-arousal. This discernment should come based on the maturity level of the group or youth with whom you're working. While a basic understanding of the window of tolerance is mostly what's needed, it can sometimes be powerful to teach youth about the specifics of the window.

FACILITATOR: "When someone is experiencing something like anger or rage, what do you think their heart is doing? . . . Yes, it's beating really fast. When someone starts to shift toward and out of this top level of the window of tolerance (*point to the top of the window of tolerance*) what happens in their body is called hyper-arousal. Think of that prefix, 'hyper.' Their central nervous system gets all hyper and activated to the point where it's extremely difficult to think straight, talk straight, learn anything new, or even follow directions. That's like the blind rage we were talking about before.

"On the other side of the spectrum is when someone's nervous system starts to shut down. That's down here, the bottom of the window of tolerance (*point to bottom of window of tolerance*). When someone is down here but not completely out of this window, the person may feel depressed, or detached, or may not really feel anything at all. When they shift down below the window of tolerance they might dissociate and be really spacey, and their nervous system is the opposite of when someone is really angry or in a blind rage. That's what 'hypo-arousal' is; their system is shutting down to the point where they can't think straight, talk straight, learn anything new, or even follow directions.

"So even though the physiological reactions are opposite when someone goes above or below the window, the impact on the person is similar; they can't think coherently, can't speak coherently, and can't take in new information and learn anything new."

After presenting the basic premise of the window of tolerance, use discussion to highlight its impact and further teach about physiological traumatic reactions. Use the following possible discussion points to aid in this process:

- Have you ever felt triggered outside the window of tolerance?
- What are ways that you've learned to come back into the window of tolerance?
- How might mindfulness be helpful for when someone is getting triggered out of the window of tolerance?
- How does the window of tolerance relate to reacting versus responding?

Develop any other question that you feel will be helpful in processing the window of tolerance. If you have already presented the previous two mini-modules it can be skillful to reference and relate their content to the window of tolerance whenever possible.

Mini-Module 4: Identifying Triggers

Triggers are people, places, things, thoughts, memories, emotions, or traumas that *trigger* you in some way (e.g., a memory can trigger anger, anger itself can be a trigger, a person can be triggering). When it comes to trauma-impacted youth triggers are often what propels someone outside the window of tolerance. Identifying and understanding triggers are best practices in trauma treatment. With training, youth can learn to identify and respond skillfully prior to shifting out of the window of tolerance.

There are a number of ways to present and discuss triggers, and I often find myself describing internal versus external triggers or personal, social,

and environmental triggers (adapted from how they're presented in our MBSAT curriculum).

What Are Internal and External Triggers?

Visual aids can be powerful in helping youth to internalize concepts. I often use sticky notes and ask the group to come up with a list of cues that trigger them and then write them on the sticky notes and stick them to a larger piece of poster paper. I first ask, "What things or cues trigger you? Make you upset, angry, or really stressed out?" I usually keep the question vague and not specifically about what triggers trauma, as sometimes youth may not be comfortable talking specifically about trauma. Anger and stress are often safe emotions to start listing.

After I have a number of triggers on the first large piece of poster paper from fielding answers to the question above, I tape another piece of poster paper on the wall and draw a decisional "T"—then, title one column *internal triggers* and the other *external triggers*. I'll then ask someone to volunteer to define the difference between an internal and an external trigger. An internal trigger is defined as any part of one's subjective awareness that triggers thoughts, memories, emotions, behaviors, and so on. An external trigger is anything outside of one's subjective awareness (i.e., it is in their objective awareness) that either triggers thoughts, emotions, memories, or behaviors themselves, or triggers an internal trigger.

Use the talking points and example script below as a guide:

- Triggers can be categorized as both *internal* and *external*.
- Internal triggers are parts of our subjective awareness: such as emotions, memories, and so on.
- External triggers are part of our environment: such as places, people, and so on.
- External triggers can trigger an internal trigger (e.g., a really jerk person you see or hear can bring up emotions of anger or frustration).

Example Script

FACILITATOR: "Who knows the difference between an internal and external trigger? Who wants to try to define them? . . . (*Discuss.*) Right, an internal trigger is something that arises inside you. It's a part of your inner world. It could be something like a memory: just remembering experiences can make us feel either positive or negative . . . An internal trigger could also come from remembering a bad experience that could make us want to do something in order to forget it; it could be an emotion, or even just a thought. An internal trigger is anything that comes up inside of us that triggers something else. And an external trigger is something that's in the environment. It could be a person being rude to you, a place: as, for example, every time you walk by the park where you got high with your friends, just walking by that place could trigger you. And there's an inherent relationship between internal and external triggers: an external trigger can trigger an internal emotional state, say if a person comes up to you and is rude, and anger rises within you, that could then trigger you to get really angry, become violent, or sometimes shut down, or get out of the situation."

One way to finish this activity is to take the sticky notes from the prior poster paper (e.g., when the group was brainstorming triggers) and move them onto this new piece of poster paper in their respective "Internal" and "External" columns. It's not about being right about what trigger goes in which column, but rather to have an in-depth discussion about the different types of triggers. This will get youth contemplating what their triggers are even though this has been a general activity (i.e., not about them specifically).

What Are Personal, Social, and Environmental Triggers?

Another way to think about triggers is via the three (broadly categorized) levels of influence on triggers and behavior: personal, social, and environmental influences. The essence of this presentation and discussion is to sug-

gest that there are numerous forces that influence our thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and triggers. (This activity is loosely based on the work of Al Switzer (Patterson, Greeny, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzler, 2011).

What you'll be doing with the youth is delving deeper into the idea of what it is that triggers them by reviewing the different triggers that can be placed within the personal, social, and environmental areas (a similar activity to that of the “Internal” versus “External” columns).

Start the activity by taking a blank piece of poster paper labeled “Three Major Levels of Influence” and taping it on the wall (and next to the “Internal and External Triggers” poster if you’ve decided to do both activities). Draw three rows from top to bottom starting with *Personal*, then *Social* under it, and, finally, *Environmental* at the bottom. The personal level of influence has to do with the individual’s subjective awareness and level of motivation and will. The social level of influence regards the person’s social network and their relationships. Finally, the environmental level of influence has to do with both the macro environment the individual is living within (e.g., living in a neighborhood with high community violence) and the microenvironment, as well (e.g., verbal and emotional abuse in the home). Use the talking points below to present these concepts:

- State the three major levels of influence: personal, social, and environmental.
- Provide concrete examples for each level of influence.
- Distinguish between the macro and micro levels of the environmental level of influence.

Example Script

FACILITATOR: “I want to discuss what are called the three major levels of influence on behavior, especially when it comes to the automatic behaviors that are often associated with trauma. You can see here on this poster paper (*point to three levels of influence poster*) that we have three rows that all represent major levels of influence: personal, social, and environmental. Who wants to

volunteer to state what they think these different levels are? Give specific examples."

(Discuss as necessary.)

"The personal level has to do with you as an individual. That can be your level of self-awareness, abilities related to stopping or starting the targeted behaviors, and your relationship with triggering materials. Some people have a really tough time dealing with strong emotions; others don't. Some of us are really motivated to finish high school; others aren't. All of those variables would be placed under the personal level.

"The social level includes your social network: who you hang out with, what activities and interests they have, whether they do drugs, if you have strong support from them, if they went through a traumatic experience with you—all of that. Those are all social influences. If someone in your social network is pressuring you to smoke weed, for example, versus someone else's friend trying to get them not to smoke weed, those are two very different factors but both are on the social level of influence. Does that make sense?

"And finally there's the environmental level. That's the neighborhood you live in, your city, your community, and the issues that come with it. So, for example, for someone who's trying to learn how to regulate their anger and fighting when they get just a little stressed out, do you think it would be easier or harder if they lived in a neighborhood with a lot of people being aggressive and stressful situations? Right, it'd be harder.

"Even if I practice restraint from eating cookies to lose weight, one of the best things I can do is not have cookies around me. Am I at more risk to eat the cookie if the cookie is right in front of me every day or not in the house at all? Those factors significantly influence our behavior when it comes to dealing with the symptoms and backlash of stressful and traumatic experiences."

After presenting and discussing the initial material above, place all of the triggers on the sticky notes from the previous activity under the right realm of influence. You can either have youth move the sticky notes, or ask them to direct you where to move them. Personal influences should include most internal triggers, such as strong emotions, memories, and so on. Social influences should include peers, support networks, and triggering social events. Environmental influences should include the socioeconomic status of the individual and the community, the amount of illegal drug activity in the community, the amount of violence in the community, and so on.

Next, you can either lead the group through a general discussion using the following possible discussion questions or hand them out as a worksheet to offer more confidentiality to youth who may not feel comfortable sharing at a group level:

- What are your primary triggers?
- Where would they fall on the internal versus external or the personal, social, and environmental triggers map?
- Which of these triggers or influences can you control? Which can't you control?
- What is your plan to deal with those you can control? What about the ones you can't?
- If you could choose one trigger to work on today, what would it be and why?

Mini-Module 5: Influences on Behavior

I use an adapted version of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory to review how different systems can influence behavior and experience. This activity presents concepts that educate youth about the details of how an environment can influence both experiences and behavior. It delves deeper into the environmental level than the three levels of influence discussion from the triggers mini-module. It is a great way to not only present the idea of trauma, but all of the interrelated systems that can mitigate and aggravate it.

Overview of the Ecological Systems Theory

The conceptual framework from the Ecological Systems Theory is highly applicable to the environmental level of influence from the triggers mini-module and overviews the different systems individuals interact with in their environment that have both direct and indirect influence on their lives. It is a great way to present the contextual factors that often underlie isolated incidents of interpersonal trauma, while also respecting the experience of living in a constant state of stress.

Below is a summary of the systems within Bronfenbrenner's theory. This summary is for your review. Below the summary, I've included a simplified version that works better in explaining this concept to youth:

- *Microsystem*: Entities that the youth interacts with directly. For example, the family system, school, people in the community, and so on.
- *Mesosystem*: The relationship the entities in the microsystem have with one another. For example, what value does a youth's family place on education? If a high value is placed on education, the interactions between the family and school systems are positive.
- *Exosystem*: Entities that have an indirect but strong influence on the youth's life. For example, the mother's job, the neighborhood one lives in, and so on.
- *Macrosystem*: The major cultural influences, from both cultural heritage and current living culture (e.g., if one lives in poverty) that influence an individual's life.
- *Chronosystem*: The major life events, transitions, and eras that influence an individual's life. This includes, for example, an individual whose parents have just divorced (major life event), the technological era, the war on drugs, the increase in incarceration in the United States (eras of strong influence on society), and so on.

The adapted version presents the theory in a simplified format: direct influences, indirect influences, and societal influences. For this step of the activity, tape a piece of poster paper to the wall and draw the adapted version of Ecological Systems Theory. This is an image of a solid circle

representing an individual, with three concentric and large circles for each of the simplified levels of experience or influence.

Next, present each system by giving concrete examples for how each of them affects an individual's life. Use the following talking points as a guide:

- Direct influences: experiences that come from systems someone interacts with directly and often daily (e.g., school, family, neighborhood).
- Indirect influences: experiences that come from systems that one may not interact with directly but influence their life overall (i.e., a parent's job and income influencing a neighborhood where the individual lives).
- Societal influences: the large-scale narratives that shape culture and public opinion (e.g., media, racism).
- Present an example of an individual affected by the different systems.

Example Script

FACILITATOR: "I want to talk about the different levels of influence that contribute to our behaviors and certain experiences we might have had. I know some of us have been through extensive struggles and hardships. Sometimes that can be looked at as trauma, basically an experience or set of experiences that haunts us in some way, whether they're dreams or flashbacks, or getting really triggered out of nowhere. This inner circle here (*point to inner circle of the adapted ecological systems poster*) represents the individual, and all these circles around the individual represent the different levels, or systems, that can impact our lives.

"The innermost circle outside the individual represents direct influences on the individual's life. These are systems that an individual directly interacts with. So, what would be some examples of these? When you think of yourself, with what systems do you directly interact? What do you do every day? Who do you see? What institutions do you have direct experience with? (*Youth will usually mention their schools, families, etc.*)

"Right. You interact directly with the school system, the juvenile justice system, the family system, and so on. So your success in those systems at least in part would probably depend on how well those systems were run, right? For example, if you went to a really poor, underfunded school that didn't have high expectations for their students, how do you think that would affect your overall education? Your education would most likely suffer.

"The next circle out represents indirect influences on the individual's life. Think about the job that your mom or dad or caregiver has. If that person has a high-paying job, that affects the community you live in, the house you live in, and, ultimately, your lifestyle. If the person has a low-paying job or no job, the community you live in, the house you live in, your lifestyle—all that would most likely be different from that of an individual whose parent has a high-paying job. And growing up in a poor, violent, drug-ridden community is very different from growing up in a safe, middle- to upper-class community. Would you all agree? (*Youth will usually nod their heads.*) That's the indirect level of influence on our lives and contributes to a lot of experiences you might have had, including being robbed, being shot at, taken advantage of, abused, and so on.

"The last level or circle out is the societal level of influence. It conveys the major cultural beliefs of society, often spread through mass media, politics, and other channels. The societal level of influence in part represents things like poverty, ethnicity, racism, and so forth. Let's take a look at a specific example.

"Take, for example, a young person of Mexican descent. She lives with her aunt and uncle. Her parents live in Mexico. Her family is filled with love, but she misses her parents. Why aren't her parents living here in the United States? Well, they can't get into the country because of their immigration status. What is immigration status related to on these three levels of influence?

(Pause for response from youth.) Right. Societal thought. That affects the makeup of this young person's family and their lives in the direct level of influence or experience; she's been traumatized by not feeling her family belongs and is understandably angry at the country and the world."

Behavior is a touchy subject with youth because they are often *behavioralized*, that is, defined by what they do (at least by adults). Youth often just want to be themselves but feel pressure from adults and other peers, so this mini-module often prompts rich discussion. The following are possible questions to ask:

- What are some of the environmental forces that lead to people going to jail, becoming addicts, having experiences of trauma, and so on?
- Has anyone in this group either experienced these forces personally or known someone who's had these environmental forces play a vital role in their behaviors?
- Is there anything that can be done to combat some of these environmental forces of influence? If so, what?
- What are the things in your life you can and can't control?
- Do you feel you can learn to control your response to your triggers?
- Do you think you may one day be able to fully heal and not be haunted by a traumatic past?

This mini-module has basically presented the idea that experience and behavior can be significantly shaped by context. It has been extremely powerful in my work because it authentically offers youth insight into what they may and may not have control over in their lives. That is, it may not be realistic for a youth to never get arrested again, never use drugs, or never fight with their family members if all of those forces continuously present themselves in the lives of that youth. It may be difficult to help youth reduce their startle responses to loud cracking noises if they constantly hear gunfire each night.

I emphasize helping youth authentically figure out what they do have

control over in their lives and helping them achieve greater success in those areas. Thinking they could control every aspect of their environment could very well set them up for failure, which would in turn decrease treatment outcome.

Concluding Thoughts

Although these mini-modules do not represent everything I teach to my clients, I find myself using them often. They appear to be the most important concepts for trauma-impacted youth to learn. What I suggest is that you review the above five mini-modules and think about which might most apply to the specific youth with whom you work. Psychoeducation is an important aspect of trauma treatment, and when you take inventory and figure out what types of content arise over and over again (e.g., through therapy discussions), that's a good indicator that those can be developed into mini-modules (which I highly recommend you do).

Also, please remember that you can teach these concepts in a number of ways: through individual sessions, in groups, informally via conversation, or formalized in a group curriculum, to name a few. If you're thinking of using these mini-modules in a group, think about them as the content that will help develop further engagement by contextualizing mindfulness practice and trauma. Formal meditation and daily mindfulness activities can be intermixed with the mini-modules to form a well-balanced lesson plan and will help to develop actual skills (e.g., mindfulness) and build group cohesiveness. And as always, please make whatever adaptations are appropriate for your group.