

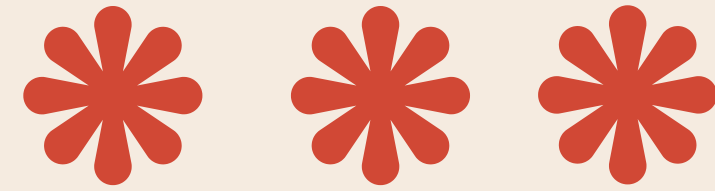
2026 AST Educators Conference

When Students Shut Down or Blow Up:

Trauma-Informed Strategies for Behavioral
Challenges in Surgical Technology Education

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Why This Topic Matters

- Surgical technology education is high-pressure by design
 - Behavioral challenges are increasing, not disappearing
 - Most educators were trained to teach content — not regulation
 - Today is about practical strategies that protect learning and professionalism
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Name the Reality

When a student shuts down or blows up, it's often labeled as attitude, laziness, or lack of professionalism.

Content & Not Behavior

We teach skills well.
Little to no training in behavior management.



Reframing those moments as stress responses, and learning how to respond preserves learning, accountability, and safety.

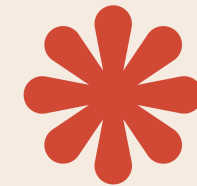
Why This Is Happening More Now

COVID-19

COVID disrupted emotional development and coping skills in younger students.

Social Demands

Many are working full-time, caring for children, financially stressed, and are first-gen college students.



This is not about lowering standards.
It's about keeping students regulated enough to meet them

What's Actually Happening in the Brain

Simple brain explanation:

- Under stress, the thinking brain goes offline
- You cannot teach sterile technique to a dysregulated nervous system

The Stress Response



- Fight → “blow up” (arguing, defiance, anger)
- Flight → leaving, avoidance
- Freeze → shutting down, blank stare, silence

Window of Tolerance

Hyperarousal



Point of
overwhelm

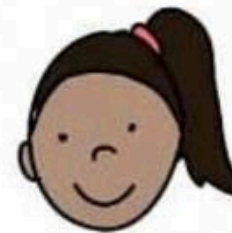


Regulation

Optimal
(window of
tolerance)

Something
triggers
escalation

Feeling
OK



Hypoarousal



Comfort
and something
sweet

Two Patterns Educators See

The Shutdown Student

- Silence
- Avoidance
- Missed assignments
- Flat affect
- “I don’t know” to everything



Two Patterns Educators See

What NOT to do:

- Public calling out
- Interpreting as laziness
- Increasing pressure in the moment

Trauma-informed response:

- Lower emotional temperature first
- Private check-in
- Clear structure + choice
- Predictability



Two Patterns Educators See

The Blow-Up Student

- Defensiveness
- Anger
- Crying
- Walking out
- Confrontational tone



Two Patterns Educators See

What NOT to do:

- Power struggles
- Matching intensity
- Public correction

Trauma-informed response:

- Regulate yourself first
- Short, calm directives
- Delay discipline conversations
- Revisit expectations when calm



Practical Strategies Educators Can Use Tomorrow



Strategy 1: Regulate First, Teach Second

- Calm voice
- Slow pace
- Fewer words
- Neutral body language

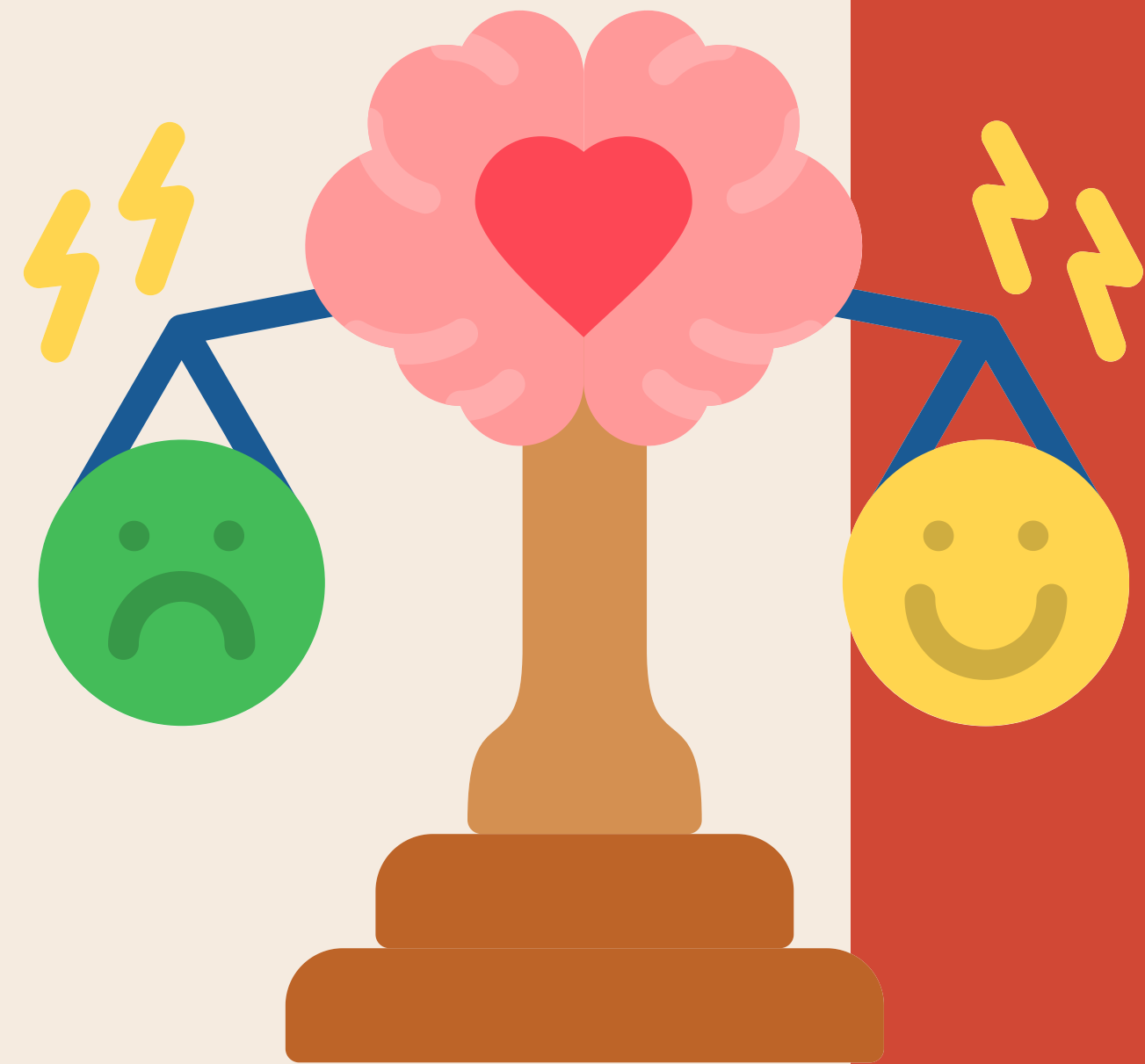


Practical Strategies Educators Can Use Tomorrow



Strategy 2: Containment Over Confrontation

- “Let’s pause this and talk after class.”
- “I can see this is a lot right now.”



Practical Strategies Educators Can Use Tomorrow



Strategy 3: Clear Structure Is Trauma-Informed

- Predictable routines
- Clear expectations
- Transparent grading
- No surprise consequences

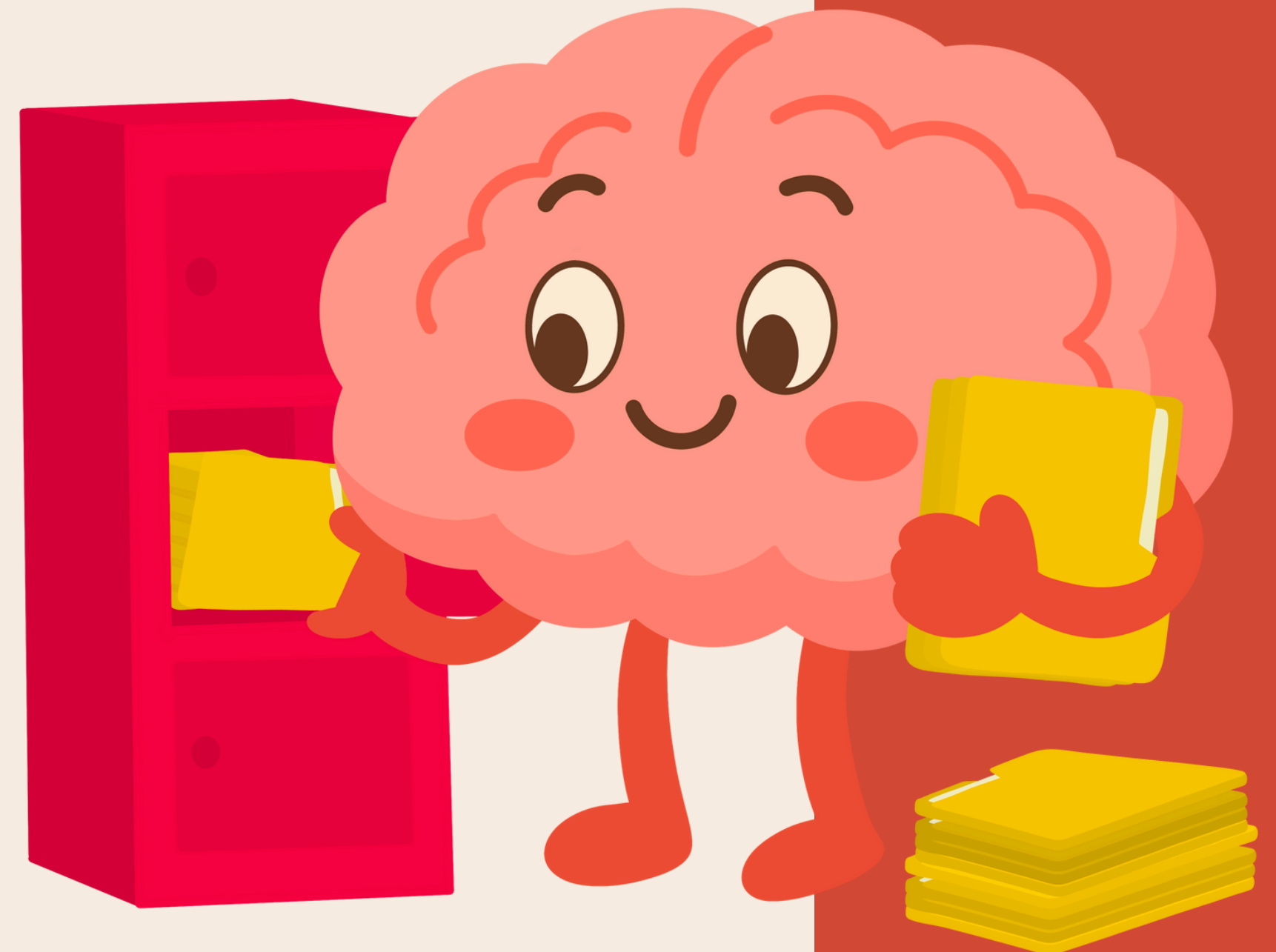



Practical Strategies Educators Can Use Tomorrow



Strategy 4: Accountability Without Escalation

- Trauma-informed ≠ permissive
- Standards stay high
- Delivery changes





Case Study



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- Academically capable student
 - Increasing silence and withdrawal
 - Avoids eye contact and participation
 - Missed labs or incomplete work
 - Frequent “I don’t know” responses
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What Educators Often Feel

- Frustration
 - Confusion
 - Concern about professionalism
 - Pressure to 'push' the student
 - Fear of lowering standards
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What was actually happening



- Overwhelm
- Fear of Failure
- Cognitive Overload

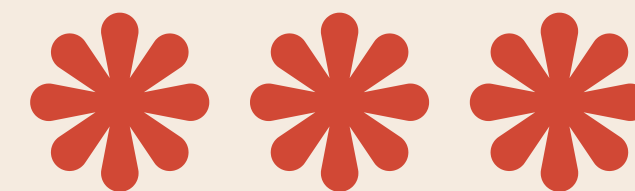
Key Point:

This was not a motivation problem
- It was a regulation problem





Check-in



How many of you have experienced this?

What labels are usually applied to the student?



Key Takeaways



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- Students learn best within the window of tolerance
 - Shutdown and blow-ups are stress responses
 - You don't need to be a therapist
 - Small shifts prevent big escalations
 - Regulation protects learning and professionalism



Our role isn't to fix students — it's to
create conditions where learning can
happen, even under stress.





THANK
YOU

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