RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES

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Regulating Distress Through the Five Domains of Safety: A Trauma-Informed Model for Modern Leadership

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Abstract

Trauma is no longer viewed solely as an individual clinical problem; it is increasingly recognized as an organizational reality that shapes behavior, engagement, and performance in the workplace. Employees bring adverse childhood experiences, combat trauma, chronic stress, discrimination, and workplace harm into their professional roles, influencing attention, memory, emotional regulation, and trust. Trauma-informed leadership (TIL) provides a framework for addressing these realities by prioritizing human well-being as a strategic leadership goal (Lloyd, 2024). Within the TIL Impact Framework™, *regulating distress* emerges as a core leadership behavior that enables individuals and teams to function within an optimal "window of tolerance" for stress. This behavior is operationalized through five interdependent domains of safety: physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural. This article synthesizes trauma theory, neuroscience, organizational psychology, and leadership studies to articulate why regulating distress is indispensable for modern leadership and how the five domains of safety serve as practical mechanisms for achieving this goal. The paper explores the neurobiological underpinnings of distress, defines each domain of safety, and illustrates their relevance across organizational contexts. It argues that these domains are not peripheral "nice-to-have" concepts but essential leadership capacities that determine whether people can think clearly, build trust, learn, innovate, and flourish in the face of volatility and ongoing stressors. Implications for leadership development and organizational policy are discussed, positioning regulating distress through the five domains of safety as both an ethical mandate and a strategic imperative for sustainable, human-centered leadership.

Keywords: trauma, safety, regulating distress, leadership, organization

Trauma has long been studied in clinical, military, and therapeutic contexts, but its relevance to organizational life has only recently begun to receive sustained attention (Bloom, 2013; Lloyd, 2024; van der Kolk, 2014). Employees bring their full lived histories

into the workplace, including adverse childhood experiences, combat exposure, intimate partner violence, racial trauma, spiritual abuse, chronic stress, and prior experiences of workplace harm. These histories shape how individuals perceive threat, interpret feedback, respond to authority, manage conflict, and engage with organizational change (Felitti et al., 1998; Herman, 2015; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

Traditional leadership models often assume rational actors operating in psychologically neutral environments. However, research on trauma and stress has revealed that these assumptions are often unrealistic. Trauma can dysregulate the nervous system, alter neurobiological pathways, heighten threat sensitivity, decrease cognitive flexibility, and narrow tolerance for ambiguity (Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2012). In organizational contexts, unrecognized trauma and unregulated distress can manifest as disengagement, irritability, conflict, avoidance, perfectionism, emotional outbursts, or withdrawal—behaviors that are frequently misinterpreted as defiance, incompetence, or lack of commitment rather than as manifestations of dysregulation (Rock, 2008; van der Kolk, 2014).

Trauma-informed leadership (TIL) provides a lens for understanding and responding to these dynamics. Building on SAMHSA's (2014) trauma-informed principles, the TIL Impact Framework™ integrates empirical leadership research with trauma theory to identify four key attributes (authenticity, emotional intelligence, relational capacity, and resilience) and four core behaviors (understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing) of trauma-informed leaders. Among these behaviors, regulating distress is a central aspect. It involves intentionally shaping the emotional climate of the organization so that individuals and teams can function within an optimal range of arousal, remaining capable of rational thought, relational engagement, and ethical action.

Within the TIL Impact Framework™, regulating distress is grounded in five interdependent domains of safety: physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural. These domains correspond to different facets of human security—physiological, emotional, relational, ethical, and identity-based—and together create the conditions necessary for people to think, learn, trust, and grow. When these domains are present, individuals experience reduced amygdala activation, increased prefrontal functioning, and greater capacity for connection and collaboration (Arnsten, 2015; Edmondson, 2019; Herman, 2015).

This article synthesizes two lines of work: (a) a broader theoretical articulation of regulating distress as a TIL behavior, and (b) a detailed exposition of the five domains of safety as mechanisms through which leaders operationalize distress regulation. The goal is to demonstrate that TIL is not merely about awareness but about concrete

behaviors that foster sustainable safety across these five domains, thereby supporting both human and organizational flourishing.

Trauma, Distress, and the Human Nervous System

Distress arises when perceived demands exceed perceived internal or external resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For individuals with trauma histories, this threshold is often altered. Trauma primes the nervous system to interpret neutral or ambiguous stimuli as potential threats, sensitizing the amygdala and biasing perception toward danger (van der Kolk, 2014). When a threat is perceived—whether physical, emotional, relational, or moral—the following typically occurs:

- The amygdala becomes hyperactive, prioritizing survival.
- The sympathetic nervous system activates fight, flight, or freeze responses (Porges, 2011).
- Prefrontal cortex activity decreases, impairing executive functions such as planning, impulse control, and complex decision making (Arnsten, 2015).
- Working memory and information processing suffer (Schwabe & Wolf, 2010).

In workplaces, these neurobiological cascades may surface as difficulty concentrating, emotional volatility, avoidance of tasks or people, seeming resistance to change, or sudden shutdown during conflict. Leaders who are unaware of trauma may interpret these behaviors as "attitude problems," laziness, or incompetence, rather than as signs of dysregulation. Such misinterpretation often leads to punitive or shaming responses, which further amplify distress and erode trust.

Without safety, employees cannot consistently access the higher order cognitive and relational capacities that organizations rely on for problem solving, creativity, learning, and collaboration (Rock, 2008). Regulating distress, therefore, is not optional; it is foundational. It requires leaders to create conditions that signal safety to the nervous system, thereby downregulating threat responses and allowing executive functioning and relational capacity to be restored. The five domains of safety provide a structured framework for conceptualizing those conditions.

Trauma-Informed Leadership and the Behavior of Regulating Distress

TIL integrates knowledge about trauma with leadership practices that prioritize safety, trust, empowerment, and healing (SAMHSA, 2014). It is not a discrete leadership style but a cross-cutting framework that can enhance and deepen other models such as transformational, servant, authentic, and adaptive leadership.

Within Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework, regulating distress denotes a leader's deliberate efforts to monitor and manage an organization or team's emotional temperature. This

concept aligns with Heifetz's (1994) idea of a "holding environment" in adaptive leadership, where leaders maintain stress at a tolerable level, allowing individuals to engage with complex issues without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down (p. 102). Trauma-informed leaders extend this notion by explicitly attending to the neurobiological and psychological effects of trauma.

Regulating distress involves both proactive and responsive components. Proactively, leaders cultivate systems, policies, relationships, and communication patterns that promote stability and predictability. Responsively, leaders intervene when distress escalates—by adjusting expectations, pausing nonessential demands, facilitating debriefings after critical incidents, or connecting individuals to appropriate support. In both cases, the leader's own emotional regulation is crucial; a calm, grounded leader can coregulate the team, while a reactive leader can intensify distress.

Theologically or morally oriented leaders may also view regulating distress as an expression of stewardship and compassion. Leadership is then understood not merely as managing tasks, but as caring for the well-being of those entrusted to them—helping them navigate both external and internal storms. Whether framed through organizational psychology, trauma theory, or faith, the conclusion is consistent: leaders who regulate distress make it possible for people to function at their best.

The five domains of safety—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—anchor this behavior in specific, observable practices. Each domain targets a different dimension of perceived threat and, when intentionally cultivated, collectively reduces distress and supports flourishing.

The Five Domains of Safety as Mechanisms of Distress Regulation

Domain 1: Physical Safety

Definition and Relevance

Physical safety refers to the absence of threats to bodily integrity, environmental hazards, or physiological overload. It includes secure facilities, safe equipment, reasonable workloads, predictable schedules, and freedom from harassment or physical harm.

Physical safety aligns with the base of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and is reinforced by neuroscience, which demonstrates that physical threats trigger immediate survival responses (Porges, 2011). When physical danger or chronic bodily strain is present, the brain prioritizes survival, reducing the capacity for higher level thinking and collaboration (van der Kolk, 2014).

Organizational Manifestations

In organizational settings, threats to physical safety may include the following

- unsafe work environments or inadequate protective equipment
- aggressive or explosive supervisory behavior
- sexual harassment or intimidation
- unpredictable scheduling and chronic overwork leading to exhaustion
- lack of emergency preparedness or crisis protocols
- exposure to environmental hazards, noise, or crowding

These conditions elevate cortisol, wear down the body's stress response systems, and impair executive functioning (McEwen, 2007).

Leadership Implications Leaders regulate distress physically by

- enforcing robust safety and antiharassment policies;
- designing predictable routines, clear procedures, and emergency plans;
- supporting rest, hydration, movement, and realistic workloads; or
- addressing unsafe behavior or environments promptly.

When physical safety is secured, the nervous system receives a crucial "all clear" signal. Employees expend less energy scanning for danger and more on their actual work, increasing cognitive bandwidth and capacity for engagement.

Domain 2: Psychological Safety

Definition and Relevance

Psychological safety is the shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks—such as asking questions, voicing concerns, admitting mistakes, or offering dissent—without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or retribution (Edmondson, 1999).

Trauma often involves psychological betrayal, invalidation, or silencing (Herman, 2015). Individuals with such histories may be susceptible to tone, criticism, or ambiguity and may become hypervigilant to cues of potential humiliation or exclusion.

Theoretical Foundations

Psychological safety has been strongly linked to team learning behaviors, performance, and innovation (Edmondson, 2019). When people anticipate ridicule or punishment, the amygdala interprets interpersonal risk as threat, suppressing analytical reasoning and prompting self-protective behavior (Rock, 2008). For trauma survivors, this effect can be amplified, as criticism or failure may echo earlier experiences of shaming or rejection.

Leadership Implications

Leaders cultivate psychological safety by

- responding with curiosity rather than judgment,
- normalizing mistakes as part of learning,
- being emotionally predictable and consistent,
- clarifying expectations and reducing unnecessary ambiguity,
- avoiding punitive or shaming responses, or
- following through on commitments to build trust.

When psychological safety is strong, employees are more willing to share ideas, raise concerns, and admit when they are struggling. This sense of safety not only supports individual healing but also enhances organizational adaptability and innovation.

Domain 3: Social Safety

Definition and Relevance

Social safety refers to a felt sense of belonging, inclusion, and connection within a group. It is rooted in relational neuroscience, showing that humans regulate their nervous systems through proximity to other supportive individuals (Siegel, 2012).

Social exclusion activates similar neural pathways to those activated by physical pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). Thus, relational instability, ostracism, or neglect can dramatically increase distress, particularly for individuals whose trauma involved abandonment, relational betrayal, or community loss.

Organizational Threats.

Threats to social safety include the following:

- gossip and triangulation
- cliques and in-groups
- leadership favoritism
- relational neglect from supervisors
- withholding information as social control
- intentional isolation or exclusion from meetings or decisions
- failure to acknowledge contributions

These dynamics undermine trust, fuel insecurity, and erode team cohesion.

Leadership Implications

Leaders foster social safety by

- demonstrating a consistent, authentic connection with team members;
- building inclusive team norms and rituals that foster a sense of belonging;
- intervening in bullying, gossip, or exclusionary behavior;
- publicly acknowledging contributions and effort; and
- ensuring information flows fairly and transparently.

Social safety enables coregulation: individuals calm one another through supportive interactions, which reduces loneliness and strengthens collective resilience and performance.

Domain 4: Moral Safety

Definition and Relevance

Moral safety refers to the assurance that an individual's ethical values, sense of fairness, and moral integrity will be respected within the organization.

Moral injury—initially identified in military contexts—occurs when individuals perpetrate, witness, or fail to prevent acts that violate their deeply held moral beliefs, or when they experience betrayal by an authority figure (Litz et al., 2009). In organizational settings, moral injury can arise from unethical practices, double standards, or pressure to compromise values, resulting in profound distress, burnout, and disengagement (Dean et al., 2019).

Organizational Threats

Moral threats include the following:

- tolerance of unethical practices
- retaliation against whistleblowers or truth-tellers
- unfair discipline or favoritism
- leaders ignore or minimize harm
- pressure to deceive, mislead, or compromise personal values

Such conditions fracture trust and may lead individuals to emotionally or physically exit the organization.

Leadership Implications

Leaders create moral safety by

- upholding ethical standards consistently, even when costly;
- practicing transparent decision making and explaining rationales;
- addressing injustice and harm promptly and fairly;

- encouraging principled dissent and protecting those who speak up; and
- demonstrating accountability, including admitting and repairing their own mistakes.

Moral safety restores dignity and anchors the organization in integrity. When employees trust that the organization's actions align with its espoused values, distress associated with ethical conflict is reduced, and commitment increases.

Domain 5: Cultural Safety

Definition and Relevance

Cultural safety ensures that individuals' cultural identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences are respected, valued, and protected. It moves beyond surface-level diversity rhetoric to focus on identity-based well-being and trauma prevention.

The concept arose in healthcare as a response to harms inflicted on Indigenous populations and other marginalized groups by mainstream systems (Ramsden, 1993). It recognizes that racism, discrimination, microaggressions, and cultural erasure are forms of trauma with psychological and physiological consequences (Sue et al., 2007).

Organizational Threats

Threats to cultural safety include the following:

- microaggressions and subtle bias
- tokenism and symbolic rather than substantive inclusion
- dismissing or minimizing cultural or religious needs
- stereotyping or essentializing groups
- unequal access to advancement, resources, or voice
- policies that assume a dominant cultural norm and ignore others
- these harms can trigger identity-based distress, hypervigilance, and withdrawal

Leadership Implications

Leaders promote cultural safety by

- practicing cultural humility and continuous learning,
- seeking feedback from diverse employees on their lived experiences,
- ensuring equitable access to opportunities and decision making,
- responding promptly to identity-based harm or discrimination,
- creating policies and practices that account for diverse cultural realities, and
- supporting individuals' self-definition rather than imposing identity categories.

Cultural safety affirms identity, reduces identity-based anxiety, and deepens belonging and engagement. For many employees, especially those from historically marginalized communities, this domain is nonnegotiable for establishing trust in leadership and the organization.

Interdependence of the Five Domains

The five domains of safety function as an interconnected system. A breach in one domain often destabilizes others:

- Without physical safety, psychological safety is difficult to sustain.
- Without psychological safety, social safety becomes superficial and fragile.
- Without social safety, cultural safety efforts can feel performative.
- Without moral safety, trust disintegrates across all domains.
- Without cultural safety, belonging fractures and moral and social safety are undermined.

Regulating distress requires simultaneous attention to all five domains of safety. An organization with excellent physical safety protocols but a culture of fear and favoritism will still generate significant distress. Conversely, a warm social climate cannot compensate for chronic ethical violations or unaddressed racism. Leaders must, therefore, approach safety systemically, understanding that each domain reinforces the others.

From a TIL perspective, the five domains serve as diagnostic and design tools. They help leaders identify where distress is being generated and where targeted interventions are needed. They also provide a positive blueprint: when all five domains are robust, the organizational environment communicates, "You are safe here." This message allows the nervous system to settle, enabling individuals to engage more fully in meaningful, purposeful work.

Implications for Leadership Development and Organizational Policy

This synthesized model—regulating distress through the five domains of safety—has several implications for leadership and organizational practice:

Leadership Development Must Integrate Trauma-Informed Competencies

Safety is not a peripheral issue; it is a core leadership skill. Leadership curricula should include training on trauma, stress, the nervous system, and practical strategies for cultivating safety across all five domains.

Performance Issues Should be Interpreted Through a Safety Lens

Before labeling behaviors as "difficult" or "noncompliant," leaders should ask: Is this a sign of distress or dysregulation? Integrating a safety lens does not remove accountability, but it encourages compassionate and accurate interpretation, as well as constructive support.

Organizations must embed the five domains into policies, systems, and structures. Safety cannot depend solely on the goodwill of individual leaders. Policies, human resources practices, communication norms, and crisis responses should be explicitly reviewed and redesigned with physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural safety in mind.

Leadership Evaluation Should Include Safety-Based Metrics

Traditional metrics often prioritize output over well-being. Evaluations should assess how leaders contribute to or undermine safety (e.g., through psychological safety indicators, turnover patterns, equity measures, and feedback from direct reports).

Crisis Response and Change Management Must be Trauma Informed

Organizational crises and significant changes (layoffs, mergers, restructuring) activate threat responses. Trauma-informed leaders plan for the emotional impact of change, communicate transparently, and provide support, thereby regulating distress rather than exacerbating it.

Self-Regulation and Self-Care are Crucial for Effective Leadership

Leaders cannot regulate others' distress while consistently disregarding their own. TIL development must include support for leaders' mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, recognizing that many leaders are also trauma survivors or operating under chronic stress.

By embedding the five domains of safety into leadership practice and organizational design, regulating distress becomes a shared, systemic responsibility. This shift moves organizations away from reactive, crisis-driven cultures toward proactive, humane systems capable of sustaining both performance and people.

Conclusion

In a world marked by ongoing individual and collective trauma, leadership that ignores distress is increasingly untenable. Unregulated distress impairs cognition, erodes trust, fractures relationships, and undermines performance. TIL responds to this reality by

centering the behavior of *regulating distress*—not as a soft, optional trait, but as a critical leadership function grounded in science, ethics, and, for many leaders, theology.

The five domains of safety—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—operationalize this behavior. They offer a clear, research-informed framework for understanding what safety requires and how leaders can create environments in which people's nervous systems can settle, their minds can focus, and their relationships can heal and grow. When these domains are intentionally cultivated, organizations become places not of additional harm, but of refuge and restoration.

Leaders who regulate distress through the five domains of safety do more than manage teams; they steward human lives. They create cultures where individuals can move from mere survival to genuine flourishing, and where organizational success is built on a foundation of dignity, justice, and shared well-being. In this sense, TIL is not only compassionate and ethical; it is strategic, sustainable, and profoundly necessary for modern organizations navigating volatile and uncertain times.

About the Author

Dr. Rebekah C. Lloyd is a leadership scholar, veteran of the U.S. Army, and founder of the Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership. She holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership and is the developer of the Trauma-Informed Leadership Impact Framework, a research-based model that integrates neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and organizational strategy. Her work explores how trauma-informed practices strengthen leadership effectiveness, resilience, and organizational well-being. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Lloyd, email: rebekah@lloydconsultingfirm.com

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