

## **Trauma Informed Care: How and why it is essential for service and support agencies and workers**

(Originally written for the D.D.S. SafetyNet by [Nora J. Baladerian, Ph.D.](#))

### **WHAT IS TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE?**

“Trauma-informed care” requires supporters to recognize, understand, and respond to the effects of all types of trauma. Trauma is defined by Nancy Smyth, professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work as “...a wide range of situations where people are physically threatened, hurt or violated, or when they witness others in these situations.”<sup>1</sup> Trauma may also result from the experience of a natural disaster, life-threatening illness, and death of someone close, especially sudden death.

It is important to recognize that nearly everyone, including the people you support, has experienced some form of trauma in their life. This can be directly experiencing, witnessing (seeing something traumatic happening to someone else) or learning about a trauma. The essential fact is that the event caused the person to feel traumatized. Recognition of the traumatic impact is as important as is providing support for the person’s recovery from the trauma.

The purpose of embracing Trauma-informed care is to ensure that traumatized individuals have support as they build or rebuild a sense of control and empowerment in their life. Trauma-informed care emphasizes emotional and physical safety for those receiving (and providing) services.

Traumatization may or may not have been recognized at the time it occurred or any time after. For example, the person may have been traumatized by the death of a family member, yet their emotional trauma

<sup>1</sup><https://swhelper.org/2017/01/27/trauma-informed-care/>

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was not recognized. Even more likely, however, is that the person has experienced multiple traumas throughout their lifetime, and your work may be the first time anyone has acknowledged the trauma and taken steps to help them heal. Your acknowledgement of their suffering and your support make a huge difference to the person you are supporting.

## **WHAT ARE THE MAIN AREAS OF WORK IN TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE?**

Trauma-informed care can be viewed as a planning process used to build constructive relationships and support networks for the person who has experienced trauma. The principle areas of work include focusing on:

1. Promoting safety in the community and at home, including consideration of people, location, access to meaningful support, and working to reduce the risk of future traumatic experiences
2. Trustworthiness and openness in relationships
3. Building a reliable support system including peer support
4. Collaboration - promoting positive coping strategies and practices
5. Empowerment - encouraging the person's expression of their preferences and choices and honoring them
6. Awareness and sensitivity to cultural, historical, and gender Issues

## **WHAT IMPACTS HOW A TRAUMA EFFECTS SOMEONE?**

Trauma may contribute to what is commonly referred to as "difficult behaviors", as well as depression, anxiety and other stress related illnesses. Prior to shifting to the perspective of Trauma-informed care, the underlying question asked either openly or silently was "What is the matter with you?" Trauma-informed care changes this to "What happened to you?" This question demands an answer that includes the background of the person served, with particular attention to the person's experience of trauma and how it changed them.

As a supporter, you can assume that everyone with a developmental disability has experience some level of trauma. For example, we know that people with developmental disabilities are at least 3 times more likely to be abused than others.

It is important in getting to know the person, to gently ask about:

1. How they felt after any trauma they experienced.
2. How serious the trauma was as measured by the person.
3. What help the person got either immediately, later on, or never.
4. Whether the help they received actually reduced their suffering and trauma symptoms.

When you know this, you are much better prepared to support the person now and in the future.

## **WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA?**

Although each person responds differently, here are some common effects of trauma to be watchful for:

### **1. Emotional**

- a. New fears that are related to the trauma (it may happen again) as well as overall increased fearfulness (fear of the dark, fear to sleep alone, fear of dressing for bed)
- b. Onset of tearfulness, crying, sadness
- c. Onset of anger, anticipatory fear that may cause self-defense actions (that may look like aggression)
- d. Feeling anxious, worried, fearful; being "jumpy"
- e. Nightmares, daymares, trouble sleeping
- f. Avoiding people or not wanting to do activities they liked before
- g. Change in prior habits, preferences, activity level

### **2. Physical**

- a. No longer wants to go to a particular location or be near certain people
- b. May become withdrawn or may become aggressive to self or others
- c. Change in appetite, food choices
- d. Always tired or wired

### **3. Psychological**

- a. May become depressed, withdraw from everyone, suicidal
- b. May become aggressive with self or others
- c. May lose or gain weight
- d. May begin to have aches and pains (headache etc.)

These changes may only last a few days or weeks, or may last many years. The more severely the trauma has affected the individual, the more severe the changes may be. Remember, the question is not "What is the matter with you?" but "What happened to you?"

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP AS A SUPPORT PERSON?**

#### **Show Respect:**

The most important thing that you as a supporter can do is to show that you respect the person you are serving.

1. You respect their need for space (distance) from them and closeness, when appropriate.
2. You spend quality time with them, inquiring about their day, feelings, and experiences as well as wished-for things. You share your experiences as well. You build a relationship of mutual trust and caring.
3. When you ask questions, do so in a normal conversational manner, be attentive (do not be looking at your phone or a screen), and demonstrate a sincere interest in the person.
4. Do not make promises that you cannot keep. Particularly, do not promise that they will always be safe now...no one can.
5. Provide emotional support, encouragement and care. You say and mean, "I believe you" and "I am here for you."

#### **Honor the Person:**

Honor a person's trauma-based limitations:

1. Avoid going near places or persons that are linked to the trauma.
2. Assist the person in building a reliable support system
3. Create an instruction sheet for how to get help when needed and put it in a place they will remember. Practice using it.
4. Identify triggers and anniversary dates, and plan for them. In the

case of a severe trauma, anniversary dates are remembered by the body. Most people feel them about six weeks prior to the date of the trauma, and they last about six weeks after. They generally have the same effect each year: e.g., onset of anxiety, specific fears reminiscent of the trauma as well as typical physical effects such as sleeping, energy, appetite.

5. Talk to the person about their feeling of safety everywhere they usually go. Take steps to increase feelings of safety.

### **Choice and Control**

Experience of a trauma may cause the victim to feel powerless. If this is the case, it is critical that the person build (or regain) personal empowerment and control of their life. As a supporter you can:

1. Help the person understand that the traumatic event caused the changes they are experiencing. Tell them that their reactions to trauma are normal, and most people experience both emotional (feelings) changes and physical changes, such as change in appetite, sleep cycle. Reassure the individual that there are things they can do to feel better.
2. Create a list of things that could help the person recover, and ask which of these would they like to do. Some ideas include:
  - a. Creating a daily or weekly schedule, including activities designed to support healing from the trauma;
  - b. Supporting engagement in activities that help bring a sense of calm, empowerment, enjoyment, such as music, art, cooking, reading, watching fun movies, and meditation.
  - c. Doing physical activities, taking a walk, gardening, biking, swimming, yoga.
  - d. Attending a support group for trauma victims
3. Healing from the trauma may be helped through the services of a professional trauma therapist. As a supporter you can assist the individual to:
  - a. Locate a licensed therapist who specializes in trauma

- treatment, and set a regular schedule to begin healing;
- b. The therapist may be able to work over the computer or the phone, so no transportation needs exist, which has been found to be effective and much easier on the trauma victim.

Your awareness of trauma helps the people you serve feel understood and increases safety in their everyday lives.

### **What is Compassion Fatigue?**

Being a supporter of people who are victims of trauma and abuse can be challenging. Supporters may experience "Compassion fatigue" and have emotional or physical symptoms similar to those who experienced the actual trauma victim - difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, stress related illnesses, sadness, less enjoyment in life, and many more .

You may have heard this discussed as burn-out. It is a natural consequence of exposure to trauma-related information and images. If you do not realize that you are experiencing it or you do not get help, everyone suffers, including you and your work!

(For more information on compassion fatigue, you can find *Are You Experiencing Fatigue?* [here](#).)