



Explore

Exploring trauma-informed approaches

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including the five 'R's and the five principles of trauma-informed care

What is a trauma?

Trauma can refer to a traumatic, abusive, or neglectful event(s), that are experienced as being emotionally or physically harmful or life threatening.

Whether an event(s) is traumatic depends not only on the adult's experience of the event, but also how it negatively impacts on emotional, social, spiritual, and physical wellbeing.

Trauma can be understood in terms of the three 'E's:

- **Event:** what was the event(s)?
- **Experienced:** what was the adult's experience of the event?
- **Effects:** what were the effects of the event on the adult?



What is trauma-informed care?

Trauma-Informed care means being able to see beyond an adult's presenting behaviours and to ask, 'what has happened to you' rather than 'what is wrong with you?' This relies on staff having a compassionate curiosity to understand adults.

It involves recognising when someone may be affected by trauma, collaboratively adjusting how we work to take this into account, and responding in a way that supports recovery, does no harm, and recognises and supports people's resilience.

This approach allows adults to feel safe and develop trusting relationships with services and practitioners. Being "trauma-informed" is much more than a term. It is multi-layered and requires a whole system approach. It applies to all areas of an organisation and across the system. This includes integrating trauma-related aspects, knowledge, and concepts into areas such as training, recruitment, policies and procedures.

Working with trauma

It is useful to consider the five 'R's when working with adults affected by trauma. These are:

- **Realising** how common the experience of trauma and adversity is;
- **Recognising** the different ways that trauma can affect people;
- **Responding** by taking account of the ways that people can be affected by trauma to support recovery;
- **Resisting re-traumatisation** by providing opportunities to offer a greater sense of choice and control, empowerment, collaboration, and safety;
- **Reflecting** on practice, with a fundamental focus on relationships at the heart of our work.

Important to note

Re-traumatisation can occur when talking about specific events. In general, it should be made clear that adults are not required to talk about the specific details of trauma. When gathering information, it is not always necessary to know the full details, but rather the impact of trauma and details of recovery.

Trauma-informed care in practice

In addition to the five 'R's, there are five key principles of trauma-informed practice.

Safety

Physical and emotional safety are key to do meaningful work. Traumatized adults may have developed an overactive stress response and may often feel unsafe.

Be open and honest, explain what is happening and why at every stage, making sure the adult understands what will happen next, the possible outcomes, and practical information, such as when and how you will meet.

Consider intersectionality¹ and how to meet people's needs for cultural safety. Minority groups are often disproportionately affected by trauma; discrimination can also worsen/increase the impact of trauma.

¹ Sociology. The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "intersectionality (n.), sense 2," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8904687553>.

Trust

For adults who have experienced trauma, it can be difficult to establish trust.

Develop trust by implementing good personal and professional boundaries; be aware that you may need to re-establish trust each time you meet with the adult.

Be reliable and honest about what you can and cannot do, while recognising and addressing the power imbalances between you and the adult.

Use a non-judgmental, compassionate approach and be responsive to the experiences of those you work with, remembering that everyone experiences trauma differently. *Refer to our learning resources about [language and terminology](#).*

Choice

Offering realistic choices may be challenging for the adult and those working with them. Acknowledge the power difference at the initial stages to support working with adults who may have experienced others misusing power. Acknowledge the limits in choice, for example changes in staff.

Engage the adult and give them choice in how work continues. Consent should be sought, explaining how information will be shared and the limits to confidentiality, giving the adult options and discussing with them what they would like to happen.

Collaboration

Collaboration means working towards a common goal or purpose. Adults who have experienced trauma may have very little trust in their needs mattering to others, or very little experience of being involved in decisions, so may need support and encouragement to do this.

Interactions that contain a psychoeducational element, where staff invite people to collaborate in their recovery by sharing information, are particularly useful.

Collaboration could involve asking someone what they need for a certain part of the meeting or visit or identifying coping strategies that may be helpful or problematic in the longer term and discussing options for support.



Empowerment

The principles described above all contribute to empowering adults we work with. Showing someone that they can be safe, demonstrating you can be trusted and so can they, offering choice and collaboration to someone who has never had these options, are all empowering.

Empowerment means treating the person as an equal. This may include offering challenge (constructively, rather than judgmentally), which can enable reflection and be very useful.

Supporting and empowering adults to recognise unhealthy coping strategies can be a life-changing opportunity.

References

NHS Education for Scotland (2024) [*National Trauma Transformation Programme*](#)

Office for Health Improvements & Disparities (2022) [*Working definition of trauma-informed practice*](#)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) [*SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma Informed Approach*](#)

Community Care (2023) [*A trauma informed approach to social work: practice tips*](#)