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Trauma Informed Collaboration

Our life experiences shape who we are, what we learn, and how we respond to different events. When we encounter distressing, life-threatening, and overwhelming situations, their intensity challenges our ability to draw emotional and psychological strength from our usual coping mechanisms. Instead, our response to these experiences creates stress that continues to build, challenging our ability to be content, safe, and secure.

We refer to the strong emotions that can unexpectedly affect our ability to maintain our steady state as trauma. Researchers continue to learn how our bodies can hold onto the memories of these traumatic events, even those that may have occurred very early in our childhood. Unfortunately, “few people go through life without encountering some kind of trauma” through no fault of their own.¹

However, we can change how we interact with others to be more trauma informed. When we are willing to develop an awareness that the prevalence of trauma is significant and decide to operate with that knowledge and consideration, we can find more success in our interactions and collaborations with others.

This article will explore some of the fundamentals of trauma informed collaboration as a respectful, supportive approach that helps build resilience.

What is trauma?

Many people “mistake ordinary hardship or distress for genuine trauma”, which can lead to them start using the word, trauma, as they reflect on various life incidents and memories.² Not every difficult situation is categorically traumatic, and not all traumatic events will be debilitating. Most of the time, we can move beyond the initial feelings that these bad experiences stir in us. When these experiences don’t easily fade into memory, they could be viewed as causing longer-term harm.

For something to be classified as traumatic in the psychological sense of the definition, the experience is:

- Out of the person’s control
- Sudden and unexpected
- Harmful or life-threatening
- Damaging to a person’s sense of safety
- Responsible for creating overwhelming vulnerability³

Trauma affects the body's sympathetic nervous system by creating a state where it perceives it is constantly at risk and should be ready to respond to threats at any moment. Living with this kind of hypervigilance means that the body's usual fight, flight and freeze responses are always activated. The stress hormones and adrenaline our bodies produce continue to circulate rather than follow the expected path of clearing out of our systems when the crisis ends so that we can return to a more relaxed state.

Researchers like Dr. Bessel van der Kolk and Dr. Gabor Maté, who have studied and helped to classify the many different types of trauma, have shown that over time, unresolved or even unconscious trauma disturbs both physical and emotional functions. These disruptions can cause everything from pain and sleeping problems, to chronic illness and severe emotional disturbances that affect someone's sense of who they are and their relationships.

It may be helpful to realize that trauma can:⁴

- Affect as a single event or repeated occurrences of events over time
- Arise from interpersonal relationships of people who know each other
- Influence developmental stages and patterns of emotional, social, and psychological growth
- Be political in nature, threatening people's lives, beliefs, culture, and livelihoods

What is trauma informed collaboration?

Trauma informed collaboration is an approach you can adopt as a regular part of how you interact with people daily. It means that you acknowledge and are aware of and have an appreciation that inputs – even of the most seemingly innocuous nature – can create sensory overloads in people that are traumatic responses. When someone reacts unexpectedly, it can be challenging to understand why. Sometimes it can turn a situation into one that is unintentionally counterproductive and can damage our relationships and, potentially, even future interactions. By becoming trauma informed, we can influence the outcomes of our interactions so they have the potential to be more consistent, positive, and productive for everyone.

Is this what it means when we hear something is triggering for someone?

A trigger is an association someone makes that can inadvertently kick-off “re-traumatizing interactions” that cause them to experience a “dysregulated” or intense stress response.⁵ Being triggered means someone is re-experiencing trauma. It isn't just being “uncomfortable” or sensitive or feeling that something is “rubbing you the wrong way.”⁶ A person may only be aware that something will necessarily act as a trigger for them once it happens.

Being more trauma informed, that is, aware of how far-reaching trauma can be, means that we can become more attuned to signals in people's body language that indicate someone is displaying a traumatic stress reaction.

Here's what you might notice:⁷

- A shift in someone's posture where they appear more nervous, uneasy, or afraid by shifting their position frequently, withdrawing or even turning their body away from an interaction.
- Trembling fingers, clenching and unclenching of fists, fidgeting, or using something physical that is nearby to create a protective barrier (such as a bag, pillow or book).
- Self-soothing gestures such as putting a hand on their head, neck, or lap.
- Rapid and quick facial expressions such as
 - raised, lowered, or furrowed eyebrows
 - frowning or lowering of lip corners, pursed lips, or lip biting.
- Reluctance to make eye contact, looking bored, off to the side, or off in the distance.
- Crossed arms and legs, tapping and jiggling feet.
- A higher-pitched tone of voice, more rapid speech than usual, or speaking slowly and quietly or with definitive emphasis on certain words.

Why is trauma informed collaboration important?

Operating with the knowledge that most people have experienced traumatic events is a supportive approach that actively demonstrates that you are caring and compassionate about your connections and relationships with others in your own life. It also is a way to influence interactions, experiences, and environments to make them healthier at home, in the community, or at work. You might help someone who is having trouble regulating their emotions or reduce the chance that they could display challenging behaviours.

Developing your trauma informed approach takes time. As you learn, conscious practice will help you to build better relationships. More and more healthcare professionals are adopting this approach as a standard of care because they realize the benefits. You may have heard it referred to as person-centred care.⁸

How does the prevalence of trauma affect people's experiences of seemingly ordinary events?

It may be surprising to learn how significantly trauma affects nearly everyone.

- 70% of U.S. adults have experienced some traumatic event at least once in their lives⁹
- 75% of Canadians will experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime¹⁰
- 1 in 10 people in Canada have been diagnosed with PTSD¹¹

Often, people display symptoms of trauma in their interactions with others. These can present as:¹²

• Physical changes

- Headaches, heart rate increase, sweating
- Exhaustion, loss of appetite, loss of libido
- More susceptible to illness
- Constipation/diarrhea
- Hypersensitivity or hyperawareness (to sounds and/or touch)
- Harmful indulgences (alcohol, drugs, food)

• Emotional changes

- Fear, depression, anxiety, panic
- Extreme mood swings, rage, anger
- Withdrawal or isolation
- Guilt, blame, shame
- Loss of interest in regular activities

- Flashbacks or nightmares (PTSD)
- All of these emotional changes could stem from a PTSD diagnosis, however, some or few people go on to develop what we consider PTSD¹³

Why is it essential to adopt a trauma informed collaborative approach?

This approach aids our ability to respond to stressful situations in healthy ways. It might help to think about it using these five words:¹⁴

- **Realize** that stress and trauma happen to all of us.
- **Recognize** that our reactions are attempts to feel safe again.
- **Respond** with understanding, compassion, and patience every time.
- **Resist** re-traumatizing to boost emotional safety and avoid triggering events proactively.
- **Resilience** helps keep the focus on people's strengths.

By adopting principles founded in safety, empowerment, trust, transparency, collaboration, supportive help, and attentiveness to historical and cultural issues, you'll become more confident in yourself and those you are interacting with. Think about how this approach could be beneficial for equity deserving groups, such as the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and actively work to address misogyny, racism, and marginalization.

Trauma informed collaboration helps you develop healthy and appropriate boundaries. It allows you to intentionally lead from a place of empathy in all your interactions. It's a powerful tool that can alleviate or eliminate discrimination, promote understanding, and support harmony in co-existing despite our differences.



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