

The ABC's of Trauma-Informed Care

Reviewed 9/2025



Community

MENTAL HEALTH

CLINTON • EATON • INGHAM

AGENDA

- What do we mean by trauma? How does trauma affect people?
- What can we learn from listening to the voices of people who have experienced trauma?
- Why is understanding trauma important in the work we do at CMHA-CEI?
- What can we do to insure that we help those we serve who have experienced trauma?
- Why we all matter!
- The stresses of our own work and lives may also make trauma a personal concern
- How understanding trauma and improving our services helps all of us

What do we mean by trauma?

- Trauma refers to intense and overwhelming experiences that involve serious loss, threat or harm to a person's physical and/or emotional well being.
- These experience may occur at any time in a person's life. They may involve a single traumatic event or may be repeated over many years.
- These trauma experiences often overwhelm the persons coping resources. This often leads the person to find a way of coping that may work in the short run but may cause serious harm in the long run.

Examples of Traumatic Life Experiences

- Physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse in childhood or adulthood
- In Childhood
 - neglect or abandonment (food insufficiency, lack of money to meet basic needs, homelessness)
 - death of a parent
 - divorce
 - family life that includes drug addiction, alcoholism, parental incarceration, violence
- Rape
- Serious medical illness or disease (disabling conditions, loss of function, invasive and distressing procedures)

Examples of Traumatic Life Experiences

- War, combat and civil unrest conditions including torture affecting soldiers and refugee civilians
- Catastrophic losses of one's home, livelihood, people, pets due to flood, tornado, hurricane or other disasters of nature
- Involved in or witnessing horrific events involving violence, gruesome accidents or death/serious injury

What is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study?

- Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente (an HMO) Collaboration
- Over a ten year study involving 17,000 people
- Looked at effects of adverse childhood experiences (trauma) over the lifespan
- Largest study ever done on this subject

People enrolled in the Kaiser Permanente health plan were asked ten questions related to the following adverse childhood experiences....

- Physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse
- Neglect or abandonment
- Divorce
- Alcoholism or drug addiction in the family
- Family violence
- Poverty, homelessness, lack of food and basic needs
- Family member in prison
- Family member with mental illness

What They Found

Of the **17,000** respondents

- **1 in 4** exposed to **2** categories of ACEs
- **1 in 16** was exposed to **4** categories.
- **22%** were sexually abused as children.
- **66%** of the women experienced abuse, violence or family strife in childhood.
- Women were **50%** more likely than men to have experienced 5 or more ACEs

Impact of Trauma Over the Lifespan

Are neurological, biological, psychological and social in nature. They include:

- Changes in brain neurobiology;
- Social, emotional & cognitive impairment;
- Adoption of health risk behaviors as coping mechanisms (eating disorders, smoking, substance abuse, self harm, sexual promiscuity, violence); and
- Severe and persistent behavioral health, health and social problems, early death.

(Felitti et al, 1998)

Multiple trauma experiences raise the risk for.....

- Anxiety problems and fears
 - > Avoiding people, places and things that are similar to or reminders of the traumatic event(s)
- Physical health problems
- Sleep problems
- Emotional problems such as feeling numb and/or disconnected from oneself or environment
- Memory problems
- Flashbacks

Multiple trauma experiences raise the risk for.....

- Alcoholism and alcohol abuse, substance use/abuse
- Obesity
- Respiratory difficulties
- Heart disease
- Multiple sexual partners
- Poor relationships with others
- Smoking
- Suicide attempts
- Unintended pregnancies

Trauma experienced in adulthood may also affect a persons emotional and physical well-being

Examples:

- Combat related trauma
- Refugee/torture/civil unrest
- Witnessing or experiencing violence
- Catastrophic loss (natural disasters)
- Terrorism

Bottom line findings: These experiences raises the individuals risk for severe emotional distress, suicide, physical illness, substance abuse and a host of other life difficulties

Trauma may also lead to a set of symptoms referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The following symptoms are clear indications that the person has been overwhelmed by trauma and experiencing serious mental health consequences:

- ***Reliving the experience***
- ***Avoidance and emotional numbing***
- ***Over sensitivity and irritability***



Re-living

- Intrusive memories images, or perceptions;
- Recurring nightmares;
- Intrusive daydreams or flashbacks;
- Exaggerated emotional and physical reactions;
- Dissociative experiences (feeling disconnected from one's body and environment)

Avoidance and Numbing

- The avoidance and numbing set of symptoms includes
 - Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, activities, or situations associated with the trauma;
 - Feelings of detachment from people, places and things;
 - Inability to have positive and loving feelings;
 - Limited emotions, loss of interest; and avoidance of activity.

Over Sensitivity and Irritability

- Exaggerated startle response
- Being on guard much of the time
- Insomnia and other sleep disturbances,
- Difficulties in concentrating, and
- Outbursts of anger

Findings

- 1 in 6 men have experienced emotional trauma
- 80% of people in psychiatric hospitals have experienced physical or sexual abuse
- 66% of people in substance abuse treatment report childhood abuse or neglect
- 90% of women with alcoholism were sexually abused or suffered severe violence from parents

Findings

- **2/3 (67%)** of all suicide attempts
- **64%** of adult suicide attempts
- **80%** of child/adolescent suicide attempts

Are Attributable to Childhood Adverse Experiences

Women are 3 times as likely as men to attempt suicide over the lifespan.

Findings

- **92%** of incarcerated girls report sexual, physical or severe emotional abuse
- Boys who experience or witness violence are **1,000 times** more likely to commit violence than those who do not
- As many as one third of women and **14%** of men are survivors of childhood sexual abuse

Bottom Line

The experience of trauma in
childhood and adulthood
matters!

A ***quality*** healthcare, human services
and/or social safety net organization is
designed to address the impact of
trauma for every single person in that
organization

The Challenge

We don't know what kinds of experiences our clients have had when they present for services, so we need to approach them in a universally sensitive manner

- > If we assume that their presenting issues are not related to trauma, then we miss a great opportunity to help
- > If we assume trauma may be playing a role, then we begin to pay attention to signs of trauma and ask the right questions
- > The steps we take to create a safe and trusting environment benefits everyone

What actions should our organization take?

- > It would be wise to assume that trauma may play a role in the person's current life difficulties and that our job is to...
 - 1) engage the person in exploring his/her life history related to trauma in a way that is respectful and sensitive
 - 2) insure that our policies, procedures, activities, environment and ways that we relate and talk to each other creates a safe and trusting environment

Why is trauma-informed care important in the work we do?

- To provide effective services we need to understand the life situations that may be contributing to the persons current problems
- Many current problems faced by the people we serve may be related to traumatic life experiences
- People who have experienced traumatic life events are often *very sensitive* to situations that remind them of the people, places or things involved in their traumatic event.
- These reminders, also known as triggers, may cause a person to relive the trauma and view our organization as a source of distress and not as a healing and welcoming environment

Why is Trauma-Informed Care important to our work?

- We might unintentionally cause harm by practices, policies and activities that are insensitive to the needs of our clients.
 - Re-victimizing or re-traumatizing someone unintentionally is a real possibility
- All of us who are not immune from adverse experiences in the present or the past.
- Understanding trauma also means recognizing that our personal traumatic experiences or the stress associated with working in human services may impact our emotional and physical well being as well as our work success and satisfaction

How we may unintentionally cause our consumers to relive their trauma: The importance of relationships

WHAT HURTS

- Interactions that are humiliating, harsh, impersonal, disrespectful
critical, demanding,
judgmental

WHAT HELPS

- Interactions that express kindness, patience, reassurance, calm and acceptance and listening
- Frequent use of words like PLEASE and THANK YOU

How we may unintentionally cause our consumers to relive their trauma: The importance of the physical environment

What hurts

- Congested areas that are noisy
- Poor signage that is confusing
- Uncomfortable furniture
- Cold non-inviting colors and paintings/posters on the wall

What helps

- Treatment and waiting rooms that are comfortable, calming and offers privacy
- Furniture is clean and comfortable
- No wrong door philosophy: we are all here to help
- Wall coverings, posters/pictures are pleasant and conveys a hopeful positive message

How we may unintentionally cause our consumers to relive their trauma: The importance of our attitudes and beliefs

What hurts

- Asking questions that convey the idea that “there is something wrong with the person”
- Regarding a persons difficulties only as ***symptoms*** of a mental health, substance use or medical problem

What helps

- Asking questions for the purpose of understanding what harmful events may contribute to current problems
- Recognizing that mental health, substance use and physical health ***symptoms*** may be a persons way of coping with trauma

A Trauma-Informed Care environment improves the experience of everyone including the workforce

- Human service work challenges our own personal resources. Working with people who are struggling with serious life difficulties may contribute to.....
 - Emotional exhaustion
 - Disappointment or frustration with a lack of accomplishment (lacking job success and satisfaction)
 - Becoming impatient and finding our compassion and empathy declining (compassion fatigue)

Folkman 1990

Thank you for taking trauma
informed care.