Getting Started with Trauma-Informed Workforce Development

What is Trauma-Informed Workforce Development?

Trauma-informed workforce development occurs when staff understand, recognize, and respond with supports that address the negative effects of psychological, emotional, and spiritual trauma. Trauma-Informed Services emphasizes that for clients to take full advantage of skill development opportunities they need to trust the organization as a whole and the individual staff members providing direct services—they need to feel safe.

Being trauma-informed is about understanding and attending to how the cognitive, psychological, and emotional effects of trauma can block an individual's brain from developing the skills, attitudes, and habits that are associated with successful employment. One example of this is that for staff to provide trauma-informed services they need to develop an empathetic understanding of how traumatic stress can cause concentration difficulties, which can make it challenging to keep up in training programs. Staff also need to understand how traumatic stress can cause anxiety that is self-medicated with substances, and both the anxiety and substance abuse may appear as lack of motivation to show up to training opportunities and as a lethargic engagement in the job search process.

To ensure that job readiness and workforce development services are trauma-informed, all staff need to understand:

1. How trauma affects people's ability to organize and manage themselves to take advantage of life's opportunities and cope with life's challenges.
2. Understand the practices that will help them process and cope with their traumatic experiences and enable them to gain employment
3. Develop procedures for following-up with clients to help them identify and manage workplace stressors and triggers to facilitate job retention.

Two Starting Points

1. Naming The Problem For Yourself As A Workforce Development Professional

For too many adults living in economically marginalized communities, events capable of causing trauma are in almost every aspect of the environment in which they live.

trauma-informed job readiness and workforce development is about understanding and attending to how the cognitive, psychological, emotional, and behavioral effects of trauma can impair an individual's abilities to develop the skills, attitudes, and habits needed for successful employment. For example, for staff to provide trauma-informed services they need to develop an empathetic understanding of how traumatic stress can cause concentration difficulties, which can make it challenging to keep up in training programs. Staff also need to understand how traumatic stress can cause anxiety that is self-medicated with substances, and both the anxiety and substance abuse may appear as lack of motivation to show up to training opportunities and as a lethargic engagement in the job search process.

Staff need to have a clear understanding of how traumatic experiences can *affect individual functioning*.

2. Naming The Problem With And For Your Clients

We all tend to look away and avoid asking others about what may be happening when we see signs of mental illness or trauma. However, one of the most helpful things that can be done for clients is to carefully ask about and listen to what they say about their life experiences. This act of asking and listening can provide the critical insight needed to determine the true underlying barriers that may be preventing them from short- and long-term career success.

Trauma-informed services help clients see, name, and heal (through connecting them with qualified professionals) their inner injuries to increase the likelihood of workplace success. Change is initiated by helping clients to understand the lasting trauma caused by past or ongoing experiences, and understand how unhealed trauma affects how they show up in the workplace. This is done by talking with clients about trauma and potential triggers, helping them access therapy and other counseling supports, and coaching their development of self-regulation skills to deal with overwhelming feelings when triggers arise.

To do this staff first need to understand how to *destigmatize discussing trauma*.

Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Services

Safety Throughout the organization, clients and staff feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe	**Trustworthiness & Transparency** Decisions are made with transparency, and with the goal of building and maintaining trust	**Peer Support** Individuals with shared experiences are integrated into the organization and viewed as integral to service delivery
Collaboration & Mutuality Power differences (between staff and clients and among staff) leveled to support shared decision-making	**Empowerment, Voice, & Choice** Client and staff strengths are recognized, built on, and validated - this includes a belief in resilience and the ability to heal from trauma	**Cultural, Historical, & Gender Lens** Potential for stereotypes and biases are recognized and addressed in policies, protocols, and practices that are responsive to differences in client needs

What does it look like to provide trauma-informed Services?
- Ask and listen to what clients say about what they have gone through
- Directly and supportively talking with clients about trauma and potential triggers
- Helping clients access therapy and other emotional supports
- Helping clients develop emotional and behavioral self-regulation

Assess Your Organization on Each Principle of Trauma- Informed Services

Completing the organizational self-assessment for trauma-informed care will help you and your colleagues identify opportunities for program and environmental change, assist in professional development planning, and inform needed organizational policy change.

When reviewing these questions remember that you are evaluating your organization/department, not your individual performance.

This self-assessment can be completed anonymously by individual members of the organization and then aggregated, or it can be completed collectively by discussing as a group and coming to an agreement on the rating for each element. If completed individually and then aggregated, it is helpful to discuss items where responses are extremely varied. Lack of consistency may be due to a lack of understanding about an item itself, a difference of perspective based on a person's role in the agency, or differences in understanding about policies, procedures, and daily practices.

Safety

Throughout the organization, clients and staff feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe.

	Not implemented anywhere in organization	Partially implemented throughout organization	Fully implemented in some areas of organization	Fully implemented throughout organization
	0	1	2	3
1. Staff have assessed and addressed aspects of the environment that may be re-traumatizing, and have developed strategies to make environment feel safe				
2. The physical environment promotes a sense of safety, calming, neurobiological regulation, and de-escalation for clients and staff				
3. The protocols for informing clients and families of rules, procedures, activities, and schedules include precautions that are mindful of the fact that people who are frightened or overwhelmed may have difficulty processing information				
4. There are mechanisms to recognize and address psychological safety concerns identified by clients and staff				

Issues that need to be addressed:

Existing initiatives and opportunities that can be connected/leveraged to advance change:

Trustworthiness & Transparency

Decisions are made with transparency, and with the goal of building and maintaining trust.

	Not implemented anywhere in organization	Partially implemented throughout organization	Fully implemented in some areas of organization	Fully implemented throughout organization
	0	1	2	3
1. Communication protocols deliberately promote transparency and trust with clients, families, and staff				
2. There are mechanisms to review policies and identify whether they are sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors				
3. There are written policies and procedures that recognize the pervasiveness of trauma in the lives of clients and families and express a commitment to reducing re-traumatization and promoting well-being and recovery				
4. There are training policies that demonstrate a commitment to staff training on trauma-informed care as part of orientation and in-service training				

Issues that need to be addressed:

Existing initiatives and opportunities that can be connected/leveraged to advance change:

Peer Support

Individuals with shared experiences are integrated into the organization and viewed as integral to service delivery.

	Not implemented anywhere in organization	Partially implemented throughout organization	Fully implemented in some areas of organization	Fully implemented throughout organization
	0	1	2	3
1. There are staff well-being policies that attend to the impact of working with people who have experienced trauma				
2. There are written policies and procedures for including clients and families who have experienced trauma and peer supports in meaningful roles in governance, policy-making, services, and evaluation				
3. People with lived experience have the opportunity to provide feedback to the organization on quality improvement processes for better engagement and services				
4. There is a process for staff to recognize the value of and engage with peer supports to manage workplace stress				

Issues that need to be addressed:

Existing initiatives and opportunities that can be connected/leveraged to advance change:

Collaboration & Mutuality

Organization partners in the active leveling of power differences between staff and clients and among staff.

	Not implemented anywhere in organization	Partially implemented throughout organization	Fully implemented in some areas of organization	Fully implemented throughout organization
	0	1	2	3
1. Communication protocols deliberately reduce the sense of power differentials among clients, families, and staff				
2. Clients, families and community members have been asked for their definitions of physical, psychological, and emotional safety				
3. There are pamphlets and programs that educate clients, families, and local community about traumatic stress and triggers				
4. Procedures for screening have been integrated into the client flow plan				

Issues that need to be addressed:

Existing initiatives and opportunities that can be connected/leveraged to advance change:

Empowerment, Voice, & Choice

Client and staff strengths are recognized, built on, and validated - this includes a belief in resilience and the ability to heal from trauma.

	Not implemented anywhere in organization	Partially implemented throughout organization	Fully implemented in some areas of organization	Fully implemented throughout organization
	0	1	2	3
1. The leadership and governance structures demonstrate support for the voice and participation of clients and families who have trauma histories				
2. Communication protocols deliberately reduce the sense of power differentials among clients, families, and staff				
3. Communication protocols and client materials deliberately normalize traumatic stress responses among clients, families, and staff and contribute to feeling comforted and empowered				
4. Consumer rights are posted in places that are visible				

Issues that need to be addressed:

Existing initiatives and opportunities that can be connected/leveraged to advance change:

Cultural, Historical, & Gender Lens

Potential for stereotypes and biases are recognized and addressed in policies, protocols, and practices that are responsive to differences in client needs.

	Not implemented anywhere in organization	Partially implemented throughout organization	Fully implemented in some areas of organization	Fully implemented throughout organization
	0	1	2	3
1. Leadership understands the developmental and cultural foundations behind the *Why* and *What* of Trauma Informed Care (TIC)				
2. Training addresses the ways identity, culture, community, and oppression can affect a person's experience of trauma, access to supports and resources, and opportunities for safety				
3. Providers understand variation in developmental needs and can adjust care accordingly				
4. Culture, gender, and other factors have been considered in the context of trauma screening				

Issues that need to be addressed:

Existing initiatives and opportunities that can be connected/leveraged to advance change: