

A Guide for Trauma Informed Practices

How the guide is organized:

The guide is organized by trauma informed principles. Beneath each principle is an explanation and practice suggestions. At the end of the guide is a list of common triggers and some explanation about what triggers are.

I. Guiding Principle: Safety

Safety is fundamental to a trauma informed approach. Safety in a trauma informed approach refers to whole-person safety. This means physical safety, emotional safety, psychological safety, spiritual safety, safety in the environment, and cultural safety. If someone does not feel safe it is difficult to build enough rapport to establish a sense of trust in the relationship, which we need in order to be experienced as effective in the subsequent trauma informed principles.

Practice Suggestions:

- A. Model calm safe behaviors, and communication
 - Convey relaxed body posture, examples: relaxed arms at side, open hands, smooth brow, and unclenched jaw.
 - Announce yourself if approaching from a location where you are not easily heard or seen.
 - Be aware of your voice volume and match it to the situation at hand.
 - Use the amount of eye contact that the individual models.
 - Be mindful of your use of gestures. Try to avoid rapid and large gestures.
 - Get on the individuals' level to avoid looming over them. Example: if someone is seated, seat yourself.
- B. Be aware of the individual's trauma history to the extent that it is disclosed to you.
 - Ensure you are familiar with the individuals crisis support plan (if they have one).
 - Notice people, places, and situations that trigger the individual. If possible, help prevent triggers. When needed help manage them as suggested by treating professionals and the individual (if developmentally appropriate).
 - Ensure safety in the environment.
- C. Encourage the use of coping skills and distress tolerance skills
 - Help the individual practice a preferred coping skill if they become overwhelmed. What does the individual need to self-soothe?
 - If the individual is overwhelmed let them know that in this moment, they are safe.

- Help the individual re-orient themselves to the here and now if they become overwhelmed. Help them to practice a grounding technique, example: connecting to their senses in the environment.
- Encourage the person to name what they are feeling (sensations/emotions) if they become overwhelmed.
- Remind the individual of distress tolerance skills they may practice, examples: splashing cold water on their face, paced breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, etc...
- Help the person to accept the reality of the situation if they cannot change it. This allows the individual to be unburdened from the perceived responsibility to have to change an unchangeable situation.
- If the individual is in crisis: ensure they are safe in the environment, access support for the individual, in a calm voice let them know that help will be on the way, and that you will not leave until help arrives.

D. Normalize the Individuals Trauma Responses

- Start a sentence with “it makes sense that you...”
- Start a sentence with “it is understandable that you...”
- “It is not your fault that...”
- “This is a normal response to what you have endured.”

E. Convey Empathy

Avoid These Practices	Instead Do These Practices
Stay away from phrases such as: “I understand”, “I know how you feel”, “I went through the same thing”.	Engage in perspective sharing through reflecting the underlying thoughts and feelings conveyed by the individual.
Avoid phrases that convey sympathy rather than empathy. Examples include: “I feel bad for you” & “I feel sad for you”.	
Resist offering platitudes or quick fixes in response to difficult and complex experiences. This has the impact of minimizing.	Honor the complexity of the situation, show your listening through use of active listening such as paraphrasing. Assist the individual with identifying who they can access for support with the situation.

Avoid sarcasm and be judicious about your use of humor.	Learn the individual's style of humor and mirror that in your interactions.
---	---

II. Guiding Principle: Trust and Transparency

Trust is so precious, and it can be hard to build with someone who has had the lived experience that people cannot be trusted, especially those people who were supposed to care for you, and that you were supposed to be able to depend on. Providing structure, dependability, and predictability create experiences that are different from the chaos that someone may be used to and can start to lay a foundation for trust. Being transparent and honoring boundaries are also ways to help build that trust. Transparency is an act of power sharing that lets the individual in and makes them feel like they have some control.

Practice Suggestions:

- A. Build trust by respecting the individual's personal boundaries
 - Ask for permission if you are going to get close to the individual, make physical contact, or give unsolicited advice of any kind.
 - Provide at least an arm's length of space when you first meet and engage with the individual.
 - Provide more than an arm's length of space if the individual is overwhelmed/overstimulated. Also provide more space if the individual is modeling needing more space as their baseline behavior.
 - Respect the individual's self-determination when it comes to sharing their personal history.

- B. Practice personal integrity to build trust
 - Do what you said you were going to do. Follow through with action steps and commitments that you made with the individual.

- C. Provide advance notice to help the individual adjust to changes
 - Verbalize any anticipated changes as far in advance as possible (examples: scheduled meeting change/planned activity change).
 - Provide transition time between activities. Example: in 5 minutes we will be leaving the park.

- D. Be transparent about the limits of confidentiality and your involvement in the case
- Be as transparent as possible when it comes to what is happening in the case, what your role is, and what may lie ahead.

III. Guiding Principle: Collaboration and Mutuality

It is essential to keep the individual and the family system engaged and at the heart of all the processes impacting their lives. Keep their knowledge and preferences central in your advocacy work.

Practice Suggestions:

- A. Make requests instead of giving directives
- B. Convey respect and regard for the individual's likes, dislikes, preferred activities, and unpreferred activities
- Plan and engage in activities that reflect the individual's preferences.
- C. Speak to the individual in a way in which they can understand
- Be mindful of the individual's developmental age and stage when offering examples and explanations.
 - Be judicious about the amount of information that you give at any given time and allow ample time for processing.
 - Use active listening skills to convey mutuality in understanding of thoughts and feeling.

IV. Cultural Humility, Awareness, and Responsiveness

The individual and family system are the experts in their own cultural perspectives/practices/preferences, and this is honored in our advocacy work.

Practice Suggestions:

- A. Respect the families' cultural perspectives, needs, and practices
- Practice respectful curiosity to discover unmet cultural needs.
 - Openly receive the family's cultural perspective by having an awareness of how your own identity/ beliefs/values/opinions may be influencing your interpretation of their needs/values.
 - Advocate for access to linguistically appropriate services.
 - Ensure the youth can engage in their religious and cultural practices in placement.
 - Ensure the youth has access to cultural items.

B. Practice self-reflection and educate yourself

- Set time aside for self-reflection to discover how your own biases may be influencing your advocacy work.
- Have an awareness of how systems of oppression (historically and currently) impact the experience of people of color interfacing with the child welfare system.
- Have awareness and understanding of how the experience of oppression is a source of historical and ongoing trauma.

V. Guiding Principle: Voice and Choice

Open space to hear the individual and encourage them to make choices. This builds confidence over time and helps foster an internal locus of control.

Practice Suggestions:

- A. Help the individual to see where their personal power lies in a situation
- Help someone to understand how they can act on the things that matter to them.
- B. Help the individual to use their voice in decision making
- If developmentally appropriate encourage the individual to share their own voice in court and Child and Family Team (CFT) meetings.
 - Encourage family members to also use their voice so that their perspective is central in the planning process.
- C. Provide helpful information that will assist the individual in decision making
- Help someone to understand the make-up, influences, and processes of systems that they are engaging with, for example: CFT's and court hearings.

VI. Guiding Principle: Empowerment

Give the individual the support and information that they need to be a change agent in their own life. Bring awareness to their strengths and help them to capitalize on their strengths to solve problems.

Practice Suggestions:

- A. Provide specific, timely, and genuine praise to the individual.
- B. Affirm the individuals use of safe boundaries and choices.
- C. Point out the individual's strengths and assist them in seeing how they can be applied to obtain goals or to help problem solve a situation.

- D. Help the individual to see themselves as a resilient, strong, and capable survivor.
- E. Assist the individual to build skills and knowledge necessary for asking for and utilizing help when needed.
- F. Help the individual to have hope for themselves and their future.

VII. Guiding Principle: Avoid Re-Traumatization

At minimum, trauma informed practice is a universal precaution that aims to prevent re-traumatization.

Avoid These Practices	Instead do These Practices
Do not initiate conversation about the individual's trauma history.	Listen attentively and practice active listening skills if someone chooses to share their story.
Avoid asking the individual "why" when it comes to their past and current responses to traumatic events.	Instead normalize the way the individual responded to the circumstances at hand, this sound like: "it makes sense that you...", "it is understandable that you..."
Avoid asking curiosity or probing follow up questions if the individual has chosen to share about traumatic events in their life.	Respect the individual's boundaries with their story. Acknowledge the courage it took to share what they did.
Do not convey expressions of shock, surprise, or being overly concerned if someone chooses to disclose something difficult/traumatic.	Convey a facial expression of openness and attentiveness. This could look like relaxing facial muscles and practicing attending behaviors such has a slight head tilt and gentle head nods as you take in information.
Avoid exclamations of surprise and shock when someone tells you about difficult experiences.	Instead affirm the individual's strength and resilience in surviving the experience.
Avoid giving value judgements regarding the individuals involved in the trauma history.	Help the individual to identify and utilize their own strengths and to apply their preferred coping skills.
Stay away from giving advice based on your own trauma history and journey of healing. Each individual's journey of healing is unique.	

VIII. Guiding Principle: Practice Self-Care

In order to be present, mindful, and intentional enough to carry out these practices we need to start by taking care of ourselves. Filling our own internal reservoir of resilience, allows us to have enough left over to effectively advocate for others, and to still participate in those things that give meaning to our personal lives.

Practice Suggestions:

A. Self-Reflection

- Reflect on how your own trauma history may impact your involvement in a case. What are your triggers and how can you plan for them?
- How are you connecting to hope? Practice reframing situations to find the strengths/opportunities/hope.
- Are you being kind to yourself? What are you saying to yourself about yourself and this situation? Consider practicing self-compassion.

B. Mindfulness in the Moment

- Practice mindfulness in the moment by checking in with yourself throughout the day: how are you feeling physically/mentally/emotionally? Based on that assessment what action do you need to take? Check-in with yourself again to see how applying your chosen action impacted you. Consider if further action is needed based on how you are feeling.

C. Self-Care Plan

- Create a plan of self-care practices that you can use in the moment and after stressful situations. Think about having a diverse set of practices that can speak to you as a whole person: psychologically/spiritually/emotionally/physically/socially.
- Reflect on whether you are practicing self-comfort or self-care when stressful situations come up. There is a place and time for both, consider what is needed in the moment.
- Remember to cultivate joy as part of your self-care. Who and what makes you delight, and laugh?
- Consider having a self-care buddy. This is someone that will help support you in following through with your self-care plan.

D. Access Support

- Do not be afraid to ask for help, the work that you do is both rewarding and difficult at times. It is normal and understandable that you would ask for help.
- Debrief case situations with your volunteer coordinator when needed.

- Reach out to your support system (natural/community supports) to process the non-case related aspects of your experience.

E. Boundaries

- Have boundaries with your time and availability. Are you always available? Over time this could take a toll on you, consider how you could have a healthy separation between your personal life and volunteer life.

Building Trauma Awareness: Triggers

What is a Trigger?

A trigger is a person, situation, place, activity, thought and/or emotional state, that brings up unwanted and overwhelming emotional/behavioral responses. Triggers are as unique as individuals and could really be anything. Triggers can be fast resulting in a quick behavioral response. Triggers can also be slow meaning that they create the conditions for a behavioral response to occur when paired with a fast trigger.

A trauma reminder is a trigger that brings up unwanted/overwhelming emotions, sensations, memories, and/or behaviors tied to a person's trauma history. It is best to address these types of triggers through working with a trusted Behavioral Health Professional. Trauma reminders could be physical characteristics and personality attributes of others. This includes the real possibility that due to no fault of your own, you could serve as a trauma reminder for someone. Trauma reminders could also be tied to the environment and include situations/ locations/ events.

List of Common Triggers

- Trauma Reminders
- Trauma history
- Loud sounds
- Touch
- "No"
- Crowds
- Directives and commands
- Phone calls
- Bedtime
- Bath time
- Disliked activities

- Unpreferred people
- Visits
- Cancelled activities
- Raised voice
- Unwanted attention (verbal and non-verbal)
- Standing too close
- Sensory overload
- Bodily sensations
- Unexpected changes in routine and schedule
- Unwanted jokes
- Anniversaries (examples: death dates/time in care)
- Holidays
- Birthdays
- Sudden changes between activities
- Symptoms experienced due to physical or mental health
- Tired
- Hungry
- Thirsty
- Communication challenges (expressing self and/or interacting with others)
- Being alone
- Pain
- Lack of sleep
- Medication side effects or lack of access to needed medication
- Learning challenges
- Feeling too hot or cold
- Having few options and limited ability to make choices
- Being at school
- Bright lights
- Disliked smells
- Lack of access to personal items
- Too much information at once
- Rushing the individual
- Being ignored or dismissed