

Trauma-Informed Care¹

We know that people in the justice system have much higher rates of adverse childhood experiences and lifetime trauma experiences than the general population.² Yet, conditions and interactions in correctional settings, such as power imbalances and confrontational approaches, can echo early trauma and, unintentionally, be retraumatizing.

Past trauma can contribute to resistance and lack of engagement in treatment and programming. For example, people may:

- misperceive environmental cues as threatening even when no real danger exists
- be mistrustful, anxious about being judged, or frustrated with their justice system experience
- seem deferential, fearful, and/or resentful of authority figures
- appear guarded or even hostile
- test staff (e.g., “I want to see if you will turn out to be like others in my life who have hurt me”)
- be reluctant to participate in interventions and to engage with staff until they have built a sense of trust and safety with them³

Recognizing, understanding, and addressing trauma appropriately—by using trauma-informed care (TIC)—can have a significant impact on our interactions with people who are justice-involved and on outcomes.

DEFINITIONS

Trauma

An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the person’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being⁴

Resilience

The capacity to adapt after a traumatic event

Five Key Principles of Trauma-Informed Care⁵



¹Adapted, in part, from Carey Group Publishing’s *Supervisor’s EBP BriefCASE Trauma and Resilience* series. <https://shop.thecaregroup.com/products/supervisor-s-ebp-briefcase-supplemental-set-trauma-and-resilience-series>

²Pettus-Davis, C., Renn, T., Lacasse, J. R., & Motley, R. (2019). Proposing a population-specific intervention approach to treat trauma among men during and after incarceration. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 20(3), 379–393. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/men0000171>; Reavis, J. A., Looman, J., Franco, K. A., & Rojas, B. (2013). Adverse childhood experiences and adult criminality: How long must we live before we possess our own lives? *The Permanente Journal*, 17(2), 44–48. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3662280/pdf/permj17_2p0044.pdf

³Levenson, J. S. (2023). Reframing and responding to resistance. In *Supervisor’s EBP BriefCASE: Module 21. Understanding and working with resistant behavior* (pp. 7–9). Carey Group Publishing. Adapted with permission; Levenson, J. S., Prescott, D. S., & Willis, G. M. (2022). Trauma-informed treatment practices in criminal justice settings. In E. Jeglic & C. Calkins (Eds.), *Handbook of issues in criminal justice reform in the United States* (pp. 483–502). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77565-0_24

⁴Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *SAMHSA’s concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*. <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>

⁵Fallot, R. D., & Harris, M. (2011). *Creating cultures of trauma-informed care (CCTIC): A self-assessment and planning protocol*. Community Connections. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272167009_Creating_Cultures_of_Trauma-Informed_Care_A_Self-Assessment_and_Planning_Protocol

Translating Trauma-Informed Care into Practice

Viewing behavior through the lens of trauma creates possibilities for more effective interventions that contribute to community well-being and safety. The following are some ideas for translating TIC principles into practice:⁶

1. CONSIDER TRAUMA AS AN EXPLANATION FOR BEHAVIOR. View people's actions through the lens of "What happened to you?" rather than "What's wrong with you?"

2. REMEMBER THAT TRAUMA IS TRIGGERED IN MANY WAYS, AND TRIGGERS ARE DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE. Raised voices, closed doors, personal space violations, drug testing; these are just a few of the conditions that can trigger PTSD reactions.

3. HELPING RELATIONSHIPS SHOULD FEEL SAFE. Safe relationships are predictable, consistent, and nonshaming, and they model appropriate boundaries, language, and use of power.

4. REFRAME RESISTANCE. Recognize that defensive, combative, or avoidant behavior may reflect a person's ambivalence about the desire to change and the need to maintain what is familiar, or it may represent inner conflict between wanting to share and being scared to disclose information.

5. AVOID CONFRONTATION. Neutralize power struggles by negotiating, compromising, cooperating, taking turns, and using techniques that include a collaborative approach, such as motivational interviewing.

6. RECOGNIZE THE NEED FOR DE-ESCALATION AND HELP FACILITATE SELF-REGULATION SKILLS. When someone feels threatened, it heightens anxiety, vulnerability, and fear. Help people calm down by using calm tones, validating feelings, paraphrasing, respecting personal space, coaching them to breathe deeply and rhythmically, and offering choices.

7. BUILD RESILIENCE. Use positive reinforcement and nonpunitive methods when possible to help people learn from their mistakes, accept their strengths and weaknesses, use coping skills, ask for help, improve problem-solving skills, set realistic goals, and adapt to change. Convey a message of hope and a belief that they can be their best selves.

TRAUMA TREATMENTS AND PROGRAMS

Refer people with a history of trauma to evidence-based treatment and programs, such as the following:

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing

<https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/treatments/eye-movement-reprocessing>

Prolonged Exposure

<https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/treatments/prolonged-exposure>

Sanctuary Model

<https://www.thesanctuaryinstitute.org/about-us/the-sanctuary-model>

Seeking Safety

<https://www.treatment-innovations.org/seeking-safety.html>

Trauma Affect Regulation: Guide for Education and Therapy

<https://www.nctsn.org/interventions/trauma-affect-regulation-guide-education-and-therapy>

Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model

<https://www.cebc4cw.org/program/trauma-recovery-and-empowerment-model/detailed>

⁶ Levenson, J. S. (2020). Translating trauma-informed principles into social work practice. *Social Work*, 65(3), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swaa020>; Levenson, J. S. (2023). Trauma-informed practices in a justice setting. In *Supervisor's EBP BriefCASE: Module 20. Providing trauma-informed care in a justice setting* (pp. 8–11). Carey Group Publishing. Adapted with permission.