Introduction to Trauma and a Trauma-Informed Approach

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Trauma occurs when an individual experiences an event that is emotionally painful or distressing, which results in lasting mental and physical effects.

Exposure to trauma is common in individuals living with mental illnesses.

Events that may be traumatizing:

- Historical and structural racism
- Natural disaster
- War or terror
- Accident or illness
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Domestic violence
- Removal from the home
- Bullying
- Community violence, mass shootings
- Loss and grief

Experience of the event, rather than the event itself, is traumatizing. Not all who experience the same event will experience adverse outcomes. So, although a community may experience the same event, not all will be traumatized by it.

Effects on emotions, behaviors, and thoughts are common:

- Poor sleep and nightmares
- Negative thoughts
- Flashbacks or reminders
- Feeling isolated or helpless
- Anger or mistrust
- Fear and anxiety
- Sadness
- Forgetfulness
- Numbness
- Shame and guilt

Types of Trauma

- **Acute**: Single, one-time traumatic event
- **Chronic**: Multiple and varied traumatic events, effects are often cumulative
- **Complex**: Multiple interpersonal traumatic events, often called attachment or developmental trauma
- **Secondary/Vicarious**: The stress experienced due to empathy for others you see or care for who are exposed to trauma
- **Triggers**: A reminder of past trauma that causes a trauma reaction

Areas of the Brain Impacted: Trauma puts the brain into survivor mode!

- **Amygdala**: Processes emotions, particularly fear. It regulates flight, fight, freeze responses and connects emotions to memories and sensations
- **Hippocampus**: Memory storage center and responsible for learning
- **Prefrontal Cortex**: Responsible for problem-solving, planning, and control of emotions. Trauma can damage this area leading to impulsive behavior and emotional outbursts

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NAMI Minnesota (National Alliance on Mental Illness) is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of children and adults with mental illnesses and their families. NAMI Minnesota offers education, support and advocacy.

MEETS STANDARDS

A trauma-informed approach is a mindset and skillset, not a specific intervention. Instead of asking "*what's wrong with you*?", ask "*what happened to you?*"

How to Get Started

1. Realize the widespread impacts of trauma and understanding possible paths for recovery
2. Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma
3. Respond by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and
4. Seek to actively resist re-traumatization (avoiding reminding people of their traumatic experiences and causing them distress)

Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Needs Met

Read more here!

"Adopting a trauma-informed approach is not accomplished through any single, particular technique or checklist. It requires constant attention, caring awareness, and sensitivity."
-Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

How to Cope if You Have Experienced Trauma

- Spend time with your support system
- Engage in activities you enjoy
- Avoid or limit drugs and alcohol
- Maintain a routine that feels good to you
- Honor your values and boundaries
- Take breaks and practice mindfulness
- Check in with your body
- Seek help from a trauma-informed professional

How to Help Others Impacted by Trauma

- Validate experiences and emotions
- Listen with compassion and empathy
- Respect boundaries
- Promote connectedness
- Share decision-making and collaborate
- Model healthy behaviors
- Create safe spaces
- Refer others to resources and help

1) *National Alliance on Mental Illness. Tools of Managing Traumatic Stress. (2020). Retrieved from: https://nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/October-2020/7-Tools-for-Managing-Traumatic-Stress*
2) *National Institute of Mental Health. Coping with Traumatic Events (2023). Retrieved from: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events*
3) *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach (p. 9). HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.*

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