Traumatic experiences result from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening, such as intimate partner violence or childhood sexual abuse. Trauma can also be experienced as a result of structural violence, that is, the multiple ways that political, economic and social structures result in injustice, inequality and marginalisation. A trauma-informed approach requires an awareness of a person’s history of trauma and understanding the impact that violence and victimisation has in their lives. The aim is to move away from a victim-blaming deficit focus towards a strengths-based approach, asking ‘what has happened to you?’ rather than ‘what is wrong with you?’.

A framework that is grounded in understanding and responding to trauma is important in any service that supports women, due to the links between poor mental health and experiences of gendered violence, including family violence and sexual abuse. A gendered approach is also essential due to the disproportionate impacts of violence on women, as well as trans and gender diverse people. For example, women are more likely than men to experience violence and sexual abuse from a partner or relative. Women experience higher levels of dissociative symptoms and are more likely to self-harm and suffer from internalising disorders such as eating disorders, following traumatic experiences.

While violence is prevalent in the community, traumatic experiences intersect with systemic oppression, and disproportionately affect people on low incomes, racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTIQ community and young people. A trauma-informed approach should recognise how socio-cultural factors such as gender inequality, power, colonisation and disenfranchisement give rise to victimisation and are barriers to seeking support. Using this intersectional lens, behaviours that may be considered ‘difficult’ are understood as appropriate responses or adaptations to trauma.

There are broad practice principles for trauma-informed practice, and these include: recognition of traumatic events and the impact on life and functioning; ensuring the physical and emotional safety of service users; fostering a sense of trust between the service user and service provider; peer support; emphasis on collaboration; and autonomy and strength-based approaches. Importantly, trauma-informed practice needs to be responsive to cultural, historical, and gender issues. This last principle includes the provision of gender-responsive services, or considering gender-specific needs when interacting with individuals. The Blue Knot Foundation’s 2019 guidelines emphasise the need for counsellors to be attuned to the contexts in which individuals are embedded.

A trauma-informed framework sets out how an understanding of the impact of trauma on an individual should inform the service model provided by health and human service agencies. It informs not only service delivery, but also the organisational, structural and systemic levels of an agency. This includes being aware of potential triggers that trauma survivors may experience when accessing services and taking steps to avoid re-traumatisation.

Critiques of trauma-informed practice highlight the focus on a biomedical and psychiatric framing of trauma, which can blame and pathologise the individual rather than acknowledge and address the broader structural inequalities which cause trauma, such as colonisation and/or gender-based violence. A framework for trauma- and violence-informed practice expands the concept of trauma-informed practice to account for the impact that systemic and interpersonal violence and inequities have on a person’s life. Further, a social justice and violence-informed model of mental health avoids pathologising or locating the problem in the individual by ‘acknowledging the individual’s resistance and that until injustices of violence and oppression can be addressed, the prevalence of mental illness is unlikely to be reduced’.
There is debate about whether all settings can be trauma-informed. For example, it has been argued that prison services cannot be trauma-informed due to the inherently violent nature of the process of criminalisation and prison infrastructure.\(^{11}\)

There is no consistent approach to trauma-informed practice or how to implement it across different settings in Australia, and publicly available evaluations of trauma-informed services are limited.\(^{10}\)

**Spotlight author:**
- Renata Anderson

**WHV thanks the following expert reviewers for their input:**
- Melinda Dows, Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, Eastern Health
- Alyssha Fooks, CASA House

**Overview**

*Engaging with complexity: providing effective trauma-informed care for women [UK]* Centre for Mental Health (London), 2019

*Women’s input into a trauma-informed systems model of care in health settings (The WITH Study) final report* ANROWS, 2017

*Chapter 7: Gender and trauma-informed principles In: The Women’s Mental Health Taskforce [UK]: final report* United Kingdom. Department of Health and Social Care, 2018

*New terrain: tools to integrate trauma and gender informed responses into substance use practice and policy* Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health (Canada), 2018

*Curricula to support trauma-informed practice with women In: Moving the addiction and mental health system towards being more trauma-informed [Canada]* Centre for Addiction and Mental health (CAMH), 2012

*Trauma and violence-informed approaches to policy and practice* Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018

**Emergence of trauma-informed practice for women**

*From treatment to healing: the promise of trauma-informed care [US]* *Women’s Health Issues*, 2015

*The importance of gender-responsive trauma-informed care [US]* *Women’s Health Research Institute [Blog]*, 2015

*Understanding trauma through a gender lens [US]* NCCD Centre for Girls and Young Women, 2010
**Trauma-informed practice in Australian settings**

The First Response project: trauma and culturally informed approaches to primary health care for women who experience violence: summary report Lowitja Institute, 2019 and project website

Trauma-informed care in general practice: findings from a women's health centre evaluation Australian Journal of General Practice, 2018

Literature review of trauma-informed care: Implications for mental health nurses working in acute inpatient settings in Australia International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 2017

Women in prison: histories of trauma and abuse highlight the need for specialised care The Conversation, 2016

Trauma informed dental care for adult survivors of sexual assault [Video 1] / [Video 2] / [Video 3] South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, 2017

Guidelines for trauma-informed family sensitive practice in adult health services La Trobe University. The Bouverie Centre, 2013

**Trauma informed practice in international settings**

For women living with HIV, a trauma-informed approach to care [US] Health Affairs, 2019

Impact of women specific interventions [UK] Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (Iriss), 2018

Development and implementation of trauma-informed training for women's corrections facilities in Aotearoa New Zealand Practice: The New Zealand Corrections Journal, 2018

Trauma-informed social work practice with women with disabilities: working with survivors of intimate partner violence Advances in Social Work, 2017

2.1 Women First: an analysis of a trauma-informed, women-centred harm reduction housing model for women with complex substance use and mental health issues In: Exploring effective systems responses to homelessness Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016


A paradigm shift: relationships in trauma-informed mental health services [UK] BJPsych Advances, 2018
Critiques of trauma informed approaches in practice

In the business of trauma: an intersectional-materialist feminist analysis of ‘trauma informed’ women’s refuges and crisis accommodation services in Sydney and Vancouver [Thesis]. University of Sydney. Sydney Digital Theses, 2019

As the world becomes trauma-informed, work to do Journal of Trauma and Dissociation, 2017

The future of healing: shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement Medium, 2018

Clinical guidelines

Practice guidelines for treatment of complex trauma and trauma informed care and service delivery Blue Knot Foundation, 2019 [Register to download] and related [2012 Practice guidelines]

Abuse and violence: working with our patients in general practice. 4th ed. Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 2014

Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services United States. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA); 2014.

Key ingredients for successful trauma-informed care implementation Center for Health Care Strategies (US), 2016

SAMHSA’s concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach United States. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014
References


