**Being Trauma-Informed**

***What is a Trauma-informed approach?***

According to SAMHSA’s concept of a trauma-informed approach, “A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed:

* Realizes the widespread impact of trauma;
* Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in individuals
* Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and
* Seeks to actively resist re-traumatization." [[1]](#footnote-1)

A trauma-based approach primarily views the individual as having been harmed by something or someone and believes that **everyone has skills and strengths for survival, resistance, transformation and autonomy.** This approach is grounded in and directed by a thorough understanding of the neurological, biological, psychological and social effects of trauma and interpersonal violence and the prevalence of these experiences in persons who receive services.

**Possible reactions following Trauma**

We all react in different ways to trauma, experiencing a wide range of physical and emotional reactions. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to think, feel, or respond, and sometimes the response might not make sense to you. These responses are NORMAL reactions to ABNORMAL events.

* Shock, denial, or disbelief
* Confusion
* Anger, irritability, mood swings
* Anxiety and fear
* Guilt, shame, self-blame
* Withdrawing from others
* Feeling sad or hopeless
* Feeling disconnected or numb
* Change in appetite
* Nausea
* Absence of feeling physically or emotionally
* Difficulty remembering events or timelines in a clear and “logical” manner
* Insomnia or nightmares
* Fatigue
* Being startled easily
* Difficulty concentrating
* Racing heartbeat
* Edginess and agitation
* Aches and pains
* Muscle tension, spasm or shaking

**Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach:**

**1.** Safety

**2.** Trustworthiness & Transparency

**3.** Choice,Collaboration & Connection

**4.** Strengths-based

**5.** Peer Support

**6.** Cultural, Historical, and Gender Recognition

**Ways to Practice a Trauma-Informed Approach:**

**Just CARE:**

* **Create space for listening non-judgmentally and heart-fully.** 
  + Ask the individual if their immediate safety is at risk: Ask: “Are you safe now?”
  + Tell them you believe them and it is not their fault.
  + If possible, ensure that the disclosure takes place somewhere the individual affected by sexual violence feels comfortable and where their privacy is heeded.
  + Your support and influence is important, but you won’t be able to ‘save the day’ or solve the survivor’s problems for them. It can be helpful to remember your own limitations and boundaries, and to be gentle with yourself as you offer support.
* **Ask them what support looks like for them.** 
  + The person you are supporting has their own wisdom and journey which may be different than yours. It is important to provide the space they need to move at their own pace through the process of recovery. Problem solving efforts and strong recommendations from service providers, friends, and University officials may be perceived as blaming and personal attack.
  + The person you are supporting may need the chance to re-establish a sense of personal control over what happens in their lives. They need to understand options, to be heard, and to have their decisions respected. It is helpful to have clearly defined boundaries and role definitions of those professionals who offer assistance as the individuals’ boundaries have already been violated.
  + Ask what support looks like for them, don’t assume what they need, or make decisions for them. Provide referrals with their consent. For example, “Would you like me to refer you to resources?”
  + Let them tell you only what they want to share. Don’t pry for details or ask “why” questions that may imply that they’re at fault.
  + Depending on your relationship with the person who’s disclosed, support can be offering extensions on assignments, or simply going for a walk or to a movie and **not** talking about the traumatic event.
  + Understand how cultural context influences perception of and response to traumatic events and the recovery process; respect diversity, provide opportunities for individuals to engage
* **Respect Confidentiality.** 
  + Respect their right to confidentiality and let them know about any potential limits to confidentiality as soon as possible (especially if you are a staff or faculty member). This may feel awkward but it’s important for survivors to be fully informed before they share information. Ensure they understand why, how, and when you may share the information they have provided to you. Offer as much choice as possible if you do need to break confidentiality (i.e. would you like me to call \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, or would you like to\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_).
* **Empathize and Validate.** 
  + Recognize that the individual had no control over what happened to them. Let them know that the way they survived during the traumatic experience(s) was actually their way of resisting what was happening to them and of saying no.
  + Respond to disclosure with belief and validation: acknowledge that what happened to the individual was harmful, but is not a reflection of the survivor’s character.
  + Understand that recovery and healing is possible for everyone regardless of how vulnerable they may appear.
  + Emphasize the survivor’s strengths, such as the courage they displayed in disclosing and the determination they have to make it to this point. Validate their coping mechanisms.

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)