Trauma Informed Care Series
Trauma-Informed Communication

Trauma-informed communication is an approach to engaging with survivors of trauma that focuses on understanding their trauma, avoiding triggers, and empowering them with choice and control. It also involves finding a balance between telling their stories in a way that can move people and not re-traumatize them or other survivors. Trauma-informed communication can also help leaders and organizations communicate with compassion, clarity, and grace during times of stress and anxiety.

Children, young adults, and adults who have experienced trauma may have limited capacity for learning. Sometimes, their constant state of tension and arousal can leave them unable to concentrate, pay attention, or retain and recall new information. Their behavior at times can be challenging in settings and environments where they may come for help and support. Tauma can affect a person's ability to trust others, including professionals, and providers. As a result, it becomes challenging for persons who have experienced trauma to communicate with others as they tend to protect themselves from reliving a traumatic experience.
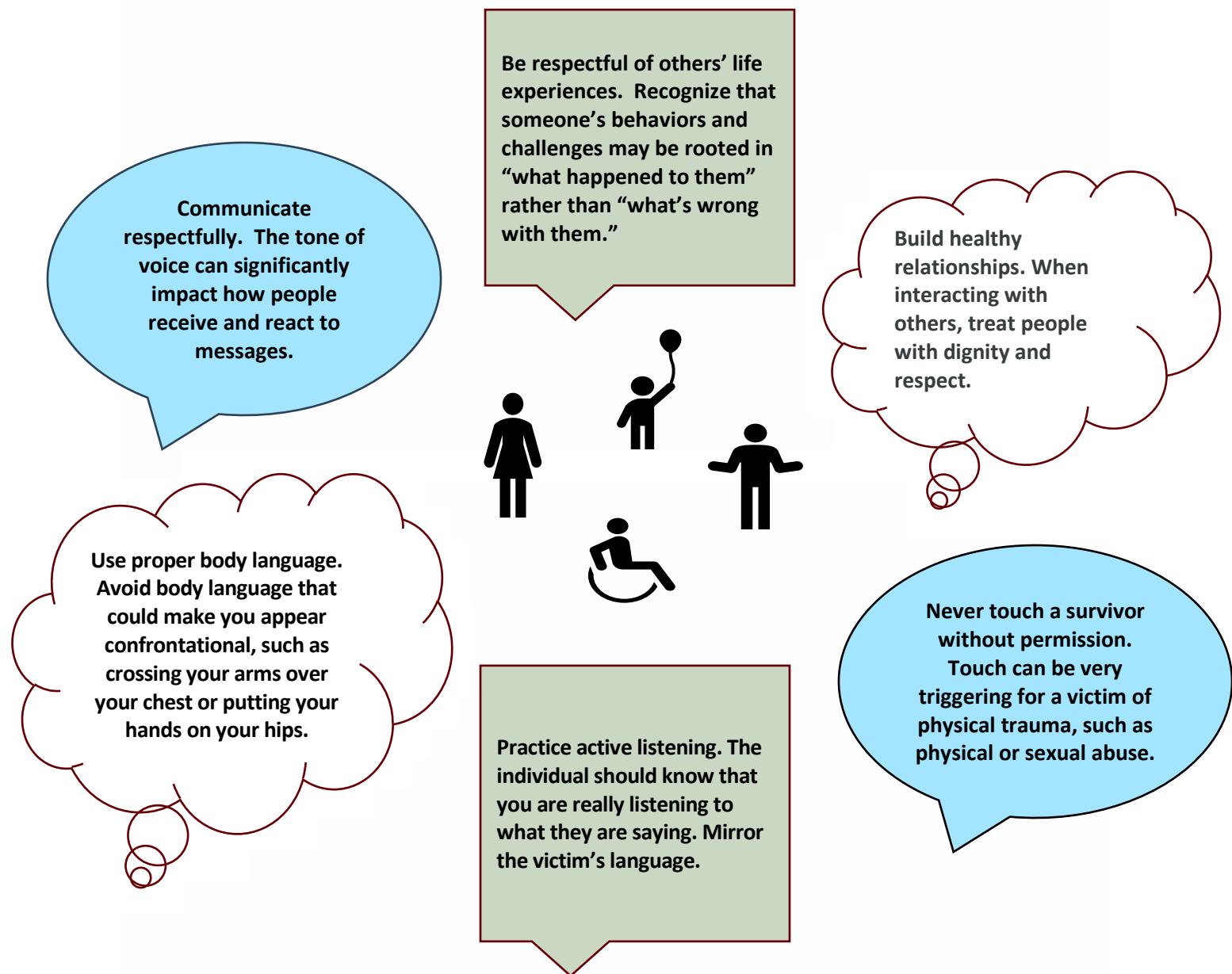
Adapting the Four "Rs"

A useful method for understanding and implementing a trauma-informed approach to communication is using the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) 4 R's framework

Realizing the prevalence of trauma. Even if you are unaware of it, you most likely know one or more people who have undergone some type of trauma, such as the recent COVID pandemic. Trauma is prevalent enough to assume that everyone you interact with is dealing with something.	**Recognizing** how trauma affects people. Although everyone's experience is unique, trauma often has psychological, physical, emotional, and behavioral effects on a person. It is important to recognize how trauma can make someone behave and see this as a sign of what the individual is going through.
Responding by putting your knowledge into practice. Once you recognize trauma, respond with words and actions that show you are empathetic toward the individual's situation and wish to have meaningful interactions. This is a trauma-informed approach to communication.	**Resist retraumatizing** people. Organizations often inadvertently create stressful or toxic environments that interfere with the recovery of persons served, the well-being of staff and the fulfillment of the organizational mission. Often statements are made, or questions asked that can retraumatize someone.

Best Practices for Trauma-Informed Communication

Because the trauma-informed communication approach assumes the presence of trauma, it does not require the client to disclose their experience and thereby risk retraumatizing them through repeated disclosure (Trauma-Informed Practice Guide, 2013)[1]. When youth, young adults, and adults served feel safe they often feel open and at ease and may become more willing to "tell their story." Providing a calm environment will help those served feel as though we care about their privacy and that we are interested and attentively listening to how safe they feel, both physically and emotionally. An essential aspect of helping people feel comforted and in control is ensuring that they know they can ask for what they need.

Be respectful of others' life experiences. Recognize that someone's behaviors and challenges may be rooted in "what happened to them" rather than "what's wrong with them."

Communicate respectfully. The tone of voice can significantly impact how people receive and react to messages.

Build healthy relationships. When interacting with others, treat people with dignity and respect.

Use proper body language. Avoid body language that could make you appear confrontational, such as crossing your arms over your chest or putting your hands on your hips.

Never touch a survivor without permission. Touch can be very triggering for a victim of physical trauma, such as physical or sexual abuse.

Practice active listening. The individual should know that you are really listening to what they are saying. Mirror the victim's language.

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[1] *Trauma-Informed Practice Guide and Organizational Checklist (2013).* British Columbia Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council.

Trauma-Informed Communication and the Workplace

Communication is a primary focus of trauma-informed care in the workplace and with the workforce. Communication and trauma are tied together because trauma affects our brain and communication is a brain-based activity. Trauma-informed communication is vital to improving a person's physical, mental and emotional well-being and should be integrated into all workplace policies, procedures, and activities. Many of the communication techniques used in trauma-informed care can be viewed as traditional, common-sense manners.

As agencies and organizations, it's helpful to employ the following techniques to create healthy workplace environments:[2]

Provide awareness training. Educate your workforce on the effects of stress and trauma and how these experiences can have a lasting impact on people's lives. When employees have a better understanding of trauma and its effects, they can relate better to those who have been impacted. Better relationships increase happiness, which increases an employee's ability to handle stress.

Encourage people to use their employee assistance program (EAP). All too often, people are hesitant to use their organization's EAP, thinking it will reflect negatively on them. It's helpful to reassure employees that using this benefit is confidential and can provide tremendous support for those facing stressful life events. Organizations that have a strong partnership with their EAP see increased leadership confidence, healthier workforces, and a more positive workplace culture.

Establish and enforce sensible policies and procedures. Ensure rules and policies prioritize people's needs and not those of the organization. Streamline procedures so people do not have to jump through needless hoops. Be consistent in enforcing rules and transparent in documenting digressions. Continually seek feedback from clients and employees

Offer mindfulness and breathing training. Being present and knowing how you feel can help reduce the effects of toxic stress. Many organizations offer their employees mindfulness training. Others encourage their employees to practice breathing techniques to reduce stress. In either case, business leaders are wise to help their employees build resilience.

Promote work-life balance. Employees who are facing many stresses tend to have a higher risk for injury, mistakes, and decreased productivity. It is in an organization's best interest to encourage, promote, and allow work-life balance among employees.

Create safe and comfortable spaces. Make sure offices and waiting rooms are clean and calming and not congested or cluttered. Signage should be clear, understandable, and accommodating, especially for those who speak different languages or are visually impaired.

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[2] Solon, R, *How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture.* feiworkforce resilience, FEI Behavioral Health, January 2020

RESOURCES

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Ohioans who are experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis and their family members can call, chat, or text 988 to reach a trained counselor who can offer help and support.

Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services

- Crisis Text Line – Text 4Hope to 741 741 for free, confidential conversation
  Crisis Text Line | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (ohio.gov)

- Ohio Careline (1-800-720-9616) for free, confidential connection to licensed provider.
  Ohio CareLine | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

- OhioMHAS Learn and Find Help for a variety of resources on support prevention, treatment, and recovery.
  Learn and Find Help | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (ohio.gov)

- Resources
  Resources | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (ohio.gov)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Learning Materials and Resources | SAMHSA - Review materials from SAMHSA, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCSTN), and other organizations designed to help you recognize and respond to child traumatic stress.

TIP 57: Trauma-informed Care in Behavioral Health Services | SAMHSA - Created for behavioral health professionals, this SAMHSA Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) gathers experience and information from experts in behavioral health to highlight best practice guidelines for pursuing a trauma-informed approach and providing trauma-specific services. The resource provides a research-based explanation about trauma and its impacts on substance use and mental disorders to explore intervention and treatment principles.

SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach | SAMHSA Publications and Digital Products - This manual introduces a concept of trauma and offers a framework for becoming a trauma-informed organization, system, or service sector. The manual provides a definition of trauma and a trauma-informed approach and offers 6 key principles and 10 implementation domains.

Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach | SAMHSA Publications and Digital Products - This practical guide updates and expands the discussion presented in SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach Resource from 2014. The primary goal of this guide is to provide implementation strategies across multiple domains based on the original publication.

The Wellness Project

[The Wellness Project](#) is a collection of resources to support and enhance your wellness and resilience. The purpose of this website is to discover a variety of ways for supporting helping professionals, so they can show up as the "best version of themselves." It includes a holistic system of wellness activities such as reading, listening, watching, cooking, connecting, moving, breathing, and resting.

Goals are to give our workforce tools to practice self-care, build resilience, enhance caregiving and ultimately improve the services and supports we provide.

fei Workforce Resilience

fei has a 40-year history in enhancing workforce resiliency by offering a full spectrum of solutions, form EAP and organizational development to workplace violence prevention and crisis management. *How Trauma-Informed Communication Improves Workplace Culture* is intended to provide helpful communication techniques for creating healthier workplace environments and culture.