



Trauma-Informed Approaches and Awareness for Programs Working with Fathers

Defining Trauma and a Trauma-Informed Approach

Trauma refers to experiences that can cause intense physical and psychological stress and have lasting negative effects on an individual's physical, socio-emotional, and/or spiritual well-being.ⁱ This can influence key skills such as how we think, feel, behave and relate to others.

A program or organization that is trauma-informed follows a process of "universal precaution,"ⁱⁱ meaning it assumes all clients may have experienced trauma and takes appropriate precautions such as:

- Acknowledging the wide-reaching effects of trauma and understanding potential paths for recovery.
- Incorporating trauma-related knowledge into policies, procedures, and practices in a standardized way (see the tips section for links to commonly used methods, assessments, and trainings).
- Understanding possible signs and symptoms of trauma and recognizing them among program participants or staff.
- Seeking to prevent future trauma and re-traumatization.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many of the fathers who participate in fatherhood programs may have experienced trauma. However, they are not always easy to identify, so it is important for programs to be "trauma-informed" to provide reliable and effective services for all fathers.

Ensuring that a fatherhood program is trauma-informed requires developing an organizational framework of knowledge and understanding about trauma-informed practices; providing trauma-informed training for all staff members; being aware of the organization's capacity to address trauma; and seeking out additional resources and referral services to meet the needs of program participants. Being trauma-informed does not necessarily mean that an organization provides direct mental health or other counseling services to treat trauma, although trauma-informed programs may be better prepared than other programs to provide referrals for such services.

This brief highlights the importance of a trauma-informed approach and offers tips and considerations for programs that serve fathers.

Why Focus on Fathers and Trauma?

- Three out of five men in the United States have experienced or witnessed at least one traumatic event in their lives, but they may be reluctant to seek help because they equate that with being dependent and vulnerable.^{iv}
- Men who have experienced or witnessed trauma may not be aware that certain behaviors, such as being easily startled, having trouble sleeping, and engaging in angry outbursts, are normal responses to trauma.^v
- Men of color and men who are low-income are more likely to have experienced trauma, but are less likely to seek help than their white and middle-class peers.^{vi}
- To cope with the physiological and psychological symptoms of trauma, some men engage in behaviors that have negative health outcomes, such as excessive alcohol and drug use.^{vii}
- Some traumatized men disconnect from those around them to cope with their trauma.^{viii}
- A father who is suffering from the effects of trauma is less likely to be able to devote himself to the daily demands of parenting. Parents who experience trauma may withdraw from their children or become easily agitated by everyday

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sources of stress – such as busy traffic, disagreements with a partner, or a bad day at work, all of which could result in negative or harmful interactions with their children.^{ix}

- Parental trauma can have long-term and profound negative effects on a child’s development and mental health, including social, emotional and behavioral problems, trouble in school, and secondary traumatization.^x
- Individuals who have experienced trauma may become re-traumatized in situations or environments that make them feel as if their past trauma is reoccurring. Program participation can also re-traumatize clients if they feel it is dangerous or unsafe and it reminds them of their past trauma.^{xi}
- Staff members working with fathers who are suffering from the effects of trauma may experience trauma themselves from exposure to their clients’ traumatic experiences.^{xii}

Tips for Using a Trauma-informed Approach When Working with Fathers Who Have Experienced Trauma

In addition to the tips provided below, see the **Helpful Resources** section for more information on how to operationalize or enact these tips.

- Provide trauma-awareness training for all staff on best practices for serving clients with trauma, including:
 - how to recognize signs or symptoms of trauma;
 - how to identify and make referrals to appropriate community resources;
 - how to follow up with clients after referral to outside services or in-house treatment for trauma.
- Assess the level of trauma-informed awareness of your organization and make appropriate changes to ensure that all aspects of the program environment convey a sense of safety and respect toward all fathers.
 - All staff (management, direct service, and support team members) should treat all potential and actual participants with respect and empathy.
 - Fathers are more likely to disclose trauma if they feel safe and understood by program staff who they can identify with.
- Create a safe space that reduces opportunities for re-traumatization and avoids exacerbating trauma-related issues. To avoid re-traumatization, organizations should:
 - Provide adequate security and safety within the facility.
 - Be transparent and upfront with all clients about program rules, policies, and potential consequences for breaking them. Consistently enforcing all policies and procedures in a predictable way is key to supporting a sense of safety for traumatized clients. Provide opportunities for fathers to shape the rules and norms of the program.
 - For example, if your organization works with fathers who have been incarcerated, policies and procedures that unnecessarily reduce autonomy (e.g., strict rule enforcement without the input of those served or unclear rules about consent and confidentiality of programming/services) should be avoided.
 - Know the history of the buildings in which you provide services. Be aware of any organizations that may have previously occupied the space, services that may have been offered there, and the reputation of the space in the community.
 - For example, if child welfare, foster care, or child support services were previously administered there, this might bring up memories of traumatic experiences for some fathers.
- If many participants have trauma needs that are not met, consider hiring mental health professionals and implementing a trauma-informed screening tool to proactively assess whether fathers have experienced or are experiencing trauma. Work with community mental health partners, in addition to the mental health staff, to identify appropriate screening tools and ensure that staff are trained to conduct the screening and know how to make appropriate referrals.
 - See the Helpful Resources section for more information on screening and links to sample tools. If your client population includes veterans, consider using a screening tool that addresses combat-related trauma.
- Acknowledge and address secondary trauma.

- Educate all staff about secondary trauma, including strategies for identifying and managing any negative effects with particular emphasis on self-care.
- Include training about ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) in addition to general trauma training as a way to help staff recognize their own histories of trauma and understand how their experiences could affect their work with clients.
- Provide a safe, judgment-free environment between supervisors and supervisees and train supervisors to recognize and respond appropriately to secondary trauma. For staff who are not formally supervised, arrangements should be made to ensure consistent opportunities for processing exposure to secondary trauma.
- Ensure that all staff are familiar with your organization's policies regarding secondary trauma.
 - For example, an organization may establish a policy of reassigning staff if they have strong emotional reactions to client stories and experiences.
- Be realistic about what trauma-related services your organization can safely and effectively offer and refer fathers to additional services and resources as needed.
 - Develop strong community partnerships to provide a continuum of care and services that can decrease the number of times fathers have to disclose traumatic experiences.
 - Offer to accompany fathers to appointments or arrange introductions between fathers and health care professionals.
 - Follow-up with fathers after they have had a chance to use the referral. This can help build rapport and show that you are invested in their well-being.
 - Be a source of consistent support for fathers as they receive referral services and participate in your program. Such consistency is one step toward helping them regain a sense of control over their daily lives.

Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [National Center for Trauma Informed Care](#) provides various resources including:

- [Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services](#), which includes a section on Screening and Assessment (Part 1, Chapter 4).
- Checklists for [traumatic life events](#) and symptoms of [civilian PTSD](#), and [SAMHSA's screening tools](#) for a number of mental health concerns including trauma.
- [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#), which discusses the nature and impact of trauma and offers a framework for how an organization, system, or service sector can become trauma-informed.
- [Models for Developing Trauma-Informed Behavioral Health Systems and Trauma-Specific Services](#), which describes trauma-informed and trauma-specific service models identified by state behavioral health service systems and organizations.

American Institutes for Research (AIR) has links to toolkits on trauma training:

- [Trauma informed care and trauma-specific interventions](#), which includes information on the prevalence of trauma and trauma related stress, trauma informed care and how it differs from other trauma services, and what trauma interventions look like across service systems.
- [Trauma informed care](#) links and featured work.

National Center on Family Homelessness toolkit:

- [Trauma informed organizational toolkit](#), a how-to guide for creating organizational change.

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse:

- June 8, 2016 webinar with downloadable list of additional resources: [Understanding Trauma-Informed Programming: A Primer for Responsible Fatherhood Programs](#).
- Resources list from February 18, 2015 webinar, [Let's Talk About Mental Health](#), which includes sample assessment tools for work with youth.

The Trauma Informed Care (TIC) Project: The [TIC website](#) includes a link to webinars, videos, and other helpful [resources](#) for learning about becoming trauma informed.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA): The [myhealthvet website](#) includes a link to a [PTSD Screening Form](#).

Central Iowa's ACES: The Iowa ACES [website](#) includes a link to free online training on ACES.

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