

# Walk as One

## USING TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED APPROACHES TO BEST SERVE YOUR CLIENTS... AND YOURSELF

This section of the guide clarifies trauma and violence-informed approaches for service providers in the gender-based violence sector and provides tools and techniques for you to embed these approaches in your practices. Although this section is focused on information, tips, and tools for service providers, it is broadly applicable to staff throughout your organization.

### Appreciation

Working with people and communities who have experienced trauma and violence can be challenging and difficult. You deserve respect, appreciation, and recognition for your dedication, knowledge, compassion, and skill. We hope this guide will help you learn how trauma and violence-informed approaches to working with users of your services can enhance and support both you and them. Many of the ideas and suggestions will be familiar to you and reflect the ways you currently practice; some may be new concepts and approaches. Take the lead from your organization and find a best model of practice that empowers, supports, and improves engagement for you and your clients.

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### OUR FOCUS

*Walk as One* is written to support service providers and their organizations to address and mitigate the risks of harm and re-traumatization, particularly in high-stress sectors like gender-based violence, by becoming trauma and violence-informed. Trauma and violence-informed approaches ('TVIA') emphasize that safety and trust are important for those receiving services and for those providing services. The principles of trauma and violence-informed approaches to service delivery provide a guiderail that can support individual and system-level change to prioritize the health and well-being of all people.

Vicarious or secondary trauma is often cited as a reason for high turnover and burnout amongst those working in the gender-based violence sector. Increasingly, we are talking about vicarious trauma and other

forms of trauma and violence as serious occupational risks and concerns. Despite this, service providers go to work every day with a strong sense of wanting to help and make a difference. Very real stresses of the work can be offset by the satisfaction and rewards that come from rich relationships and interactions with our colleagues and those we are supporting, and from witnessing change and feeling a sense of mutual regard and common purpose. Using trauma and violence-informed approaches not only ensures your clients are best served, but helps you to find satisfaction, remain healthy, and to reduce your risk of burnout and vicarious trauma.

## REVISITING THE NEED FOR TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED APPROACHES TO SERVICE DELIVERY IN THE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE SECTOR

Trauma is the response to an event that **overwhelms our ability to cope**. It describes the challenging effects that living through a distressing event or series of events can have for an individual. Trauma may impact one's physical, psychological (emotional or cognitive), social, and spiritual health and well-being.

Defining a traumatic event can be difficult as the same event may be more traumatic for some people than for others. However, traumatic events experienced **early in life**, such as abuse, neglect, and disrupted attachment, can often be devastating. **Later life events**, such as experiencing violence, a serious accident, sudden unexpected loss, or living through a natural disaster or war can be equally challenging and traumatic. (CAMH, 2022).

Trauma can also result from intergenerational and historical acts, such as genocide, terrorism, and colonialism that continue to reside in systems, structures, and people in power.

**Trauma and violence-informed approaches** are about **creating safety** for all by understanding trauma and the **intersecting impacts** of systemic and interpersonal violence and structural inequities on their life and what brings them to their point of interacting with you and your organization. This approach emphasizes both historical and ongoing violence and their traumatic impacts.

Trauma and violence-informed approaches are designed to **shift your focus** when interacting with your client, and others, so you can see that their behaviours, challenges, and experiences are shaped by their current circumstances and possibly also by previous and historical traumatic experiences. It involves shifting your perspective from "What is wrong with you?" to "What has happened, and perhaps is still happening, to you?" Consideration is given not only to ongoing interpersonal forms of violence, but also structural – systemic forms, such as systemic racism, other forms of discrimination, and poverty, and their effects.

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*Events are traumatic due to **complex interactions** between the individual's neurobiology, their previous and ongoing experiences of trauma and violence, and the influence of their broader community and social structures.*

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Trauma and violence-informed approaches are not about you eliciting or treating people's trauma, but rather focus on **minimizing the potential for harm and re-traumatization** and **enhancing safety, control, and resilience** for everyone involved.

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### **Actioning trauma and violence-informed approaches**

*A trauma and violence-informed approach incorporates universal precautions to prevent further harm or re-traumatization by creating a culture of safety for all.*

*Trauma and violence-informed approaches requires everyone in your organization to examine their assumptions and beliefs and to work from a place of humility and humanity.*

*Practicing in a trauma and violence-informed way also means providing safe and respectful services to everyone whether or not you know about their experiences of trauma/violence.*

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Trauma and violence-informed approaches for service providers are demonstrated through both **outward-facing** and **inward-looking** actions. Outward-facing actions are those focused on your clients, colleagues, and the public. Inward-looking actions are those actions individual service providers take to build self-awareness and care for themselves as they relate to how you think, feel, and behave.

Trauma and violence-informed approaches to service delivery in the gender-based violence sector in the Northwest Territories are grounded in five core principles. To implement trauma and violence-informed approaches, individuals providing service must:

1. Build their own and others' awareness and understanding of trauma and violence and their impact on people's lives and behaviour
2. Emphasize safety and trust
3. Offer people real choices through connection and collaboration
4. Recognize and build people's strengths and resilience
5. Incorporate a people-centred perspective

These core principles do not operate in isolation from each other. Rather, they are interwoven like the parts of a tree.



Principles of Trauma and Violence-Informed Approaches

## ACTIONING TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED PRINCIPLES AND APPROACHES

Incorporating the five principles underlying trauma and violence-informed approaches into daily practices and interactions can and has made a significant difference for many service providers, organizations, and their clients.

Reminder: trauma and violence-informed approaches for service providers are demonstrated through both **outward-facing** and **inward-looking** actions. Outward-facing actions are those focused on your clients, colleagues, and the public. Inward-looking actions are those actions individual service providers take to build self-awareness and care for themselves as they relate to how you think, feel, and behave.

### What do trauma and violence-informed approaches look like in action?

Building on the common understanding and framework, here are some practical examples of how you can action the five principles underlying trauma and violence-informed approaches.

#### Principle 1:

#### Build awareness and understanding of trauma, violence, and their impact on people's attitudes, behaviours, and lives

Regardless of their position, staff have a key role in organizations demonstrating trauma and violence-informed approaches. Staff do not need to be trauma experts to apply trauma and violence-informed principles. These principles and practices will help you in your interactions with others, and further your understanding of your client, colleagues, and your own experiences and behaviours.

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*"Being aware of such things, like how a person's past experience in residential school or fleeing a war-torn country might be impacting them today, helps me to be more compassionate and also provide more informed support with better outcomes."*

*– Quote from a NWT service provider*

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#### Outward-facing: in becoming trauma and violence-informed, each of us will:

- Make time to learn about:
  - The high prevalence of trauma and violence
  - The significance of historical (collective and individual) and ongoing (interpersonal and systemic) violence
  - How the consequences of trauma can affect development across the lifespan, memory, and behaviour.
  - The wide range of coping strategies that people use to cope and survive
- Take time to learn about the diversity of our community and develop a depth of understanding of how structural violence has impacted local populations.



- Treat everyone as if they have experienced trauma. **We don't have to know their story to be supportive**
  - we only need to know what we need to know to do our job
- Handle disclosures appropriately:
  - Believe survivors stories are true for them
  - Affirm and validate
  - Recognize strengths and resilience
  - Express concern for safety and well-being
- Examine and understand our own privileges, power, and biases
- Reflect on our interactions with survivors/clients. Every interaction is an opportunity to reflect on how you apply the guiding principles to build your awareness and practice.
- Share our learning with colleagues

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*Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it's not a problem to you personally.*

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### **Remember to also look inward:**

- Build self-awareness, self-compassion, and self-care strategies
- Incorporate self-reflection as a regular practice

Practice compassion for yourself as a person and a professional

- Practice good self-care as your health and well-being are vital to your ability to support others. Self-care includes everything you do to take care of your physical, psychological, social, and spiritual health.
- Learn about the science of trauma to deepen your understanding of how your body responds to trauma
- Talk about your experiences working in the gender-based violence sector through a trauma and violence-informed lens
- If your organization is not already on a path to becoming trauma and violence-informed, talk with your senior leaders about engaging the whole organization

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*"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." (Maya Angelou)*

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## Principle 2: Emphasize safety and trust

Trauma and violence-informed approaches incorporate universal precautions to ensure everyone is treated as if they have experience of trauma and/or violence. It is not necessary to know a person's background or story to be able to interact in a safe, respectful, thoughtful, trauma and violence-informed manner.

### Outward-facing: in becoming trauma and violence-informed, look at your practices through the eyes of the people accessing services and:

- Create safety and trust for clients, colleagues, and the larger community
- Create welcoming and calming environments and intake processes
- Adapt the physical environment to meet safety, relational, and privacy needs
- Take a **calm, respectful and non-judgemental approach** with the goal of ensuring people feel accepted and deserving. Slow down, don't interrupt, be present, and give each person your full attention.
- See the whole person, not only the presenting behaviour or label. Remember to **shift your perspective** from "What is wrong with this person?" to "What has happened to, and perhaps is still happening to, this person?"
- Provide clear and accurate information and communicate predictable expectations about the programs and services your organization and you as a service provider offer.
- Ensure informed consent and confidentiality as well as communicating relevant limitations.
- Work with community partners to build warm referrals as a practice and to manage high-risk cases as a community. Don't just hand out cards or phone numbers, instead facilitate relationships with other service organizations.
- Pay attention to "us and them" power imbalances that are structured into the service system. In any situation ask yourself: who has power in this situation and who doesn't? Practice sharing power – taking a shared power approach in your interactions with clients.
- Advocate for people who have been written off as "too difficult" to support.
- Advocate for increased understanding of trauma and violence-informed approaches in the community.
- Seek client and community input into safe and inclusive spaces and practices.

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*"One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say."*

Bryan H. McGill

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What does it mean to be truly welcoming? It means that we meet people where they are. We allow their stories and truths to change us. We seriously consider if we "welcome people in" or "mandate them out." We reimagine our services and practices from their perspectives and needs.

### Remember to also look inward:

- Reflect on what you need to be safe and supported in your workplace.
- Engage in a dialogue with your organization about how you can establish and maintain healthy boundaries that protect you from harm and trauma exposures responses, including vicarious trauma.
- Debrief with colleagues/your supervisor about difficult and potentially traumatizing clients and situations. Talk about their impact on you. Take care not to share graphic details that may be traumatizing for others nor to violate confidentiality.
- Support colleagues who want to debrief as a meaningful contribution to a supportive work environment.
- The universal precautions of trauma and violence-informed approaches also apply to staff: it is not necessary to know a person's history of trauma and violence to be supportive.
- Support those at risk of vicarious trauma and other types of trauma exposure responses (e.g., peer support, check-ins, self-care programs).
- Review your workplace violence policy and seek support if you are experiencing any form of workplace violence or harassment.
- Have clear safety protocols.



### Principle 3: Offer real choices through connection and collaboration

The trauma and violence-informed principles are interconnected and support one another. Creating safety and trust with your client facilitates connection and collaboration with clients, colleagues, and community partners.

Trauma and violence-informed approaches recognize the importance of establishing a connection with your clients and collaborating with them to determine their needs, to identify realistic and meaningful choices, and to support their decision-making.

These approaches also incorporate connecting and working with other service providers to better understand their programs and services, to facilitate referrals and service delivery transitions, and to foster a sense of community within teams, across organizations, sectors, and with those we are providing service to.

Collaboration involves **working together – sharing power** rather than holding power over another. Survivors of violence often experience a loss of power and control during the violent incident(s). So, it is important to adopt a sharing power approach rather than replicating their experience of loss of power and control.

**Outward-facing: consider the client and do what you can to accommodate their real needs while still respecting your boundaries as a service provider.**

- Practice **empathetic listening** when clients are talking about their experience(s) and what kind of support they are looking for.
- Empathetic listening is an active process that requires you, as the listener, to demonstrate compassion, nonjudgment, and to make a genuine attempt to understand what the survivor is sharing with you from their perspective. More details about how to listen empathetically and the benefits can be found in the Trauma and Violence-Informed Approaches to Communication in the Appendix.
- Remember that empathetic listening fosters connection.
- Be honest and upfront about what is possible. Clearly articulate boundaries: talk about the limits of the system and what you can do.
- Develop knowledge of local programs and services and identify realistic and meaningful choices for your client while recognizing and respecting that the decision is theirs to make. As a service provider, you can support their decision-making process while respecting that the decision is ultimately theirs to make.
- When and where possible, look for flexibility within your programs and services to make the system work for those using it. Flexibility can be demonstrated through mutual scheduling of appointments, allowing sufficient time for meaningful engagement, the completion of forms, and generally responding to the client's needs in the moment.

### Remember to also look inward:

- Learn about choices that are available to you as a staff person that can help reduce harms associated with your work.
- Engage in discussion with leadership about available options for your support.
- If you are off work due to operational stress, ask to be involved in planning your return to work.
- Take time to build relationships with colleagues and community partners as a path to greater connectivity and collaboration that will support you and the work that you do.

### Principle 4: Recognize and build people's strengths and resilience

Trauma and violence-informed approaches incorporate a strengths-based, rather than deficits-based, approach to providing services and interacting within your community. Essentially, a strengths-based approach focuses on people's strengths – their positive attributes and behaviours – their resourcefulness and resilience – as well as those in their support network and community, rather than focusing on weaknesses. With its emphasis on strengths, resourcefulness, and resilience, hope is embedded in a strengths-based approach. This principle applies not only to the clients we serve, but also to our colleagues, other community members, partners, and ourselves.

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*"Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." Desmond Tutu*

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### Outward-facing: we can never know exactly what it is to walk in another's shoes. Instead, we can:

- Acknowledge individual journeys, and the effects of past and current experiences of trauma and/or violence on people's lives – one's health and well-being, behaviour, as well as the barriers and opportunities they may encounter.
- Help people to understand that their response to trauma/violence is normal.
- Reframe coping strategies as indicators of resilience and survival.
- Recognize and help people identify strengths and discuss how to build on them for next steps.
- Learn how to minimize triggers, to recognize and respond to trauma responses, and offer skills for calming and staying present; see Grounding Activities in the Appendix.
- Remember to choose your language carefully to demonstrate nonjudgement, caring, and respect and to seek clarification as needed.
- Hold space for others.

### What does it mean to hold space for another person?

"It means that we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they are on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control." (Heather Plett)

### Remember to also look inward:

- Acknowledge your gifts, strengths, and the creative and healthy ways you cope with adversity, trauma, and/or violence (direct or indirect).
- Learn how to calm and ground yourself, and how to recognize your own triggers.
- Protect time for breaks and meals. Take a break and chat with a colleague, friend, or family member. Move your body. Go outside and walk – enjoy nature. Talk with leaders about the need to protect this time and ask for their support.
- Build, nourish, and invest in your support system with peers, family, and friends.
- Take vacations and turn your work phone off.
- Take regular social media breaks.
- Foster resilience: resilience tips and practices are covered later in this guide.

### Principle 5: Incorporate a People-Centred Perspective

A people-centred perspective grounds our services in the needs, experiences, and knowledge of our clients, our staff, and our community. **Safety, dignity, and compassion** are the primary qualities of this principle. Actioning this principle acknowledges our shared humanity and recognizes that your clients, colleagues, and community partners are more than the person you experience *in a moment*.

### Outward-facing: in becoming trauma and violence-informed, we see the humanity of the person in front of us as we:

- Recognize that clients are people beyond the needs, crisis, or behaviour they are presenting.
- Take the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual health and well-being of the person being served into consideration in all your interactions.
- Focus on safety, dignity, and compassion in all interactions.
- Treat people with respect, strive for equity, and emphasize hope with and for clients.
- Listen carefully for what the person wants to do, not what you think they should do
- Seek to understand and respect diversity and how to action inclusivity.
- Practice cultural humility and challenge your biases, stereotypes, and privilege.
- Advocate for clients with community partners in situations of victim-blaming.

### Remember to also look inward:

- Prioritize safety, dignity, and compassion in your interactions with others and for yourself
- Respect differences in perspective and experience between yourself and others, and practice humility in all its forms.
- The importance of respect, relationships, and reciprocity is integral to a people-centered principle and approach.
- Take the time to recognize and value the contributions you and your colleagues make in others' lives.

It changes our relationships when we see people who have experienced violence and trauma as valued community members, with knowledge we do not have. Fostering inclusion and seeking ongoing input and feedback from clients, colleagues, community partners, and your community builds relationships, reduces our own sense of isolation, and strengthens the community.

## Take a Moment to Reflect on Actioning the Five Trauma and Violence-Informed Principles

- Do you think you are already becoming trauma and violence-informed? How do you know? [A Personal Reflections Tool](#) can be found in the Appendix to help you determine if you already use trauma and violence-informed approaches in your daily work.
- See the [Practice Analysis Exercise](#) in the Appendix to put the principles into action
- How does actioning these five principles feel to you? Do you need more clarity or direction? How will you get it?
- See the Appendix for a brief poster, *Top Things Any Service Provider Can Do to Support People Experiencing Violence*, to remind you how to action these principles.

## ADDITIONAL TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED INFORMATION, TIPS, AND TOOLS

Becoming trauma and violence-informed is a journey which involves ongoing learning and growth. This section of the guide provides additional information, tips, and tools to aid you in your practice.

### Gender Sensitivity in Trauma and Violence-Informed Practice

Sensitivity to gender is the ability to recognise different perceptions, experiences, and needs that women, men, and 2SLGBTQ+ people may have because of their gender identity. Gender-sensitive service recognize differences between genders and appreciate the need to attend to these differences in service planning and practice. Furthermore, it acknowledges different perceptions, experiences, and interests arising from different social positions and access to supports that people may have because of their gender identity.

Providing gender-sensitive service in the GBV sector includes consideration and implementation of strategies to address the different needs of women and men, as well as those who do not identify with these two genders. Gender-sensitive practice validates childhood and adult life experiences (such as interpersonal violence and abuse) as well as day-to-day social, cultural, family, and economic realities. Integrating gender-sensitive practice means a reorientation of focus, including an inspection of currently held beliefs and assumptions around gender “rightness”.

Through a process of reflection, service providers can begin to increase awareness about changes that need to occur to integrate gender-sensitive care into all aspects of trauma and violence-informed service provision.

### Gender, trauma, and violence

There are important gender differences in the rates and impact of as well as responses to trauma and violence. Different genders experience different types of trauma at different rates. For example, females are more likely to experience sexual assault, criminal harassment, and intimate partner violence, and psychological distress than males. Males are more likely to physical assault, accidents, and injury, including witnessing death or injury than females (Tolin & Foa, 2006).

Women and 2SLGBTQ+ people are more likely to report negative traumatic effects from experiencing interpersonal violence than men. this finding is not intended to evoke an aegument around comparative suffering or to negate the suffering and trauma men experience. Instead, it highlights the differential reported impact of trauma and violence.

**Below are some examples of how men and women respond to trauma and violence based on research conducted with men and women with direct experience of violence (Oliff, 2017).**

What	Men	Women
Early life impact on neurobiological development	Greatest impact on behaviour and sense of acceptable and nonacceptable behaviour	Greatest impact on personality
Response to highly stressful situations	Action-oriented and reticent	Emotionally expressive and reflective
Coping styles	Problem-focused coping	Emotion-focused, defensive, and palliative coping
How fear is internalized	Fear learning	Fear expression
Aggression-related responses	<p>More likely to express physical, overt, and direct aggression.</p> <p>Higher aggression in relatively neutral conditions or situations requiring emotional control.</p>	<p>More likely to express relational and indirect aggression.</p> <p>Increased response to aggression-inducing stimuli.</p>

In summary, there are real sex and gender differences in brain and behaviour as a result of trauma and violence, but we should not simplify. There are no male or female stereotypes, but some features are more common in women and others in men.

### Take a moment to reflect:

- Do you assume that men commit all acts of gender-based violence?
- Do you assume that women are the victim of most, if not all, acts of gender-based violence?
- Have you thought about what prevents people from reporting violence and seeking help from the formal system? If so, could you identify these barriers?

See the Appendix for Gender Sensitivity Communication Tips.



## RACE AND TRAUMA

It is important to recognize that when working in the NWT you may encounter a high level of exposure to racial trauma. Working in a system that perpetuates racism or with professionals who, knowingly or unknowingly, discriminate against families of color can be a significant source of moral distress, burnout, and vicarious trauma. Identifying as “black, Indigenous, and people of color” (BIPOC) may mean you experience incidents of racism that impact you directly, such as micro-aggressions, workplace discrimination, or lack of representation at a leadership level. Not being BIPOC does not make you immune to vicarious racial trauma.

In addition, witnessing the ways in which the system you work within may repeatedly re-traumatize people of color can be a source of racial trauma in and of itself. Experiencing and witnessing racism can contribute to trauma exposure response and impact your well-being.

The NWT’s historical legacy of residential school and colonialism and the ways it has manifested in systemic inequality, race-based interpersonal assaults and violence, and racial discrimination all can create racial trauma.

### Racial trauma is cumulative

It is possible to experience racial trauma even when you are not personally involved in the discriminatory or racist event, such as when you observe the event or identify with the victim. While individual events can have lasting effects, racial trauma is not necessarily limited to one isolated incident, and can result from the persistent, systemic, deeply embedded racism that exists in several facets of NWT society, culture, and history. Increased study on intergenerational trauma reveals that mass traumas, such as historical oppression, can have psychological, familial, and neurobiological effects on future generations.

In your work, you consistently confront larger structural inequalities that impact clients and their families. Seeing these larger structural inequities cause and exacerbate trauma for clients is a source of trauma for all professionals and may have a heightened impact people who identify as BIPOC. Racial injustice and assault, especially within BIPOC communities, may impact staff who identify as BIPOC in deeper and more personal ways and may co-occur with responses to trauma exposure at work and stories of clients, or possibly family and friends, who have had similar experiences.

### Take a moment to reflect:

- Do you have intrusive thoughts and memories of similar events as those you hear from your clients within your family, friends, or home communities?
- Are you having physical reactions to something that reminds you of your own traumatic events?
- Do you want to avoid people who are of a different race than you?

## CULTURAL HUMILITY

Cultural humility is a humble and respectful attitude toward individuals of other cultures that pushes us to challenge our own cultural biases and realize that we cannot possibly know everything about another culture or another person's experiences within our same culture.

Cultural humility was established due to the limitations of cultural competence. Some of us believe ourselves to be sufficiently culturally competent after learning some generalizations of a particular culture regardless of whether these assumptions are backed by evidence. Cultural humility encourages our active participation in every interaction with a client in order to learn about their personal cultural experience.

Cultural humility suggests remaining humble and aware of our own deficient knowledge of other cultures. Mostly, it's about being okay with not knowing everything about someone else's cultural experience; especially as each individual is multi-dimensional with a complex cultural identity.

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*"True humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's about thinking of yourself less." C.S. Lewis*

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Cultural humility also requires us to be critical of our own cultural biases. For example, you might prefer the independence of family members versus interdependence, and judge others of the same racial heritage who hold a different view. Cultural humility pushes us to challenge our assumptions, judgments, and prejudices; it encourages experts to become students when interacting with others.

Cultural humility can deepen understanding and increase the quality of our connections and interactions with communities that are not our own.

Some practical ways to grow cultural humility include:

- Intentionally engage in self-critique and reflection to recognize and accept biases and assumptions.
- Engage in empathetic listening and ask genuine open-ended questions of the people you encounter to better understand their perspective.
- Project an attitude that is open to others in terms of what aspects of their cultural identity are important to them.
- See and foster respectful, authentic, and trustworthy relationships with a diversity of communities.
- Learn to sit with ambiguity – grayness instead of black and white – and commit to lifelong learning.
- Demonstrate vulnerability and compassion with and for yourself and others.

### Take a moment to reflect:

- Think of your own heritage – how do you define a good person or a good family?
- Do you expect others of a similar background to feel the same way?
- Would you judge them if they came from your home community but believed differently?

## LANGUAGE IS POWERFUL!

The language we use can tell us a lot about the assumptions and biases we have inherited as members of the community. Pay attention to the choices you make.

- Use positive language that is sensitive, respectful, and appropriate.
- Do not use jargon.
- Be mindful of tone, volume, and pacing.
- Do not assume and be cautious of labels.
- Do not use language that further stigmatizes, patronizes or pathologizes people.
- Use language that accurately and respectfully captures the essence of people's experiences. Instead consider that we have not yet found a way to support their needs, or our services are not meeting this person's needs at this time. What would we need to change to meet their needs?
- Ask people what language they use/prefer; examples include gender terms, disability terms, identity terms ("how do you identify yourself" is a good question).
- Use people centred language. A person is not a "Schizophrenic" or an "Addict". When someone has cancer, we don't say that they are a "Cancer." We say they are a person first who has or is living with cancer. Likewise, we name the person first, for example, "Jordan has been assaulted."

### Examples of Trauma and Violence-Informed language reframes

"She has poor coping methods" reframed to "She has survival skills and resourcefulness that have kept her going."

"He just wants attention" reframed to "He is trying to ask for help"

"They should be over it by now" reframed to "Recovery from trauma takes time and is a process. Everyone is different. There is no expiry date"

"She is weak, fragile, broken, etc." reframed to "She is strong and resilient for what she has lived through"

"He will never be the same" reframed to "People are transformed after trauma"

"We are done now." Reframed to "Is there anything else you would like to tell me to help me better meet your needs?"

### Take a moment to reflect:

- What words have you used that have become emotional triggers for your client (s)?
- What have you replaced these words with?
- What are your psychological (cognitive and emotional) trigger words and phrases?
- How will you manage your response when you hear them?

## TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED TIPS FOR “DIFFICULT” PEOPLE

There are a few people who have so much trauma in their lives that they become labelled as “too difficult” to serve, and so become marginalized often by the very systems set out to help them. Trauma and violence-informed principles can help us challenge our perception by reminding us to hold their humanity at the centre of our interactions with them, with an appreciation and understanding about the difficult ways that trauma and violence influence behaviours.

In conflicted or crisis situations, ask yourself: do they already have a crisis or trauma plan outlining what best helps them in these moments? If so, refer to it and follow what it contains. If not, quietly observe the person for cues and clues about what you might be able to do to help. If they are a regular user of your services, consider working on a crisis or trauma plan to review with them next time so you are both better able to deal with their experience.

Here are some more suggestions for challenging situations:

- Remain calm, patient, non-judgemental, and focused on the client.
- Indirect eye contact may feel safer for some.
- Keep your questioning limited and allow time for responses.
- Give the person respectful, safe, and calm space – don’t crowd them or corner them either physically or verbally.
- Check the surroundings – can they see exits or might they feel trapped? Is it private enough? Do YOU have access to an exit if needed to allow them privacy or time to regain composure?
- Offer something to drink (water, tea, or coffee).
- Have sensory objects to hold, touch, feel, smell, hear. Sensory objects help some people (including yourself) to feel grounded.
- Be mindful of temperature – some people feel chilled while others feel overheated – and then respond to their needs.
- Reassure them, use their preferred name, listen, and respond calmly.
- Let them know you want them to be ok.
- If appropriate, offer simple grounding support with slowed breathing – offer to breathe with them.
- Are there any cultural practices that might help? (Don’t assume!)
- Sometimes movement or nature helps people. If safe and appropriate, go outside, walk together, suggest they move their bodies in some way (e.g., stand up, stretch, take a deep breath, etc.).
- Watch your own responses and breath – remember to breathe deep and slow.
- If they have an urgent issue that they are stuck on but that can’t be immediately addressed, problem solve together to identify one step that could be taken once they are feeling more settled.

- If appropriate, create a follow-up support plan (i.e., for that evening, next day, weekend).
- If English is not a person's first language, find out if there is a translator available (who is not related or otherwise a risk to them). Otherwise optimize reassuring, calm facial and body language with short simple sentences, while taking care not to increase the volume of your voice.

## Additional tips

There may be times when your client is difficult despite your best efforts to provide trauma and violence-informed services. Take a deep breath and remind yourself **not to take it personally**. After a discussion with your supervisor about these challenges, you may need to ask a colleague to work with this client instead of you.

## Take a moment to reflect

- How have you responded to “difficult clients” in the past?
- What is your go to response when faced with people externalizing their crisis?
- Does it work for them? If not, are there changes you can make?

## LOW IMPACT DEBRIEFING

Debriefing with colleagues and/or your supervisor can help with self-care and the impacts of vicarious trauma, but we must do it in a way that does not simply transfer our feelings of being harmed or traumatized onto someone else.

Steps for low impact debriefing with a colleague/supervisor:

1. Be self aware; notice when you need to do a debrief.
2. Provide fair warning; for example, “I need to debrief sometime today.”
3. Gain consent; for example, “Would that be ok with you or is this a good time?”
4. Ask for what you are needing; for example, “I feel worried about a situation I had today.”
5. Consider time; for example, “Do you have about 20 minutes to debrief?”
6. Low impact disclosure: talk about how you feel, not the details that traumatized you.
7. The last step is to express appreciation and follow-up if you feel it is needed. For example, thank them for making time to listen to you and you may want to ask: how was that debrief for you?

## CREATING PHYSICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

Reaching out for help can be daunting and new environments can add to the stress and anxiety a traumatized person is already feeling. Work environments that feel physically and psychologically safe help to put clients and staff at ease. There are many aspects of your work environment that contribute to creating physical and psychological safety; some changes may be beyond your budget while others are relatively straightforward to do.

### Physical environment

- The use of lighter cool colours, soft yet well-lit spaces (rather than fluorescent lighting), and reduced clutter contribute to creating a calming environment.
- Cool colours include blue, green, and purple.
- Lighter-coloured rooms are perceived as calmer and safer.
- Avoid stark white and deeply hued warm colours (i.e., red, orange, yellow).
- Natural lighting is optimized where possible
- Accessibility is factored into elevators, door widths and door handles, access to exits, bathrooms in their entirety, and furniture placement.
- Comfortable, well-spaced furniture enhances feelings of safety; furniture and space are used to optimize privacy too.
- Consideration is also given to background noise (kept low if possible) and scents that may be triggers or allergens are avoided.
- The space presents as well-kept, clutter is avoided, and materials available are inclusive.

### Psychological environment

- Welcoming intake processes, forms, and signage help create safe work environments.
- Staff are trained to greet clients in a warm, welcoming, and professional manner.
- Opportunities to complete forms in advance or in privacy are offered.
- Signage uses positive and welcoming language, with requests rather than commands, and incorporate local languages.
- Natural art is calming.
- Local art is comforting as it reflects the community and can contribute to creating a sense of cultural safety.
- Plants are calming and contribute to a welcoming and safe environment.
- Positive and inclusive materials about community resources that reflect the diversity of the people being served contributes to creating cultural safety.
- Consideration should also be given to reflecting people living with disabilities and 2SLGBTQ+ people in waiting room posters, art, and materials about community resources.



As a front-line service provider, you may not be able to have much impact on the organization's environment you work in, but here are a few things you may be able to do:

- Offer clients somewhere to sit and a beverage.
- Point out washroom location options when your client first comes in. People in crisis often need to access the facilities.
- Put up posters and stickers. Think about the reading material in your waiting rooms and the people represented in them. Change it if necessary.
- Make sure that inclusive and affirming language is the standard you use in all workspaces.
- Make sure forms reflect only what you need to know or only collect what you are required to collect.
- Ask clients if they are comfortable with having the door closed during meetings.
- If someone is having a difficult time and requires support, actively listen to their needs. Validate their experiences and show compassion and empathy even if they are not your client and you are simply showing them where to sit.

### Take a moment to reflect:

- Does your physical work environment support or negatively impact your client's experience? If so, how?
- What can or should you change?
- How will you address things that you can not change?

### Tips

- Walk through your work environment as though you are one of your clients and try to see it as they experience it.
- Assess your environment through accessibility, diversity, and trauma lenses.
- Create opportunities for clients to provide feedback and suggestions about their sense of physical and psychological safety in your work environment.

## TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE-INFORMED APPROACHES FOR STAFF

Trauma and violence-informed principles and approaches provide a holistic framework for service delivery in the gender-based violence sector in the Northwest Territories as they are intended to take everyone's needs, health, and well-being into account. **Trauma and violence-informed approaches emphasize that safety and trust are important for those receiving services and for those providing services.** Trauma and violence-informed principles and approaches acknowledge and seek to address and prevent the harms of providing services in the gender-based violence sector.

### It's Not About Working Harder – It's About Collaboration and Connection

You don't work harder delivering trauma and violence-informed approaches. Rather, you work in collaboration and connection with one another, fostering opportunities for choice and mutuality. Collaboration and connection may look different depending on the relationship, but this principle becomes the norm in our teams, across sectors, services, and between us and survivors in becoming trauma and violence-informed.

The practice of trauma and violence-informed approaches asks for your commitment to do your part to reduce and mitigate harm to clients, colleagues, and yourself – to consciously make efforts to avoid further traumatization. At the same time, you must come from a strength-based perspective, recognizing that your clients, colleagues, and you have your own unique knowledge, assets, courage, capacities, and value.

Many service providers also have personal trauma backgrounds or experiences. Your own experiences can enhance your compassion and understanding but can also increase your exposure to trauma and violence through your work. Personal and organizational acknowledgement that this is more common than not, with strategies and resources in place to support the wellbeing of all, demonstrate a trauma and violence-informed commitment.

### The impossible is ... well ... impossible.

Working in organizations that cannot possibly meet the needs of their community or clients because there is not enough funding, staff, training, and resources creates frustration, stress, and even harm. Moral distress describes the experience of service providers who wonder if what they are doing actually helps in a system that seems so broken. Inadequate funding, jobs that have low pay, and no benefits are common in the gender-based violence sector.

Trauma and violence-informed approaches can help empower you to interrupt the sometimes day-to-day relentless pace of your work by holding you to the principle of being people-centred. The practice of centring on people asks you to slow down and be present for everyone you encounter in a day. It is a way to acknowledge that you are only one person, who can only do so much in the time that you have. It is not a bad thing to recognize that you can't 'do it all'.

What you can do is connect with others – honest connections of authenticity and value. Your compassion and attention to another human being is a powerful gift that creates the humane conditions for mutuality, healing, and social transformation.

**We tend to underestimate how meaningful genuine connection and support can be.**

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### **Tip for the tired**

*Working with people who have experienced trauma and violence can be exhausting. When we are tired, we don't always react the way we should when others share something.*

*Keep this simple tip in mind ... when someone shares something with you, try to match their level of enthusiasm (or concern) and follow-up with at least two questions. By asking two questions, you are showing you care about what they are sharing with you. This simple strategy can go a long way on those days you would rather just be left alone. Be sure to be genuine when you ask.*

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### **Take a moment to reflect**

- How can you be more present with the people you encounter every day?
- How can you bring more authenticity to your interactions?
- Where can you be more collaborative with clients and colleagues?
- What of your own experiences and history informs your work? Does it help or hinder you?
- What do you keep trying to do that is impossible? Why do you keep trying to do it? Can you let go?

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

It's not always easy to recognize behaviours as signs of trauma. We often see people in tough circumstances without a full picture of what brought them into our organization. We don't get to see them thriving in their communities. We don't have a full understanding of their strengths and capabilities. This can wear on us, and distorts our view of particular groups, contributing to stereotypes, stigma, and even acts of discrimination.

Without empathy, the natural tendency is to view the person as the problem. When people are seeking help because of the trauma and/or violence in their lives, they are often already experiencing stigma. By seeing them as contributing to their problem, we are sending the message that we are blaming them. What we are often unintentionally doing is layering on more stigma and the shame that goes with it. Ultimately, we then can't find a good outcome; the person may leave without help, they may not come back, or they internalize more of the stigma they are feeling.

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*People treat empathy as if it were an "on-off" switch. Turn it on for friends and colleagues, and then turn it off for the "bad people".*

*Empathy is a tuner or dial, not a switch. Turn it up or turn it down as you need to. If you distress indicates too much openness, do not be closed off. Instead, tactically reduce how open you are.*

*Dr. Lou Agosta, [Listening with Empathy](#)*

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### Take a moment to reflect

What are the stigmas and biases you carry? We all have them. Pay attention to how they show up in your relationships and how you are encouraged to think negatively about certain people or groups. It takes active awareness to make choices about how you see others.

To learn more about empathy, the different kinds of empathy, and how to build it see the Appendix for [Understanding and Building Empathy](#).

## TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSES AND RECOGNIZING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Trauma exposure response is a term used to describe the various internal changes as a result of repeated exposure to violence and trauma: hearing and/or witnessing traumatic and/or violent events, often without adequate resources and supports to offset the risks. This exposure can be primary (you directly witness the suffering), it can be secondary (you hear or see the suffering from those that suffer), or it can be tertiary (you hear of or read of the suffering). Your trauma response does not always differentiate between the three types and any or all of them may be felt as your own experience.

Trauma exposure response often develops gradually, and it varies from one individual to the next. Trauma exposure responses include burnout, compassion fatigue, moral distress, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious/secondary trauma. It is not unusual, that at any given time, an individual staff member, team, or organization may be experiencing one or symptoms of several of these trauma exposure responses.

Trauma exposure response symptoms are often similar to the trauma symptoms experienced by survivors of traumatic events, although the severity of symptoms might differ. It is important to acknowledge and understand these symptoms and the various types of trauma exposure responses to stay healthy and effective at work and to manage what you take home.

**Burnout** is the emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion that you may experience from prolonged exposure to excessive stress. It may be accompanied by low job satisfaction, and/or feeling powerless and overwhelmed at work. Components of burnout include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, loss of ideals, and reduced personal accomplishment and commitment

This emotional depletion is often reflected in both a lessened ability to care and an inability to experience or express empathy for your client and their situation or choices. Untreated trauma exposure is a leading factor in burnout.

The adversarial, high-stress nature of some jobs can lead to burnout on its own. Burnout is not simply a result of stress. Stress can be a factor that leads to burnout but attributing burnout to overstress simplifies this complex condition. Burnout results when you are not provided with the tools, training, and resources to handle an excess of highly emotional and traumatic circumstances, clients, and cases.

**Compassion Fatigue** refers to the gradual erosion of the ability to tolerate difficult stories and suffering of others. It involves physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from working as a helping professional. Compassion fatigue can cause you to slowly lose hope, empathy, and compassion for others and yourself. Compassion fatigue can lead to becoming desensitized to another's pain or intolerant of hearing stories of trauma and suffering.

Compassion fatigue affects your external responses and actions. It relates to how you respond and act and is measured by what you put out into the world. Compassion fatigue depletes your resources and makes it hard to respond and serve as a fully competent, proficient helping professional.

We are not inferring that compassion at work has negative effects as the evidence suggests that having compassion, especially for self and others, can be a protective measure. It is about finding that balance and exercising self-care, too.

**Moral Distress** is harder to define. It occurs when an individual feels in conflict between their own personal ethics, values and internal moral compass and the actions, decisions, and practices of their workplace (or other community partners) as well as systemic inequities that can both hurt and help clients. Adding to this distress would be a feeling that one cannot address the conflict because of a sense of powerlessness and isolation.

**Secondary traumatic stress** is often seen in first responders who attend to traumatic and violent incidents or help those who survive, such as the police and healthcare workers. Symptoms experienced are similar to posttraumatic stress disorder, but do not meet the criteria for this diagnosis. Secondary traumatic stress may develop in response to one traumatic incident.

**Vicarious trauma**, also known as **secondary trauma**, describes the negative, cumulative psychological impact on service providers of being exposed to someone else's traumatic experience(s). It is a negative reaction to trauma exposure and includes a range of symptoms that are similar to experiencing trauma directly.

Vicarious trauma is the manifestation of negative physical and psychological conditions resulting from constant exposure to clients' traumatic stories and experiences. Exposure to these traumatic stories and experiences changes your internal schema. Even though you might not have experienced this trauma firsthand, repeated exposure to traumatic stories and experiences can haunt you. Unlike compassion fatigue, which transforms your external responses and actions, secondary trauma negatively shifts your internal worldview.

Internalizing a client's trauma can affect your memory and disrupt your internal thoughts and views about the world, trust, safety, self-esteem, independence, and intimacy. You do not need to work directly with a traumatized individual to experience secondary trauma. Vicarious trauma can be experienced by reading about or listening to traumatic stories.

Therefore, any of your colleagues regardless of their role can experience vicarious trauma through responding to violent/traumatic incidents, listening to people recall their experience of violence/trauma, the documents they read or process, or the videos they review for work.

Developing vicarious trauma is not inevitable though. Strategies to prevent or treat it are identified in the self-care and wellness strategy section of this guide.



Several studies indicate that the development of vicarious trauma often predicts that a helping professional will eventually leave the field for another type of work.

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### Signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma

- *Social withdrawal*
- *Extreme of rapid changes in emotions (e.g., involuntary crying)*
- *Aggression*
- *Increased sensitivity to violence*
- *Physical symptoms (e.g., aches, pains)*
- *Sleep difficulties*
- *Intrusive imagery*
- *Cynicism*
- *Difficulty managing boundaries with clients*
- *Relationship difficulties*

*There are vicarious/secondary trauma self-tests available online that can help you assess how your workplace is affecting you.*

*Source: EQUIP Healthcare*

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**Compassion Satisfaction** is the sense of meaning and fulfillment you derive from working within your profession and doing your job well. It is possible to experience trauma exposure response, and all of its negative symptoms, while still feeling compassion satisfaction. However, over time, trauma exposure responses can erode your compassion satisfaction. Nevertheless, compassion satisfaction is a powerful tool in combating trauma exposure response. The evidence shows that working from a place of compassion can also be a protective measure in mitigating harm from trauma and violence exposures.

Despite the demands and stresses of working in the gender-based violence sector, service providers go to work every day with a strong sense of wanting to help and make a difference. Very real stresses of the work can be offset by the satisfaction and rewards that come from rich relationships and interactions with our colleagues and those we are supporting, and from witnessing change and feeling a sense of mutual regard and common purpose.

### Take a moment to reflect

- How do you feel and respond to what you are exposed to in your work?
- How do you decide when it is too much?
- What can you do to recenter yourself?
- How are you doing, right now?

## An Additional Source of Stress or Harm in the Workplace – Lateral Violence

**Lateral Violence** can be considered a form of bullying or workplace harassment.

It is demonstrated by displaced aggression/violence directed at one's peers and coworkers, usually by those feeling powerless themselves who are directing their own dissatisfaction toward each other.

It can consist of covert or overt acts of verbal or nonverbal aggression (gossip, slander, shaming, blaming, backstabbing) as well as exclusion and attempts to socially isolate others.

The result is that these behaviours can create an unsafe and toxic workplace because everyone is affected.

This dynamic can be seen in groups that experience oppression. It has been noted that people who feel victimized by forms of systemic/structural violence may turn on each other, feeling powerless to confront the system that oppresses them. This dynamic unfortunately has emerged at times in the gender-based violence sector, much to the distress of everyone involved.

### What helps?

- Recognize and educate on the roots of lateral violence as internalized oppression.
- Do not participate or engage in acts of lateral hostility or violence.
- Treat everyone with respect and dignity.
- When it does occur, deal with it openly and immediately.
- Encourage open dialogue at team meetings about how to mitigate lateral violence and engage in behaviours and activities that build rapport, trust, and a strong team.
- Speak with trusted colleagues and supervisors if you find yourself on the receiving end of acts of lateral violence or are aware of it against another.
- Support those who are being victimized by lateral violence without setting up a polarized scenario.
- Seek external help for conflict mediation if needed.

A **Case Study** of trauma exposure responses can be found in the Appendix.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? YOUR SELF-CARE AND WELLNESS STRATEGY

Focusing on self-awareness, self-care, and self-compassion are effective ways to prevent or treat vicarious trauma. Self-awareness has been discussed throughout this guide, and self-compassion is essentially about treating yourself with kindness, forgiveness, and care; this is expanded on in resilience practices. So, this section will primarily focus on self-care. **The basics of health and wellness are good nutrition, adequate sleep, and regular exercise. Social connections are also essential to our health and wellbeing.** These basic building blocks of health and wellness often need to be augmented by specific self-care and wellness strategies.

Study after study continues to demonstrate the effectiveness of mindfulness to enhance our well-being, self-care, and foster compassion. When you think of mindfulness, an image may come to mind of sitting cross-legged on a cushion or doing yoga.

Mindfulness can be thought of as an umbrella term that **encompasses a wide range of practices and resources** that can help you to ground, stabilize yourself, reduce anxiety, increase awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, regulate your emotions, and enhance your thinking, problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Mindfulness practices can help you to reduce your trauma exposure responses and build capacity for resilience.

Mindfulness is also linked to increasing and fostering compassion, kindness, and empathy for self and others. So, it is not just a strategy for personal awareness, self-care, and well-being but also for teams and organizations. Mindful-based practices increase our awareness and appreciation of our interconnectedness, making it another useful strategy to support social justice and change.

**Mindfulness helps you be and live in the moment. It helps to prevent you from becoming stuck.**

### What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is when you focus on being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery, and other strategies to relax the body and mind and help reduce stress.

Spending too much time planning, problem-solving, daydreaming, or thinking negative or random thoughts can be draining. It can also make you more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and symptoms of depression. Practicing mindfulness exercises can help you direct your attention away from this kind of thinking and engage or reengage with the world around you.

There are many simple ways to practice mindfulness. Some examples include:

- **Pay attention.** It's hard to slow down and notice things in a busy world. Try to take the time to experience your environment with all your senses — touch, sound, sight, smell, and taste. For example, when you eat a favourite food, take the time to smell, taste and truly enjoy it.
- **Live in the moment.** Try to intentionally bring an open, accepting, and discerning attention to everything you do. Find joy in simple pleasures.
- **Accept yourself.** Treat yourself the way you would treat a good friend.
- **Focus on your breathing.** When you have negative thoughts, try to sit down, take a deep breath, and close your eyes. Focus on your breath as it moves in and out of your body. Sitting and breathing for even a minute can help.

You can also try more structured mindfulness exercises, such as:

- **Body scan meditation.** Lie on your back with your legs extended and arms at your sides, palms facing up. Focus your attention slowly and deliberately on each part of your body, in order, from toe to head or head to toe. Be aware of any sensations, emotions or thoughts associated with each part of your body.
- **Walking meditation.** Find a quiet place 10 to 20 feet in length and begin to walk slowly. Focus on the experience of walking, being aware of the sensations of standing and the subtle movements that keep your balance. When you reach the end of your path, turn, and continue walking, maintaining awareness of your sensations.

Simple mindfulness activities can be practiced anywhere and anytime. Engaging your senses in nature is especially beneficial.

For more structured mindfulness activities, you'll need to set aside time when you can be in a quiet place without distractions or interruptions. You might choose to practice this type of exercise early in the morning before you begin your daily routine.

Aim to practice mindfulness every day for about six months. Over time, you might find that mindfulness becomes effortless. Think of it as a commitment to reconnecting with and nurturing yourself.

## Take a moment to reflect

- What have you done in the past to let go of your day? Was it healthy?
- What can you do more of to be more mindful?
- What can you minimize to be more mindful?
- Do you practice the basics of personal health and wellness: good nutrition, adequate sleep, and regular exercise as well as social connections?
- Do you think that your self-care and wellness strategy is adequate and effective?

## RESILIENT RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

### “Grow through what you go through”

Human beings are amazingly resilient. Resilience refers to a dynamic process that enables an individual to develop, maintain, or regain one's health and well-being despite experiences of significant adversity, trauma, or violence.

While it is common to experience the immediate effects of trauma, many people find healthy ways to cope with, respond to, and heal from trauma. That is not to say that they do it on their own. They may receive the necessary support from their own circle, and they may choose to reach out to mental health services. Resilient responses to trauma have been identified in which people re-evaluate their values and redefine what is important to them after experiencing trauma. Such resilient responses include:

- appreciation for and a sense of new possibilities in life
- improved relationships with others
- redefined or increased sense of purpose and meaning
- recognizing personal strengths
- sense of spirituality

It is very important to note that you do not begin the healing journey from trauma and/or violence by jumping right into the possibility of growth. People, including yourself, need to feel acknowledged and supported to move through the grief, loss, and pain of their experiences before being able to see the possibilities of their transformative growth.

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*“Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in”  
Leonard Cohen poet, performer*

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Connecting to others who have had similar experiences, peer supports, being active in any kind of social change related to the traumatic events, helping others, and feeling a sense of community can all help. Finding and making meaning from these experiences can profoundly change how we see ourselves, the world, and others.

### Take a moment to reflect:

- What are some of your resiliency life lessons?
- How do they shape how you face adversity and/or challenges today?
- How have they positively impacted your life?
- How did you turn your experiences into lessons and opportunities for personal growth?
- What lessons do you need to learn today?

## PRACTISE RESILIENCE: WHEN THE ROAD GETS ROCKY, WHAT DO YOU DO?

Sometimes when we are having a tough time, we think the answer is to avoid thinking about it. We often don't say anything because we don't want those feelings to resurface. Alternatively, some of us become stuck in a tough situation and it's all we think and talk about. Taking a trauma and violence-informed approach to your work means that when those coping strategies surface, practice resilience instead of giving in to them.

Here are some resilience practices which can help you confront psychological (i.e., cognitive and emotional) pain more effectively.

### 1. Change the narrative

When something bad happens, we often relive the event over and over in our heads, rehashing the pain. This process is called rumination; it's like a cognitive spinning of the wheels, and it doesn't move us forward toward healing and growth.

The practice of expressive writing can move us forward by helping us gain new insights into the challenges in our lives. It involves free writing continuously for 20 minutes about an issue, exploring your deepest thoughts and feelings around it. The goal is to just get something down on paper. (Note: If 20 minutes of continuous free writing is intimidating, pick your own "right" set amount of time.)

When writing like this, we're forced to confront ideas one by one and give them structure, which may lead to new perspectives. We're actually crafting our narrative and gaining a sense of control.

### 2. Practice self-compassion

Stress, trauma, and/or violence may make us feel alone. We wonder why we're the only ones feeling this way, and what **exactly** is wrong with us. In these situations, learning to practise self-compassion can be a gentle and effective road to healing.

**Self-compassion** involves offering compassion to ourselves: confronting our own suffering with an attitude of warmth and kindness, without judgment.

Here is one practice you can do any time you start to feel overwhelmed. It has three steps, which correspond to the three aspects of self-compassion:

**Be mindful:** Without judgment or analysis, notice what you're feeling. Say, "This is a moment of suffering," or "This hurts," or "This is stress," or "I'm having the thought or feeling that ..."

**Remember that you're not alone:** Everyone experiences these deep and painful human emotions, although the causes might be different. Say to yourself, "Suffering is a part of life," or "We all feel this way," or "We all struggle in our lives."



It can be helpful to acknowledge the humanity and universality of our emotions and/or thoughts while not downplaying our experiences.

**Be kind to yourself:** Put your hands on your heart and say something like “May I give myself compassion,” or “May I accept myself as I am,” or “May I be patient.”

If being kind to yourself is a challenge, imagining how you would treat a friend could help. Here, you compare how you respond to your own struggles—and the tone you use—with how you respond to a friend’s. Often, this comparison unearths some surprising differences and valuable reflections: **Why am I so harsh on myself, and what would happen if I were kinder?**

### 3. Meditate

As mindfulness gurus like to remind us, our most painful thoughts are usually about the past or the future. We regret and ruminate on things that went wrong, or we get anxious about things that may happen. When we pause and bring our attention to the present, we often find that things are ... okay.

Practicing mindfulness brings us more into the present, and it offers techniques for dealing with negative emotions when they arise. That way, instead of getting carried away into fear, anger, or despair, we can work through these emotions more deliberately.

One meditation that we can sprinkle throughout our day—or practice on its own—is **Mindful Breathing**. It involves bringing attention to the physical sensations of our breath: the air moving through the nostrils, the expansion of the chest, and the rise and fall of the stomach. If your mind wanders away, you bring your attention back. This can be done during a full 15-minute meditation or during a moment of stress with just a few breaths.

In a study, participants who did a mindful breathing exercise before looking at disturbing images experienced less negative emotion than people who hadn’t done the exercise. Negative thoughts can pull us along into their frantic stream, but the breath is an anchor we can hold onto at any time.

Additional self-care and resilience tips can be found in **Gentle Reminders** in the Appendix.

## Take a moment to reflect:

What can I do to increase my awareness of my own thoughts and emotions?

- What can I do to develop my emotional intelligence and agility, and the associated ability to regulate my emotions?
  - What was going on for me when “X” was happening?
  - What did I want to happen today?
  - What went well? What did not go the way I intended?
  - What did I learn? What will I do differently next time?
  - What do I need to let go of to be able to move on – to ensure I don’t become stuck?
- 

## THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

Becoming trauma and violence-informed is a journey. It takes time, commitment, and practice. It is never meant to be one more thing we must do to check off our list as it is more a way of being than doing; a way of being that many of you are already engaged in. To assist with this journey, an additional Practice Reflection tool can be found in the Appendix to help you determine your progress and opportunities for growth.

Becoming trauma and violence-informed helps us learn to see people as more than their behaviour or story, to care about what is happening, and to see each person as a member of the larger society. It asks us to truly collaborate, especially with those we are providing services to.

Becoming trauma and violence-informed involves embracing humanity with compassion and respect. Relationships are richer and more rewarding when we incorporate trauma and violence-informed principles into our daily practice.

These principles and approaches validate the best in us – our experiences, strengths, and aspirations. Becoming trauma and violence-informed offers a meaningful shift through everyday actions and practice as we strive to create safety for all.

# Adopting a Trauma and Violence-Informed Approach to Communication

Using a trauma and violence-informed approach means informing yourself about violence, trauma, the causes and effects of trauma, and trauma responses. It then requires integrating this understanding into your interactions and communications with survivors of violence and other traumatic events. It means taking steps to minimize the possibility of causing harm and re-traumatization and maximizing safety, control, and resilience.

How do you do this? Educating yourself about gender-based violence and the associated trauma is a good first step. The next step is to integrate this understanding into your interactions and communications with and about survivors of gender-based violence.

Remember what, when, and where you need to communicate will vary depending upon your role and responsibilities in relation to a survivor of gender-based violence. Below are general communication tips to be supportive and to help minimize the possibility of causing further harm and re-traumatization. These tips are intended to complement existing organizational policies, procedures, and practices.

*Building trust, establishing safety, and embedding respect into your communications with individuals who have experienced gender-based violence is critical.*

## Communication Basics

- Remain calm, patient, and focused on the survivor.
- Carefully choose your words and be mindful of the tone of your voice and body language to ensure you are communicating respect and compassion, not judgment.
- Know and communicate the boundaries of what you and your organization can do.

## Communicate Essentials First

- Identify who you are, what your organization does, and how you can help.
- Determine how the survivor wants to be addressed (e.g., first name or surname) and comply. For example, Amanda Simpson may want to be addressed as Mandy, so do so.
- Determine together when, where, and how to communicate.

## Practice Empathetic Listening

- Empathetic listening is an active process that requires you, as the listener, to demonstrate compassion, nonjudgment, and to make a genuine attempt to understand what the survivor is sharing with you from their perspective.
- Try not to rush or interrupt the survivor and learn to be comfortable with silence. Silence creates space to process information and emotions.
- Listen carefully to what the survivor is sharing with you. Listen to understand, but do not probe. Ask questions on a need-to-know or clarification basis. Avoid using why as it implies blame and judgment. Pay careful attention to the survivor's response (verbal and nonverbal) and adapt accordingly.
- Empathetic listening involves acknowledging facts and feelings shared by the survivor when you respond. This acknowledgement demonstrates that you are listening, that you are trying to understand, and it also provides an opportunity for clarification in case you misunderstood or missed something.
- Paraphrasing what the survivor has shared with you may start with, "What I understand you are saying"
- Acknowledging and validating experiences may sound like, "That sounds like a terrible experience" or "No one deserves to be treated like that."
- Keep in mind that nonverbal communication sends a message too. Leaning slightly forward while maintaining adequate personal space and slow nodding can demonstrate attentiveness.
- Note: maintaining eye contact is often identified as a means of indicating we are being attentive. However, maintaining eye contact may not be culturally appropriate and depending on the psychological impact of the violence, a survivor may not be comfortable with eye contact, so you will need to evaluate and adapt.
- Empathetic listening does not necessarily mean that you agree with the other person. It means that you are trying to understand their perspective and experience.
- Remember that listening with genuine empathy fosters connections, trust, and respect. We want to be treated with respect: to experience fairness, dignity, and an open mind – to be seen and heard as a fellow human being without judgement.

## Immediate And Long-Term Needs

- Be prepared: learn about gender-based violence services in your area while recognizing the boundaries and limitations of you and your own organization.
- During your conversation with a survivor of gender-based violence, you may become aware of immediate and/or long-term needs, such as shelter or mental health services.
- Depending upon your boundaries, you may offer to connect a survivor with relevant services. Alternatively, you may ask the survivor if they would like you to share a list of relevant service providers with them.
- Remember: do not make assumptions.

## Collaborate With the Survivor

- Work with survivors by offering accurate information, creating opportunities for choice, and identifying options while they make decisions about their life.
- Why? A collaborative approach helps to ensure you do not introduce or mirror the unhealthy power and control dynamics survivors have experienced in abusive relationships and/or during gender-based violence.
- A collaborative approach supports empowerment.

## Additional Tips

- Factor in the physical, psychological (cognitive and emotional), and cultural safety of survivors of gender-based violence and yourself in your communications.
- Establishing and communicating boundaries guides expectations and provides for clarity. Boundaries also help to maintain physical and psychological health and well-being.
- Do not assume gender identity, including one's pronouns.
- Remember that being present, polite, and considerate goes a long way.
- If and when possible, chose a quiet space that maximizes privacy and minimizes noise, distractions, and disruptions when communicating with a survivor.
- Practice self-care and reach out for help when you need it.



## Additional Information

Possible signs of trauma responses to look for when communicating with survivors of gender-based violence:

- Sweating
- Change in breathing (breathing quickly or holding breath)
- Difficulty relaxing, muscle stiffness
- Flood of strong emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, hopelessness, etc.)
- Rapid heart rate
- Startle response, flinching
- Shaking
- Staring into the distance
- Becoming disconnected from present conversation, losing focus
- Inability to concentrate or respond to instructions
- Inability to speak
- May have gaps in memory

(Source: Poole, N., et al. (2013). *Trauma Informed Practice Guide*.)

## Triggers Can Reactivate Trauma

Neurobiological changes caused by trauma can result in triggers. A trigger refers to seemingly neutral instances (stimuli) that lead to re-experiencing the traumatic event. In the moment, a trigger recreates past traumatic experiences so that potential threats are perceived as real and immediate. When triggered, even well-intentioned actions by others can result in re-traumatization. Commands, communication of blame, shame or judgement, touches, sounds, smells, or other stimuli can remind a person of early trauma and trigger an emotional or physical response of freeze, fight, or flight.



# Grounding Activities

Grounding activities can be used before, during, or after a distressing incident. The purpose of grounding is to keep or bring a person into the present in their mind and body. Grounding activities can also assist with calming yourself and someone you are trying to help.

Grounding activities involve engaging with one's senses whether through words, movement, or physical sensations (e.g., positive and soothing self-talk; look outside and count the number of trees, birds, and/or signs you can see; or running cool water over your hands while noticing the smell of the soap).

Below are six (6) techniques that you can quickly use in the here and now, from the Lancashire & South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust (with minor northern adaptations), to help you, a client or colleague.

## The 5,4,3,2,1 technique

- Name 5 things you can see in the room with you (e.g., chair, painting)
- Name 4 things you can feel (e.g., my feet on the floor, cool air on my skin)
- Name 3 things you can hear right now (e.g., people talking outside)
- Name 2 things you can smell right now (e.g., toast, perfume)
- Name 1 good thing about yourself (e.g., I am strong)

## Touch and describe an object

- Find an object around you, for example, a cushion, backpack/handbag, water bottle.
- Try to describe it as if you are explaining it to someone who has never seen it before.
- For example:
  - "This is a cushion; it is a square shape with a red and purple pattern of stripes ... it feels soft with some hard ridges around the corners"
- Repeat until you feel calm.

## Memory Game

- When you are feeling stressed/anxious and you need to try to reorient yourself to the present moment, using declarative memory can help with this.
- For example:
  - Name as many types of birds or dog breeds that you can.
  - How many communities have you visited?
  - Repeat the alphabet backwards

## Say your Mantra

- When you are not in a stressed, agitated, or anxious state, it can be helpful to develop a list of personal mantras or affirmations that help you when you become panicked or disoriented.
- Write them down somewhere (on your phone or in a notebook) and keep them easily accessible.
- For example:
  - I am safe, I am here in the present moment.
  - This feeling will pass, nothing bad is happening right now.
  - I can handle these emotions, I am strong.

**Note:** mantras can be used for various purposes to help regulate emotions – in preparation, in the moment, and for calming after an incident.

**Tip for staff:** mantras can be used to affirm commitments such as a commitment to remaining calm and/or respectful. For example, your mantra may sound like,

- No matter what, I will remain calm, I will not let my emotions determine my actions.
- I will speak calmly and respectfully. I will not raise my voice or say anything hurtful or inappropriate.
- Stay calm, do not react.
- Feel free to repeat your mantra as many times as needed

## Square Breathing

- Getting your breathing under control can be hugely effective in reducing stress and anxiety. Square breathing is a simple way to refocus your attention to your breath and the present moment.
- With your index finger, slowly trace the shape of a square in front of you, keeping your eyes on that finger.
- With one side, breathe in for 3 seconds...
- With the next side, hold your breath for 1 second...
- With the third side, breathe out for 3 seconds...
- With the final side, hold for 1 second...

**Note:** there are many different breathing exercises that can help ground an individual. Breathing exercises are a common form of emotional regulation and means of promoting a sense of calm. A quick search online will identify many options, such as counting breathing, cycle breathing, breathing combined with a calming phrase, breathing deeply to a count or words, and more.

## Self-Soothe Box

For your clients or for yourself – at work or at home (contents are likely to vary)

- It's recommended to have a range of sensory things and something to focus your mind on. You could include something to smell, to touch, to look at and maybe even something to taste.
- Touch – Stress/fidget toys, smooth stones, playdough, soft fabric, yarn, etc. This serves as a good distraction for your hands and can encourage your muscles to relax.
- Smell – Peppermint for grounding, and lavender, rose, or chamomile for relaxation. Go with smells that you find comforting.
- Taste – Mints, chocolate, gum. (Drinking water can be soothing as it engages the senses, and you can use it to regulate your breathing. It is also important to stay hydrated.)
- Music – Identify/write down calming songs that are personal to you. Create a playlist of music you find calming and listen to it when you need or want to.
- Memories – Nostalgic items or photos of people or places with positive memories linked to them.
- Positive Affirmation/Quote Cards/Posters and/or Breathing/Calm Techniques Cards/Posters
- Activity – Having an activity to complete can really help you self-soothe, for example, knitting, beading, carving, drawing/painting, colouring sheets, and reading.

## Trauma Crash Kit

Many workplaces that provide support services to people experiencing various forms of violence, whether interpersonal or systemic, recognize that the people they interact with on a regular basis are often in a heightened state from trauma. This idea of a “trauma crash kit” was developed at a shelter for women experiencing homelessness who would frequently arrive very agitated.

The kit was simply a **basket containing several objects** including smooth stones, stress balls, paper fans, soft hand size pieces of flannel, braids of sweetgrass, sage bundles, herbal tea packets, small vials of soothing aromatherapy, little chocolates, peppermints, gum, a deck of grounding cards, etc.

People could choose something from the kit to support them to feel safe, grounded, and regulated. Whatever would work for them in that moment.

Women would also suggest, and sometimes add, something to the basket to help other woman in the future.

The basket became a valuable trauma tool that everyone participated in.

# Personal Reflections

## A SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

**Pro tip:** We encourage you to write out responses to these reflective prompts rather than merely reading and thinking about them.

### 1. Actioning trauma and violence-informed principles

- Do you think you are already trauma and violence-informed? How do you know?

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- How does actioning trauma and violence-informed principles feel to you? Do you need more clarity or direction? How will you get it?

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### 2. Gender and Trauma

- How have your parents, family members, classmates/peers, and romantic interests influenced your beliefs about gender?

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- If you did not behave according to gender expectations/roles, were there any consequences?

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- Do you expect men and women to behave in certain “proper” ways? How do you react when they don’t?

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- When someone calls you out regarding potentially harmful behaviours towards 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, do you feel compelled to quickly defend yourself and your intentions? Why is that? What are you hoping to communicate with this?

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- How do I feel about being asked to use or corrected to use non-binary pronouns (they/them, etc.)?

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### 3. Race and Trauma

- Do you have intrusive thoughts and memories of similar events as those you hear from your clients within your family, friends, or home communities?

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- Are you having physical reactions to something that reminds you of your own traumatic events?

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- Do you want to avoid people who are of a different race than you?

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### 4. Cultural humility

- Think of your own heritage – how do you define a good person or a good family?

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- Do you expect others of a similar background to feel the same way?

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- Would you judge them if they came from your home community but believed differently?

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- Are you comfortable with not knowing, able to accept that you cannot master another culture?

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- Have you committed to lifelong learning about the many cultures in your community?

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## 5. Communication

- What words have you used that have become emotional triggers for your client (s)?

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- What have you replaced these words with?

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- What are your psychological (cognitive and emotional) trigger words and phrases?

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- How will you manage your response when you hear them?

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## 6. Serving “difficult” clients

- How have you responded to “difficult clients” in the past?

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- What is your go-to response when faced with people externalizing their crisis?

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- Does it work for them? If not, are there changes you can make?

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## 7. Safe and supportive environments

- Does your physical work environment support or negatively impact your client's experience? If so, how?

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- What can or should you change?

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- How will you address things that you can not change?

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## 8. Collaboration and compassion

- How can you be more present with the people you encounter every day?

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- How can you bring more authenticity to your interactions?

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- Where can you be more collaborative with clients and colleagues?

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- What of your own experiences and history informs your work? Does it help or hinder you?

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- What do you keep trying to do that is impossible? Why do you keep trying to do it? Can you let go?

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## 9. Empathy

- What are the stigmas and biases you carry? How do you reach past them?

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- How do you define empathy? How is it different from sympathy/pity?

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- What role has empathy played in your life? Think about a situation where you have experience empathy or witnessed empathy. How did it make you feel?

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- Do you try to incorporate empathy into your everyday life? How do you do this?

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## 10. Trauma Exposures Responses

- How do you feel and respond to what you are exposed to in your work?

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- How do you decide when it is too much?

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- What can you do to recenter and/or ground yourself?

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- What are you doing right now to stay healthy and whole in your work?

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## 11. Personal health and wellness

- What have you done in the past to let go of your day? Was it healthy?

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- What can you do more of to be more mindful?

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- What can you minimize to be more mindful?

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- Do you practice the basics of personal health and wellness: good nutrition, adequate sleep, and regular exercise as well as social connections? Mindfulness activities?

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- Do you think that your self-care and wellness strategy is adequate and effective?

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## 12. Personal Resilience

- What are some of your resiliency life lessons?

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- How do they shape how you face adversity and/or challenges today?

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- How did you turn your experiences into lessons and opportunities for personal growth?

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- What can I do to increase my awareness of my own thoughts and feelings? What can I do to develop my emotional intelligence and agility and the associated ability to regulate my emotions?

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- What lessons do you need to learn today?

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- What did you want to happen today?

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- What went well? What did not go the way you intended?

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- What did you learn? What will you do differently next time?

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- What do you need to let go of to be able to move on – to ensure you don't become stuck?

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# Practice analysis

## PUTTING TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE- INFORMED PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

Meet Jane and Marie. Read their stories and identify if there is implicit bias in the way they are described. Reflect on how you might re-tell each story to change the language.

What might services providers do to support them, using trauma and violence-informed approaches?

Two sample analysis are on the next two pages to show one person's ideas and possible rewrites. You might see other elements and interpret the stories in other ways.

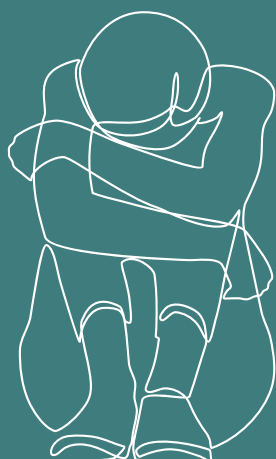


## JANE

Jane is 26-year-old woman with developmental disabilities. Since discharge from her group home three years ago, she has had a series of unsuccessful housing placements followed by periods of homelessness. Jane is well known to shelter and services because of difficult relationships she chooses to be in. Jane is “hard to serve” because of her non-compliant behaviours and very poor hygiene. As a result, Jane has been banned from some services and the homeless shelter. Jane does not have a family support system. Jane is back in the women’s shelter refusing to shower or change her clothes.

IMPLICIT BIAS		CHANGE THE LANGUAGE	TVI PRINOPLES
“ <b>unsuccessful housing placements</b> ” suggest that Jane is to blame when homeless	←	Jane has not been able to secure housing and has had homelessness	There is a reason for Jane’s behaviour
“ <b>difficult relationships she choose to be in</b> ” implies that it is her fault she is in a difficult relationship	←	She has experienced some difficult relationships	Ask how to make it safer for her
“ <b>hard to serve</b> ” suggests it is her fault she has trouble accessing services and that she had to be “banned”	←	Services are not meeting her needs	Spend time connecting
“ <b>non-compliant</b> ” she won’t do what we want her to do	←	We have not yet figured out how to help her	Give her options and listen carefully
“ <b>refuding to shower or change her clothes</b> ” Jane is a problem for the shelter	←	We want to understand what she is trying to tell us	Recognize the strength it took her to get to you





## MARIE

Marie is a 32 year old woman who relocated from Cameroon to a more isolated NWT community several years ago with her then partner who was working for a local contractor. Her first language is French. Marie is very withdrawn, will not meet shelter worker eyes, and is evasive of any questioning. She does not connect with other women and seems to not be eating. Shelter staff feel she is unappreciative of their efforts to engage her and tend to leave her on her own. Marie's time in the shelter is coming to an end soon.

IMPLICIT BIAS		CHANGE THE LANGUAGE	TVI PRINCIPLES
<b>"Is withdrawn and will not meet shelter workers"</b> suggests that Marie is uncooperative	←	Shelter staff haven't connected with Marie yet	Welcome Marie who is so far from home
<b>"is evasive of any questioning"</b> Implies she is not being honest	←	Language may be an issue or she may not fully trust us	Find an interpreter who speaks French
<b>"does not connect and isn't eating"</b> Implies she is not friendly or social	←	Marie is far from home and her language	Spend time connecting
<b>"unappreciative of their efforts"</b> suggests resentment of her by shelter staff	←	Staff are not sure if they have been helpful	Ask what food she likes
<b>"Marie's time in shelter is coming to an end soon"</b> sounds like "good riddance"	←	Staff are working to put next steps into place with Marie	Recognize the strength it took her to get to you

## TOP THINGS

# ANY SERVICE PROVIDER CAN DO TO SUPPORT PEOPLE EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

Usually you do not know if a person has a history of or is currently experiencing violence. Trauma-and-violence informed service is an appropriate approach to use whether or not you know. Good service does not require a disclosure of such experience; the goal is safety for all.

### Signs that a person may be experiencing violence

Injuries | Mental health symptoms | Alcohol/drug misuse | Financial strain | Recent separation |

Client cancels visits, uses health services more frequently, or defers to a partner in visit |

Partner or parent is always present; answers for client.

## FOR ALL PEOPLE

- A Assume** – that the majority of clients will have a history of trauma/violence of some form and that any client may be currently experiencing abuse.
- B Be Alert** – for signs that a person is currently experiencing trauma/violence.
- C Create** – psychologically and physically safer environments for all clients and service providers; care for all that is suitable for those who have experiences of trauma/violence.
- D Demonstrate knowledge** – that mental health issues and substance use issues are often connected to histories of violence, and that events such as pregnancy may be a time when violence begins or escalates.
- E Engage** – respectfully with all.
- F Foster opportunities** – for choice and control by clients.

## FOR THOSE WHO MAY HAVE OR ARE CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

- L** **Listen** – Listen to the person closely, with empathy and without judging; be alert to the signs suggesting they are experiencing violence.  
*“That sounds terrible”*
- I** **Inquire about needs and concerns** – Assess and respond to their various needs and concerns e.g. emotional, physical, social, and practical (e.g. childcare).
- V** **Validate** – Show them that you understand and believe their EXPERIENCE. If they disclose violence, assure them that they are not to blame. *“You have really survived a lot” “No one deserves...”*
- E** **Enhance Safety** – Discuss a plan to protect themselves from further harm if violence occurs again. *“I’m really concerned about your safety” “I’d like to help you make a safety plan”*
- S** **Support** – Support them by helping them connect to information, services, and social support. *“Would it be OK if I got us some advice from...?”*

## FOR YOURSELF

Examine your own **privileges and assumptions** – e.g., education, position, power, wealth, experiences of violence.

Learn about **mental health and wellness effects** of violence, risk assessment, and safety planning.

## WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION

**Challenge language that objectifies, judges or blames.**

Use “woman”, “man”, “people” (instead of “battered woman”, “abuser”, “IDU”, “at risk”)

Switch “she doesn’t want help” → “our help isn’t meeting her needs”

Switch “non-compliant client” → “unsuitable care”

**Design and tailor services support and empower.**

E.g. evaluate routine intake procedures and practices, cancellation and policies, waiting spaces

**Contribute to organizational conditions to support good service**

E.g. provider/client ratios; policies, culture

Adapted from EQUIP Health Care. To learn more, please visit [www.equiphealthcare.ca](http://www.equiphealthcare.ca)

References:

Varcoe, C. (2014). Interpersonal violence assessment. In A.J. Browne, J. MacDonald-Jenkins, & M. Lucktar-Flude (Eds.). Physical Examination and Health Assessment by C. Jarvis (2nd Canadian Edition. Pp. 120-137). Toronto: Elsevier

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# Gender Sensitivity

## COMMUNICATION TIPS

Here is sample language for when you have to talk to your clients about gender:

- I am going to ask you for some personal information about your identities. I want to learn more about who you are, and I want to make sure that I am respecting you whenever we meet.
- I am asking these questions without anyone else in the room to give you a private and confidential space to share any information about your identities and experiences that you want to share with me.
- The information you share with me is confidential, unless I think your safety or the safety of someone else is at risk.
- Sometimes clients have thoughts or questions about this process. Do you have any questions about what I've discussed so far?
- Some of these concepts or terms are new. Please ask me questions about the words I'm using, what I'm asking, or why I'm asking. Language is constantly changing, so please share whichever words work best for you, even if they're not listed as an answer to my questions.
- You may also feel uncomfortable sharing this information, especially if you have never shared this information about yourself before. You do not have to answer any question you are not comfortable answering, and you do not have to share any information you wish to keep to yourself.

(Adapted from Barba et al. (2021). Identifying the Intersection of Trauma and Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Part I and II: The Screener.)

Some additional sample language for when you first meet a client:

### 1. What name should I use for you

- If someone identifies a name that differs from their intake documentation or the name that is used on their ID, consider asking the following questions:
- Is there anyone you would like me not to use this name around? What name should I use around them?
- Would you like me to talk to other staff at this organization to let them know they should use this name?
- Are you comfortable with me writing this name in your records, where other people might see it?

### 2. What are your pronouns?

- I'm going to list some commonly used pronouns. You can choose from these options or tell me the pronouns you feel best describe you. You can choose more than one.
- If someone does not understand what a pronoun is, you can ask, "Do you like being called he, she, they, or something else?" If someone still does not understand what a pronoun is, it can be helpful to provide an example: "If I were to leave the room you would say, 'She left the room.' She and her are my

pronouns. If you were to leave the room, how would you want people to refer to you?" He/Him, She/Her, They/Them, Ze/Zir/Hir, I'm not sure.

- If someone identifies pronouns that differ from their intake documentation, consider asking the following questions. Is there anyone you do not want me to use these pronouns around? What pronouns should I use around them? Would you like me to talk to other staff at this organization to let them know they should use these pronouns? Are you comfortable with me writing these pronouns in your records, where other people might see them?

This question is only necessary if the information is required by your organization.

### 3. What is your gender? What gender or genders do you identify with the most?

- If they do not understand the question, consider saying: I'm going to list some common gender identities. You can choose from these options or tell me the terms that best describe your gender. You can choose more than one. Reading through the options can often help clarify. Male, Female, Two Spirited, Agender, Gender Fluid, Gender Queer, Gender Expansive, Non-Binary, Trans Female, Trans Male, Questioning/Exploring, I'm not sure, prefer not to respond.



# Understanding and Building Empathy

**Empathy — understanding the thoughts and feelings of the people around us — is one of the most important and most trying parts of being human.**

**What exactly is empathy? If it doesn't come easy, can you develop more of it?**

Stanford psychology professor Jamil Zaki Ph.D., director of their Social Neuroscience Laboratory, says that empathy is a skill that has to be developed rather than something you are born with. “Empathy is a simple word for a complex idea,” he explains. “Research psychologists understand empathy as an umbrella term for multiple ways that we respond to other people’s emotions.”

It’s not just others that benefit from our empathy, we do too. People who experience empathy also tend to be less stressed and depressed, more satisfied with their lives, happier in their relationships, and more successful at work.

**There are three types of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and empathic concern or compassion.** To unpack these types, imagine that you’re having lunch with a friend when they get a phone call. You don’t know who they’re talking to, but at some point, your friend starts to cry.

As you see your friend break down, you might start to feel lousy yourself. Taking on their feelings is emotional empathy. It’s that vicarious sharing of what someone else is going through. You also might try to figure out what they’re feeling and why, and that’s cognitive empathy. If you’re a good friend, you probably care about what they’re going through and wish for them to feel better, and that’s empathic concern or compassion.

**Of course, empathy is not always possible nor is it always the wisest response.** You do not owe anyone your empathy. If you find yourself unable to empathize with a person or people who actively seek to destroy or disparage the group you’re in, for example, you are not a failure. In fact, empathy can sometimes run counter to justice and can sometimes give us tunnel vision, in wanting to help some people over others.

Nevertheless, as a service provider, you have a responsibility to cultivate empathy in the same way that you try to take care of your physical health.



## HERE, DR. ZAKI LAYS OUT FIVE EXERCISES TO HELP BUILD YOUR EMPATHY

(Adapted from *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*, Jamil Zaki Ph.D.)

### Exercise #1: Strengthen your internal resources

Think about something you're struggling with and how it makes you feel. Then imagine a friend coming to you with that same problem and how you'd respond to them. Doing this can highlight the chasm between the kindness we give to the people in our lives and the kindness (or lack of) that we show ourselves. You'll probably find a significant difference in how you'd treat your friend versus how you'd react to yourself.

High-achieving people often struggle to do this exercise.

Empathy has to start at home, you can't just give of yourself emotionally until there's nothing left. By building self-compassion, we are increasing our capacity for empathy.

### Exercise #2: Feeling spent? Spend kindness on others

At some point in your day, especially when you're stressed or feel like you don't have any spare energy, spend in some small way — whether it's in time, energy, or money — on someone in your life. Send a text message of support to someone who's having a hard time. When you're running errands, pick up your partner's favourite coffee. Carry an older neighbour's groceries in.

In an attempt to conserve energy for ourselves, we tend to turn inwards when under pressure. While it may seem counterintuitive, performing these tiny acts — especially at moments when we feel like we can't — can be energizing and enlivening. You may be happily surprised to find that when you give to others, you don't end up depleting yourself.

### Exercise #3: Disagree without debating

Have a conversation with someone you disagree with. Rather than debating or discussing the contentious issue, share your story of how you came to form your opinion and then listen to how they arrived at theirs.

This is likely to be the most uncomfortable of the exercises, but it's worth doing given our current social climate in which a person's ideology can be equated with their personality.

**Note:** Do not do this exercise with someone who harms or denigrates you or the group(s) you belong to.

The point of this activity is to show us that it's possible to disagree with another person without disliking them or seeing them as the enemy. Empathy does not mean condoning, but it can mean understanding.

#### Exercise #4:

#### Use technology to connect, not just to click and comment

For this exercise, think of how you currently use your phone and rethink how you might use it differently.

Try to be intentional about technology as a medium in which human connection can exist and which you can use to pursue that connection.

Many of us pick up our phones only to look up an hour later to realize we've spent the time doing a whole lot of aimless scrolling and clicking and not much else. For a few days, do an internal audit each time you catch yourself looking up from your phone. Take notice of how you feel, what (if anything) you've gained, and what you've retained. By asking yourself basic questions — "What am I thinking? Is this what I want to be doing? What do I feel right now?" — you have the chance to look at its impact on you and your well-being.

When you can, try to use your digital interactions as a chance to better connect with others. This could mean having more real-time interactions and conversations. Instead of just leaving an emoji on a friend's Instagram post, why not directly text or call them? One of the worst things you can do for your sense of human connection, is to lurk on various platforms and let anger and other negative feelings seep into you.

#### Exercise #5:

#### Praise empathy in others

Make it a habit to acknowledge empathic behaviour when you see it. For this exercise, take a moment in your meetings, whether online or in-person, to recognize the people on your team whenever they help others achieve their goals. A lot of our attention tends to go towards the loudest voices, which are not necessarily the kindest voices. When we notice the good around us, it balances our attention.

These exercises can become a lifelong practice. The more we cultivate our own empathy and encourage it in others, the more we contribute to a **culture of kindness**.

# Case Study of Trauma Exposure Responses

Tina has represented children in child welfare cases for seven years. She has over 150 clients on her caseload and spends most of her day in court. In the evening she works late, calling clients and foster parents and trying to prepare for the next court day. She typically is at the office until 6:30 or 7:00 pm every night, but she never feels caught up on her work. By the time she gets home, she has no energy to spend time with her own kids. After her kids are in bed, she will scarf down a bowl of cereal and have two glasses of wine to relax.

She recently was appointed to represent a teenager who is returning to foster care after her placement with a relative guardian broke down. The social worker's report stated the client was combative with her guardian and would not follow the rules of the house. The client was struggling in school and was at risk of being held back a grade. She had been placed in a group home.

When Tina met with the client at court, she did not have much time to talk. She asked the client how things were going at the group home. When the client said she was having problems with the staff and house rules, Tina snapped, "If you don't like the group home maybe you should have tried to work things out with your guardian." When the client said she wanted to stay in her previous school Tina said, "I can ask the judge about that, but why do you want to stay there when you are failing your classes?"

After court, when Tina got back to the office, she complained to her colleagues about teenagers messing up their placements.

## Reflection Questions

1. In what ways might Tina be experiencing trauma exposure response?
2. How is trauma exposure response impacting Tina's work?
3. How is trauma exposure response impacting Tina's personal life?
4. What are some ways Tina can address her trauma exposure response?
5. How could Tina increase her compassion satisfaction?
6. What are some ways Tina's manager or law office could support her?

# 12 Gentle Reminders for Self-Care and Wellness

We are living in uncertain times, and we work in a demanding sector with repeated exposure to trauma and even violence. All of this can easily compound the stress that we already feel from the nature and intensity of the work we do. Here are 12 gentle reminders for these stressful times.

1. There are no wrong or right feelings in times such as these; you may feel a myriad of feelings and be gentle with them. They will come up and stay - honour them, give them names, and breathe.
2. Notice how are you feeling; write it down, share it, or name it silently or out loud to yourself. We all process feelings differently.
3. Move your bodies in whatever way feels good and nourishing – walking, running, stretching, at the gym, or on the land – out in nature.
4. Feelings of stress and anxiety and ultimately of not “feeling safe” may stir conscious or unconscious memories of past times in your life when you didn’t feel safe. Notice it - name it – suspend judgement. All feelings are okay.
5. Anxiety likes to trick us into thinking that if we “have all the information” or “more information” that THEN we will alleviate our uncomfortable feelings, but really, they just make us feel more anxious. Notice when you need a break from talking about it, reading about it, etc.
6. Focus on anchors for yourself – routines that are based in connection with yourself or with others. Anchors can include your morning coffee/tea, calling a friend or family member on the way home from work, taking your pet for a walk, tending to your plants, etc.
7. Know that this feeling or worry about safety will exacerbate past feelings of not being safe for those that we work with as well.
8. Since most of us are living right now in the feeling part of our brain, it can be very difficult to access the thinking part. Remember to learn or teach, we must feel safe first.
9. Remember clients are ALWAYS listening, wondering, and ALWAYS asking two questions: Am I safe here? Am I wanted here? Help narrate discussions of this for your clients and for your own families.

10. Clients don't say "geeze I sense a lot of tension and things have changed and I am scared, sad, confused, worried." Instead, they demonstrate these thoughts and feelings with their behaviors. They melt down, they become demanding or argumentative. This is normal, while not fun, it is okay. They are just saying please someone **help organize** what's happening and see my feelings. By the way, we do the same; hence people arguing over shopping carts and toilet paper. So, apply this also to everyone you work with, your family, friends, neighbours, and yourself.
11. Breathe. First, remember to breathe and then explore different breathing exercises until you find the one that feels right for you.
12. Recite a mantra "It will all work out" "I can do hard things" "I am calm" "I am healthy" – whatever you can think of. The biggest reminder though is to allow space for your feelings and the feelings of those you are working with – no need "to do" but rather just be.

(Adapted from Leah Niezwaag, LCSW, IMH-E® Gentle Reminders.)



# Take Time to Reflect

## – A PRACTICE REFLECTION TOOL

### DEVELOP YOUR PRACTICE OF APPLYING TRAUMA-AND-VIOLENCE INFORMED PRINCIPLES

For too many of us, the workplace is a fast-paced, high-pressure environment with little time to just breathe. Professionals working in the gender-based violence sector are often dealing with high stakes and escalating situations, working with people and populations in which traumatization and violence are ongoing. Vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, burnout, moral distress, and secondary traumatic stress are all too common experiences for frontline service providers.

Individuals and organizations can take steps to reduce the harms that are caused by working in the gender-based violence sector. Integrating and applying trauma and violence-informed principles can help protect you and the people you serve from harm and re-traumatization.

#### The Power of Support

Human beings are incredibly resilient with even modest support. Every encounter in your day is an opportunity to practice trauma and violence-informed principles and to build your skills. Remaining calm, being present, and demonstrating respect, compassion, and nonjudgement can cut through even the most difficult situations to offer hope and support that is meaningful. You don't have to solve other people's situations. Instead, ground yourself in humility to "be with" others in solidarity with our shared humanity.

#### Becoming Trauma and Violence-Informed takes practice

As part of implementing trauma and violence-informed approaches, **take time to reflect** on different encounters throughout your day using the principles as a guide. Over time, the questions and reflection will become automatic, and you will find that you see the world through the trauma and violence-informed lens.

Reflect on specific encounters with survivors/clients. Take care to reflect critically for the purpose of learning and development, not to use the exercise to judge yourself or others harshly. Perfection is not the goal. Integrating trauma and violence-informed principles into your practice is a journey with ups and downs. The work is difficult and complex. Balance compassion for yourself with honesty and critical thinking.



**Questions that are outward-facing: seek to prevent harm and re-traumatization.**

**1. Build awareness and understanding of trauma, violence, and their impact on people's lives and behaviour**

- Were you honestly able to look past the behaviour or label the person came in with?

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- How did you do that? (Be concrete and specific - what did you do?)

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- Was there any point that you found yourself in judgement?

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- What was it?

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**2. Emphasize safety and trust**

- What did you do to create safety? (Be concrete and specific - what did you do?)

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- What did you do to deserve trust? (Be concrete and specific - what did you do?)

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- Were you aware of power dynamics that create "us and them" divisions?

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- Imagine how the person would describe the meeting/session when they left. What words might they use to describe it?

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3. Offer real choices through connection and collaboration

- Did you ask and then listen carefully for what the person wants?

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- Did you talk honestly about the services that are available?

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- Did you brainstorm options that support the person's expressed wants?

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4. Recognize and build people's strengths and resilience

- What strengths did you see in the person? If you did not see them in the moment, think about them now.

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- What did you do that was supportive?

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- Do you think the other person experienced it as support?

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5. Incorporate a people-centred perspective

- Did you practice humility – do you believe the other person is the expert of their life?

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- Were you able to let go of finding solutions for them?

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- Was there mutual regard and respect in the interaction?

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### Outward-facing exercise:

- Think about the meeting or session from the other person's perspective. How would you describe it if you were them?

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- What words would they use to describe their experience of you – with you? What do you think they left with?

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- From that perspective, what principles did you use? What do you want to further develop?

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### Questions that are inward-looking: your health and wellbeing are a priority.

1. Build awareness and understanding of trauma, violence, and their impact on people's lives and behaviour

- How are you feeling in this moment? What are you thinking?

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- Was there an encounter in your day that left you upset, hurt, drained, and/or angry? If so, where do you feel it in your body?

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- Does structural violence play into the encounter? If so, how?

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2. Emphasize safety and trust

- Did you feel safe in the encounter?

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- Do you feel supported in your workplace?

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### 3. Offer real choices through connection and collaboration

- What were your choices in the situation?

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- Who could support you?

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- Are you sufficiently aware of relevant community resources?

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### 4. Recognize and build people's strengths and resilience

- What do you feel good about in the encounter?

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- Did you give yourself time afterward to take a break, ground yourself, and/or debrief?

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- Do you practice self-care and actively foster resilience?

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### 5. Incorporate a people-centred perspective

- Did you feel respect, dignity, and safety in the encounter?

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- Do you get caught in thinking it's up to you to solve the problem?

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- Do you remember to take time to recognize the contribution you and your colleagues make in others' lives?

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### **Inward-looking exercise:**

Find words to describe how you are/how you were.

- Focus on your response, rather than the event.

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- Where does it sit in your body?

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- Say them out loud.

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- Write the descriptive words down to see them and think about what they are telling you.

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What steps can you take to support yourself?

- Suggestions can be found in the practical guide, see: Your self-care and wellness strategy

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