Trauma- and Violence-Informed Care (TVIC)

An Orientation Tool for Service Providers in the Homelessness Sector

What is trauma?

Trauma refers to both an experience and a response to that experience, and includes things such as child abuse and neglect, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and grief. It also includes experiencing natural disasters, wars, violence against a community, or trauma passed from one generation to the next such as Indigenous peoples' trauma from residential schools.[1,2] Trauma makes it hard for people to cope. Homelessness itself is traumatizing.

→ **Trauma and violence harm a person's mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing.**

→ **Trauma and violence physically change the brain and nervous system.**

What are common responses to trauma?

Trauma can cause a sense of helplessness and shame, anxiety and depression, terror and rage.[2] People who have experienced trauma and violence may act in ways that appear rude, hostile or aggressive.[3,4] It is important to ensure that those who may need help the most are not denied services.

→ **When someone seeks help, try to understand why they may be acting a certain way or struggling to cope.**

What is the role of substance use?

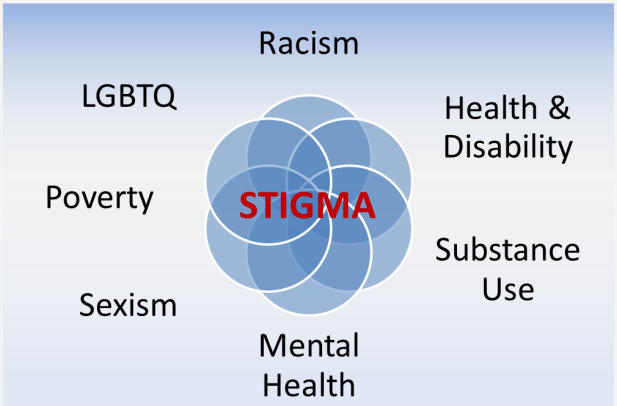
Problematic substance use is very common among people who have experienced trauma and violence. It can be a reason people are homeless, and can lead to more trauma and violence. People who use substances problematically can be treated poorly in society and face high levels of stigma.[5] Sometimes, they are not allowed to access the very services needed to be safe and to improve their lives. They may also avoid services because of the way they are treated. This is also traumatic.

→ **Substance use can be a way of coping with trauma.**

Root Causes of Homelessness

Every person's path to homelessness is different. While mental health issues, substance use, disability, or fleeing abuse may be a part of this story for some, the true causes of homelessness are the many factors that create barriers to people having stable housing. Root causes of homelessness such as racism, sexism, high levels of stigma, poverty, rising cost of living, and lack of employment and affordable housing can block people's way at every step.[5]

People who experience homelessness often experience multiple forms of stigma.



> *"I would like to be off these streets… you can't imagine how cold it's been… we use [drugs] to numb everything so time passes quickly…we don't want to know what's happening, we want silence, peace, death even."*[6]

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Trauma and Violence are Extremely Common For People Who Experience Homelessness

"I was burnt with cigarettes from [the time I was] three weeks old. I still have the scars across my body."[6]

75% *experienced trauma or violence as a child.*[7]

25% *of women reported domestic violence as a reason for homelessness.*[8]

24% *of adults aged 25-49 reported substance use as a reason for homelessness.*[8]

27-52% *experienced physical or sexual assault within the* ***past year.***[9]

"The violence I experienced from my stepfather and witnessed my mother go through from him made me very angry. I started using cannabis and alcohol from a young age."[6]

Most people experiencing homelessness have suffered multiple forms of trauma and violence, this includes being homeless.

Why TVIC?

- The goal of TVIC is to create safe, welcoming physical and socio-emotional environments and workspaces for all service users, staff and volunteers.
- A supportive environment means both service users and providers are encouraged to be involved in decisions that affect them. This also protects providers from experiencing vicarious trauma themselves.
- The focus of TVIC is on safety, trust, strengths and empowerment.
- TVIC principles can be practiced by anyone and does not require having counselling training, or knowing or discussing a person's history or experience of trauma or violence.
- It is critical to recognize how common trauma and violence are, the affect of these on people, and how ***structural violence*** makes life harder for some people.

→ **Because trauma is so common and because you don't know if someone has experienced trauma or violence, it is best to treat everyone in a safe and compassionate way.**

Structural violence refers to the harms caused by society that can disadvantage some people more than others. For example, discriminatory policies and racism within systems such as criminal justice, social assistance or child protection, can cause trauma and lead to mistrust of these systems.[10]

Unlocking the Doors

People who experience homelessness and/or use substances problematically experience judgement and discrimination everywhere they go. Sometimes when they try and use services they are not treated with empathy and respect, or they are turned away. This can stop them from getting the help they need such as medical care or safe shelter. It puts them at risk for more trauma and violence on the street.

Creating a welcoming space is the first step.

How to work in a

Trauma- and Violence-Informed Way

1

Create a welcoming environment

Display posters and signs to demonstrate that everyone belongs, and is respected.

Greet people with warmth, empathy and compassion - make them feel welcome.

Display local and meaningful art, chosen with service users.

Get feedback from service-users with a comment box or survey. Let people know that you are listening and that they are heard.

2

Emphasize safety and trust

- Safety is an important first step to building strong, trusting relationships. Help build positive and safe relationships by being open, consistent, and as predictable as possible.
- Be open to learning about people's lives and experiences and cultures. This will foster compassion and trust among service-providers, volunteers and service-users and promote physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural safety.[11]
- Because trauma often leaves people feeling like they have no control or choice, support people by offering choice whenever possible.
- Let people know that you care and they matter; positive change occurs in the context of authentic relationships.
- Aim to support colleagues to help manage job stress that may result in vicarious trauma, burnout and compassion fatigue from helping people who are dealing with trauma, violence and stress.

3

Adapt your language

The language we use creates our reality. The words we choose to describe things matter. The tone we use also matters. *How* we say something is as important as what we say.

- Avoid using labels when describing people and use people-first language such as “people who use substances”.
- Avoid making assumptions and be aware of stigma when talking to people about substance use.
- Consider language on forms and paperwork and ensure it is also respectful and not stigmatizing.

Instead of…

What drugs do you use?

Try…

Do you use any substances?

Instead of…

You’re back again.

Try…

Hello. It’s nice to see you again.

Instead of…

Battered woman, drug user, addict, alcoholic

Try…

Woman, man, people

4

Build on peoples’ strengths and resilience

- Take a strengths-based approach and recognize the opportunities, hope and solutions for each person instead of the problems, barriers and vulnerabilities.
- Identify each person’s unique strengths and capabilities that will help them find their path.
- Celebrate each person’s successes, and create opportunities to contribute to the community - it is essential to feel useful and valuable to ourselves, to others, and to our communities.
- Understand and validate what is important to the person - not to the ‘experts’ or to you.
- Value differences – everyone has a unique contribution to make.

5

Acknowledge the barriers people face

Try asking: How did they get to the service? Are they cold or wet? Have they eaten? Do they need to use the washroom? Assist with making people feel welcome and comfortable first whenever possible.

Offer help: What is required to access services? Are there forms and waiting lists that could be challenging? Do they need identification? Directly help with these requirements where you can.

Advocate: How might people be treated by a landlord, employer, at social assistance or by health care providers? What discrimination may they face because of ethnicity, gender, substance use, and/or mental health for example? Consider how you could help navigate those barriers.

Take a harm reduction approach

- This means focusing on reducing harms related to problematic substance use, and not necessarily on stopping or reducing substance use.
- While stopping use may be a goal a person makes for themselves at some stage, a first step is to accept people as they are and meet them where they are at.
- Treating people with compassion and respect helps them to get their other needs met to improve their health and wellbeing.
- Harm reduction policies, programs and practices protect those who use substances from harms associated with getting, possessing and using substances.
- Supervised injection sites, needle exchanges, safe housing, peer-support programs, managed alcohol programs, and safe ride programs are examples of harm reduction services.[12]

Does your organization take a harm reduction approach?

Does your organization have any harm reduction policies?
How are people 'under the influence' of substances treated? Are they refused help?
Are there supplies and spaces to help people use more safely?
Are people at risk of violence or arrest because of substance use or because they were refused service?

To learn more: EQUIP Harm Reduction Tool

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