

Five How-Tos of Trauma-Informed Practice

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What is trauma-informed advocacy?

Trauma-informed advocacy takes into account the impact of trauma on a client. Among other things, it means attending to a client's emotional and psychological needs in the context of your work.

Using these methods, we build stronger client relationships.

A more trusting relationship means better follow-through from clients, greater honesty, and more accountability on the client's side. And finally, it means we don't make things worse for our clients.

What is the first step to being trauma-informed?

Identify the role of trauma in your work with the client. Is it central to what you are trying to achieve, such as accessing services for a sexual assault survivor, so you must know about it to advocate for your client? Or is it secondary, like fighting an eviction, and you don't need to learn about it to provide assistance?

If it is not central to the work, advocates shouldn't attempt to uncover it; the focus is on preventing re-traumatization. Either way, you can provide supportive advocacy, prepare your client with the tenets below, and take into account the science of trauma in your work.

What does it mean to be trauma-informed?

According to the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#), an organization is trauma-informed if it:

1. **Realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;
2. **Recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system;
3. **Responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and
4. Seeks to **resist** re-traumatization actively.

The five how-tos of trauma-informed practice:



#1 Establish safety

- Consider the physical environment (e.g., the position of seating for clients and staff, address blind spots in your space, soft lighting that doesn't feel punitive or clinical)
- Be non-judgmental (Not "what's wrong with you," but "what happened to you?")
- Repeat safety assurances because people in a heightened state may not hear or remember well (e.g., confidentiality promises to clients, security for staff)
- Preview what will come: don't spring things on people, give a warning about tough conversations before having them
- Start with unconditional positive regard for your client: your underlying feelings will come across in your facial expressions, your tone, and your word choice



#2 Be collaborative

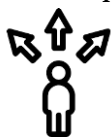
- Ask open-ended questions, allow space and time for the client to share their perspective and story
- Recognize the power imbalance between you and your client
- Frame services in terms of a partnership, identify client's goals and restate for their confirmation
- Reinforce client's autonomy often
- Acknowledge the client's perspective while guiding them to a possible solution (e.g., "I know the priority for us is X, and the route to addressing that is Y")
- Look to alternative sources to narrow down the facts ("can I talk to your doctor about this?")

- When a client seems to be making decisions against their own interest, start with “I’m worried” instead of “don’t do that”



#3 Be trustworthy and transparent

- Be predictable and consistent: follow through on your promises, avoid overpromising. Being realistic about what’s possible is essential to trust
- Establish clear boundaries at the outset, set expectations about communication (e.g., “you can call anytime, but I return voicemails between 9am-5pm”)
- When you fail, acknowledge it, apologize, explain (e.g., “I’m sorry I didn’t call you when I said I would – I had an emergency come up that needed my attention right then”)
- Don’t sugarcoat the situation: never say “at least” to someone who feels things can’t get worse. Empathy – not sympathy – is key (see [this video on empathy](#))



#4 Provide choice

- Provide options at the start of each conversation (“e.g., I have three items to talk about, they are X, Y, and Z – which should we talk about first?”)
- Identify multiple paths to get to the client’s goal
- Never say “you have to” – paternalism has no place in trauma-informed advocacy; instead, talk through likely consequences of all decisions in terms of client’s original goal and allow them to make a decision (e.g., “my role is to make sure you have all the information I have to make this decision, so let’s start with what happens if you decide X”).
- Preserve choice when the survival brain takes over: when client impulsively gives up on services, set a time to talk about it once more before ending the relationship



#5 Empower

- Find things to compliment and praise (e.g., “You did the right thing calling me as soon as you got that letter”)
- Celebrate the achievements of your client outside of your professional relationship (e.g., “Amazing job graduating high school!”)
- Ask “How did you do so well in the face of so many challenges?” and draw on those strengths when engaging the client
- Empower the client for future encounters with an issue – teach when to disagree, when to appeal, when to ask for a supervisor
- Provide the practical tools for success: folder for paperwork, pens, and paper for notetaking, mini calendar or phone calendar set-up

Learn more:

- Visit the [Illinois ACEs Response Collaborative’s website](#)
- Watch this webinar, [Trauma-Informed Advocacy: Practical Tools for Working with Vulnerable Populations](#)
- See [this blog on self-care](#) so that you can keep providing excellent services to your clients.

A version of this resource originally appeared on [Illinois Legal Aid Online](#)