

Trauma-Informed Practice Manual for Newcomer Services

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pchs
Leading With Conviction And Courage

Prepared by: Social Planning Council of Peel
Prepared for: Punjabi Community Health Services

Acknowledgements

Land Acknowledgement

The Social Planning Council of Peel (SPCP) would like to express their gratitude and respect for the privilege to work and live on the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River.

This land has been the home to Indigenous people for thousands of years.

As guests on this land, we acknowledge the impacts of colonization, including unequal access to opportunities. We acknowledge our roles in supporting activities and policies that contribute to the decolonization and production of information to voice social issues and improve the quality of life for individuals and communities.

We are committed to working in partnerships with the Indigenous communities to ensure this land acknowledgment is more than just words; it's a commitment to fostering respect, understanding, and reconciliation. We thank the Indigenous people of this land, and express our respect for their past, present, and future stewardship of this land.



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Introduction

As newcomers navigate the challenges of resettlement, PCHS employs a trauma-informed approach to deliver services that prioritize sensitivity, respect, and the prevention of re-traumatization. Recognizing that many individuals arrive in states of distress, this approach emphasizes understanding each client's unique experiences, thereby fostering empathy and promoting optimal outcomes for those rebuilding their lives.

Settlement workers play a crucial role in supporting newcomers, many of whom have experienced significant trauma. Understanding trauma-informed practices is essential for ensuring that services are delivered with sensitivity, respect, and a focus on minimizing re-traumatization. By recognizing the impact of trauma on clients, settlement workers can create safer, more supportive environments that foster trust, empowerment, and long-term well-being.

Newcomers include:

- Economic and business immigrants
- Family-sponsored immigrants
- International students
- Temporary foreign workers
- Permanent residents
- Refugees
- Asylum seekers



How to Use This Manual



Understanding trauma-informed practice is essential for settlement workers, as it enhances their ability to support newcomers effectively while also protecting their own well-being.

This trauma-informed training manual serves as a valuable resource for the following purposes:

- **Training**
 - Equipping new staff with foundational knowledge of trauma-informed care
 - Conducting workshops and refresher training to reinforce best practices
- **Learning & Professional Growth**
 - Increasing awareness of the impact of trauma on clients and staff
 - Encouraging self-reflection and use of assessment tools

Who is this Manual for?

This manual is designed for individuals and organizations that provide support to newcomers who may have experienced trauma. It is particularly relevant for those working in direct service, advocacy, and policy development to ensure trauma-sensitive approaches in their interactions and programs.

Intended Audience:

- **Frontline Support Workers** – Individuals assisting newcomers with housing, employment, healthcare, and legal services, often encountering stories of hardship and trauma.
- **Mental Health Professionals** – Counselors, therapists, and social workers who provide emotional and psychological support to newcomers processing trauma.
- **Educators and Community Leaders** – Teachers, mentors, and faith-based leaders working with individuals and families to foster integration and resilience.
- **Legal and Immigration Professionals** – Lawyers, paralegals, and immigration consultants supporting refugees and asylum seekers in emotionally charged situations.
- **Emergency and Crisis Responders** – Individuals in shelters, crisis centers, or outreach roles who support those facing domestic violence, homelessness, or other emergencies.
- **Translators and Cultural Mediators** – Professionals facilitating communication between service providers and newcomers, often hearing distressing personal accounts.



By using this guide, readers will gain practical tools to create safer, more inclusive environments, minimize re-traumatization, and empower individuals through a trauma-informed lens. This manual is designed for professionals, volunteers, and organizations working with newcomers who have experienced trauma.

Defining Trauma

As defined by the World Health Organization, ***"Trauma can result from experiencing or witnessing distressing events and can lead to significant disruptions in mental health, often contributing to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression."*** (WHO, 2022).

Types of Trauma

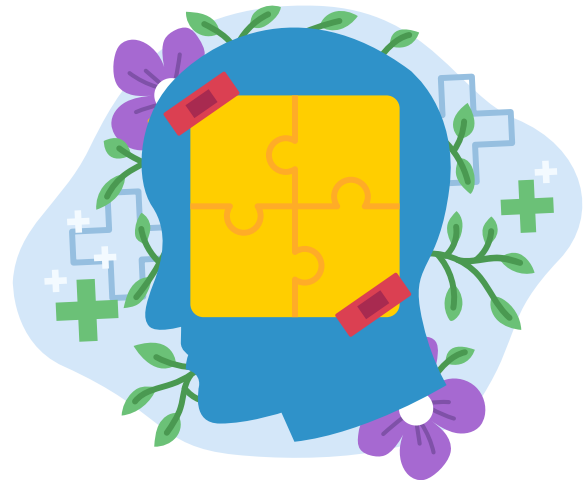
Trauma isn't one-size-fits-all. It shows up in different ways for different people and it is important to understand and acknowledge those differences. Some of the most common types of trauma include:

1. **Acute Trauma** – This type of trauma comes from a single overwhelming event, like an accident or an assault (NIMH, 2022).
2. **Chronic Trauma** – This develops over time, often from repeated stressors such as domestic violence, childhood neglect, or long-term illness..
3. **Complex Trauma** – This happens when someone experiences multiple, ongoing traumatic events, particularly during childhood. It can deeply affect a person's ability to trust and feel safe..
4. **Developmental Trauma** – Occurs when adverse experiences happen during critical developmental stages in childhood, impacting brain development, emotional regulation, and future relationships (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).
5. **Secondary or Vicarious Trauma** – Happens when individuals, such as healthcare workers or caregivers, experience emotional distress from exposure to other people's trauma.
6. **Historical Trauma** – Refers to the collective trauma experienced by a cultural, racial, or ethnic group over generations, often due to colonization, slavery, or systemic oppression.

Defining Trauma

7. **Intergenerational Trauma** – Trauma that is passed down through generations, affecting families long after the initial traumatic event occurred.

While these different types of trauma can manifest uniquely, they all share the potential to disrupt a person's emotional and physical well-being. Recognizing the various forms of trauma is crucial in understanding how deeply it can shape lives.



How Trauma Affects Us

Trauma doesn't just live in our minds—it's stored in our bodies, emotions, and behaviors. Some common effects include:

- **Emotional Struggles:** Feeling anxious, depressed, fearful, guilty, ashamed, or even emotionally numb.
- **Cognitive Challenges:** Intrusive thoughts, difficulty concentrating, flashbacks, or struggling with memory.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Trouble sleeping, chronic fatigue, headaches, stomach issues, and a racing heartbeat.
- **Behavioral Shifts:** Avoiding places or people, using substances to cope, withdrawing from loved ones, or engaging in self-harm.

Trauma and the brain



When we experience trauma, our brains go into survival mode. The amygdala (our fear center) becomes hyperactive, while the hippocampus (which helps process memories) can struggle to make sense of what happened. Meanwhile, the prefrontal cortex (responsible for reasoning and emotional control) may have trouble stepping in to calm things down (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). This is why traumatic memories can feel so vivid, overwhelming, and difficult to shake.

Importance of Trauma-Awareness

For individuals who are new to a country, trauma can be a significant but often invisible barrier to settling in and accessing support. Many newcomers have experienced displacement, war, persecution, or other distressing events before arriving in a new place. Without an awareness of trauma, service providers might misinterpret behaviors like withdrawal, fear, or difficulty communicating as reluctance or lack of engagement. Being trauma-informed means creating safe spaces, offering culturally sensitive support, and recognizing that healing takes time. When we approach newcomer clients with empathy and understanding, we can support individuals in the way they need to be supported.

Trauma in Newcomers

People who immigrate into a country are known as “newcomers,” whether it's for employment, refuge, education, or to change living conditions. However, this process of migration and the factors surrounding migration has led to Newcomers experiencing higher rates of trauma while being put at a disadvantage to seeking care. Newcomers can experience different types of trauma before, during, and after their migration. Many newcomers may have gone through political unrest, war, poverty, street violence, forced displacement, loss of property, loss of community, separation from family, abuse, neglect, poverty, destructive effects of climate change, and exposure to human rights violations (Im et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019). The migration itself is an unstable time and can leave people in a vulnerable position during the journey. This is especially true for refugees who have fled their country of origin out of fear of persecution or harm. Even once the migration to a new country has been completed, newcomers may face discrimination, marginalization, and barriers to resources (Sim et al., 2023). All of these factors contribute to the higher rates of trauma in this population. It is important to keep all these factors in mind when engaging with a client who has newly arrived into the country.



Canada has experienced a great influx of newcomers in recent years. Many of these newcomers are refugees who have come from conflict areas in the Middle East. This means that not only have they experienced traumatic events in their home countries, but may also face religious and racial discrimination in Canada (Sim et al., 2023). Due to this shift in Canada's population, it is important to understand how best to approach intervention and care for newcomers.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

According to a literature review report published by Public Health Ontario (PHO) in 2020, and based on ***The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study*** by Felitti et al, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic or stressful events occurring in the first 18 years of life. The list of commonly recognized ACEs includes:

1. emotional, physical or sexual abuse
2. emotional or physical neglect
3. growing up in a household with a parent or caregiver who uses alcohol or substances;
4. has a mental health problem
5. exposure to intimate partner violence
6. separation or divorce
7. criminal behaviour resulting in incarceration. (Carsley & Oei, 2020, P.02)

Why do we need to be aware of ACEs?

According to Felitti et al research published 1998, we need to be aware of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) because they have a strong and lasting impact on adult health and well-being. The study found a **dose-response relationship** between the number of ACEs a person experiences and the likelihood of developing¹ **serious health problems** later in life. And here's why:

ACEs Increase Health Risks:

- People with multiple ACEs have a higher risk of developing chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, diabetes, and liver disease.
- They are also more likely to engage in risky health behaviors like smoking, drug abuse, excessive alcohol consumption, and having multiple sexual partners.

ACEs Affect Mental Health:

- There is a strong connection between ACEs and depression, anxiety, suicide attempts, and other mental health disorders.
- The study found that people with four or more ACEs were 12 times more likely to attempt suicide than those with no ACEs.

ACEs Contribute to Social Problems:

- People who experience multiple ACEs are more likely to face relationship difficulties, lower educational achievement, unemployment, and involvement in criminal activity.
- ACEs can lead to intergenerational cycles of trauma, where abused children grow up to become parents who struggle to provide a healthy environment for their own children.

Early Intervention Can Prevent Long-Term Harm:

- Understanding ACEs allows for early identification and support for at-risk children and families.
- Programs like home visitation for new parents, mental health support, and education on healthy coping strategies can reduce the negative impact of ACEs.

Health Professionals Can Improve Treatment Approaches:

- Many adult health problems may be rooted in childhood trauma, yet traditional medical care often does not address these underlying causes.
- Raising awareness about ACEs can help doctors, social workers, and policymakers create better prevention and intervention programs to support long-term health and well-being.

Being aware of ACEs helps us understand the deep connection between childhood trauma and adult health. By recognizing and addressing these experiences early, we can improve physical and mental health outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and break the cycle of trauma across generations.

Who needs to know about ACEs?

Comprehensive strategies are needed to identify and intervene with children and families who are at risk for these adverse experiences and their related outcomes. Such strategies should include increased communication between and among those involved in



- family practice
- internal medicine
- nursing
- social work
- pediatrics
- emergency medicine

ACEs in the newcomers' communities

In the systematic review published by Abdelhamid et al. in 2024, it was identified that 103 ACE questionnaires were used in studies involving children. Only 14 of these addressed adversities specific to refugee experiences, such as exposure to war or family separation.

The finding is concerning because it shows that most ACE questionnaires used in studies involving children do not account for specific refugee experiences, like war exposure or family separation, which are critical to understanding the challenges faced by refugee children. This gap may hinder effective support and intervention.

Another research made by Sim & Georgiades, 2022, Neighbourhood and family correlates of immigrant children's mental health: a population-based cross-sectional study in Canada, highlights that immigrant children are particularly vulnerable to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) due to socioeconomic hardship, neighborhood instability, and parental distress. Many live in low-income areas with higher social disorder, which can contribute to internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., aggression) problems. Parental trauma and distress further impact children's mental health, often exacerbating negative outcomes. However, strong positive parenting and residing in immigrant-dense communities can act as protective factors. The study emphasizes the need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive interventions to support immigrant families and mitigate the effects of ACEs on children.

Trauma Informed Approach

Trauma-Informed Practice is a strengths-based approach that recognizes and responds to the profound impact of trauma. It prioritizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for all individuals while empowering survivors to regain a sense of control in their lives.

A trauma-informed approach ensures that individuals receive care and support tailored to their experiences, fostering healing, and resilience.

Cultural Humility

Cultural humility is an essential framework in trauma-informed care that emphasizes ongoing self-reflection, openness, and a willingness to learn from clients rather than assuming cultural expertise (Jiswari & Arnold, 2018). For newcomers, this approach helps build trust and prevents retraumatization by respecting their cultural identities and experiences. Trauma often stems from both pre- and post-migration factors such as war, discrimination, and systemic barriers, all of which must be understood through a culturally sensitive lens (Ranjbar et al., 2020).

Incorporating cultural humility into service delivery includes hiring diverse staff, offering multilingual resources, and providing training in trauma-informed and culturally responsive care (Miller et al., 2019). When clients feel their culture is acknowledged and respected, they are more likely to engage in treatment (Canonico, 2021). This approach not only improves outcomes for newcomers but also reduces burnout and enhances the overall quality of care.

Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach in an Organization

Why Trauma-Informed Care is Important

Newcomers often arrive in a new country with the hope of safety and a better future, yet many carry the weight of past traumatic experiences. These can stem from war, forced displacement, persecution, or systemic oppression (Silove, Ventevogel, & Rees, 2017). Without a trauma-informed approach, service providers may inadvertently retraumatize individuals by failing to recognize the deep emotional and psychological wounds they carry. As mentioned before, trauma can manifest in different ways, such as hypervigilance, distrust of authority figures, or difficulty navigating complex systems. When organizations do not account for these factors, they risk misinterpreting behaviors and placing undue burdens on newcomers who are already vulnerable.

By implementing Trauma-informed Practices, organizations create environments that prioritize safety, trust, and empowerment. This involves training staff to recognize trauma responses, fostering culturally humble interactions, and offering support tailored to newcomers' unique experiences. Services, particularly those that play a role in the integration of newcomers, need to be built on a foundation of compassion and awareness.



Guidelines and Strategies to Implement Trauma Informed Care

Miller et al., (2019) has outlined some baselines and ideas for Trauma Informed care, or “clinical pearls” include:

Practice strengths based approach to care

It is important to acknowledge the strengths of the client as it promotes resiliency and can increase a person’s capacity to heal from trauma.

Foster a Safe and Trusting Environment

Create a welcoming, immigrant-friendly healthcare setting by promoting trust, respecting cultural values, and asking for consent before discussing sensitive topics.

Recognize and Address Trauma Holistically

Understand how trauma affects the brain and behavior, screen for trauma and related mental health conditions, and provide appropriate, culturally sensitive treatment.

Use a Two-Generational Approach

Consider the needs of both children and adults in immigrant families, acknowledging how trauma may affect each generation differently.

Know and Connect with Trusted Resources

Be familiar with reliable local services, including mental health, housing, and legal support, and refer clients only to organizations that provide culturally competent care.

Advocate Within and Beyond the Clinic

Support immigrant patients by advocating for their needs in healthcare and community systems and ensure you’re also caring for your own well-being.

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