

A Trauma-Informed Response to Sexual Violence and Harassment



Trauma affects the people who experience it in profound, but different, ways.

Understanding the many consequences and symptoms of trauma is essential to ensuring that, in addressing sexual violence and harassment, we do not inadvertently cause more harm to survivors.

We also need to recognize that the experience of trauma is widespread, including collective or ongoing traumas, such as colonialism, racism, ableism, transphobia or homophobia, and that the person who has caused harm may also be deeply affected by their past experience of trauma.

To truly move forward in healing, as individuals and communities, our response to sexual violence and harassment must always be trauma-informed. But what does that look like in practice?

Understanding the impacts of trauma

A traumatic event is an event “in which a person experiences something that is frightening and overwhelming, and that entails a sense of loss of control.”¹ People can experience the same event differently. Personality, previous events, personal resources, and social location all play a role in how we perceive events and our place in them, so one person may develop trauma from an event and another participant may not.

During the traumatic event, a person might experience fight, flight or freeze reflexes. These reflexive reactions are stronger than conscious thought and a survivor might not understand why they reacted the way they did. Trauma also affects the ability to form memories, which means that a survivor might not be able to tell one, coherent, complete story the first time they disclose an incident. More information may come out later or a person might be able to describe one part of the incident clearly and vividly, and have no memories or only scattered memories of everything around that moment.

Trauma can have physical, mental, and social repercussions. After the triggering event(s), an individual might be in a state of hypervigilance, or they might be lethargic and dissociative. They might try to minimize or deny what happened as a way of coping with it, or they may find themselves reliving the

¹ Dr. Lori Haskell and Dr. Melanie Randall. The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims, Report submitted to Justice Canada. 2019. https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/trauma/trauma_eng.pdf



event over and over again. They may seem irritable or extremely vulnerable. They may engage in compulsive behaviours to try and regain a sense of safety and control.

Cognitively, a survivor may have difficulty making decisions. They may be in a state of constant alarm, making it difficult for them to accurately assess people's intentions and the risks posed by certain decisions. They may engage in isolating or self-destructive behaviours. They may have difficulty trusting other people and try to distance themselves emotionally.

A trauma-informed approach

A trauma-informed approach is based on four pillars:

- Realizing the impact of trauma
- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma
- Responding in ways that are based on the knowledge of trauma
- Seeking to avoid retraumatization²

According to the Clinic Community Health Centre, "[T]he trauma-informed model replaces the labelling of clients or patients as being 'sick,' resistant or uncooperative with that of being affected by an 'injury.' Viewing trauma as an injury shifts the conversation from asking 'What is wrong with you?' to 'What has happened to you?'"

A trauma-informed approach seeks to provide a sense of safety, of choice and control, to the person who has experienced trauma. A trauma-informed approach acknowledges what the survivor has gone through, allows the survivor to decide what healing looks like, involves them in decision-making, and requires frequent check-ins to make sure their needs are being met.

A trauma-informed response in practice

RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES

Survivors of sexual violence and harassment often choose to share their story first with someone they feel comfortable with: a trusted professor or teaching assistant, support staff they see every day, a roommate or a friend. They may also come to their local union steward or executive member to disclose an incident.

Responding to disclosure in a trauma-informed manner is essential to ensuring that people feel comfortable seeking further help and support.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMSHA's concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. July 2014. https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf.



When someone discloses that they have experienced sexual violence or harassment, a trauma-informed response means:

- Expressing empathy and compassion: “I’m so sorry this happened to you. This must have been very difficult.”
- Being careful not to express judgment, to assign blame, or to suggest doubt in any way.
- Mirroring the language used by the survivor to describe what has happened.
- Asking questions for clarification when necessary, but not asking someone to recount more of their story than they are comfortable with.
- Providing information to allow the survivor to make an informed choice, while being careful not to pressure them into a certain response. “We have a Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office on campus. They can provide you with access to medical services and counselling. Would you like to contact them?”
- Asking the survivor about confidentiality, whom you may share information with, and how much information you may share.
- Clearly explaining what your responsibilities are when you do have an obligation to report information to the institution, to the police, or to a professional regulatory body.

SUPPORTING MEMBERS

The local union has a legal responsibility to provide support and represent members in good faith who are engaged in grievances, institutional investigations, or internal union processes that could result in disciplinary actions.

Providing support and representation in a trauma-informed manner means:

- Engaging with the person you are supporting in a compassionate, non-judgmental manner.
- Communicating openly and clearly, explaining the process, potential outcomes, and any delays or changes in the process.
- Making decisions collaboratively with the person you are supporting when it is possible, checking in to make sure they feel safe and supported.
- Making time for questions and concerns.





BARGAINING SUPPORTS

People who have experienced sexual violence and harassment are not the only ones who may experience trauma after an incident of sexual violence and harassment. First responders, bystanders, and employees who provide services to survivors may also experience trauma. Your local can ensure that all members who have experienced trauma due to sexual violence and harassment receive appropriate supports by including them in your collective agreement negotiations.

Such supports could include:

- Paid leave for survivors of gender-based violence to allow them to access counselling, medical supports, legal assistance, and other supports as necessary.
- Accommodations and mental health supports for those involved in responding to incidents of sexual violence and harassment. This could include critical incident leave: automatic paid time off for those involved in responding to a violent or traumatic incident on campus.
- Training for all staff on trauma-informed responses to sexual violence and harassment.

PREVENTING SECONDARY TRAUMA

The work of receiving disclosures and responding to sexual violence and harassment takes its toll. Your local union stewards or executive members – and particularly women in these roles – may receive multiple disclosures because of their position. They may spend months supporting a survivor or respondent through an institutional investigation or grievance procedure.

Workers can experience secondary or vicarious trauma, burnout or depression. This may manifest itself in many ways, including apathy, fatigue, growing cynicism or lack of compassion, irritability, anxiety, deliberate avoidance, or guilt.





There are practices that individuals can implement to help prevent the development of secondary trauma, including:

- Self-awareness and maintaining boundaries.
- Practicing good self-care, including adequate sleep and nutrition.
- Exercise and meditation.
- Debriefing with peers or a trained counselor.

But secondary trauma is not merely an individual problem, and local unions should adopt practices that prevent it for stewards, executives, and members who are involved in responding to sexual violence and harassment:

- Set the goal of being trauma-informed in all of your local union's work.
- Work collaboratively and pay attention to the distribution of workload.
- Make training and supports available to local executives and stewards.
- Learn to identify the signs of secondary trauma, and be ready to intervene quickly when necessary.

Where to find more information

[Trauma-Informed: The Trauma Toolkit](#) –
Klinik Community Health Centre

[Trauma-Informed Practice Guide](#) –
BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance
Use Planning Council

[The Institute on Trauma and Trauma-
Informed Care](#) – State University of New
York at Buffalo



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