

Trauma-Sensitive Strategies for Direct Service Staff

Make eye contact and be genuine. If someone has experienced a traumatic event in their past, it may take a while for them to feel safe and connected, or to trust someone right away.

Non-verbal communication (smiling, relaxed body language, etc.) goes a long way in terms of creating a safe space and making someone feel comfortable and open to accomplishing the work that needs to be done.

Provide reminders/follow up. Experiencing trauma can impact brain function in several ways, including executive functioning (paying attention, organizing and planning, initiating tasks and staying focused on them, regulating emotions, and self-monitoring/keeping track of what you are doing). Sending one letter may not be sufficient or effective in terms of communication for someone who has been through trauma and has trouble organizing/planning. A quick call to remind someone about an upcoming appointment or that paperwork is due could save time, energy, and hardship if it prevents a termination procedure for noncompliance.

Don't take it personally. We can learn to identify defensive behavior as a sign of trauma-reactive behavior, rather than a deliberate outburst. As previously mentioned, trauma can have impacts on the brain and can make emotional regulation very difficult (not to mention the impact of everyday stresses, which are exponentially greater for low-income households). Being mindful of trauma as a potential precipitating factor can help us focus on staying rationally detached and not taking the actions/behaviors of others personally.

Take breaks. Self-care is essential for any staff that work in trauma-exposed environments. Anyone who does direct human service is working in a trauma-exposed environment. Whether we experience trauma directly (witnessing a violent incident, being threatened, etc.), or vicariously (hearing about what happened to others), we are trauma-exposed. Find something that helps to relieve stress, whether it's taking a walk, making sure to eat lunch/drink plenty of water, going to yoga, talking to a therapist, listening to music, etc. Self-care is essential to prevent burn out in our work.

Practice cultural competence/promote racial and social equity. It's important to understand that our own point of view is not the only way. Being culturally competent means that we can work effectively with people from a variety of ethnic, cultural, economic, political, and religious backgrounds. It is being aware and respectful of others and the way they view the world. It means developing the skills necessary to identify our own false or negative beliefs/stereotypes and biases, and to be flexible and willing to change. Promoting racial and social equity means being aware of how the dominant society has historically oppressed underrepresented/minority groups, and consciously working within our systems to reverse this. We are One Fairfax, and all voices deserve a seat with equal weight at the table. Being culturally competent/promoting racial and social equity is necessary to avoid re-traumatization for those who have experienced discrimination; to do our jobs effectively; and to better serve our residents and our community.

Empower and provide choice whenever possible. Our systems and policies are sometimes set up in a way that inadvertently minimize client choice and individual strength, and emphasize a power differential that can be detrimental/damaging to those we serve. We should always seek to level the playing field and empower others by identifying and focusing on strengths rather than deficits; encouraging positive self-esteem/self-worth; and aiming to strengthen the experience of choice whenever we can. Each person's situation is unique and deserves an individualized approach. Belief in resilience, internal strength, and that a person is more than their circumstance can play a huge part in healing from previous trauma. We can promote this in multiple ways - even a small shift can have a big impact.

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Sources:

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