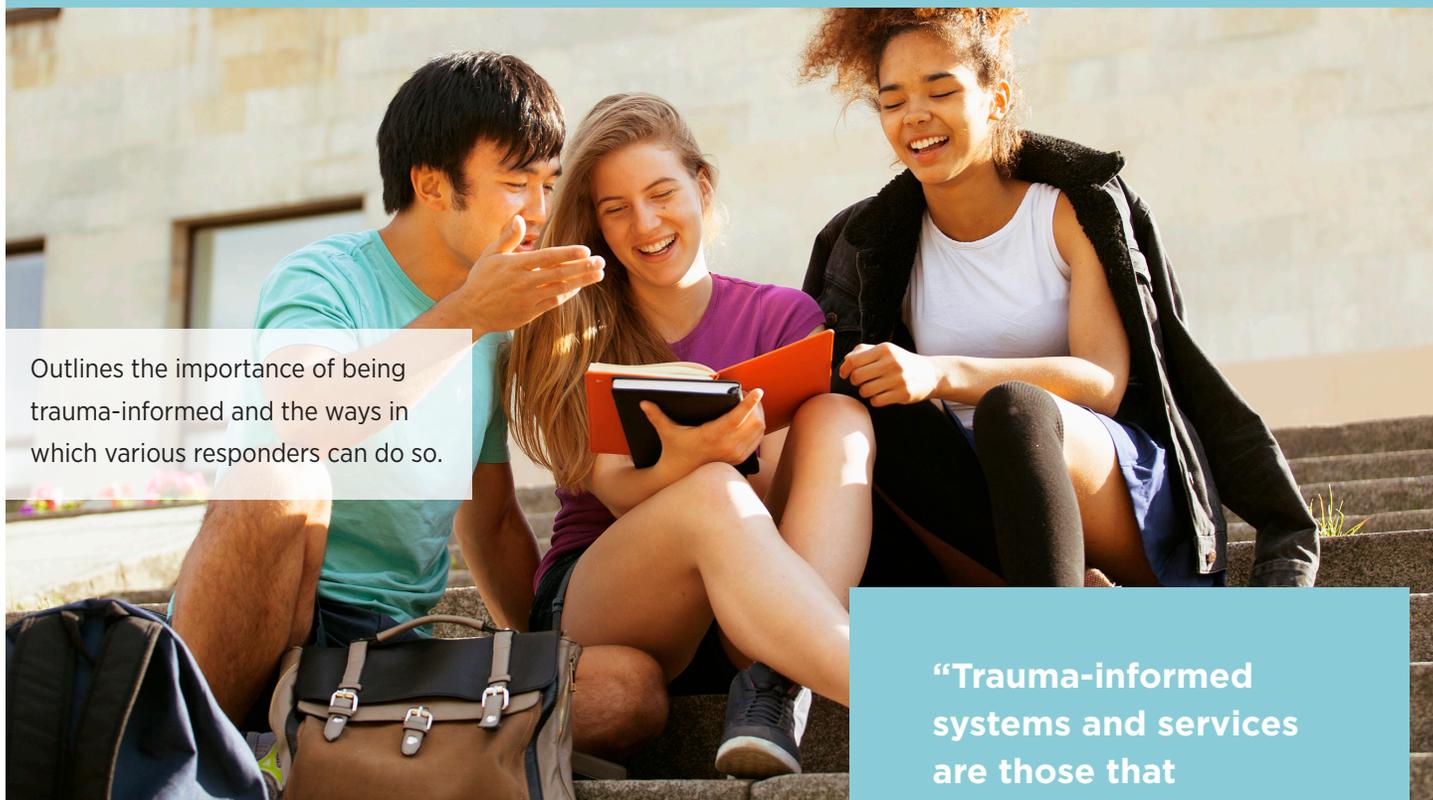


# UNPACKING ESSENTIAL C'S COMPETENCY: A Guide to Trauma-Informed Approaches



Outlines the importance of being trauma-informed and the ways in which various responders can do so.

**“Trauma-informed systems and services are those that have thoroughly incorporated an understanding of trauma, including its consequences and the conditions that enhance healing, in all aspects of service delivery.”<sup>1</sup>**

The trauma associated with experiencing gender-based violence can be pervasive, impacting every aspect of a complainant’s life.<sup>2</sup> Institutions that take the trauma into account when responding to gender-based violence are much more likely to help survivors on their path to recovery.

To be trauma-informed, one must understand the widespread impact of trauma, recognize its signs and symptoms, respond accordingly, and actively avoid re-traumatization.<sup>3</sup> This paradigm shift asks responders to move their frame of thinking, ceasing to ask “What is wrong with a person?” and instead inquiring “What happened to this person?”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, responders should stop assuming “I know what this person should do”, and instead ask themselves “How will I work with this person so he/she can make informed decision about his/her well-being?”

A trauma-informed approach can be implemented by anyone on a campus. It is different than the professional delivery of trauma-specific interventions or treatments designed specifically to address trauma consequences and facilitate healing,<sup>5</sup> both of which require credentials or in depth training. Instead, with some basic information about trauma-informed approaches, campus community members will be better prepared to support individual disclosures of gender-based violence or previously unreported trauma. This basic information will also help those who have a desire to be helpful or are situated to build caring relationships with students.

1 Roger D. Fallot, Ph.D. & Maxine Harris, Ph.D., *Trauma-Informed Approaches to Systems of Care*, Community Connections (Spring/Summer2008).  
2 Throughout most of the Toolkit, the term “complainant” is used versus “survivor.” In this document, survivor is used more frequently because the person who has experienced gender-based violence often does not come forward and is not known. The goal is not to always pursue a complaint. The goal is always helping a survivor.  
3 The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAMHSA’s Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach, website (last updated August 14, 2015) at <http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions>.  
4 Maxine Harris & Roger D. Fallot, eds, *Using Trauma Theory to Design Service Systems: New Directions for Mental Health Services*, (April 2001) ISBN: 978-0-7879-1438-7.  
5 Supra note 3 at Trauma-Informed Approach and Trauma-Specific Interventions.

## WHAT DOES THIS REALLY MEAN?

To reduce trauma, a complainant needs to be respected, informed, and involved in their own pathway to recovery.<sup>6</sup> Exposure to trauma can create new vulnerabilities and increases a range of pre-existing vulnerabilities. Trauma-informed responses are anchored in five principles:<sup>7</sup> safety, choice, empowerment, collaboration and trust.

These principles are essential, as they represent some of the most prominent things many survivors feel are taken away from them by the very act of gender-based violence. Responders should pay particular attention to these principles and incorporate them into their approach whenever possible. The following summaries provide guidance on the interconnection of the five principles central to the trauma-informed approach:

### Ensuring Physical and Emotional Safety

All responses should take into account the physical and emotional safety of a complainant by providing the complainant choices (see next principle) in deciding how best to facilitate that safety. Safety pertains to every aspect of the responder's interaction with the complainant, including the physical space (location and environment), the time, and type of communication (frequency and mode). Responses should be sufficiently flexible, allowing for modification when a complainant feels other strategies would increase safety. Responders should be cognizant of the trauma in all of their interactions, and seek alternate ways to minimize revictimization when they perceive signs of stress or discomfort.

### Maximizing Choice and Control

Whenever possible, people should have the autonomy to direct their own lives. Acts of gender-based violence should not remove that autonomy. Therefore, complainants should be offered real choices, free from coercion, in the aftermath of gender-based violence. Campus protocols should reflect this commitment to survivor autonomy. Complainants should be informed about their rights and available options, and provided with information about possible benefits and consequences of each option. Services and interim measures should be offered to a complainant without any contingencies. Responders should consider providing a complainant with options about meeting times and locations; asking about preferred method of contact; and inquiring about the preference of the gender of providers. In addition, responders should discuss with the complainant the individual's ability to start and stop services or interim measures. Responders can also bolster complainant autonomy by asking about preferred names and pronouns, inquiring about whether the complainant wants to attend specific meetings, and giving complainants the option of having a support person at all meetings and proceedings.

### Maximizing Collaboration and Sharing Power

Complainants are an integral part of any response to gender-based violence. They must be consulted about their goals and feelings throughout the entire process and whenever possible, have decision-making power. Though complainant decisions can be made collaboratively with campus stakeholders, a complainant's independent decisions should be upheld as often as possible. Responders should also collaborate with each other to maximize resources and reduce the number of burdens on the complainant.

### Prioritizing Empowerment and Skill-Building

Each individual has their own strengths and capabilities, and is ultimately the foremost expert on their own life. A complainant's strengths and capabilities should be fostered to help empower a complainant and build resilience. Campus stakeholders should not assume what a complainant wants, needs, or feels. Instead, it is important to ask complainants and believe their answers. Finally, responders should encourage complainants to give feedback about responses, affirm and validate complainant feelings and experiences, and use the feedback to implement changes.

### Maximizing Trustworthiness through Task Clarity, Consistency, and Interpersonal Boundaries

Trustworthiness is built through engaging in consistent practice, upholding boundaries, and communicating in a clear manner. There should not be an expectation by any responder that a complainant should automatically put trust in them. There are numerous reasons why that is not the case. However, campus stakeholders can begin to create a trustworthy environment by providing clear and consistent information about what will be done, by

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Supra* note 1.

whom, when, why, under what circumstances and with what goal. Transparency is important, and responders must be accurate and honest about possible outcomes, and must never make promises. Campus stakeholders should also maintain personal boundaries. For example they should refrain from sharing personal information, touching, exchanging personal phone numbers, and having contact outside of professional appointments.

## **BECOMING TRAUMA-INFORMED**

“Any human service program, regardless of its primary task, can become trauma-informed by making specific administrative and service-level modifications in practices, activities, and settings in order to be responsive to the needs and strengths of people with lived experience of trauma.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Commitment & Communication**

Stakeholders must not underestimate the critical need to educate the larger campus community about the need for, and focus on, trauma. Articles in alumni magazines and student newspapers, messages from the President’s office, letters to students and their parents, information including but not limited to during orientation sessions, and talking points developed by the communications department are just a few ways to begin communication.

Communication is meaningless if it is not supported by commitment. Commitment means there is both a financial and philosophical investment in ensuring that the campus is trauma-informed. Campuses should require through protocols that responders to gender-based violence be trauma-informed. Campuses should sponsor training, pay for responder education, and provide resources to responders that assist them to become trauma-informed directly in their role. Campuses should consider requiring specific training, work experience or certifications in trauma-informed treatment modalities for positions that would work directly with survivors in a support capacity.

### **Building Capacity**

The specific type, length and frequency of training required to utilize a consistent trauma-informed approach will vary depending on the stakeholder’s level of engagement with and responsibilities to the complainant or overall campus. The following recommended methods should be used to train individuals on trauma-informed approaches, at either basic or advanced levels:

- Develop or utilize existing short online modules accessible to the entire campus population.
- Create talking points and one-page guides for communicating directly with survivors/complainants.
- Create online, downloadable lists of on- and off-campus resources that can assist survivors of gender-based violence.
- Offer in-person trainings with experiential components, such as scenarios and role plays.
- Capitalize on the resources and training already developed by professional groups by identifying these training and resources, making them available on campus, or sending campus responders to attend. For example, there are courses on integrating trauma-informed approaches for law enforcement, advocates, medical and mental health professionals, and attorneys.<sup>9</sup>
- Create trauma-informed questions to be used by investigators.
- Post articles on best practices.
- Include descriptions of trauma-informed approaches in protocols.
- Include descriptions of trauma-informed approaches in proposals for new campus initiatives, activities, or funding.
- Connect with and participate in campaigns that focus on gender-based violence and trauma.
- Develop talking points for communications with the larger campus community and the media.

### **Addressing Challenges**

It is important to think about the challenges a campus may face in implementing a trauma-informed approach. Be prepared to think creatively about solutions to address these common challenges.

8 Supra note 1.

9 See, e.g., *End Violence Against Women International, Trauma Best Practices*, List of Resources at <http://www.evawintl.org/PAGEID19/Best-Practices/Resources/Trauma-Informed>. For more suggestions on trauma-informed resources, see the Online Resource Guide.

## General

- How to keep a campus community trained and informed when there is constant change and turnover.
- Stakeholders are unsure what, if any, role they could or should play in responding to gender-based violence.
- People are not comfortable discussing anything related to gender-based violence.
- How to incentivize training and trauma-informed responses.
- Understaffed campuses (especially for smaller campuses that may have only one or two people actively engaged in the response), and individuals finding it too time consuming to engage in training.

## Availability

- Difficult to access a variety of employment statuses, including full-time, part-time, tenured, seasonal, adjunct, contractor etc.
- Stakeholders feel overwhelmed with their current positions or caseloads. Responders do not want to take on anything new, let alone something that may attract more clients.
- Due to legal constraints (e.g., union contracts) training cannot be required without prior approval.

## Personal Belief Systems

- Individuals are tied to myths about how a “true” survivor should respond.
- Stakeholder fear of appearing biased. For example, someone may be in a position to interact with both a complainant and respondent, especially if both are part of the same diverse community (same racial or ethnic group, LGBTQI+, etc.) and feel that this could compromise that role.
- Some people may not understand or believe in the effectiveness of trauma-informed approaches. Others may not want to gain expertise in this area or feel it is not a priority. Still others believe they already are trauma-informed.
- Depending upon their position and role, a responder may be concerned that this approach could compromise confidentiality.
- Some may be distrustful of campus systems.



“BLAB IT” is an easy way to remember the key steps for supporting a survivor of gender-based violence. It was developed by the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center to help anyone respond if someone they knew disclosed gender-based violence. BLAB IT provides a trauma-informed response method, and moves responders away from the compliance-only mindset that hinders their ability to develop a more relationship-centered response. This response will likely help the complaint feel heard and supported, and potentially encourage them to become connected with other resources on campus or in the community. Below is a detailed explanation of BLAB IT. Remember, anyone can use BLAB IT.

### **B** BREATHE

Breathe deeply—We describe that as “connecting your head and heart.” So you are thinking logically, but emotionally intelligent.

Check in with yourself

### **L** LISTEN

Listen supportively and empathetically to the student—Ask clarifying questions, but avoid questions that start with “why?” These tend to come across as blaming and can shut down the conversation.

### **A** AFFIRM

Affirm, validate experience, normalize response—Given how diverse our potential responses to trauma are, any response can be seen as “normal.” Saying something like, “It makes sense you feel that way,” or, “I think a lot of people experience that,” can help normalize a reaction to a traumatic situation.

### **B** BELIEVE

Assure the student that you believe them—remember that a policy does not need to have been violated for someone to feel traumatized, we aren’t asking you to be investigator and judge in that moment.

### **I** INFORMATION

Create a supportive environment to gather appropriate information, if it is your role—especially if you are a mandated reporter. Inform stakeholders early and often about the role as responsible employees and mandated reporters.

### **T** TRAUMA-INFORMED SUPPORT

Make appropriate referrals for supportive services. Continue to validate, normalize and offer referrals for ongoing concerns.

Take care of yourself; these situations are difficult to handle, and you will need an outlet to access in the event you require emotional support yourself!

## THE WHO AND WHY

Institutions, both criminal justice and campus, can unintentionally exasperate or re-inflict trauma through approaches that do not account for the complainant's experiences.<sup>10</sup> Most campus stakeholders have an opportunity, if properly prepared, to interact with complainants in a trauma-informed manner. Beyond the primary responders, below are some examples of who should be ready to respond and what that interaction may look like.

### Groups that Potentially Have the Most Frequent Contact with Student Survivors

These individuals should know what to do if they receive a disclosure of gender-based violence.

#### 1. Other Students

Peers are most often the first person a survivor confides in and seeks support from. Student groups, student leaders, and the general student body should be prepared for such disclosures by knowing where to access information for survivors of gender-based violence, and encouraging survivors to seek assistance and other emotional support as needed.

#### 2. Environmental Services/Custodial Staff, and Food Services Staff

Individuals in the above referenced positions hold unique relationships with students, as they interact on a regular, sometimes daily basis. These interactions take place even on evenings and weekends, often in spaces that students occupy in a more comfortable, informal setting.

#### 3. Landlords

Landlords may also need to work with law enforcement or other stakeholders regarding an incident of gender-based violence, or assist in creating a safe living space for a complainant (e.g. upholding CPOs, letting a complainant out of their lease, etc.).

### Individuals and Groups that Have Influence on Changing Campus Culture

#### 1. Alumni

These individuals should understand that increased reporting of gender-based violence is indicative of trauma-informed protocols. Increased reporting is therefore a positive thing, not a poor reflection on their alma mater.

Alumni play a key role in partnering with the administration to discuss the impact of trauma-informed responses to gender-based violence on student retention and sustainment of alumni support. Alumni can use their connections to bring both attention and resources to the campus' effort. It may be helpful to provide alumni with talking points when speaking about their alma mater's proactive approach to gender-based violence. Alumni should also help promote a healthier campus culture through events, and support of new campus initiatives.

#### 2. Parents

Parents must be informed, starting at orientation and continuing through their child's enrollment, about the campus' dedication to responding to gender-based violence and the reasons behind doing so. Parents place their trust in the campus community to provide protection and care, and help their child achieve their educational goals.

Providing a culture of transparency helps parents better understand the campus' role in ending gender-based violence. Perhaps more importantly, campuses can help equip parents to respond in a trauma-informed manner if their child discloses victimization directly to them. Parents should understand (1) the issue of gender-based violence and why it is important; (2) what the campus will do if it receives a report of gender-based violence; and (3) how parents can work with the campus if their child is either a complainant or respondent.

#### 3. Public Relations, Marketing, Media and IT Departments

Persons in these departments are in a position to help communicate information about the existence and content of campus protocols and have an opportunity to infuse trauma-informed messages across multiple marketing and communications projects. These departments should create crisis communication plans to respond to media coverage of significant cases of gender-based violence.

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10 Supra note 5.

#### **4. Presidents, Provosts, Vice-Presidents, Boards of Trustees, Human Resources, General Counsel and Other Leadership**

These key individuals authorize campus-wide communications, approve protocol development and implementation, and allocate resources for addressing gender-based violence. As such, it is critical that these individuals be able to clearly explain the importance of addressing gender-based violence through trauma-informed protocols to other stakeholders, articulate the role and requirements of responsible employees, and enter into Memoranda of Understanding agreements with off-campus responders in order to provide a holistic response to complainants.

#### **Primary Responders to Gender-Based Violence**

Primary responders must go beyond recognizing trauma and understanding response protocols. Specifically, primary responders must find ways to incorporate the five principles into their role and work collaboratively to create holistic, culturally-relevant, and safe responses for individual complainants. Primary responders include:

- Hospitals & Health and Wellness Centers
- Community Rape Crisis and Domestic Violence Centers
- Alcohol or Other Drug and Mental Health Agencies
- Cultural Organizations
- Language Bank/Interpretation Services
- Campus Police
- Responsible Employees
- Campus Security Authorities
- Clergy
- Prosecutors
- Local Police
- Attorneys
- Title IX Staff
- On-Campus Advocates
- Complaint Resolution Decision-Makers

#### **When creating training materials and educational programs for first responders, campuses should consider integrating:**

- The five principles of trauma-informed care;
- Basic information regarding the dynamics and definitions of gender-based violence, including how specific populations are impacted and additional barriers that may exist within those populations;
- Information about the impact of trauma on individuals;
- Clarification on when, what, and to whom stakeholders need to report a disclosure of gender-based violence;
- Compassionate and non-judgmental language that minimizes revictimization;
- Information about on-campus and community-based support services<sup>11</sup>; and
- Recognition of the possibility for vicarious trauma and offering of self-care tips.

11 See, Appendix A, *A Safer Campus A Guidebook on Prevention and Response to Sexual & Intimate Partner Violence & Stalking for Ohio Campuses*, 2nd Edition, Sarah Osmer, JD (editor), in collaboration with OAESV, ODH and ODVN (2016).