

# Trauma Informed Care and the Workforce: An Introduction

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The term “trauma” carries significant weight, enough so that it can be misinterpreted as too extreme to describe most circumstances. People associate trauma with events like 9/11, the terror attacks in Boston and Paris, or the earthquake that devastated Nepal. Even though these events are traumatic and horrific on both a personal and national scale, the impact of other, more personal forms of trauma can transform communities and travel along the collective memory of generations.

Trauma, however, is more pervasive than previously understood. No matter how improbably big or seemingly arbitrary, studies are revealing that any event, which causes a sense of shattered normalcy - creating feelings of hypervigilance and avoidance - constitutes a traumatic event. Experiences of a traumatic nature can affect behavior and, in turn, cause issues in relationships, including those at the workplace. While individuals experiencing trauma are working toward recovery and developing a long-term trauma response, the altered contexts in which they operate their everyday lives must be taken into account to facilitate overall resilience.

A shift in perspective is currently sweeping the behavioral health sector. Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) is an understanding that behavioral issues displayed by individuals are not necessarily a result of what is wrong with them, but rather reflect what has happened during their lives.<sup>1</sup> TIC is redefining how to interact with disruptive behaviors by creating environments of safety, connection and management.

It remains imperative that those seeking to implement this change in perspective have a basic understanding of what trauma is.

### *What is Trauma?*

It is estimated that 70 percent of adults in the United States have been exposed to some form of traumatic event and/or experience within their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Trauma has been traditionally defined as an emotional response to a terrible event, but it can present itself in a variety of forms and for many reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.samhsa.gov/ntic/about>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ptsdalliance.org/about\\_what.html](http://www.ptsdalliance.org/about_what.html)

The multidimensional nature of trauma is what makes it so very intricate, and thus it requires a multidimensional approach to reflect on exposure to trauma, the response to that trauma, and ultimately reacting to and recovering from the experience.

- **Acute trauma** involves exposure to a single overwhelming event, e.g. the aforementioned attack on 9/11.
- **Complex trauma** involves multiple, chronic and prolonged events that are often interpersonal, e.g. domestic abuse.
- **Historical trauma** presents over a lifetime and can reach across generations, e.g. cycles of paternal abandonment, substance abuse or violent tendencies that pass from family member to family member.

### *What Does Trauma Do?*

Threatening experiences that affect the physical or emotional state of a person - or someone who is close to them - can compromise responsiveness and the ability to function in a normal social manner. Much of this is due to trauma's impact on the brain's ability to cope with future situations of a challenging nature. For example, portions of the brain such as the prefrontal lobe and amygdala can be altered in ways that foster an inability to express thoughts or regulate emotions, respectively.

Not only that, but short-term memory loss is common, as is a consistent sense of fear and extreme vigilance. Traumatized individuals may experience a chemical imbalance that causes brain cell activity to perpetually fluctuate between states of high and low activity.

There are a number of psychological and physical responses that can be monitored when determining whether or not trauma is playing a significant part in a person's behavior, including:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Fearfulness
- Compulsive and obsessive behaviors
- Feeling of no control
- Extreme vigilance
- Enhanced startle response
- Challenges with interrelationships
- Emotional numbness
- Avoidance, including withdrawal from normal routines and relationships

The type of trauma most are familiar with is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), commonly attributed to war veterans but applicable to the general population. Often a result of acute trauma, symptoms of PTSD can include repetitive nightmares or cue-triggered flashbacks. These symptoms cause an involuntary re-experience of terror and helplessness surrounding the traumatic event, wherein an individual will attempt to prioritize his or her safety.

Those with PTSD seek to avoid situations that could potentially prompt reactions and exhibit hyperarousal and hypervigilance, or an increased sense of their environment, the atmosphere and the people around them. Problems with concentration and focus, including the ability to think clearly, are not uncommon in those experiencing PTSD, and some will display an enhanced startle response.

Family, peers and coworkers may not always understand how their actions or communications can re-stimulate one's trauma. It is for the benefit of all that everyone be aware of the potential traumas in other peoples' lives and act accordingly in an effort to curtail the further impact of those traumas.

### *The Trauma-Informed Approach*

Approaching situations with a TIC mindset requires a shift in perspective. As mentioned earlier, do not ask what is wrong with an individual exhibiting behavioral issues; ask what has happened to that person.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association's (SAMHSA) Center for Mental Health Services' National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, TIC is based on an engagement approach that incorporates recognition of traumatic symptoms and histories in order to acknowledge the impact of trauma and its role in an individual's life.

Experiential context is the key to understanding and working alongside someone recuperating from a traumatic event. Studies show that trauma causes long-lasting, profound changes in a person's neurological, biological and social makeup.

TIC is an attempt to address trauma with a knowledgeable caution concerning past experiences, understanding that what might be considered unimportant to one person is a trigger for post-traumatic stress in another. Creating an environment in which traumatized individuals can operate in a safe and comfortable capacity will aid in their recovery.

Employers must always consider context when understanding challenging behavior in the workplace. To facilitate this process, SAMHSA offers six principles to keep in mind when building a TIC-based organization:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Empowerment, voice and choice
- Cultural, historical and gender issues

Embracing these principles and acknowledging the fact that trauma impacts all people regardless of ethnicity, culture, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. will allow the traumatized individual a sense of control and empowerment that can bolster the pathway to healing, as well as prepare employers for future challenges.

### *Applying TIC in the Workplace*

Whether in a residential health care setting or an accounting firm, the potential for complex employees whose personal traumas are affecting their work and behavior is not limited to the realm of mental health services. Trauma can impact everyone at any given time, and it is important for managers and staff to realize this when a peer begins exhibiting problematic behavior in the workplace.

Imagine for a moment that a coworker begins to show signs of irritability toward peers or clients, and that their day-to-day responsibilities start to suffer. It might be commonplace to describe this individual as “disrespectful,” “unprofessional” or “disconnected.”

A manager might believe the employee is unable to follow through on tasks, or shows a lack of dedication to the job. It is easier to implicate a personal failing for the worker’s behavior, rather than taking the time to truly examine the core issues.

Instead, a TIC approach can be utilized to resolve the problem. The key is to ensure an employee feels safe in their work environment.

A manager or human resources representative should approach the employee with the understanding that something has happened, either recently or in the past, that has since re-triggered a behavioral response. This basis of understanding will aid the disciplinary process as both the employee and the organization move forward together in a mutual, understanding capacity.

TIC tells us that someone in a state of trauma is making the only choices they have available. Therefore, managers can make different decisions when addressing employees with behavioral issues by establishing a different set of priorities based on history and context.

Unearthing the underlying causes for behavior shows respect; discipline out of hand can be met with aggression or, worse, a violent episode. Utilization of TIC can circumvent such events.

### *The FEI Difference*

All behavior is a form of communication between people, and if we can understand what the behavior means for the person experiencing it, we can better understand someone's needs.

FEI Behavioral Health will impart the skills necessary for leadership and the workforce to communicate in a positive and Trauma-Informed way, replacing the need for aggression and violence in employees with no other perceivable outlet. We are committed to helping organizations create and maintain a culture capable of understanding their employees in a manner with which to encourage resilience, while also providing the tools to help reduce the likelihood of violent episodes.

FEI has a 35-year history of providing Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to clients across multiple industries, including education, health care and residential organizations. A robust network of over 9,000 experienced counselors makes FEI one of the country's leading providers of EAP. In addition, FEI offers full-service work-life, wellness and crisis management services. We combine these efforts with those of our parent organization the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, which provides needed services to human serving institutions across the nation.

In 2014, FEI enhanced its suite of services by collaborating with The Mandt System to bring a train-the-trainer crisis interaction program to industries in need of new approaches to violence prevention practices. The Mandt System began developing violence prevention programs in 1975 to address the needs of mental health facilities.

Since then, their efforts have produced a program applicable within any agency or facility where aggressive or uncooperative behavior can occur. A significant focus is placed on TIC services with continual re-evaluation and updating of program content and technique to reflect emerging best practice.

This partnership will continue to grow as FEI combines its expertise in EAP with The Mandt System's thorough knowledge of TIC, providing consumers with a cost effective training program for creating a TIC-based work environment.

Together, FEI and Mandt will aid organizations in the creation of a comprehensive training approach paired with a wide range of tools for managing disruptive behavior. This proactive approach addresses behavior before it escalates, helping to reduce the risk of potential violence in the workplace.

*FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees' focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.*