

A VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACH

DEFINITIONS

WHAT IS A VICTIM CENTRED-APPROACH?

A victim-centred approach prioritises the needs and concerns of a victim above all else. It seeks to reduce the risk of re-victimisation and empowers survivors. It means acting without judgement and engaging with individuals compassionately.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma can be actuated as an emotional or even physical response to a triggering or traumatic event or experience. A traumatic event is typically outside the range of normal human experience that causes or threatens to cause psychological, emotional, or physical harm. An acute trauma response may occur following a single incident, like a car accident. On the other hand, a complex trauma response may follow repeated, prolonged exposure to danger, such as intrafamilial abuse or combat. Victims of trafficking typically experience exposure to ongoing trauma during their exploitation, which may impact their psychological, emotional, physical, behavioural, and social functioning. Trauma indicators may look different depending on the individual's personality traits and how far they are removed from exploitation. Trauma may result in a substance use disorder and multiple mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, a personality disorder, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and eating disorders.

WHAT IS TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE?

A victim-centred approach often requires incorporating trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed care acknowledges the physical and psychological impact of trauma on an individual and considers that trauma when interacting with the individual. This perspective on care seeks to promote a holistic approach to support. It accounts for the complexities involved with traumatic experiences and their impact on the individual. It also considers the complex repercussions of the individual's experience and seeks to minimise re-victimisation.

Indicators of Trauma

IMMEDIATE/SHORT-TERM INDICATORS	LONG-TERM INDICATORS
Confusion/inability to concentrate	Appears detached or withdrawn
Dizziness, nausea, or fainting	Suffers from nightmares or flashbacks
Numb and/or apathetic	Persistent fatigue ¹
False perception of time, e.g., things may feel like they are moving in slow motion	Depression or mood swings
Easily startled or anxious	Difficulty making decisions
Argumentative, hostile, or irritable	Dependency on drugs, alcohol, or toxic relationships

**This table does not represent all potential signs of trauma but is used to provide examples. (US Dept. of Health and Human Services, table 1.3-1, 2014).*

HOW DOES A VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACH APPLY TO TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS (TIP)?

Many victims of TIP have been abused whilst in exploitation and, as a result, may experience trauma or symptoms of trauma. TIP is one of the most lucrative criminal enterprises because victims can be exploited for profit in multiple ways over an extended period of time. As instances of trafficking can occur over short or long periods, this can influence victims' trauma. Moreover, many victims of trafficking experienced trauma before their trafficking, including childhood abuse, which likely contributed to their vulnerability. Exposure to multiple ongoing traumatic events, such as childhood abuse and/or neglect, is referred to as complex trauma. Complex trauma may cause significant adverse effects on an individual's functioning across numerous domains. Therefore, a trauma-informed perspective and a victim-centred approach are crucial to identifying and supporting victims while successfully minimising re-victimisation.

WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO TAKE A VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACH?

- ▶ Quickly neutralise hostility.
- ▶ Remove barriers to communication.
- ▶ Assist in preventing re-victimisation and re-traumatisation.
- ▶ Using a victim-centred approach creates an environment where a potential victim can feel safe to share their true experience, where they may have otherwise lied, repeated cover stories from the trafficker, or just been unwilling to cooperate.
- ▶ This approach also helps to build the potential victim's trust in law enforcement and can dispel misconceptions or distrust of law enforcement in general.
- ▶ It complements the work of law enforcement and addresses the nuances of crimes that can occur in situations like trafficking, where a seeming perpetrator can also be a victim.
- ▶ It helps to support investigations into trafficking cases; the cycle of trafficking is disrupted when potential victims are properly safeguarded. When information is collected through victim-centred screenings, more information will be available to apprehend criminal networks and build stronger cases against traffickers.

1. US Department of Health and Human Services, *Trauma Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*, (Series No. 57, Rockville (MD) 2014) ch 3.

IMPLEMENTING A VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACH²

Prioritise the wellbeing of the victim above all else

- ▶ Consider if the actions being taken ensure the physical and emotional safety of the potential victim.
 - ▶ Is the action being taken in the best interest of the potential victim?
 - ▶ Are the immediate needs of the potential victim being taken into consideration? If not, what is the immediate next step?
 - ▶ If I were the victim, how would I feel being in this situation? (E.g., feelings of distrust, shame or blame, anxiety or uncertainty around the future, worried that they will be in trouble, or worried about repercussions from their trafficker.)
- ▶ Take time to learn the potential victim's basic needs before the conversation.

EXAMPLE *Does the individual know where they will stay that night? Do they need a safe place to stay? Or does the potential victim have children who need safe supervision?*

Create an open, safe environment

- ▶ Stay away from sterile, hostile environments. Instead, create open, inviting environments that allow the potential victim to feel safe and open to disclosing information.

EXAMPLE *Trying to have a conversation in a large, loud, and busy room is going to be distracting and unsettling. Consider choosing a safe location in which you can create a warm environment, preferably with comfortable seating, warmly-lit lamps, and natural lighting.*

EXAMPLE *Likewise, having multiple people in a small enclosed space along with the potential victim is intimidating, and the potential victim may feel uncomfortable sharing in front of lots of people. Ideally, a maximum of two people would facilitate the interview in which one person could take notes, and the other ask questions in order to avoid the victim having to re-share their experiences multiple times. It may be helpful to offer water or snacks to help put the potential victim at ease.*

Use clear language

- ▶ Communicate using language that is easily understood and non-judgemental; avoid professional jargon.
- ▶ If there is a language barrier or the potential victim speaks limited English, utilise a trusted professional translator or a language line (such as the tele-interpreting service offered by the National Human Trafficking Hotline). Never rely upon a friend or family member of the potential victim, as they could be related to the case and influence the conversation. If possible, the translator should also be familiar with the customs and practices of the potential victim's country of origin.

EXAMPLE *Depending on the country of origin, and the exploitation type, the potential victim may be more comfortable conversing with someone of the same gender.*

2. The basis of these points are from source: Rebecca Anna Bates 'Using Trauma-Informed and Victim-Centred Approaches to Provided Assistance to Survivors of Human Trafficking [Doctoral Dissertation, Valdosta State University 2020] Available at: https://vtext.valdosta.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10428/4262/batts-rebecca_dissertation_2020.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

- ▶ Help the potential victim to know their own legal rights; give them as much control as possible and the ability to assert their own opinions.

Understand and respect boundaries

- ▶ Consider the potential victim's physical and emotional boundaries in response to their experience.

EXAMPLE *Those who have experienced physical abuse may be triggered by any type of physical touch. A well-meaning hug or touch on the shoulder might not communicate as intended.*

Acknowledge the victim's perception of victimisation

- ▶ Be aware that a victim may have an emotional bond or be in a relationship with their trafficker and may not perceive themselves as a 'victim'.
- ▶ Use the same language that the potential victim uses to identify their own experience.

EXAMPLE *If they refer to their trafficker as their 'lover' or 'partner', it is unhelpful to correct their choice of language at that moment. Instead, use the same terms the potential victim chooses. This provides validation that they are being heard and understood.*

Remember that no two people are the same

- ▶ What works for one individual may not work for another. Be willing to adapt to and advocate for the needs of each individual in each situation.

Remember that victims may be triggered when...

DEFINITION

TRIGGER

Something that evokes an overwhelming adverse emotional or physiological response, usually by recalling a traumatic memory or unresolved event.

EXAMPLE *The scent of a certain cologne may trigger the memory of a traumatic experience where the perpetrator was wearing that cologne when exploiting and abusing the victim.*

EXAMPLE *The sound of yelling may trigger the memory of an abuser who would use yelling as a coercive tactic.*

EXAMPLE *Seeing someone in a police uniform may trigger the memory of a previous encounter with law enforcement where they were arrested and experienced significant distress and fear.*

► Retelling their story

EXAMPLE Common symptoms of PTSD are avoidance of trauma-related thoughts and feelings. Talking about the trauma can be very difficult; they may respond by shutting down or getting angry if they are pushed to share. This is a common response and not necessarily the victim being defiant.

- Allow them to go at their own pace, take breaks, or remind them they can take a few minutes as needed.
- Reduce the number of times they are asked to share their story when possible.

► Feeling powerless or a lack of control

EXAMPLE After an adult victim of trafficking is identified at a police station, they may choose to go back to living on the streets rather than entering a programme. When you explain the safety concerns of living on the streets, they lash out at you and respond harshly to your help.

- Give adult victims options, depending on whether or not they feel comfortable participating in a programme right now. Offer resources for when they are ready to reach out to a programme.

► Experiencing unexpected change

EXAMPLE Due to trauma, a change in demeanour by law enforcement or healthcare professionals during a conversation might startle the victim and trigger a highly emotive response.

- Be as consistent in your approach as possible, to help the victim feel safe.

► Feeling threatened or attacked

EXAMPLE A foreign national is working in South Africa on the correct visa, but their employer is exploiting them. Upon identification as a victim of trafficking for forced labour, a frontline professional asks why they came into the country undocumented.

- Using confrontational language or relentless questioning may make a potential victim feel they are in trouble, that everyone is against them, or not believing them, and cause them to become defensive.
- This questioning may make the victim feel fearful of deportation or concerned about their legal status or the status of those who travelled with them.

► Feeling judgement or shame

EXAMPLE Using questions such as 'Were you forced to do something you were uncomfortable with?' rather than 'Did you sleep with these men?' shifts the focus and shows they are not to blame.

- Using judgemental language will most likely alienate the victim and make them feel as though they are being blamed.

► Feeling vulnerable

EXAMPLE *A victim may feel uncomfortable if the interviewer is a similar demographic to the trafficker, causing them to withdraw from the interview.*

- It is important to always come back to how the victim may be feeling. Previous experiences may affect how the victim responds.

EXAMPLE *The interview may be the first time the victim has been able to process their experience. The victim may begin to feel as though they are 'shutting down' when talking about their experience.*

- Give the victim time to share their experience and allow them to take breaks or stop the interview. Do not force the victim to share their experiences in order, but allow them to share what they are comfortable with in the moment.