A VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACH

DEFINITION

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. A trauma response may occur following a single incident event, like a car accident, or following 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 on how far they are removed from the exploitation.

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Confusion/inability to concentrate	Appears detached or withdrawn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're 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).*

[1]US Dept. of Health and Human Services (2014). Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioural Health Services. Rockville (MD). (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Chapter 3, Understanding the Impact of Trauma. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/ (Accessed: January 20th, 2021).

What is a 'victim-centred approach' and 'trauma-informed care'?

A victim-centred approach prioritises the needs and concerns of a victim above all else seeking to reduce the risk of re-victimisation and to engage with and empower survivors. A victim-centred approach means acting without judgment and engaging with individuals in a compassionate and sensitive manner.

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 seeks to minimise re-victimisation.

How does a victim-centred approach apply to human trafficking and modern slavery?

Many victims of human trafficking have been abused by way of their exploitation and as a result may experience trauma or symptoms of trauma. Human trafficking is one of the most lucrative criminal enterprises because victims can be exploited in multiple ways over an extended amount of time for profit. As instances of trafficking can occur over short or long periods of time, this can affect the trauma experienced by victims. Moreover, many victims of trafficking have experienced trauma prior to their trafficking, including childhood abuse, which likely contributed to their vulnerability to trafficking. 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, having a trauma-informed perspective and taking a victim-centred approach is crucial to be able to successfully identify, safeguard, and minimise re-victimisation.

Why is it necessary to take a victim-centred approach?

- Taking a victim-centred approach can quickly neutralise hostility and remove barriers in communication.
- It assists in preventing re-victimisation and re-traumatisation.
- Where a potential victim may have otherwise lied, repeated cover stories from the trafficker, or just been unwilling to cooperate, using a victim-centred approach creates an environment where a potential victim can feel safe to share their true experience.
- This approach also helps to build the potential victim's trust of law enforcement.
- It provides a different perspective for those working in law enforcement, addressing the nuances in crimes like human trafficking where a seeming perpetrator can also be a victim.
- It helps to support investigations into trafficking cases and disrupts the cycle of trafficking when potential victims are properly safeguarded. The more information that is able to be collected through victim-centred screenings, the more information to be able to apprehend criminal networks and the stronger the case against traffickers.

PROVIDING A VICTIM-CENTRED AND TRAUMA-INFORMED RESPONSE[2]

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?
  - Have the immediate needs of the potential victim been 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.

Create an open, safe environment and use clear language

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

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

- Communicate using language that is easily understood and non-judgmental; avoid professional jargon.

- If there is a language barrier or the potential victim speaks limited English utilise a trusted professional translator rather than a friend or family member of the potential victim. The translator should also be familiar with the customs and practices of the country of origin.

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

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

- Potential victims who have experienced significant trauma might be triggered by sharing their story. Allow them to go at their own pace and take lots of breaks as needed. Reduce the number of times that they are asked to share their story where possible.

  EXAMPLE *Common symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are avoidance of trauma-related thoughts and feelings. Therefore, talking about the trauma can be very difficult and triggering for potential victims and they may respond by shutting down or getting angry if they are pushed to share. This is a common response and not necessarily a reflection of the victim being defiant.*

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

Understand and respect boundaries

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

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 themself as a 'victim'.

- Use the same language that the potential victim uses to identify their own experience.

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

NO TWO PEOPLE ARE THE SAME

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

UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERING BEHAVIOUR

Victims may be triggered when

- Feeling a lack of control/powerless

  EXAMPLE *A victim travelling through an airport may be pulled aside for questioning due to safeguarding concerns. If other passengers are allowed to keep going, they may feel that they are in trouble and experience increased anxiety when interacting with authorities. Consider first explaining that there is no problem, and that the intervention is to ensure their safety in the UK.*

- Experiencing unexpected change

  EXAMPLE *A change in demeanour by law enforcement or healthcare professionals during a conversation with the victim might startle them and trigger an irrational or highly emotive response due to trauma.*

- Feeling threatened or attacked

  EXAMPLE *A victim who has been forced to work in the sex trade might become defensive if they are asked questions such as 'you know working in a brothel is illegal, right?' in which they feel that they will be punished if they disclose details of their work.*

  - 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.

- Feeling shame/judged

  EXAMPLE *Using questions such as 'where did you sleep with these men?' rather than 'where were you forced to 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 *If a female victim was abused by men as part of her sexual exploitation, having a man ask personal questions might feel intimidating and make her feel vulnerable and afraid, causing her to shut down.*

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

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