

A VICTIM-CENTERED 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. 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, behavioral, 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.

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Confusion/inability to concentrate	Appears detached or withdrawn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

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).

“VICTIM-CENTERED APPROACH” AND “TRAUMA-INFORMED” CARE

A victim-centered approach prioritizes the needs and concerns of a victim above all else. It seeks to reduce the risk of re-victimization and empower survivors. A victim-centered approach means acting without judgement and engaging with individuals compassionately.

A victim-centered 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 minimize re-victimization.

HOW DOES A VICTIM-CENTERED APPROACH APPLY TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

Many victims of human trafficking have been abused whilst in 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 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-centered approach are crucial to identifying and supporting victims while successfully minimizing re-victimization.

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

- ▶ Taking a victim-centered approach can quickly neutralize hostility and remove barriers to communication.
- ▶ It assists in preventing re-victimization and re-traumatization.
- ▶ Using a victim-centered approach where a potential victim may have otherwise lied, repeated cover stories from the trafficker, or just been unwilling to cooperate, 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 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 human 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-centered screenings, more information will be available to apprehend criminal networks and build stronger cases against traffickers.

PROVIDING A VICTIM-CENTERED AND TRAUMA-INFORMED RESPONSE²

Prioritize 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, warm-lighted 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-judgmental; avoid professional jargon.
- ▶ If there is a language barrier or the potential victim speaks limited English, utilize a trusted professional translator or a language line. 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, the potential victim may be more comfortable conversing with someone of the same gender.*

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

- ▶ 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.
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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.
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Understand the perception of victimization

- ▶ 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.*

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.

Victims may be triggered when

▶ Retelling their story

EXAMPLE Common symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are avoidance of trauma-related thoughts and feelings. Talking about the trauma can be very difficult and triggering; 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 program. 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 program right now. Offer resources for when they are ready to reach out to a program.

▶ Experiencing unexpected change

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

▶ Feeling threatened or attacked

EXAMPLE A foreign national is working in the United States on the correct H2A Visa, but their employer is exploiting them. Upon identification as a victim of labor trafficking, 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 traveled with them.

▶ Feeling judgment 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.

Victims may be triggered when

▶ 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.