



Trauma-Informed Care

What is Trauma?

Trauma refers to experiences that overwhelm a person's ability to cope. It may result from a single event or repeated exposure to distressing or threatening situations. Trauma can impact brain development, memory, emotional regulation, physical health, and relationships.

Common sources of trauma:

- Childhood violence, abuse or neglect (VAN)
- Domestic or family violence (DFV)
- Sexual assault (SA)
- Medical trauma (e.g. invasive treatments, misdiagnosis)
- Systemic discrimination or racism
- War, displacement, or forced migration
- Disability-related trauma (e.g. restraint, segregation, exclusion)
- Natural disasters, accidents or terrorist events
- Institutional or intergenerational trauma (e.g. stolen generations, survivors of state care)

You don't need to know someone's trauma story to treat them with care, dignity, and respect.

Why it Matters

Many people seeking assistance animal training or visiting with therapy dogs have trauma histories—especially those living with:

- Disability or chronic illness
- Neurodivergence
- Homelessness or insecure housing
- Experiences of incarceration or foster care

A trauma-informed approach builds trust, promotes psychological safety, and reduces the risk of traumatization.

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Key Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice

1. **Safety:** Ensure the environment and interactions feel physically, emotionally, and culturally safe. For example, a veteran with PTSD may feel unsafe in loud, busy settings. Training sessions may be conducted in calm, predictable spaces with a clear exit path and minimal sensory overload.
2. **Trustworthiness & Transparency:** Be consistent, honest, and clear. Explain what will happen and why, and keep your word. For example, if a session will involve public access training, let the client know in advance, describe the plan, and offer to pause or adapt at any point.
3. **Empowerment, Voice & Choice:** Promote autonomy and self-direction. Avoid “doing to” or “fixing”—instead, “work with” the person. For example, offer the client a choice between harnessing the dog or practicing cues first. Respect if they need to take a break or reschedule.
4. **Collaboration & Mutuality:** Reduce power imbalances. Validate the client's lived experience and involve them in all decisions. For example, use co-created training goals. Instead of dictating a training plan, ask, “What would make you feel more confident this week?”
5. **Cultural Humility & Responsiveness:** Respect the individual’s background, language, values, and identity. Adapt communication and avoid assumptions. For example, a First Nations client may have intergenerational trauma. Show respect by listening first, allowing silence, and being open to cultural ways of relating.

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Practical Strategies

- Use respectful, person-first language: "A person with PTSD" rather than "a PTSD client."
- Avoid labels or assumptions.
- Be aware of trauma triggers: unexpected loud sounds, touch, close proximity, or authoritative tone may trigger anxiety or panic.
- Start sessions with grounding or check-in questions: e.g., "Is there anything you'd like me to know before we start today?"
- Allow time for processing and decision-making: Don't rush responses. Give space for silence.
- Support emotional regulation: If someone becomes overwhelmed, pause the session. Offer choices like walking, deep breathing, or taking a break.
- Use clear, simple instructions: Trauma may affect memory and sequencing. Break tasks into steps and repeat gently as needed.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries: Kindness and empathy are essential—but always preserve professionalism and consent.

What to Avoid

- Avoid retraumatising through coercion or control
- Don't force participation or override objections.
- Avoid judgment about coping mechanisms
- Trauma survivors may use avoidance, shutdown, or humour to manage emotions.
- Avoid asking for trauma details
- Unless directly relevant, you do not need to know "what happened" to be trauma-informed.

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Caring for Yourself

- Working with trauma-affected individuals can lead to vicarious trauma (compassion fatigue) or burnout.
- Protect yourself by:
 - Seeking supervision or peer support
 - Reflecting on your own emotional responses
 - Building breaks into your schedule
 - Establishing boundaries and practicing self-care

Additional Resources

- Blue Knot Foundation: Trauma resources for professionals
- Phoenix Australia: Trauma guidelines and tools for service providers
- The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk
- Trauma-Informed Practice in Disability Services – NDIS Quality & Safeguards Commission
- Vicarious Trauma Toolkit – Office for Victims of Crime (US)

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