



TRAUMA AWARENESS, SEX, AND GENDER

Skills for Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed practice is an approach to service delivery which recognizes that experiences of trauma and violence are common. An important aspect of practice is to understand how trauma can be experienced differently by different groups. Developing trauma-informed programs and policies requires service providers to be “sex-informed” and “gender-informed” and to consider how diverse experiences of trauma intersect with both sex and gender, culture, and individual histories.

Qaujimaqatqangit (Inuit knowledge) respects the balance between gender roles and sees gender as fluid, and situational. This intersects with Western understandings of sex and gender which are currently moving beyond a historical emphasis on a fixed male/female binary to a deeper understanding of biology, gender identity and gender expression. When working with individuals, service providers can draw upon these different perspectives and use them to understand the realities of people’s day-to-day lives and their unique experiences, strengths, and challenges.

1. Trauma Awareness

There are important sex and gender differences in the experiences and outcomes of traumatic events between men, women and gender diverse individuals (including trans, two-spirited and gender non-conforming individuals). Anatomy, physiology, genes, hormones and neurobiology can affect the ways that bodies respond to stress, medications and other substance use. Different groups of people experience different types of traumatic events (e.g., women experience more sexual abuse and assault), have different kinds of responses (e.g., men are more likely to experience feelings of irritability or

anger), and the types of support and care they find helpful can vary (e.g., individual support, group programs, self-help resources).

Providing people with information about the effects of trauma can be an important first step in helping people to develop coping skills, identify and manage triggers, and learn about their own personal responses to past events. Some people find it helpful to learn about different kinds of trauma such as single incident trauma, intergenerational trauma or historic trauma, and vicarious trauma. Others benefit from making links between past trauma and physical health concerns such as chronic pelvic pain, digestive disorders, or insomnia. As well, connecting past experiences of trauma to current substance use concerns or mental health issues such as depression and anxiety or feelings of anger can be empowering for many people.

2. Creating Safety

Safety is a critical component of healing from traumatic experiences. In order to successfully engage with services, people need to feel they are out of immediate danger. Creating physical, emotional, and cultural safety can include ensuring a welcoming physical environment, providing clear information about program activities, and having consistent and predictable interactions with service providers. Service providers can also have open conversations about violence in the home and ways of creating safety for the entire family.

In many areas of practice, single-gender spaces and programs can be important. Female-only or male-only programming can contribute to feelings of safety for certain groups of men and women (e.g., individuals who have experienced gender-based violence). Single-gender spaces can provide opportunities to address sensitive topics and to build confidence and skills without the pressure to also be navigating gender relations. Mixed programming can provide opportunities to develop respectful attitudes, challenge societal expectations of men and women, and develop healthy relationships.

3. Choice, Voice and Control

For individuals who have experienced violence and trauma having choice and control over their own treatment and care are important for healing. As well, services that take into account men and women's multiple roles as parents, caregivers, community members, employees and paid workers, students, and more are more likely to meet individual needs and preferences. Many individuals can benefit from learning about self-care and its role in helping to heal from trauma while other individuals may be interested in healing relationships in their lives that have been affected by their experiences of trauma. Social pressures, expectations, and responsibilities related to gender may be an issue that arises for some Inuit men and women who are working to address historic trauma in their families and communities, e.g., becoming a father may have unique challenges for individuals whose own parents were residential school survivors or women may have questions about reclaiming and honoring cultural traditions while being the main income earner in their family.

Gender can also influence how and when people seek help and their treatment preferences (e.g., men are more less likely to seek support when they are experiencing difficulties while women are more likely to complete group programs). Individual counselling and support is one strategy for helping individuals to heal from trauma. Many individuals are able to guide their own healing through self-help and community resources. For many individuals, collective approaches to healing are an alternative or complement to other individualized approaches. Self-expression through the arts such as film-making and music can be healing for many individuals and can help people to come together to understand the

common forces that have shaped their experiences. Community events and activities can be a way of marking anniversaries of events that affected the entire community and support positive social connections. In recognizing that everyone has a unique journey to healing, service providers can give clients choices about services, techniques, and approaches to care and allow people to make decisions about pacing and their own level of participation.

4. Wellness and Skill-building

Many individuals are able to find their own pathways to healing through wellness activities and by developing new skills to care for themselves and engage in their communities. Educational and employment opportunities can provide a sense of belonging and meaning while engaging in activism or learning about spirituality can provide a sense of connection and promote self-confidence. Traditional cultural activities such as berry picking, sewing circles, hunting, and face and body tattooing can support healing for some people. Many of these activities are related to different gender roles and may be significant to how people see themselves and express their gender.

Being out on the land can also help people to cope with and heal from trauma. It can provide a sense of belonging, a place to practice cultural traditions, and opportunities to engage in wellness activities. While a source of healing for many individuals, some research has suggested that changes in the climate and environment can create new kinds of stress for those spending time on the land which may magnify past experiences of trauma. Land-based programs can help to address these emerging concerns while supporting individuals to learn about how land-based activities can support healing from trauma.

Discussion Questions

1. What populations does your program serve? How do people vary in their experiences of trauma and pathways to healing?
2. What are some of the ways your program works to create physical, emotional, and cultural safety? What else could you be doing to make your program safe and welcoming for everyone?
3. In your experience, how does gender affect experiences of trauma and ways of healing from trauma? What role do traditional cultural practices have in supporting healing from trauma?
4. What are your own experiences of gender roles, expectations, pressures and responsibilities? How do you think your experiences might affect how you expect clients to engage in services? Do you have questions about topics like gender identity and gender expression, and, if so, what resources exist for learning more?

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