

Creating a Trauma-Informed Training Environment

Trauma-informed principles center on safety, choice, agency, connection, and collaboration. These are advocacy principles as well. As advocates, we recognize the importance to survivors of making decisions for themselves, of being acknowledged as the experts on their own experience, and of participating in relationships that are true partnerships. We strive to be trustworthy in offering our services, supports, and advocacy. These principles should also be reflected when we provide training to our colleagues and collaborative partners. This publication offers some tips on incorporating principles of a trauma-informed approach in our training environments themselves.*

Before Training

A key aspect of being trauma informed is cultivating awareness of ourselves in the work, including as trainers. During a training, especially trainings on trauma and violence, facilitators and participants can experience a range of emotions or become overwhelmed. Hearing about trauma and violence in the context of a training may affect us differently than it does in our daily work. Creating a plan in advance for how you can consistently attend to these responses is an important part of your overall training preparation.

As a trainer, being attentive to both our own and participants' responses can be hard work. Thus, training teams are ideal when resources allow. Co-trainers can support each other and attend to the emotions that can arise for participants throughout the training. If you are training in a team, co-trainers can meet ahead of time and divide up tasks, and talk through cultural considerations, accessibility, resources, and challenges. Co-trainers may also want to practice exercises and prepare for training together. Training partners also need to discuss how they will handle problems such as participants who struggle with the ideas presented in the training, who make oppressive remarks, or who

Reflect: As a trainer or facilitator...

1. What are my strengths?
2. What are my "growing edges" or places I would like to work on?
3. What are some of the things that come up or might come up for me as a trainer/facilitator?
4. What kinds of supports do I need before, during, after? From whom?

* *Walking the Walk: Modeling Trauma Informed Practice in the Training Environment* by Leslie Lieberman is an excellent resource on this topic and one that we have learned a lot from! It is available here:
<http://www.multiplyingconnections.org/sites/default/files/Walking%20the%20Walk%20Article.pdf>

seem disengaged. If you will be training alone, you may still want to set aside dedicated time to think through these issues with a supportive colleague prior for your training.

Physical Space

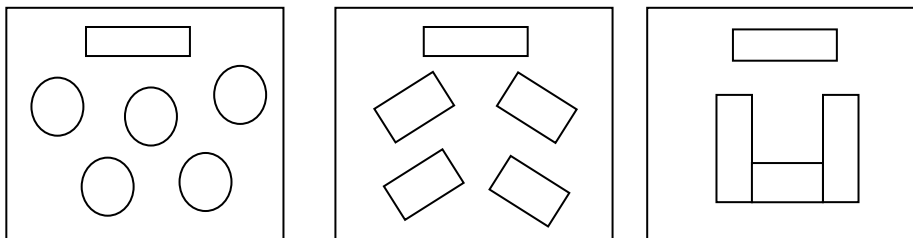
Preparing the physical training space to allow for self-awareness and self-care is essential. It is also important that seating is arranged to consider individual experiences of vulnerability, safety, and comfort. Below are a few options to consider. Participants may feel it is important not to sit in rows with people sitting one behind the other and that everyone needs table space. The space needs to accommodate people getting out of their seats easily to move around the room. This includes making these aisles wide enough to allow for people using wheelchairs to pass easily. Exits need to be easily visible and accessible. If needed for your training, the space should accommodate small group interaction. Lighting arrangements should allow for the PowerPoint to be seen clearly but also for participants to be able to see well enough to write and to exit or move around the room. Additionally, if the room is too dark, participants may feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Physical space: think...

1. Room set-up
2. Accessibility
3. Lighting
4. Comfort

Space and color are important considerations when training about trauma. If possible, you can bring and tape up photos, images, quotes, or other things that may resonate with the group. We may not, however, always have control over all of these elements in a room. It can be helpful to acknowledge this or you may decide to ask the group for suggestions about how to improve the environment, given what you are working with.

Potential Room Set-ups:



You can provide colorful name tents, art supplies, table toys, pipe cleaners, individual small containers of clay, or other hands-on craft items or small toys. Having materials within easy reach can help participants remain focused, keep their hands busy to help relieve stress, or express themselves. Participants might also notice that these things would be helpful to survivors in service environments.

Emotional Safety

Emotional safety is supported by attending to the elements of the physical space mentioned above, as well as to the tone we set at the beginning of the training and create throughout the training.

Think about the pace of the training and the timing of and inclusion of breaks. Building in regular breaks and honoring the timing of them goes a long way! It allows people to do what they need to care for themselves and anticipate what they might need. One way to do this is to intersperse check-in/break slides throughout your PowerPoint. This could be a slide with a beautiful visual image, included after a certain number of slides or after challenging slide content or, as NCDVTMH trainer Cathy Cave suggests, it could be a slide that says “healing stretch or healing breath.” Other examples that create space to take in the content may be longer lunch breaks, ice breakers or welcoming activities, and opportunities for sharing and discussion in pairs and at tables.

Emotional safety: think...

1. Pacing
2. Breaks
3. Activities
4. Content
5. Feedback

Transparency is a key element of creating emotional safety in trauma-informed practice. Transparency includes ensuring that our expectations and intentions in our relationships and organizations are clear rather than hidden. This can be modeled in the training context by providing information about plans and expectations. Examples include sharing the training schedule early in the process to inform participants of breaks, training hours, and lunch plans; explaining the training’s focus on self-awareness and for doing the work that supports this; and explaining the reason why craft materials are on the table. This also involves establishing an atmosphere of collaboration by soliciting opinions, comments, questions, experiences, and observations from participants and encouraging participation throughout.

Another essential part of creating emotional safety during training is to notice and respond to what is coming up in the room. For example, you may notice a shift in the energy in the room, that it seems like the content is not resonating or the material is challenging or difficult, or someone may raise an issue or concern about the training or content. These are opportunities to respond respectfully and transparently, and in ways that do not create dynamics of silencing and minimizing. This may be by naming the discomfort and asking participants to get into pairs to share and discuss (turn to each other and discuss what is working and what is not and then perhaps reporting back to the group in ways that everyone feels comfortable with). This may be as simple as a quick break or pausing and saying, “Let’s take a moment to stretch or breathe. Feel free to stretch, grab some water, do what you need to get comfortable.” It may be pausing and pulling back from difficult content in the moment and doing so in a way that does not embarrass or

"out" the person who is uncomfortable.

Another way to support emotional safety and learning is to balance training content so that participants have the opportunity to feel hopeful and energized about themselves and the work, and about their connection to others within the training group (e.g., by alternating heavy content with content about resiliency and hope).

One of the ongoing tasks in our organizations is to establish environments where all staff are engaged in the "self-work" that supports and sustains their empathy, balance, and well-being, even when experiencing stress themselves. Throughout our training, we can strive to create a learning community where self-awareness is encouraged and participants have tools and resources for tending to the feelings and responses that arise during the training experience. In addition to taking

Setting the Tone:

The beginning of every training sets the tone for the rest of the training. For short trainings, an introduction can be a couple of minutes; for longer trainings, an introduction can take 15-20 minutes or longer.

Key questions to think about:

1. How does the energy in the room feel (hectic, low, scattered, excited)?
2. What might help people get into the room (e.g., a group breathing or movement exercise, acknowledgment of the previous day's content or travel or sleepiness, a facilitated activity where people talk to someone next to them)?
3. What do people need to know (table toys, agenda, breaks, permission to take care of selves, bathrooms)?

individual responsibility for being self-aware, each participant also has responsibility to support the safety and comfort of the group. It may be helpful to ask the group for their suggestions on ways to accomplish this (for example, not sharing specific details of abuse experiences).

We can also offer and support choice throughout the training. We can do this by explicitly affirming and supporting people in doing what they need to take care of themselves and each other during the training (e.g., take individual breaks if needed), and repeating this throughout the training. We can also offer options during activities about how to participate, including not participating.

After Training

After (and during!) trainings, it is critical to build in space, support, and time for reflection, processing, and self-care. This can be done through debriefing with a colleague or co-trainer or a supervisor or mentor, and through having space to self-reflect. This may also mean thinking about and planning for the things that help us recharge after a training. Doing so helps us to maintain our own ability to be open, present, and flexible.