COVID-19
Considerations for a Trauma Informed Response for Work Settings (Organizations/Schools/Clinics)

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide trauma informed considerations for work settings as we all navigate the uncharted territory and response to novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). We will refer to organizations in this document, but this includes schools, clinics, and other places where services are provided. The following considerations are grounded in the principles of trauma informed care (see SAMHSA Guidance for a Trauma Informed Approach for more information). We invite you to use the same framework as you are making decisions and communicating to staff.

Rationale

For most people, COVID-19 will be associated with increased uncertainty and stress. When we are under acute stress we are more likely to be operating from the survival areas of our brain, which means that our thinking becomes much more black and white, our attention is more narrowly focused on the immediate here and now, we start to have difficulty planning or thinking ahead, we have difficulty regulating our emotions, and we become less able to make decisions. Stressful times are associated with threats to our safety and a loss of power and control. A trauma informed approach can help reduce or prevent a trauma response.

Considerations

In addition to using the TIC principles to guide our work moving forward, it's important to keep these general TIC practices in mind.

- **Support regulation** – when stressed, people have a harder time managing emotions and staying regulated. Build in time for regulation practices like breathing, grounding exercises, and movement. Model the calm behavior you want staff to mirror.
- **Prioritize relationships**. Social support and connection can actually buffer a stress response. During times of stress, it's important to find ways to connect and support each other.
- **Explain the why** behind decisions. Understanding why something (like a policy or practice) is happening can give people a sense of control and decrease a stress response.
- **Help staff know what to expect** to the extent possible. In uncertain times, having any amount of certainty or predictability is helpful. We aren't suggesting that you provide answers that you don't have; however, sharing information when it's available will decrease stress.
- **Reframe behaviors.** It's important to remember that emotional regulation and impulse control are more difficult during times of stress. People may not be showing up as their best selves during this period of fear and chaos. We need to

give everyone grace and realize that challenging behaviors are a reflection of the stress we are under. We need to all exercise patience and understanding. Give people the benefit of the doubt.

Following are some considerations related to the principles of TIC.

Physical Safety. A safe environment decreases the stress response and ensures that rational thinking, judgment, and attentional control can occur. It's important to address the safety concerns related to the physical space and the people using and providing services. During a health-related crisis, physical safety will be a priority. A trauma informed response includes:
- Ensuring service users and staff feel they're being protected and that their physical safety is a priority as the organization initiates crisis response efforts.
- Communicating clearly to staff, services users, and community partners about the crisis response efforts, eliminating any shaming or stigmatizing language.
- Soliciting input and feedback from staff – with the goal of understanding if there is anything the organization can do to help staff feel safer.
- Attending to staff unease.

Emotional Safety. It's important to minimize surprises and to help staff understand that the organization is looking out for their wellbeing. A trauma informed response includes:
- Helping staff understand what to expect.
- Demonstrating flexible consistency. Uncertainty is very stressful, so to the extent that an organization can be consistent and predictable this will lower stress levels. Flexibility is needed during times of rapidly changing conditions. For stressed individuals, rapid change may be unsettling, but the organization can find ways to demonstrate flexible consistency.
- Paying attention to nonverbal communication. A stressed brain will pay extra attention to nonverbal language including gestures, facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice. Be mindful of this form of communication.
- Building in time to check in about feelings. Facts are certainly needed, but emotions may be even more important. Staff need to feel supported and safe to speak about vicarious trauma, work related stress, and other emotional considerations during this crisis.

Peer Support and Relationship. Positive attachment and bonding can suppress a stress response. Social support is key to an individual's ability to be resilient in the face of trauma and toxic stress. Build on existing ways to connect or create new ones. If staff is working remotely, this will be especially important. A trauma informed response includes:
- Supporting multiple ways for communicating, e.g., video conference, email, phone or text.

- Encouraging opportunities and methods for virtual face to face contact, e.g., zoom or facetime.
- Setting up and supporting regular peer check-ins to connect.

Trust / Transparency. Being transparent fosters trust and creates a sense of value and belonging for staff. To grow trust, a trauma informed response includes:
- Communicating regularly. Clear, direct, and frequent communication will help put anxious staff at ease. Stressed brains fill in missing information and what the staff hears may be different from what is said. Regular updates are important.
- Explaining "the why" behind decisions, policies, or practices. Even if the policy or practice is met with resistance, staff will feel less worried and stressed if they understand why decisions were made or policies enacted.
- Being transparent with policy and practice. Make policies available to see and communicate out when changes are made, e.g. "starting tomorrow we are going to have staff working remotely for two weeks."
- Conveying strength <u>and</u> sensitivity. During a time of crisis, staff look for strength and leadership in the organization. This creates trust. However, it's also important to convey compassion and sensitivity. Staff need to feel they are cared for, and when they do, this builds trust too.

Voice, Choice, and Empowerment. This crisis will result in a loss of control and power for people. Providing information to and soliciting input from staff is empowering. A trauma informed response will include:
- Sharing power. For example, what decisions can staff make without approval?
- Providing choice whenever possible.
- Providing staff with the scripts needed to explain the situation and policies to service users.
- Listening to staff ideas and input about being trauma informed during this crisis. For example, "Have you noticed something that demonstrated trauma informed care?" "Have you noticed a moment that could have used a TI approach?"

Cultural Responsivity. This crisis will affect groups of individuals differently based on multiple factors, e.g., history, access to services, racism, and systemic oppression. It's important to think about the communities who will be affected by policy and practice decisions. A trauma informed response includes:
- Recognizing and building upon the cultural strengths of the populations you serve.
- Ensuring intended and unintended consequences of policy and practice decisions do not create harm for the populations you serve.
- Being mindful of historical contexts for the populations you serve, especially related to public health efforts.
- Using strategies that encourage engagement and minimize mistrust.

Collaboration. This crisis is requiring organizations to think differently about how they conduct their work and provide services. Given the tremendous needs and the huge numbers of people affected, it will be necessary to merge, expand, or collaborate across organizations.   We can't do this in isolation. A trauma informed response includes:

- Making your policy decisions with other systems in mind. Collaborating with other systems will ensure policy and practice decisions do not create barriers to service delivery in any other sectors?
- Working together to create policies that promote shared delivery of services, and working to eliminate policies where shared delivery is hindered.
- Initiating new partnerships and non traditional collaborations.
- Collaborating within the organization, across departments, teams, or sites to ensure greater effectiveness and efficiency.