

How Being Trauma-Informed Improves Criminal Justice System Responses

Module 1 Why Learn About Trauma?

Responses to traumatic events vary and, for some, trauma may disrupt their lives. This appears to be the case for justice-involved women and men, who have very high rates of trauma. When justice professionals learn about trauma, they can respond in ways that avoid re-traumatizing, ensure safety of all, reduce recidivism, and promote recovery. Learning about trauma helps to ease management, helps keep people out of the justice system, and helps staff do their jobs. When responding to someone, it is important to keep in mind that

how we think about an issue will affect how we react or respond to it. Understanding trauma can shape our responses.

► **Recall:** Based on prevalence estimates, it is safe to assume that everyone who comes into contact with the justice system has a history of trauma, so criminal justice professionals should take “*universal precautions*.”

Module 2 What Is Trauma?

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being. Trauma can

be precipitated by powerful life events such as physical or sexual abuse, violence, natural disasters, historical trauma or combat. Trauma is an individualized response when an event exceeds the individual's perceived ability to meet its demands. Trauma is pervasive, re-shaping a person's worldview and affecting all aspects of life including health, self-esteem, behavior, and functioning.

► **Recall:** Trauma is the combination of **Event**, **Experience**, and **Effects**.

Module 3 Trauma's Effects

The impact of trauma is experienced throughout life and its affects are pervasive, altering various aspects of functioning. People who experience trauma may have overwhelming feelings of fearfulness, powerlessness, anger, or extreme emotional pain. Trauma survivors try to figure out how to best avoid getting hurt again. They cope and survive by adopting behaviors that may be

problematic for functioning in the world. They may abuse alcohol and drugs to suppress feelings and memories; they may become aggressive in what they perceive to be self-defense even when there is no real threat; they may isolate themselves because it feels safer to be alone. Even after the abuse stops, it may be difficult to relinquish these survival mechanisms. Survivors often experience poor relationships because they have learned not to trust, to tell lies, and sex has been associated with violence rather than intimacy. The symptoms of trauma and symptoms of other mental health challenges can overlap.

► **Recall:** The coping behavior of trauma survivors can be problematic and it is often associated with criminal actions. When criminal justice professionals understand that many behaviors result from trauma, they can respond in a trauma-informed way. Trauma-informed responses can help increase safety for all.

Module 4 Individual Differences

Responses to powerful life events may vary based upon individual differences. Some individuals will be resilient in the face of extraordinary adversity, while others will be vulnerable and traumatized by seemingly minor difficulties. Risks may include: health issues, mental health problems, severity of trauma, proximity to trauma, biology, previous trauma, diminished coping and/or circumstances beyond the person's control.

Resilience may result from: strong family ties and/or primary relationship, connection to community, employment, genetic predisposition, meaningful activity, and strong cultural or religious beliefs. The absence of these factors may in turn increase vulnerability. Consider each person individually. Avoid blaming the victim.

► **Recall:** Trauma is an individualized response; circumstances can affect risk; people often think differently about trauma.

Module 5 Trauma- Informed Responses

Criminal justice professionals can do their jobs and keep everyone safe without re-traumatizing. Whenever possible, avoid: overreacting, inappropriate use of authority and triggering behavior. Avoid unnecessary touching. If touching is necessary, forewarn the person. Make communication more trauma-informed: allow safe space, tell "what happens next," involve the person and interact using a calm, and slow approach. Take your time. Communicate clearly. Respond with sensitivity to fear, patience, don't take behavior personally and be flexible with consequences.

► **Recall:** A trauma-informed criminal justice approach includes: Respect, Information, Safety and Choice.

Module 6 Trauma- Informed Systems

Policies and procedures in various service systems have the potential to re-traumatize. In the criminal justice system, this can occur at all points of contact: law enforcement, court, jail/correctional services, reentry, probation and other community corrections. Many of the typical procedures are necessary to maintain safety, but the key often lies in how the policies and procedures are carried out. Officers at each intercept point of the justice system can help to increase safety, promote recovery and reduce

recidivism. Take steps to formally review policies and procedures. Develop trauma screening and assessment, service plans and seek administrative support in accessing trauma-specific services. Support all staff through human resources, positive agency practices and staff policies, and through staff training about trauma, mental illness and co-occurring disorders.

► **Recall:** Be clear about which policies and procedures have options. Identify policies that are no longer relevant. Be aware where you as an officer have some discretion in how to implement policies and procedures to avoid re-traumatizing, promote recovery and decrease justice involvement.

Closing

Close the training program by using optional evaluations, issuing certificates of completion, and providing your contact information.

► **Recall:** The key to becoming trauma-informed: develop understanding of trauma, increase awareness, recognize the signs, and learn how to respond. Trauma-informed responses help to increase safety, reduce recidivism and promote recovery.