

Trauma Informed Care for Domestic Violence Survivors

Amber Bowes

Southern Adventist University

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Professor Lunelle Bertresse

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Introduction

Domestic violence is an issue that is taking place all over America. “On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than ten million women and men” (NCADV, 2024). Victims of domestic violence often face many issues such as physical injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, and sometimes death. Domestic violence leads to individuals being more likely to have depression or to commit suicide. “Domestic violence leaves more than just physical scars. It profoundly impacts the emotional and psychological well-being of survivors, often resulting in long-lasting trauma. Understanding and addressing this trauma is crucial in aiding survivors on their journey to recovery and empowerment” (Graboyes, 2024). Trauma informed care creates an environment where it is understood that individuals physical, emotional, and psychological well-being may be changed due to the experiences they have faced. It allows for a safe environment where survivors can begin their healing journey. This paper will outline what trauma is, what trauma informed care is, and the importance of trauma informed care when working with survivors of domestic violence.

What is Trauma

“The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration defines trauma as: 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” (Anyikwa, 2016). An event can be defined as traumatic when normal ways of coping are in turn replaced by unhealthy behaviors. People who experience domestic violence are exposed to multiple occurrences of traumatic events over time which can lead to long term trauma which

may be displayed by anxiety, PTSD, depression, or physical health issues. It is important to recognize that not all experiences will be universally perceived as traumatic by everyone. It is an individual's subjective experience of an event that makes it traumatic. SAMHSA addresses this topic with something called the three "E's" of trauma. These are the event, the way the event is experienced, and its effects on one's ability to cope (Anyikwa, 2016). It is important for social work professionals to understand that trauma looks different for everyone. Social workers should not assume that the clients in their shelter are all experiencing the same level of trauma; however, they should get to know each individual's situation so that they can know how to best help.

What is Trauma Informed Care

There are many different aspects of trauma informed care. These include showing an understanding of trauma and its effects on behavior, addressing safety concerns, using a culturally informed strengths-based approach, and providing ways for clients to regain control in their lives (Sullivan, et al., 2018). Recognizing that many people seeking help may have been through traumatic experiences is changing how services are provided. Trauma informed care aims to create spaces where individuals feel safe and supported, rather than adding to their past hurt. Trauma informed care is not just a concept—it is a practical way of running services. It is about making sure the way services are set up and run does not retraumatize people who have been through tough times. Instead, it should help them feel respected and in control of their own healing journey. To make this happen, organizations need to train their staff, adjust rules, and create a culture where everyone feels valued. Trauma informed care is not about just treating symptoms; it is about understanding each person's story and helping them grow stronger from

their experiences. By using trauma-informed approaches, services can become places of healing and support, helping people move forward from their past traumas.

Trauma Informed Care and Domestic Violence

There was a study by (Sullivan, et al.) done with fifty-seven shelter residents from 4 programs in Ohio. These participants completed surveys when arriving to the shelter and before leaving the shelter. The results of the study showed increased self-efficacy and higher safety-related empowerment from receiving trauma informed care. This study demonstrated the positive effects that trauma informed care can have on domestic violence shelter residents and established a platform for future researchers to gain more knowledge on this topic.

When using trauma-informed practice with survivors of domestic violence, it is crucial to recognize and address negative concepts or victim-blaming mentalities that can surround them. Trauma researchers emphasize that traumatic stress often stems from feelings of powerlessness and disconnection. In supporting women who have experienced intimate partner violence, it is essential to move beyond only focusing on individual factors that might blame the survivor. Understanding how race, ethnicity, culture, and societal factors influence their experiences is key. For instance, the question of why women stay in abusive relationships is often misunderstood. Research shows that fear, especially fear of retaliation, concern for children, and lack of support, can greatly influence their decisions. It is not simply a matter of choice but rather a complex issue of various factors. A trauma-informed approach shifts the perspective from viewing survivors' behaviors as pathological to recognizing them as adaptive and resilient responses to trauma. Unlike trauma-specific models, trauma-informed care helps social workers understand the impact of trauma on individuals, guiding their interventions to minimize the risk of re-traumatization.

This approach empowers survivors to have a voice in their plans and decisions, including when to leave an abusive relationship. Overall, restoring power and control to survivors is a fundamental principle in working with them. By adopting a trauma-informed perspective and prioritizing survivors' voices and choices, social workers can better support them in their journey towards healing and safety.

Conclusion

In conclusion, trauma-informed care plays a vital role in supporting survivors of domestic violence on their journey towards healing and empowerment. I believe that trauma informed practice is something that should continue to be used at Partnership. I believe that we should use this research to evaluate our current practices and be sure that they align with effective trauma informed care. Staff members should evaluate their own personal biases so that they are aware of them and do not allow them to affect how they treat clients. I believe that creating an environment that prioritizes trauma informed practice will help our domestic violence clients to feel safe and to be able to begin healing without facing re-traumatization.

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