

Talking About Trauma

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet for applying trauma-informed principles (For General Public)

Guiding Trauma-Informed Principles:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness
- Choice
- Collaboration
- Empowerment

1 Safety

Tips to help a person who has experienced interpersonal trauma feel safe when you are having a conversation with them:

1 (a) Physical Safety

- Is the physical/geographical space in which you are having the conversation safe? Is it away from busy roads if outside or in a room in which you are unlikely to be interrupted if you are inside?
- Have you asked the person if there is anything you can do to make the space more comfortable? Many factors, some which we can't predict, can lead to stress reactions e.g. some people might be triggered by a particular visual cue.
- Will the person be physically safe after, as well as during, the conversation? This applies to the situation to which they are returning as well as their general levels of arousal. You may need to help them with a basic [Grounding Exercise](#).

1 (B) Emotional Safety

- ‘Choose your time’: if you are initiating the conversation, have you chosen a time when the person is likely to be receptive?
- Does your non-verbal communication show that you are supportive, focused and listening in a way which is tuned into the person?
- Maintaining consistent but not fixed eye contact is important. Take care not to look distracted.
- Are you alert to possible signs of stress in the person’s body?
- This can include dilated pupils or changes in skin colour. The person may be twisting a tissue or take long pauses.
- Do you encourage the person to take their time and take short breaks if they need to?
- If the conversation is long you could return to it after a short break.
- Will the person be emotionally safe after, as well as during the conversation? Are you able to help them to lower their level of arousal if necessary?

2 Trustworthiness

Tips to build trust in a conversation with a person who has experienced interpersonal trauma:

You Can Build Trust If You:

- Are always attentive to physical and emotional safety.
- Always tune in to the person’s level of comfort and ask them whether/how you might improve it.
- Pay ongoing attention to your and their non-verbal communication. Is the person showing signs of stress? Are you being sufficiently supportive?
- Take a gentle approach which does not convey ‘an agenda’.
- Listen in the right way; do not interrupt the person unless there is an issue with their level of arousal; i.e. if ‘window of tolerance’ is exceeded.
- Ask the person how they are feeling after (as well as during) the conversation. Be ready to help them with ‘grounding’ if/as necessary (see [Grounding Exercises](#)).

3 Choice

Tips to increase options and choices in a conversation with a person who has experienced interpersonal trauma (questions for consideration)

Enabling choice

- When you are starting a conversation with a person you know or suspect may be experiencing interpersonal trauma, provide them with choice/s around the conversation.
- Has the person chosen the logistical details, including the date, time and venue? Or have you discussed your decisions with them?
- How can you give the person greater choice about the way the conversation is held and develops?
- In what other way/s can you give the person other choices, even if they are small?
- How can responding to, rather than starting, the conversation affect the extent to which you can foster choices for the person?

4 Collaboration

Tips to help us collaborate in conversations with people who experience interpersonal trauma

Collaboration

- ‘Do something with’ a person rather than do something ‘for’ or ‘to’ them.
- Don’t assume that the person can’t act on their behalf or engage in decisions and actions which affect them.
- Recognise when additional assistance may be necessary.
- Recognise that we engage more effectively with people when we cooperate with them.
- Act in a spirit of cooperation whenever and as much as you can.

5 Empowerment

Tips to maximise empowerment in conversations with people who experience interpersonal trauma

Towards Empowerment

- Understand that interpersonal trauma often stems from and fosters disempowerment, and that taking steps to feeling more empowered is essential to healing.
- Recognise that the way in which a conversation is arranged and conducted can contribute to a sense of empowerment.
- Recognise that trauma which occurs in relationships erodes self-esteem and a person's sense of their own abilities. Try to identify ways to make your interactions respectful, democratic and inclusive.
- As far as possible, seek the person's preferences around the logistics of your conversation and try to meet them in a collaborative way.

To read the full paper: Talking About Trauma - Guide to Everyday Conversations for the General Public

<https://blueknot.org.au/resources/blue-knot-publications/talking-about-trauma-guide-to-everyday-conversations-for-the-general-public/>

