

# Integrating Trauma Knowledge into Organisational Cultures Full Explainer Guide



Trauma Informed  
Stoke-on-Trent  
and Staffordshire

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TRAUMA INFORMED CONSULTANCY SERVICES

# Introduction

The journey to becoming a trauma-informed one where the values of the trauma informed approach flow through everything an organisation and are felt by every member of the community must first start with leadership. In this guide, we will explore the need for leaders and staff alike to embody these principles in all processes, policies and interactions whether they be between colleagues or when working with children and their families.

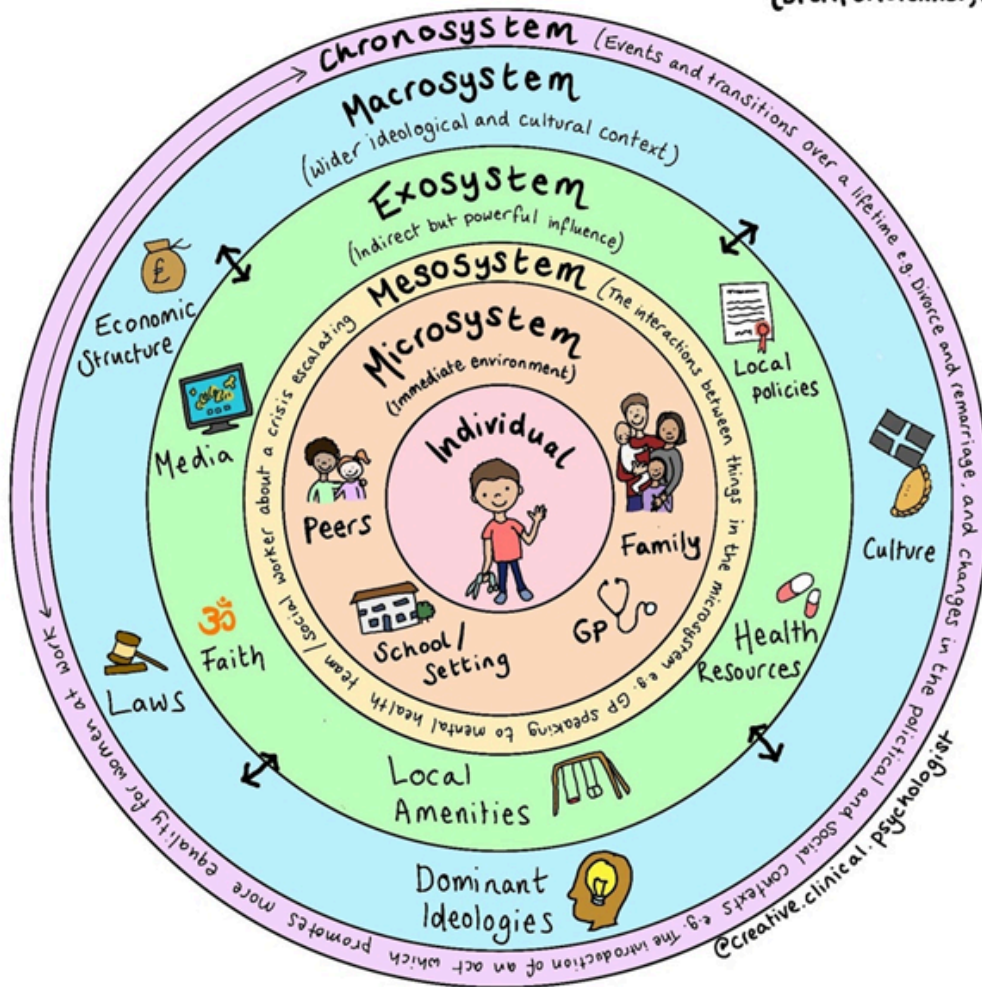
# Integrating Trauma Knowledge into Organisational Cultures

Integrating knowledge and acting upon it to inform all we do is something that a collaborative, focused and sustained effort with the end goal of this being written into the fabric of our organisations. However, here are some of the requirements:

- Regular training is needed to increase the awareness and confidence of all members of an organisation.
- All understand and use the 6 values of Trauma Informed Practice, acting as a roadmap to navigate the transformation.
- Open and honest conversations with all members of the organisation who are receptive to the existence of trauma and committed to hearing and valuing all voices.
- The environment is one of psychological safety where children and adults alike feel safe, listened to and nurtured. They are empowered to share their experiences and can play active, involved roles where they are offered choices wherever possible.
- As illustrated below, all members of the organisations have a strong view of the systems around a child, where the organisations sits and how it can interact with other organisations.

# Ecological Systems Theory

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)



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# The 6 Principles of Trauma Informed Practice

The six principles of trauma-informed practice are explained by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (**SAMHSA**) are discussed in detailed in other guides such as 'Introduction to Trauma' but here is a quick reminder:

## **Safety**

- Physical and psychological safety of entire community means that everyone can safely share their experiences free from fear.

## **Trustworthiness and transparency**

- Trust is constructed through open, involved decisions and practices which fully involve the service user.
- Communication styles are predictable, clear and respectful (more about this in the trauma informed language guide).

## **Peer support**

- Peer support builds hope and security so that nobody feels alone, working towards mutual understanding.
- Self-help groups can be explored with those who are interested subject to the remit of your service.
- Peer support is safe and validates everyone's experiences.

## **Collaboration and mutuality**

- The organisation recognises that the healing process is not linear, with each individual being unique.
- Teamwork and the levelling out of power differences between service users and the staff in an organisation breaks down the 'us and them.'

## **Empowerment, voice, and choice**

- We look first to everyone's strengths, not defining them by their traumatic experiences, recognising that there is much to learn from each other.
- The experiences and learning from others informs the care/support and plans for each individual with each feeling that they are empowered by choices.

### **Cultural, historical, and gender issues**

- The organisation goes beyond being anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive as it recognises that cultural connections and the need to address historical trauma is essential.
- All cultural, historical, and gender backgrounds of individuals are considered meaningful to ensure a person-centred approach which meets the unique needs of each individual.



# The Power of Transformational Leadership

Integrating trauma knowledge into our organisational cultures start with leadership. In this section, we will consider the power of a leader to encourage a collective effort and to celebrate as well as utilise the capabilities of every team member. This is vital if we are able to understand that success is not a solo journey but where we all must grow together. Environments that are supportive and nurturing in this way promote healing.

## Understanding and identifying the needs of our team

To be a transformational leader, one that can take an organisation on a journey towards trauma informed leadership, we must first be able to support and be aware of our employees, our teams. Indicators that someone might have lived or living experiences of trauma that are currently having an impact on their behaviour might include:

- Arriving late to work
- A change in their patterns of punctuality
- Struggling with aspects of the job they can usually manage
- Differences in how they interact with colleagues

As we have said previously, everyone will present very differently when they are struggling with some members of the organisation also experiencing high levels of anxiety or have difficulties shifting a low mood. These differences in presentations cannot be controlled by the individual. They are the product of genetics, history, personality factors and much more. This also means that the way in which we support our staff also requires personalisation as some may navigate their struggles privately and might need some time off or may request some changes to how they go about the work day in the short term but for others, the impact will last longer and they will require further support.

## Transformational leaders address under-performance supportively

Opening a conversation about under-performance with the threat of punitive measures such as termination of a contract is likely to be interpreted as threatening by someone with underlying trauma. Not only is this demotivating but it could lead to re-traumatisation.

This doesn't mean that we will simply ignore under-performance. Instead, a trauma informed approach considers it this way:

- Use curiosity and enquire as to 'why' there has been a change in performance
- Explore barriers to thriving at work and consider how these can be reduced
- Compassionate enquiry into their situation enables a collaborative means of addressing the challenges

Such steps enable under-performance to be addressed but in an environment of trust and safety which is more likely to lead to the desired outcomes for all involved.

## **Transformational leaders recognise that getting it right for their teams gets it right for the whole community**

The research evidence on the benefits that stem from the power of leaders who champion this sort of approach are so far reaching. We have hyperlinked to the original studies for those who are interested and want to take their learning deeper.

A **study** found that teams with trauma informed leaders had higher mental health and well-being with further **research** finding that when employees were held, heard and nurtured at work, they were more likely to continue their role. Reduced turnover saves valuable resources as recruitment and training are expensive tasks. These resources can be used to develop other aspects of the service/organisation, again benefiting the service users too.

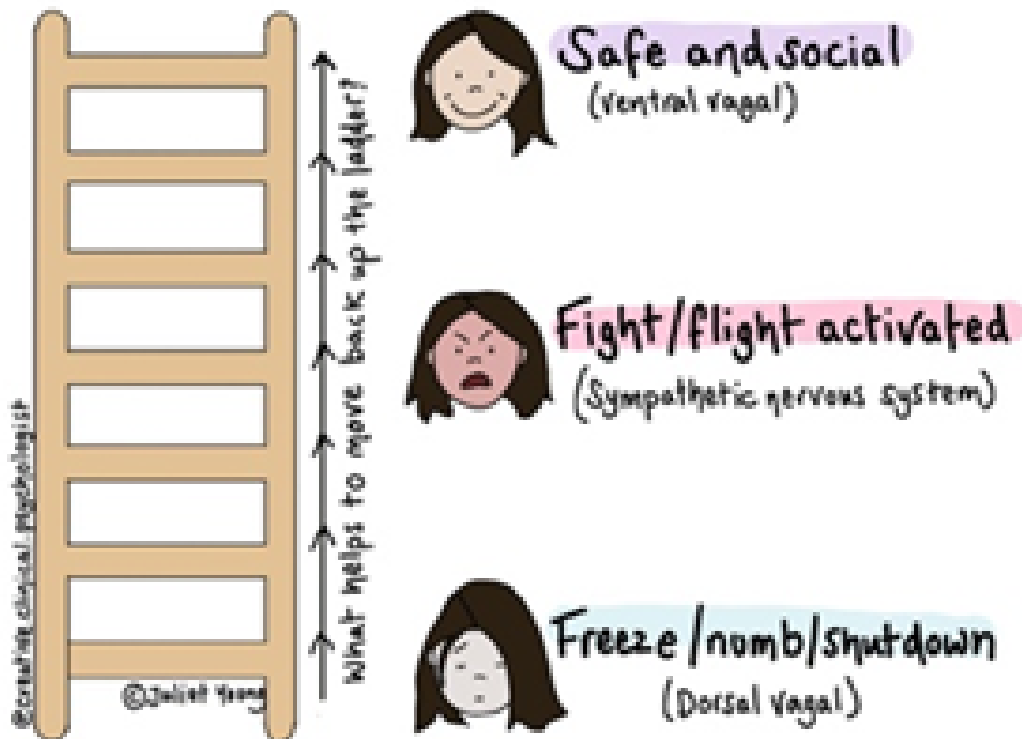
**Evidence** indicates that safe and supported individuals can be their authentic selves in all aspects of their life including at work. These feelings of safety and being valued to increased creativity, innovation, and productivity. When and if conflict does occur, the most value was found by **studies** which featured empathetic leaders who understood that this stems from something else bubbling below the surface (see image below: when we feel threatened, tensions can rise).

Compliance with legal and ethical standards also aligns with legal and ethical standards related to employee well-being, reducing the risk of legal cases and ethical violations.



# Polyvagal Ladder

A tool to think about body and mind states and what someone needs to feel safe



## Community is valued

The concept of valuing community recognises that we are all interconnected, and the well-being of one is intertwined with the well-being of all. It involves creating a sense of belonging, social cohesion, and shared purpose within a group or society. When leaders prioritise community, they create a supportive environment where individuals feel safe and supported. A strong sense of community can be a powerful buffer against the negative impacts of trauma and can aid in the recovery process.

“People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other” - **Martin Luther King Jr.**

Together, these principles form a holistic approach to leadership and community development, one that promotes the well-being of all individuals, particularly those who have experienced trauma or adversity. When leaders incorporate these principles into their organisations or communities, they not only create environments that are more inclusive and equitable but also enhance resilience, foster healing, and empower individuals to overcome the challenges they face.

## Valuing staff voices

The importance of voice and the multitude of voices cannot be overstated. It is a fundamental human instinct to connect, communicate, and share with others (Cardiff et al., 2020). This can take various forms, including the sharing of knowledge, addressing concerns, expressing care, nurturing relationships, and collaboratively brainstorming ideas and solutions. While the concept of 'voice' within organisations may sometimes lack a precise and universally accepted definition, one thing is evident: without 'voice,' an organisation cannot exist.

Could you try some of these strategies to try to further promote staff voice in your organisation?

- Suggestion boxes (these are useful for employees who would rather share anonymously)
- Team meetings
- Staff surveys or focus groups
- 1-1 meetings (make the purpose for the meeting clear e.g. to gather feedback or views so as not to alarm employees)

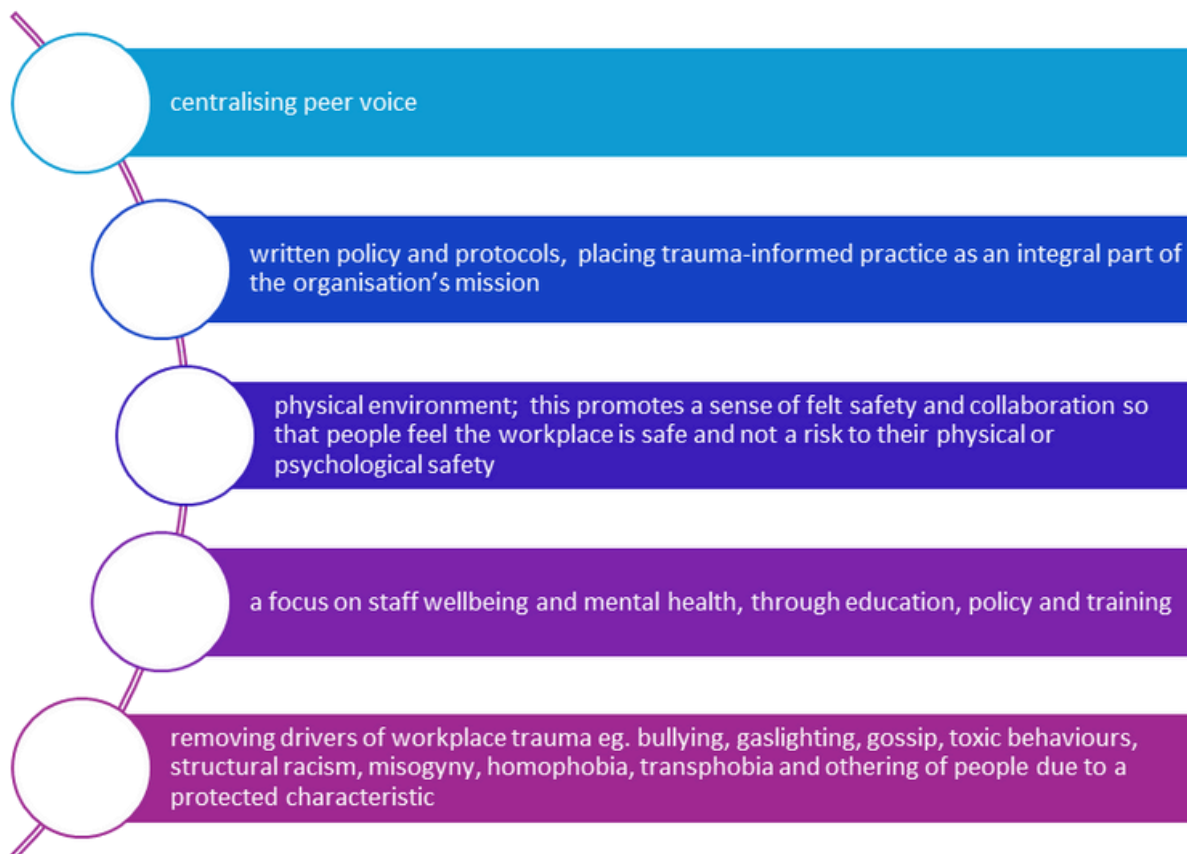
You will also want to spend time reflecting on the fact that many people may have had negative experiences previously where they have made a suggestion or provided feedback. This means that for many, there could now be a lack of engagement in conversations around feedback in order to protect themselves.

Fostering psychological safety is paramount in eliminating the apprehension that people may face when expressing their thoughts.

When you receive feedback or comments, it's imperative to treat them as if they are a valuable gift and express gratitude with a simple "thank you." Keep in mind that for some employees, voicing their thoughts may have required a considerable amount of courage, as they may have hesitated to speak up since their school days. For optimal effectiveness, communicate to the employee what action you intend to take based on their input. If they perceive that nothing has come from their feedback, they are less likely to share further insights in the future.

## Trauma informed organisational cultures foster a sense of belonging

Putting relationship building at the core of everything we do contributes towards creating a sense of belonging in addition to the factors below:



## Implementing trauma-informed policies and practices for children and young people in our organisations

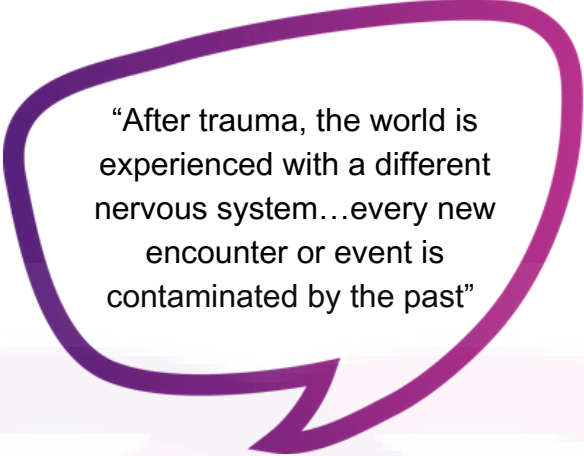
To implement trauma-informed policies and practices well, we need to consider **SAMHSA's 4 Rs Framework** which help us to consider what our initial priorities need to be as start a process of reflection and continuous improvement. Whilst it is important to note that this is not all we need to do, it certainly provides a meaningful starting point.

### Realise

This guiding assumption is about understanding and acknowledging not only the existence but also the impact of trauma is has as well as the fact that recovery from trauma is possible.

We can learn from the wise words of **Bessel Van Der Kolk**:

Trauma changes everything. It changes how people see the world, how their brain functions, how they see others and what they see in themselves. Realising this helps us to be able to create an organisational culture which supports children in ways that contribute towards recovery but realisation is the first step.



“After trauma, the world is experienced with a different nervous system...every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past”

## Recognise

Recognise the indicators of trauma in ourselves, our colleagues and the children we support is critical to a culture where everyone can thrive. You can read about this in-depth in the introduction to trauma and vicarious trauma guides.

Empathy and compassion are the fuel that trauma informed organisations need. Recognition is the first step to understanding...

## Respond

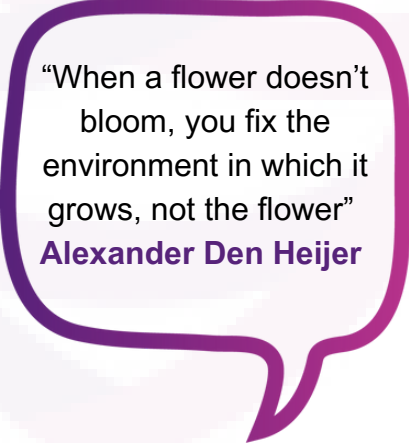
There is no cookie cutter perfect response that fits everyone. Instead, we can use our trauma informed principles to personalise our approaches:

- Respond by first ensuring safety: find out what the child’s preferences are e.g. how they want to communicate, where they feel comfortable, what their triggers are etc. Use clear and factual language free of euphemisms and metaphorical expression. Be clear and transparent in all you do. Conversations can and do make a huge difference as Dr Lisa Cherry shares in her book.
- Respond by connecting: **Dr Bruce Perry** refers to “therapeutic encounters” and **Dr Karen Treisman** suggests that “Every interaction is viewed as an intervention.” This means that every time we respond to trauma, every time we use a trauma informed approach, we are initiating the opportunity for a “turnaround point” for the young person.

## Resist

We must take a preventative approach to avoid re-traumatising those we work with.

We can do this by following our trauma informed principles!



“When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower”  
**Alexander Den Heijer**

## Transitioning towards trauma informed organisational cultures

Using the 4R's will enable us to look at all of our policies and practices through a trauma informed lens. A good starting point would be to conduct the audit, matrix and action plan included with these resources.

Don't worry! You may not have all of the answers yet but by conducting an initial review, we will be able to establish where our organisation is on this journey and start to plan how we can enhance our practice further. As highlighted in the Co-Production Guide, there is so much strength and knowledge within your community, we just need to draw on it.

These resources and the wider training offer available will contribute towards every member of your organisations using a common language, children and young people play active roles in decision-making about themselves and the service/organisation and this will be supported by external partners too to create a safe, nurturing web around children and young people.

# Creating Trauma Informed Guidelines

- Establishing clear protocols for managing space, handling disclosures of trauma with sensitivity and confidence, understanding what is behind a behaviour and minimise risk when these behaviours are displayed.
- All staff must receive ongoing CPD around how to apply trauma-informed principles and how these sit within the values and ethos of the specific organisation they are operating within.
- All guidelines should be co-produced, transparent and consistent and considered from the perspective of children and young people, caregivers and professionals.

Effective implementation will require provision mapping of internal and external resources for support for children and young people. This could include youth support groups, counselling services and more. This information must be clearly accessible and in an understandable format. A good place would be to integrate local and national support onto every organisation's website, establishing joint working or having information sheets in waiting areas for example.

All guidelines should be reviewed regularly with service users being able to clear know how to provide feedback. This feedback should be taken on board and actioned so that we can uphold the principles of both working co-productively but also in a trauma informed way.

# Suggestions for Wider Reading

Below are some suggestions for wider reading in addition to the resources hyperlinked throughout the document.

Cardiff, S., Sanders, K., Webster, J., & Manley, K. (2020). Guiding lights for effective workplace cultures that are also good places to work. *International Practice Development Journal*, 10(2).

Home Office (2023) Trauma-Informed Practice: Learning from Experience of Violence Reduction Unit delivery 2021-2023. Available from: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65b3b99b0c75e30012d80125/TIP+Learning+from+Experience+FINAL.pdf> [Accessed: 4.04.2024].

Jonsdottir, I. J., & Kristinsson, K. (2020). Supervisors' active-empathetic listening as an important antecedent of work engagement. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(21), 7976.

NAPAC (2024) Trauma-informed practice. Available from: <https://napac.org.uk/trauma-informed-practice-what-it-is-and-why-napac-supports-it/> [Accessed: 4.04.2024].

Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022) Working Definition of Trauma-Informed Practice . Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice> [Accessed: 4.04.2024].

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