



Bringing Trauma-Informed Principles into Youth Peer Relationships

Youth Peer Providers can use this tip sheet to learn more about bringing trauma-informed principles into their youth peer support practice!

Trauma-Informed Principles¹

- Safety: Physical and Emotional
- Trustworthiness and Transparency
- Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
- Collaboration and Mutuality
- Cultural, Historical, and Gender Responsiveness
- Peer Support

What is trauma-informed care?

Many young people involved in peer support services have experienced one or more traumatic events in their lives. These experiences can have long-lasting effects that require support from others around them. Trauma-informed care recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual's life - including youth peer providers and the young adults they work with.¹

Why is it important for youth peers to practice being trauma-informed?

When an interaction is not working, or is challenging, it can be because a young person feels that one (or more) of these very important principles aren't being valued in the relationship. Youth peers can practice these principles to build trust in a relationship. Peer support can recognize and respect young people's safety needs and interrupt the re-traumatization cycle, allowing the young person to begin the healing process.

How can Youth Peer Providers be sensitive to the impacts of trauma?

The peer role is deeply rooted in the idea of not trying to "fix" people but rather help them find inner strength that allows them to grow into the person they want to be.

Peer relationships are constantly evolving. You'll need to check-in on and plan to negotiate many aspects of your relationship- your boundaries, what safety in the relationship looks like, and what parts of your story you are comfortable sharing.

¹ University at Buffalo <http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html>





As the relationship evolves between you and a young person, you will learn more about what a young person needs from you, how trauma-informed practices will look in this specific relationship, and what communication methods and engagement strategies work best. Keep asking questions about what is working each time you meet and adjust accordingly. The suggestions below can help you get started creating a more welcoming environment for many young people. Your success using these strategies will expand with experience.

| Peer Providers Practice Trauma-Informed Care By: | What This Might Look Like: |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normalize trauma responses | Strategically share personal experiences with trauma responses, like feeling angry or scared |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure physical and virtual meeting spaces are safer and more comfortable for everyone | Negotiate when and where you will meet- this might mean meeting in public, well-lit spaces, or addressing privacy concerns if meeting virtually (e.g., having a code word to indicate the young person is no longer alone) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create consistency in the relationship | Be on time: follow-up the same day and be as predictable as possible. Follow through with what you say will do and don't make promises you cannot keep. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openly give and receive messages of shared experiences and offers of support | Listen without trying to solve problems and refrain from giving advice. Affirm and validate the young adult's lived experience by sharing your own appropriately. "That makes sense to me. When I was..." "I can understand why you'd feel that way. In my experience, family can be complicated..." |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster relationships that establish new ways of understanding a traumatic experience | Share stories of your own experiences of healing; connect with other young adults who have experienced similar experiences to reflect; model hope; explore expanding a young person's understanding of response to experiencing trauma |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster individual strengths of young adults | Notice, name, and create opportunities for young adults to practice and use their skills, passion, and knowledge |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce resilience and building resourcefulness | Model coping skills, accessing resources, and finding information. Practice these skills with young adults as you collaboratively address their needs, challenges, and questions. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide messages of hope and recovery | Share parts of your lived experience appropriately to demonstrate that growth and change are possible. <i>"I used to smoke cigarettes, too. When I thought about my wellness goals..."</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide credible resources for additional support and/or education about their experience | Map local community resources that are available to young adults and that other young people have shared are trustworthy and supportive |



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR YOUTH PEER SUPPORTERS

Many trauma survivors say that they have experienced growth *because of* the traumatic event. And while that may not mean that the pain or fear from trauma goes away, it demonstrates that individuals are able to find meaning *inside* the trauma, learn more about themselves in the process, become increasingly resourceful, and find opportunity to apply that increased self-knowledge to their lives. Youth peer providers can model how finding meaning in traumatic experiences can create a path toward healing.

The following questions encourage youth peers to reflect on how to apply trauma-informed principles in their work. Use these questions for individual reflection, in supervision discussions, and in group peer co-reflections. These questions could be used to explore a relationship with a specific young person receiving youth peer support or to identify trauma-informed practices youth peers can use across all relationships with youth.

SAFETY: PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL - experiencing trauma is a threat to a young person's safety and sense of self. Creating physical and emotional safety is key to building peer relationships.

1. What does a physically safe space look like for you? What might that look like for the youth you support?
2. How do you check in with youth to see what safety means and looks like to them?
3. What do you need to have in place to help each other remain safe?

TRUSTWORTHINESS & TRANSPARENCY - recognize that trauma breaks trust and violates boundaries. Seek to practice transparency and build trust.

1. How do you build trust and maintain trust with the youth you work with?
2. What might create distrust in peer relationships and how do you rebuild trust if it was broken?
3. What might it look like if someone is distrusting the system? How might you help them build trust back within the provider network?

EMPOWERMENT, VOICE, & CHOICE - trauma can minimize voice. Work to maximize healing by centering a young person's voice.

1. Where do you create space for youth to have voice and choice in your relationship?
2. How do you continue to practice peer support when youth make choices you disagree with?
3. How can you make opportunities for choice in systems where it often feels there is no choice?

COLLABORATION & MUTUALITY - experiencing trauma can leave one feeling alone. Encourage empowerment, partnership, and participation.

1. What does collaboration and mutuality mean to you? What does that look like in practice?
2. How do you work with a young person to enhance their natural supports?
3. How can collaboration bring people together and create more connections?





CULTURE, HISTORY, & RESPONSIVENESS - trauma experiences and responses are connected to culture, history, race, gender, location, and language. Be responsive to the needs of diverse communities and recognize structural inequities.

1. How does your culture and history inform your worldview? How do you support youth with different cultural and historical experiences?
2. How might you support a young person whose gender identity is not honored and affirmed by others in their life?
3. What are the unique pieces of your culture and what aspects can support healing for yourself and other young people?

PEER SUPPORT- peer support builds trust, establishes safety and collaboration, and shares lived experience. Provide opportunities to form mutual relationships to learn and grow together.

1. How do you share your lived experience in ways that promote growth and healing without oversharing or sharing for your own sake?
2. How do you care for yourself when you hear other peoples' stories that activate you?
3. Where do you receive peer support? What are your sources for healing and renewal?