



D. Institutional Re-traumatization



When providing this training to advocates in the community, the topic of institutional re-traumatization kept coming up over and over again. So, we decided to integrate it into the training.



Re-traumatization

“A situation, attitude, interaction, or environment that replicates the events or dynamics of the original trauma and triggers the overwhelming feelings and reactions associated with them.”

Source: <https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/preventingretraumatization-a-macro-social-work-approach-to-trauma-informed-practices-policies/>



What do we mean when we talk about re-traumatization?

Here’s a general definition: “A situation, attitude, interaction, or environment that replicates the events or dynamics of the original trauma and triggers the overwhelming feelings and reactions associated with them.”

When we think of the ways in which this may apply to economic trauma, we can imagine certain situations, attitudes, interactions and or environments may trigger a traumatic response.

Source: <https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/preventingretraumatization-a-macro-social-work-approach-to-trauma-informed-practices-policies/>

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Institutional Re-traumatization

1st step in financial independence
= public assistance

Trauma (incl. financial trauma)
can be exacerbated by injustice in
social structures, services &
institutions.



Here we'll explore the issue of *one* kind of re-traumatization a bit more in depth: what is sometimes called “Institutional retraumatization”

Very often one of the first steps in becoming financially independent involves seeking out public assistance, so this form of re-traumatization is particularly relevant to economic empowerment. As we have heard from advocate experiences, this is not an easy process and the power dynamics in these settings are often not only a deterrent but end up creating more harm.

The big idea is that trauma can be exacerbated by injustice in social structures, services, and institutions.

Institutional Re-traumatization

Happens not just in legal or medical institutions (police, courts, hospitals, etc.) but also social assistance services (e.g. ahcccs, welfare)

Local advocates reiterate difficulty of navigating this system



Much of the literature about the topic of re-traumatization focuses on medical or legal institutions (police, courts, hospitals, etc.) but not much is said about how it can also take place in the system of social assistance services.

When providing this training to advocates in the community, the difficulty of navigating these systems was one of the issues that kept coming up. Very often, victims are treated poorly by service providers when they seek out assistance (welfare, ahcccs, etc.), making them feel badly for being there in the first place.

"There are always long lines at DES or long wait times on the phone and the messages you get are really inconsistent. Their policies are really rigid and it's not a very human experience, staff members can be really cold. There is a long history in the US of vilifying people who access welfare benefits and it feels like the process is difficult on purpose."



A local Tucson advocate who has helped people apply for public assistance shared that the experience can be very frustrating and disempowering, this is what she said:

"There are always long lines at DES or long wait times on the phone and the messages you get are really inconsistent. Their policies are really rigid and it's not a very human experience, staff members can be really cold. There is a long history in the US of vilifying people who access welfare benefits and it feels like the process is difficult on purpose."

“... these interactions
disempower recipients
and **mimic** the conditions
of abuse.”




Source: "Women, Abuse, and the Welfare Bureaucracy",
Journal of Women and Social Work

One study that looked at this issue centered around the question of the experiences of welfare recipients in their interactions with frontline workers.

The study revealed significant “emotional and economic abuse both in the welfare system and their personal lives.” They found that “[i]nteractions with frontline workers who implement the rules and regulationsdisempower recipients and mimic the conditions of abuse that these women have already experienced.”

Source: “Women, Abuse, and the Welfare Bureaucracy”, *Journal of Women and Social Work*, Spring 2006, 84-96.



How are conditions of abuse mimicked?

- EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Extreme rudeness

Disrespect

Humiliation

Talking down to

- ECONOMIC ABUSE

Use of sanctions

Or threatening to use sanctions to reduce benefits

Source: "Women, Abuse, and the Welfare Bureaucracy",
Journal of Women and Social Work



How are the conditions of abuse mimicked?

The researchers explain that [t]wo categories on the Power and Control Wheel, emotional abuse and economic abuse, describe these experiences. Meaning, what happened in the office matches the examples that are given in the wheel.

D. Institutional Re-traumatization

- Services that mirror power & control experienced before
- Client viewed as passive recipient; provider as superior
- Organizational policies & procedures place their needs over the needs and comfort of whom they're supposed to be serving.

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Specialists in Trauma informed organizations put it like this:


"In some cases, trauma affected people can encounter services that mirror the power and control they experienced in the abusive relationships from which the trauma originated.

In many trauma "un-informed" systems, the client is viewed as a passive recipient and the service provider or care system as possessing superior knowledge and resources. Unfortunately, this relationship with a powerful authority figure whose opinions and wishes take precedence is tragically reminiscent of the abuse dynamic in which the trauma affected person was forced to accept an unequal relationship in order to avoid worse treatment.


Organizational policies and procedures can often place the needs of the organization over the needs, and comfort of those they are serving."

Source:

<https://trauma-informed.ca/trauma-informed-care/trauma-informed-organizations/>

What can we do? 

Validate process is as hard. It *is* “a thing”, “you’re not alone”. Prepare mentally, address expectations. Provide “coaching”: affirmations or helpful language.




- So what can we do?
- All of this helps to reassert the importance of a trauma-informed approach to economic empowerment. As advocates, it may not be possible to eliminate these bad experiences for our clients when they try to access public assistance, but here are some things that we CAN do:
 - [Click] Raise awareness of the issue of institutional trauma and educate our clients on it. It's not like they're imagining it, is “a thing”, it’s a common occurrence.
 - [click] Prepare victims mentally, warn them that navigating the system will probably be difficult mentally and emotionally.
 - [click] Many times we won’t be able to accompany them personally, but it is still possible to provide them with some kind of “coaching”. Such coaching may look like affirmations (“you have the right to receive this kind of help”, “you have the right to be treated with respect”, etc.) and/or specific language that they can use when they need to push.
 - Important because trauma can affect some language areas of the brain, making it hard for survivors to articulate ideas, for example, describe their current finances or express what they need exactly, so sometimes it may be helpful to rehearse or help them put stuff into words that they can use when they go to request assistance.

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QUESTIONS FOR SUPPORTING A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH:

- To what extent are program activities and settings consistent with the principles of: Safety, Trust, Choice, Collaboration, Compassion, and Empowerment?
- To what extent does the program maximize trustworthiness by making service delivery clear, ensuring consistent... open, honest, and respectful communication?
- To what extent does the program maximize client experiences of choice and control?



Experts in trauma-informed organizations provide us with a number of both Self-Assessment and Organizational Assessments to determine what extent an individual and/or organization is trauma informed.

The following is an overview of questions common in most assessments:

- To what extent are program activities and settings consistent with the principles of: Safety, Trust, Choice, Collaboration, Compassion, and Empowerment?
- To what extent does the program maximize trustworthiness by making service delivery clear, ensuring consistent... open, honest, and respectful communication?
- To what extent does the program maximize client experiences of choice and control?

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