

Scoping Systematic Review of Trauma- Informed Approaches to Support Learners in Higher Education and Employees in the Workplace

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Introduction

There is abundant literature that displays ways in which traumatic experiences can impact an individual's educational and professional achievements, mental health and productivity. How trauma affects an individual depends on many factors such as personal characteristics, the nature and specifics of the event, developmental stage, the perceived meaning of the trauma, and sociocultural influences (Muldoon et al., 2020). Grossman et al. (2021) conceptualize trauma as being experienced on multiple levels (Figure 1.0), including individual, interpersonal, and collective. These levels are not isolated but intersect and interact dynamically. Examples of trauma include adverse childhood experiences, homophobia, sexual harassment, hate crimes, human trafficking, bullying and events related to the social and behavioral determinants of health.

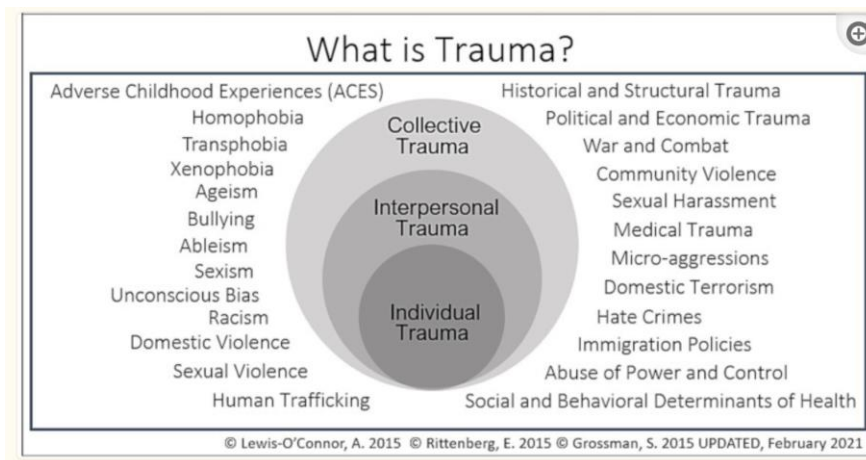


Figure 1.0. Trauma can be experienced on multiple levels (Grossman et al. (2021))

Aims

This scoping systematic review will explore existing literature trauma- informed approaches. Trauma- informed care (TIC) is a well- studied concept, which is a healthcare approach that recognizes the impact of trauma on an individual's life and emphasizes creating safe, nurturing environments where interprofessional support can be provided (Chokshi and Goldman, 2021). While TIC is extensively documented in healthcare settings, there is a notable gap in literature addressing its application in post-secondary education and the workplace. This gap is detrimental towards advocating for safe and inclusive

environments that will support faculty, students and staff. The aim of this paper is to assess how trauma-informed approaches can be implemented in higher education and in the workplace settings. By exploring these applications, the goal is to identify strategies to create greater belonging and more supportive communities for all individuals.

Methodology

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To capture more recent literature, only studies that were published after 2015 were included in the review. As this is a year that is relatively close to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, this reflects a period where significant shifts in public health, workplace policies, and research priorities began to emerge. The inclusion of these recent studies ensures that the review encompasses the latest findings, trends, and advancements that have been influenced by the pandemic and its global impact on various fields. Additionally, opinion articles and reflection pieces were excluded to maintain the focus on evidence-based practices. The included studies highlight best practices and practical interventions for trauma-informed approaches. Only English literature was included in the search strategy. Lastly, only research from North America was included to ensure the findings are relevant and applicable. This focus helps provide practical recommendations and best practices suited to the North America's needs and conditions.

The Final Search Strategy

Table 1.0. The Final Search Strategy

Concept	Keywords and Terms Used
Subject	(TS=(trauma- informed OR trauma informed)) AND
Approach	(TS=(principle* OR practice* OR approach* OR guid* AND
First Population	(TS= (workplace* OR faculty OR staff OR employee* OR team* OR organization* OR institution* OR leadership)) OR
Second Population	(TS= (higher education OR post- secondary education OR university education OR college education OR university))

NOT	AB= Child* AND AB= Elementary
Filters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year 2015+ • North America • English studies

- **TS= Topic:** It searches topic terms that include this term in the title, abstract and author keywords
- **AB= Abstract:** It searches the abstract field within a record, allowing for a focused search on the summarized content of the document.
- **OR, AND, NOT:** are boolean operators. OR returns results with any of the stated words in the list. AND returns results where all terms are included
- * is a wildcard term so that any letters following it may be included in the results. E.g., child* also returns 'children,'

Using the search strategy in table 1.0, Web of Science database displayed 132 search results.

These results were filtered using the inclusion and exclusion criteria in the methodology. A list of terms was cultivated that would help filter the search results to exclude studies that do not fit the inclusion and exclusion criteria. For example, there were too many results on trauma-informed approaches related to children and elementary school education. Since the focus of this review is post- secondary settings and the workplace environment, studies with the terms 'Child' and 'Elementary' were determined as a part of the 'NOT' category. Out of the studies produced, four were selected which best represent trauma-informed approaches within higher education. Three articles were selected which demonstrated trauma-informed practices to support staff and teams.

Discussion

Trauma- Informed Approaches to Support Learners in Higher Education

All the articles included in this review highly reinstate the importance of trauma-informed approaches in higher education. In fact, Henshaw (2022) highlights trauma-informed approaches as an

“essential framework” for human service organizations. There is extensive literature reinforcing the notion that the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for trauma-informed policies to support students' academic success. This increase is attributed to several factors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a notable rise in traumatic events globally, including race-based discrimination (Patton & Caffrey, 2023) and systemic violence against people of color (Henshaw, 2022). Global events like the Black Lives Matter movement, which emerged in response to the cultural and collective trauma following the death of George Floyd, serve as a significant example.

Given the intersection of trauma and race, the current research calls for higher education institutions to be more culturally responsive in their trauma-informed approaches. Research shows that amongst students studying STEM fields such as science, technology, engineering and math, those of underrepresented minority background, first-generation and low-income students were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Henshaw, 2022). Data also shows that communities targeted by hate crimes have experienced an increase in exposure to traumatic events since the onset of the pandemic. Being "trauma-informed" involves addressing the cultural needs of individuals, including matters related to their intersectional identities, and considering the historical traumas experienced by the person and or their cultural group (Henshaw, 2022).

Patton and Caffrey (2023) propose that higher education institutions can implement recommendations outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). These guidelines encompass four fundamental assumptions for organizations and six essential principles for trauma-informed approaches. This can be utilized at both the administrative and instructional levels in higher education.

Figure 1. Trauma-Informed Approaches Outlined by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (Papa et al., 2023), (Davidson, 2021), (Henshaw, 2022), (Patton and Caffrey, 2023)

The four key assumptions for organizations include:

- **Realizing** the widespread impact of trauma and its role in recovery
- **Recognizing** the signs and symptoms of trauma for all employees and students within the university
- **Responding** to the trauma by changing policies and procedures to support those who are experiencing trauma; and
- **Resisting traumatization** by actively resisting practices that will re- traumatize

The six key principles for trauma- informed practice include:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Empowerment and choice
- Cultural, historical and gender issues

Research by Bosse et al. (2021) examined how course policies, content, procedures, and support structures aligned with the principles of trauma-informed education were integrated into undergraduate mental health courses for traditional third-year nursing students at two American universities. By fostering a universally safe environment both inside and outside individual classrooms, these trauma-informed policies help students thrive (Bosse, 2021). As demonstrated in *Table 1.*, the approaches received positive feedback from students, demonstrating the feasibility and benefits of integrating trauma-informed education practices.

Table 1. Frequency of Student Qualitative Feedback by TIEP (Trauma- Informed Education Principle) and Representative Quotes from Nursing and Undergraduate Students (Bosse et al., 2021)

TIEP Principle	n	Representative Feedback
Social, emotional, academic safety	25	<p>"...facilitated such a welcoming, inclusive, and understanding learning environment. [Professor] demonstrated genuine care for our emotions, struggles, and personal lives"</p> <p>"...very supportive and really made class feel like a safe space. I was never stressed or anxious during class"</p> <p>"...consistently checked in on us and made us feel like we were not just a student... [Professor] made us feel like we could talk...if we did not understand something and not feel ashamed"</p> <p>"I cannot stress enough how much I appreciate how much [Professor] cared about our wellbeing and our opinions on topics"</p>
Trustworthiness and transparency	13	<p>"...emphasizes therapeutic communication in this class and practices the same too with [their] students"</p> <p>"...answered all our questions. And when [Professor] didn't know the answer [they]got back to us by the next class or posted an announcement in [LMS] with the answer"</p>
Collaboration and mutuality	12	<p>"...adapted the course to help relieve stress on us and work around the quiz schedule so it worked better for us"</p> <p>"...frequently asked us for our feedback on the course, which shows that [Professor] actually cares about us"</p>
Empowerment, voice, and choice	12	<p>"...took all our feedback and implemented changes we suggested so that was great and improved the course over the semester"</p> <p>"I particularly liked how the professor graded us in a way where we could focus on the class material rather than stressing about what our grade in the class was"</p>
Social justice	7	<p>"...one of the most inclusive and socially-informed classrooms I have been a part of ...[Professor] is really good at making everyone from every walk of life feel represented and respected"</p>
Resilience, growth, and change	3	<p>"takes the time to teach us positive coping mechanisms and asks us the positive things that happened during our week which means a lot"</p> <p>"taught me just how important mental health can be in nursing"</p>

Note. TIEP = trauma-informed education practice.

Trauma- Informed Practices to Support Employees in the Workplace

Transformational leadership is a term to describe a style that motivates employees to surpass personal interests for organizational benefit and drive significant change. Research supports the notion that organizations that have adaptive cultures, encouraging continuous change, and those that strategically align with current conditions, tend to achieve the highest performance levels compared to those with a

rigid, distinctive style (Middleton et al., 2015). Given these findings, trauma- informed approaches amongst leadership are key to support staff and teams.

A prominent model showcased in the literature is The Sanctuary Model (Figure 2) which is a trauma-informed organizational intervention (Middleton et al., 2015). It emphasizes inspiration, optimism, encouragement, honesty, and motivation. Additionally, it fosters respect, team orientation, effective communication, empowerment, reliability, trustworthiness, and empathy. Research by Middleton et al. (2015) suggests that this model is reported by leadership to inspire and motivate staff, look at problems from a different perspective. The Sanctuary Model is also reported to better support individual considerations of employees by showcasing concern for their emotional safety and work- life balance. Some examples of applying The Sanctuary Model in leadership include the following.

- **Safety:** Creating a safe and supportive physical environment. This includes establishing clear and consistent policies, procedures, and practices that prioritize the safety of everyone in the organization.
- **Self-Care:** Supporting practices for self-care among staff to prevent burnout and secondary trauma. This includes offering resources and strategies for maintaining personal well-being.
- **Trauma Awareness:** The model promotes understanding the impact of trauma on behavior and functioning. Training programs help staff recognize and respond to trauma symptoms in themselves and others.

Figure 2. Key Elements of the Sanctuary Model (Middleton et al., 2015)

The four core elements of the Sanctuary Model are the following:

- (a) trauma theory
- (b) the Seven Commitments—nonviolence, emotional intelligence, democracy, open communication, social responsibility, social learning, and growth and change
- (c) S.E.L.F.—an acronym for the organizing categories of safety, emotion management, loss, and future, which is used to formulate plans for client services or treatment as well as for interpersonal and organizational problem solving; and

(d) the Sanctuary Tool Kit, a set of 10 practical applications of trauma theory, the Seven Commitments, and S.E.L.F., all of which are used by all members of the community at all levels of the hierarchy and reinforce the concepts of the model

The Sanctuary Model provides a foundational framework for developing supportive workplace practices, while the SAMHSA model offers practical tools for effective implementation by faculty and administrators. Several reviewed articles support applying trauma-informed practice principles, as outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in *Figure 1*. Additional questions based on trauma-informed practice principles, as suggested by Papa (2023), that leaders should consider include:

1. Do we understand how our staff define safety?
2. How do we demonstrate transparency?
3. What do we do to help peers support each other?
4. Do we provide an atmosphere that supports collaborative and mutual decision making or is everything top down?
5. How do we channel the great experiences of our staff?
6. What do we do to develop and empower our workforce?
7. Do we support failures as a stepping stone to learning and success?
8. Do our policies and protocols incorporate racial, ethnic, cultural, and individual needs?
- 9.

Furthermore, training and education practices recommended by literature recognize the need for diversity, equity and inclusion training Henshaw (2022). The following approaches reflect suggested practices to better support employees (staff and faculty) and create inclusive environments:

- Re- educating white leaders on an annual basis
- The training and education process should emphasize equipping individuals with tools for self-reflection to better understand their own identities. It should also focus on recognizing and addressing microaggressions, macroaggressions, and identity-based discrimination.
- Tools should be provided to revise policies and programs and educate members on how to serve as effective and critical allies.
- Trauma- informed practices should be culturally responsive

- Openly and transparently communicating about traumatic events affecting the school community through program-wide emails to promote transparency and a sense of safety.
- Regular program evaluations are essential to ensure ethical competence and to assess the outcomes of implemented trauma-informed approaches

Conclusions

Overall, the review reflects the critical need for higher education institutions to implement trauma-informed approaches, emphasizing several key components. Firstly, establishing safety is crucial to ensure that students and staff feel secure and supported within their academic environment. Secondly, there is a pressing need for culturally responsive practices that acknowledge and address the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the university community, recognizing the intersectional identities of individuals and the historical traumas that may impact their lives.

Additionally, the review highlights the importance of integrating support systems tailored to the specific needs of students and staff affected by trauma. By incorporating the principles and guidelines outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), institutions can create an inclusive and supportive environment. This involves adopting transparent, collaborative, and empowering policies, and providing ongoing education and training to equip the university community to recognize and respond to trauma effectively.

In conclusion, higher education institutions must prioritize trauma-informed approaches to create a more inclusive, supportive, and resilient academic environment. By addressing *safety*, *cultural responsiveness*, and *comprehensive support*, these institutions can better support the diverse needs of their students and staff, ultimately promoting their overall well-being and success.

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