Trauma-Informed Gatherings: What does it mean and what does it take?

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Trauma-Informed Gatherings: What Does it Mean and What Does it Take?

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Abstract. As community members continue to experience racial trauma at both individual and community levels, our Extension team responded by adapting an anti-racism leadership training program to be more trauma-informed. Our team designed a tool using Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's trauma-informed principles to support public health practitioners to facilitate trauma-informed meetings. This tool can be a starting point for Extension professionals to create more trauma-informed gathering spaces in all areas of their work.

INTRODUCTION

After the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police, there was a clear request for support from communities across Minnesota for the staff at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development (CFD) to address the impacts of trauma related to racism and white supremacy culture. As a result, we adapted a food justice and facilitation leadership training program called Cultivating Powerful Participation (CPP) to have a broader anti-racism lens and include components of historical trauma, healing, and trauma-informed approaches to better serve the needs of our communities and staff (UMN Extension, 2021).

CPP was created by a diverse cohort of practitioners and community partners. Together, we created a tool called “The Guide for Trauma-Informed Facilitation Practices” that suggests facilitation practices that correspond to the six trauma-informed principles developed by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (refer to Figure 2). We used this tool to support public health practitioners and Extension staff in understanding how to hold gatherings that honor the needs of communities and the effects of trauma on community members’ lives.

BACKGROUND ON TRAUMA-INFORMED PRINCIPLES

Trauma is a psychological and emotional response to a distressing event that has lasting negative impacts on all components of well-being (Rosen et al., 2017). Trauma experiences can be unique for each person and impact anyone at any point in their lives (SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014). According to results from the World Mental Health Survey Consortium, more than 70% of respondents (n=68,894) from the general population across 24 countries have experienced some type of traumatic event at least once in their lifetime (Benjet et al., 2016).

In an effort to help systems better understand the connections between trauma and behavioral health, SAMHSA created a guiding approach to support organizations on their journey to becoming trauma-informed. Because many who do not work in behavioral health services do work with individuals and communities impacted by trauma, organizations continue to adapt this framework in order to promote feelings of safety and well-being and an increased capacity to address traumatic experiences.
SAMHSA’s approach includes adherence to the following six principles:

- safety;
- trustworthiness and transparency;
- peer support;
- collaboration and mutuality;
- empowerment, voice, and choice;
- cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA’s Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014).

These principles, shown in Figure 1, act as a foundation upon which to build programs and host dialogue in ways that honor individual experiences, establish meaningful relationships, and promote resilience.

While many on our team already had a basic understanding of these principles, our goal was to develop a tool focused on providing tangible strategies that facilitators could use to design and implement trauma-informed gatherings—and conversations that support and uplift participants.

**THE TOOL**

In a CPP workshop on trauma-informed approaches, we provided a PowerPoint presentation in which we shared each of the six SAMHSA principles and corresponding facilitation techniques (illustrated in Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Guide for trauma-informed facilitation practices.**

The guide illustrates examples of how a facilitator can create and promote each trauma-informed principle within a gathering space. These strategies include actions that can be built into an agenda.

The participants of the CPP program engaged with this content using a round robin technique, where small groups had seven minutes to discuss each principle with a lead facilitator. This process provided an opportunity for participants to learn about SAMHSA’s trauma-informed principles and discuss the strategies they use or could use to promote the principle in their meeting spaces.
In a post-program evaluation of the CPP program, 100% of respondents (n=35) agreed (69% strongly agreed and 31% agreed) that they had a greater understanding of how to create trauma-informed gatherings because they engaged with this tool.

**CONCLUSION**

From the emotional harm caused by the effects of personal, systemic, and organizational racism, to the more chronic effects of stress related to living and working in ways that uphold racist systems, the stressors and trauma of racism affect us all (Manekem, 2017). We need to create more trauma-informed spaces in order to create a world that is free of racism, to work in ways that are anti-racist, and to support others to do so as well.

The practices and principles outlined in our approach are similar to those of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (2021), which focuses on providing multiple means of engaging participants, representing the material, and practicing or reinforcing the learning. Like UDL, we've found that trauma-informed approaches for gatherings help to create a sense of belonging that empowers all participants to learn more effectively (Capp, 2017).

Although this tool was used in a facilitation training for an anti-racist leadership development program with the public health sector in mind, we believe that any educator could—and should—read and digest the principles and practices to make their gathering spaces more trauma-informed. To start, we encourage supervisors, leaders, and practitioners across Extension to use this tool to reflect on how these practices and principles are currently being applied to their programs and what it would take to more fully embrace them.
REFERENCES


