

BEING A TRAUMA-INFORMED EMPLOYER

RECOGNIZING TRAUMA

Trauma is the brain's response to a dangerous or violent event. If someone has sustained trauma, they can develop reactions or symptoms that can affect all areas of functioning. A traumatized person may react to mundane things (e.g. a sound) in an unexpected way (e.g. crying, rage, or disengagement) if they are triggered. Other common effects of trauma include:

- a sudden loss of interest
- irritability
- having flashbacks
- exhibiting depression
- unexplained physical pain or chronic fatigue
- difficulty relaxing, appearing tense
- startling easily when spoken to or acknowledged
- staring into the distance, appearing vacant or unresponsive
- being disconnected from conversation, difficulties following conversation or paying attention
- inability to concentrate or follow instructions

Researchers have found that when someone is chronically or repeatedly traumatized – for example, victims¹ of domestic/intimate partner violence (DIPV) – complex **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** can occur. Lasting impacts of PTSD or trauma can include symptoms like chronic pain, chronic fatigue, headaches, gastrointestinal issues, etc. If the brain perceives constant danger, it can become too hard on the immune system, which, in turn, reacts by exhibiting physical symptoms. A person who has been abused could appear distracted at times, possibly by their traumatic memories, or as a way of dissociating from the pain.

What can employers do?

While in general, it is not employers' responsibility to treat or address trauma experienced by their employees, employers can and should provide a safe, trauma-informed environment and approach to responding to employees who come forward to seek help. If an employee discloses that they have been subjected to DIPV, the employer should consider that the employee is most likely a victim of trauma. It might even explain some of their behaviour at work.

If an employee becomes very distracted or inattentive or is frequently late or absent, the employer should check in with them before taking disciplinary action, which could further traumatize and endanger the employee: financial insecurity is a key barrier for someone trying to leave an abusive

relationship. Flexibility on the part of employers, such as allowing someone time off, flexible shifts, etc. allows them to stay at work and remain financially stable. Generally, support is crucial when navigating DIPV, and can be instrumental in employees' success in overcoming difficult situations.

Victims of DIPV often feel powerless and are not in control of their relationship, their home, or other decisions that affect their lives. For that reason, it is important to work with them on making the best decisions for them, when it comes to, for example, adapting their work conditions, **safety planning**, contacting service providers, and so on. Employers should ask the employee what might work best for them, communicate openly, and be transparent about what the employee can expect from them; this can foster feelings of trust, safety, and empowerment that may be otherwise unfamiliar to the employee.

A key aspect of being trauma-informed is being non-confrontational, both verbally and physically. For example, having a comfortable, confidential and non-judgmental place to talk within the workplace is a way to ensure the employee experiencing trauma at home does not feel further traumatized in the workplace.

Other examples of supportive, trauma-informed measures may include:

- Asking the employee whether they would prefer to discuss their situation behind closed doors or with the door open
- Speaking softly, without raised voices
- Listening intently and empathetically
- Creating a welcoming environment and avoiding sensory overload, which could be triggering (e.g. no loud noises, not too much going on in the room)
- Offering water, tea or coffee
- Sitting with your arms open rather than crossed
- Sitting beside the person rather than behind a desk
- Communicating openly by asking non-judgmental, non-patronizing, open-ended questions

- Offering resources where the employee might be able to find help, e.g. the [resources](#) available in this toolkit
- Creating an environment that respects [privacy and confidentiality](#). For more ideas, check out [Supportive Workplace Policies, Practices and Programs](#)

Employers should consider the words and tone they use in response to an employee's disclosure that they have been subjected to DIPV. When having these conversation employers should ask themselves:

- Am I shaming/blaming?
- Am I trying to make decisions for this employee?
- Am I calmly negotiating with the employee?
- Have I offered help, support, and validation?

Employers should be conscious of any language (including body language) that could be perceived as threatening or that requires a victim¹ of DIPV to describe how they were subjected to violence as this would be re-traumatizing. This information is generally not necessary when determining what supports an employee needs in the workplace.

Simple gestures, posture, tone of voice and facial expressions can make a huge difference in making an employee feel safe and preventing further trauma. Employers are not expected to treat or diagnose trauma – but to show empathy and understanding. Simply put, being trauma-informed means being supportive, helpful, non-threatening and sensitive to the traumatic impact of DIPV on victims.

Additional Resources:

- [Haskell, Lori. Women, Abuse and Trauma Therapy.](#) Centre for Addition and Mental Health. Toronto, 2004.
- [Trauma and the Brain](#) (video)
- [Trauma-Informed: The Trauma Toolkit.](#) Second Edition, 2013. Clinic Community Health Centre, MB



¹Please note: the word "victim" is used throughout our toolkit where the term "survivor" could also be used to describe people subjected to domestic or intimate partner violence. While some identify as surviving the experience and others, as being victimized, we respectfully acknowledge that some people subjected to abuse do not relate to either term.