

switchboard

Supporting Others, Sustaining Yourself

Trauma-Informed Care in Action

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Today's Speakers



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Learning Objectives

By the end of this event, you will be able to...

Describe

how sustained empathy and commitment to clients can impact emotional well-being

01

Identify

signs of compassion fatigue and moral distress in yourself and others

02

Apply

core trauma-informed strategies for setting and maintaining healthy professional boundaries

03

Implement

self-care techniques and peer support approaches in your day-to-day work to reduce isolation and support well-being

04



Describe

how sustained empathy and commitment to clients can impact emotional well-being

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How do you feel after a long day of supporting clients or supporting your team that serves clients?



Sustained Empathy



Listening deeply to our clients



Caring about our clients' challenges



Wanting to help our clients



Case Scenario: Ralphel



Ralphel is a 53-year-old Syrian father of seven, who wants to work and provide for his family.

Ralphel faces several barriers, and he often feels overwhelmed by the gap between his hopes and the realities of resettlement.



In one word, how might you feel as a provider when working with Ralphel?



Think about a time when you worked with a client whose needs felt overwhelming. What helped you balance compassion for the client with your own well-being?



The Impact

Repeatedly hearing clients' difficult stories can put providers at greater risk for strong emotional, mental, and physical reactions that may stretch or overwhelm their own ability to cope.





Identify

signs of compassion fatigue and moral distress
in yourself and others

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Occupational Hazards in Case Management

- Large caseloads
- Complex client needs
- Paperwork requirements
- System gaps or under-resourcing
- Trauma-exposed work environment
- Being “overworked and underpaid”
- Burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue





Occupational Stress and Trauma Responses

Burnout

- Loss of meaning in work
- Leads to feeling overwhelmed or cynical
- Can feel like an identity crisis

Secondary Traumatic Stress

- Emotions and behaviors that are the direct result of knowing about trauma others have experienced
- Symptoms mirror those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) experienced by clients

Vicarious Trauma

- A *cognitive change* that comes from knowing about trauma others have experienced
- May include changes in spiritual beliefs or worldviews on issues like safety or trust

PTSD

- Life-threatening or traumatic event
- Emotional response: Fear, anxiety, hypervigilance, flashbacks

Compassion Fatigue

- A combination of burnout and secondary traumatic stress
- Accumulative in nature

Compassion Fatigue

- Emotional and physical exhaustion from caring for clients experiencing trauma
- Can cause detachment, emotional numbness, or overextending oneself
- Builds over time when staff lack opportunities to recover
- Often accompanied by guilt





Moral Distress



Occurs when you know the right action to take but are prevented by policies, resources, or authority.



Can cause frustration, guilt, and feelings of powerlessness.



Often situational and short-term, but repeated experiences can build stress over time.



Common in resettlement work when systemic constraints limit client support.



What signs that you are experiencing moral distress do you notice within yourself?



Moral Distress vs Guilt

Guilt

- Responsibility for, or of, a specific action
- Emotional Response: regret, remorse

Moral Distress

- Ethical and moral conflict
- Emotional Response: shame, guilt, anger, loss of trust



Case Scenario: Amina

- Amina is an 18-year-old from Afghanistan
- She wants to finish high school and find a job but faces many challenges



Given Amina's motivation but limited resources, what emotions might staff experience when supporting her?



What strategies might help you manage your own expectations as you seek to empower Amina?



Signs of Emotional Distress

Exhaustion

Cynicism/
changing
worldview

Increasing
inefficacy at
work

Intrusive
thoughts or
images

Being sad or
tearful

Overreactive
to stressors

Feeling
hopeless or
helpless

Anxiety or
fearfulness

Body pain

Difficulty
concentrating

Irritability or
anger

Social
isolation



How Distress Shows Up in the Workplace

Symptom	Presentation/Consequence
Avoidance	Avoiding or providing different levels of service to certain clients Missing work frequently
Intrusive Thoughts or Images	Fatigue and difficulty sleeping or nightmares Seeming to be daydreaming or dazed
Cynicism/Changing Worldview	Negative or hopeless feelings Low expectations of clients or dissatisfaction with career Increased blame of self or others
Changes in Mood (Sadness, Anxiety, etc.)	Appearing sad, numb, worried, or having low energy Isolating or withdrawing from colleagues Feeling overwhelmed and that work is “endless”
Overreactive to Stressors	Seeming jumpy or easily startled Making more mistakes or forgetting things Being short-tempered with colleagues and clients



Apply

core trauma-informed strategies for setting and maintaining healthy professional boundaries

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The 6 Principles of Trauma-Informed Care



Safety



Trustworthiness
& Transparency



Peer Support



Collaboration
& Mutuality



Empowerment,
Voice, Choice



Cultural &
Historical Issues

Considerations for culture and history..

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, July). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach (HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884). <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-approaches-programs>

Boundaries

Boundaries are limits on behavior that support appropriate, safe, and effective interactions.



Case Scenario: Taye (TAH-ye)



Taye is a 50-year-old man from East Africa who speaks Oromiffa fluently but has extremely limited English.

Since resettling, Taye has faced ongoing challenges:

- Difficulty maintaining housing, often due to roommate conflicts
- Limited job skills and English, which make employment unstable
- Hesitancy to connect with new people, leaving him isolated



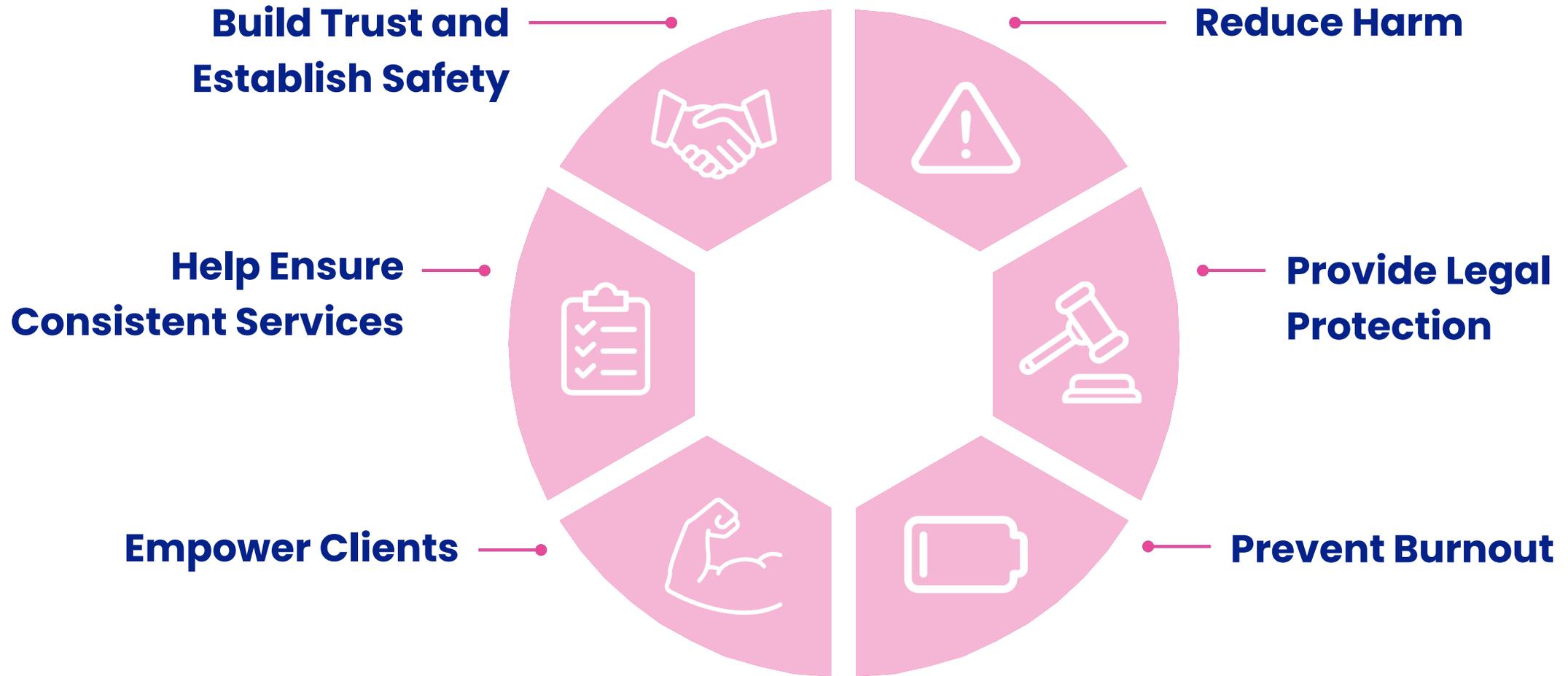


In your role, what boundary challenges could you encounter when working with a client such as Taye, who continues to have needs but shows limited progress?



What might you say or do to keep the interaction trauma-informed?

The Importance of Boundaries





Setting Boundaries with Clients



Limit self-disclosure and sharing of personal details



Treat all clients equally, and consistently enforce rules



Keep physical contact to a minimum



Do not borrow or lend money to clients, and set rules around gifts, food, and drink



Stay within the scope of your role



Seek support from supervisors when needed

Setting Boundaries with Clarity and Respect

Guidelines:

- Validate the concern
- Set the limit
- Provide an explanation
- Offer an alternative



"I'm hearing that finding a new apartment is really important to you and your family. **Unfortunately, I am not able to help with that.** I would be happy to **refer you to someone else who may be able to help.**"



"I know that would help you a lot. I wish I could help you search for better employment. **But I am not able to. My job is to focus on _____.**"



Case Scenario: Carrie

Carrie, a client known for frequently visiting the office, yelling at staff, and consistently refusing referral services, confronts you in your agency's lobby.





What is the first thing you would do in this situation?



Which trauma-informed care principle feels most important in this moment?

Tips for Maintaining and Reinforcing Boundaries

- Give **reminders**
- Use **consistent messaging**
- Provide **referrals** when possible
- Seek **support** from colleagues and supervisors
- **Document and follow up** on any boundary crossings





Implement

self-care techniques and peer support approaches in your day-to-day work to reduce isolation and support well-being

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What is one helpful resource you have used to support your own well-being in the past?



Self-Care Strategies

Mind

- Focus on what you can control
- Celebrate small successes
- Do visualization exercises
- Practice gratitude

Spirit

- Spend time with friends and family
- Practice mindfulness techniques
- Connect to religious/spiritual beliefs
- Listen to music
- Spend time in nature

Body

- Exercise
- Get some sunshine
- Pay attention to nutrition
- Practice good sleep hygiene



Case Scenario: Sami

Sami is a case manager who works for a refugee resettlement agency.

He supports many clients facing severe food insecurity and struggling to make ends meet due to low-paying jobs or unemployment.

Sami often:

- Keeps his phone on after hours in case clients have emergencies
- Finds himself assisting clients with things beyond his job description
- Works outside of his working hours





Imagine you are Sami's colleague. What might be one way you could support him?



When you've felt like Sami (overextended and exhausted), what self-care or peer support made the biggest difference for you?



Peer Support in Supervision

- Foster **peer connections** among staff
- Create space/time for **case consultation** and **conferring**
- **Model** relationally supportive approaches to your team:
 - Create time for supportive supervision (rather than task management)
 - Check in on staff's general well-being
 - Debrief after crises and complex cases
 - Offer feedback that is constructive and respectful
 - Encourage and model self-care



What staff support programs or resources does your agency or program currently offer?

Additional Options for Support

- Supervision
- Employee Assistance Programs
- Mentorship programs
- Taking paid time off
- Wellness initiatives
- Flexibility around work schedule
- Communities of practice (CoPs)
- Personal therapy





Think Outside the Box

- MSW internships
- Flexible hours
- Virtual wellness sessions
- Provide opportunities throughout the workday for a mental break
- Think outside your agency





What is one peer-support technique you plan to implement in your day-to-day work, following this training?

Key Takeaways

- **Sustained empathy** is a strength, but without support, it can impact our emotional well-being over time
- Recognizing early signs of **compassion fatigue and moral distress** allows us to act before burnout takes hold
- **Healthy professional boundaries** protect both you and your clients, fostering sustainable service
- **Self-care and peer support** are essential tools to reduce isolation and maintain resilience in challenging work





Questions?

Type your question in the Q&A



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Recommended Resources

• Switchboard

- Guide: [Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers](#) (2023)
- Guide: [Preventing Crises and De-Escalating Difficult Situations with Newcomer Clients](#) (2023)
- Archived Webinar: [Trauma-Informed Care in Case Management](#) (2022)
- Blog: [Supporting Newcomer Clients and Staff Through Service Disruptions](#) (2025)
- Guide: [Supporting Newcomers with Serious Mental Illness: Guidance for service providers](#) (2025)
- Archived Webinar: [Effective Practices for Mental Health Screening Across Cultures - Switchboard](#) (2025)
- Archived Webinar: [De-escalation in Practice: Strategies for Supporting Newcomers Experiencing Crises](#) (2025)

• International Rescue Committee (IRC)

- eLearning: [Empathic Communication in Resettlement, Asylum, & Integration Settings](#) and [De-Escalation in Resettlement, Asylum, & Integration Settings](#) (2021)



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Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers

Trauma-informed care is a practice that requires constant attention, awareness, sensitivity, and transformational change within organizational cultures.¹ While there is no simple checklist or one-size-fits-all approach, common principles and guiding practices of trauma-informed care can inform resettlement and integration services. This information guide describes some of these key principles and practices for refugee service providers, including case managers or those in similar roles, seeking to integrate trauma-informed care into their work.

What is trauma?

Trauma is a complex concept with many definitions. Essentially, trauma refers to the psychological, emotional, or physical responses to an event that is deeply disturbing, frightening, or life-threatening. Traumatic experiences can overwhelm an individual's ability to cope, leaving short-term or long-term negative physical, emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual impacts.

To better understand trauma, it is helpful to be aware of the **fight/flight/freeze response**. When a person experiences a potentially traumatic event, the body initiates an automatic response to protect them from danger and threat. Through these instinctive responses, the brain instructs the body to react in a way that is most likely to ensure survival—through fighting back, running away, or staying extremely quiet and still to avoid detection. When the threat has passed, the body then initiates a cycle of release and restoration.

1. SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. (2014, July). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). <https://traumainformed.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/samhsa-14-50883.pdf>



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Scan the QR code or click the link in the chat to access our feedback survey!

- Four questions
- 60 seconds
- Help us improve future training and technical assistance



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