

**switchboard**

# **Navigating Difficult Conversations with Clients**

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# Today's Speakers



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# Learning Objectives

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

## Recognize

ongoing resettlement challenges that require difficult conversations between clients and providers

01

## Identify

key communication skills and specific phrases that help maintain supportive, respectful conversations for both clients and providers

02

## Apply

a trauma-informed and compassionate approach to current client and service provision challenges

03

# Recognizing Client and Staff Challenges



01

02

03

 Share one or two words that describe the biggest challenges in resettlement work today.

Wordcloud Poll  260 responses  140 participants



# Factors That Affect Staff

- **Large caseloads** complicate case management and strain client interactions
- These factors lead to **burnout, loss of meaning** in work, and **compassion fatigue**
- Staff risk **high trauma exposure** from secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma



# Economic and Housing Challenges

- **Difficult to align** client needs and desires with availability/access
- Impacts **client safety, self-sufficiency,** and **emotional well-being** (feelings of self-worth and dignity)





## What is Trauma?

- No single definition
- What is traumatic to one person may not be traumatic to another

# What is Trauma?

- **May be...**
  - deeply disturbing, frightening, or life-threatening
  - outside of what would be considered “ordinary” or “normal”
- **May result in...**
  - feelings of being overwhelmed, helpless, or at someone else’s control or mercy
  - short-term or long-term negative physical, emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual impacts





# Having Difficult Conversations with Clients

01

02

03



**What is one challenge or difficult situation you've encountered in your client interactions?**



# Setting Up the Conversation

- **Set the stage**
  - Offer a glass of water
  - Ensure the room is comfortable
  - Show you care by checking in
- **This helps clients by:**
  - Reducing uncertainty
  - Restoring a sense of power and control
  - Guiding them in processing information and normalizing their reactions
  - (It also benefits **staff** in building rapport and trust with clients)





# Strategies for Difficult Conversations



# Mindfulness: STOP

**S** Stop or Slow Down

**T** Take a Breath

**O** Observe

**P** Proceed





# Referral Steps When Needed

01

**Consent**

04

**Explore Client's  
Background, Culture,  
and Context**

02

**Validate and  
Normalize**

05

**Offer Education  
and Resources**

03

**Acknowledge  
Client Strengths**

06

**Encourage Choice  
and Empowerment**

# Using Interpretation in Difficult Conversations

- Explain the **role** of the interpreter
- Reinforce **confidentiality**
- Provide a **framework** for successful interpretation (e.g., explain pauses)
- **Create space** for additional critical information or clarification





# Practical Skills: Active Listening

## Paraphrase

Demonstrate understanding, use client's own words when possible



## Summarize

Clarify conversation and any possible miscommunications



## Express Empathy

Find points of connection, honor the individual client



## Notice Non-Verbal Cues

Consider cultural norms, e.g., eye contact, body language





**Having difficult conversations includes setting boundaries.**





# Why Are Boundaries Important?

**Build Trust and  
Establish Safety**



**Reduce Harm**



**Ensure Consistent and  
Equitable Services**



**Provide Legal  
Protection**



**Empower Clients**



**Prevent Burnout**





# Setting Clear Boundaries



**Limit self-disclosure and sharing of personal details**



**Treat all clients equally, and consistently enforce program rules**



**Keep physical contact to a minimum**



**Follow organizational policies around accepting gifts, food, and drink**



**Stay within the scope of your role**



**Seek support from supervisors when needed**

# Setting Boundaries Respectfully

## Guidelines:

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



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"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 \_\_\_\_.** I would love to refer you to \_\_\_\_ who can help you search for a better job."

"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.**"





# Trauma-Informed Approach and Case Scenarios

01

02

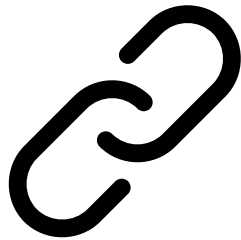
03

# Trauma-Informed Approach

- Considers trauma's **physical, emotional,** and **spiritual** impact
- Identifies trauma signs in **behavior, relationships,** and **dynamics**
- Builds **positive, restorative relationships**
- Embraces a **holistic** client approach
- Minimizes trauma **triggers**



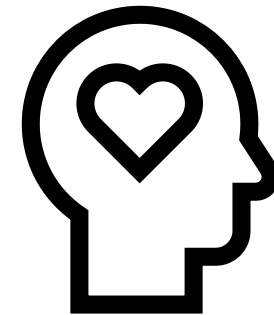
# Benefits of Trauma-Informed Care



**Improves client  
engagement in services**  
and enhances client  
outcomes



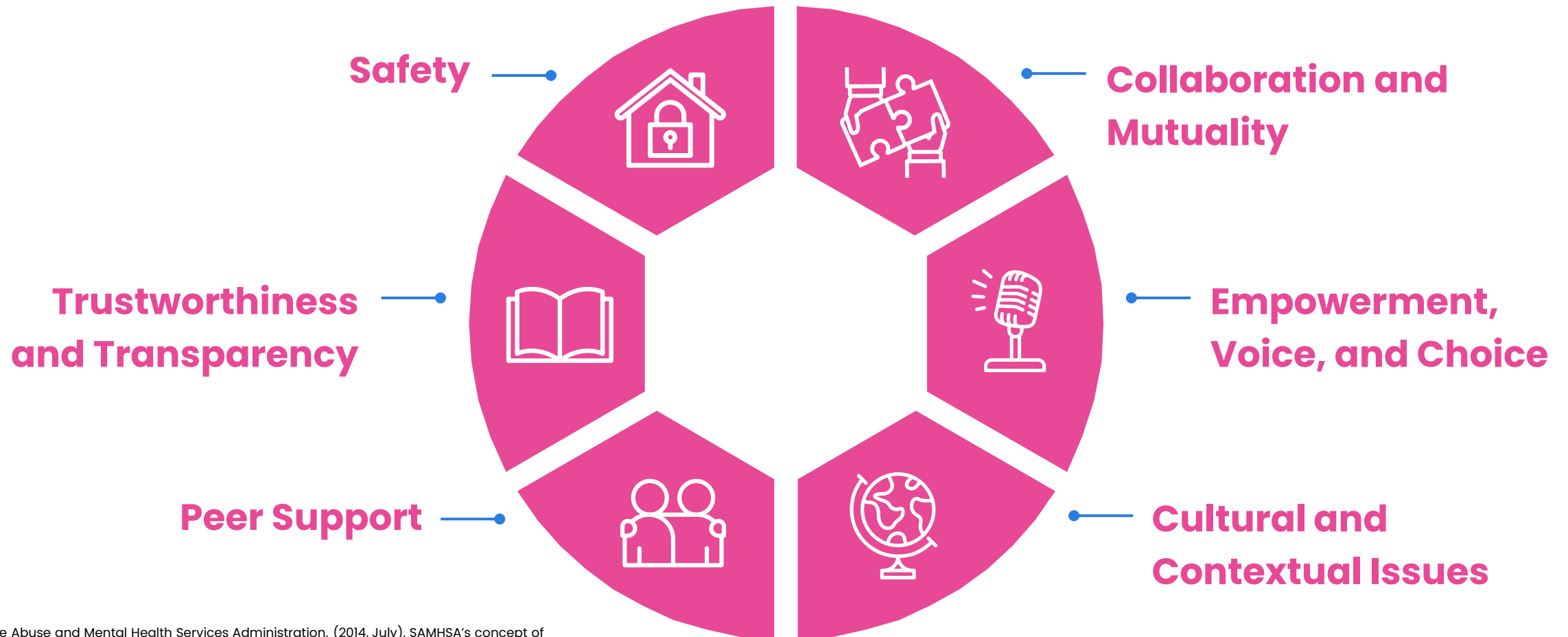
**Fosters safe  
environments**  
for all clients and staff



**Improves staff  
wellness**  
and reduces burnout



# The Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Care



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).



# Examples of Trauma-Informed Responses

**“I cannot continue this conversation if you are disrespectful.** That is one of our agreements in the client rights and responsibilities. I’m sorry you’re feeling discriminated against. I would love to speak more about your concerns calmly.”

“Many clients we support have experienced what you are experiencing. We know it’s hard, and we are here to help you navigate this difficulty.”

“No problem, I can explain again. Unfortunately, your services in this program are now coming to an end...”

Clients may need resources to meet their immediate needs and may be unsure of whom to trust. **Resist thinking that clients’ behaviors are manipulative.**

# Case Scenario: Miguel, Sinola, and Esperanza



**Miguel, Sinola, and their daughter Esperanza (19)** are from Cuba. They arrived in the U.S. two months ago. Miguel was an accountant in Cuba, and Sinola worked at a restaurant near their home. Esperanza is determined to go to school and has told their case worker that she does not want to work. Miguel wants to work but only in an accounting job to avoid wasting his education and experience. Over the last two months, his employment specialist presented him with a few entry-level positions that he turned down. Sinola was also offered two job interviews but turned them down. The family is nearing the end of their employment service period with no job prospects in sight. The family is distressed and angry and begins telling their case manager that they need to do more for them.





**Describe how you would use a principle of trauma-informed care to respond to the family's distress and anger.**



**What might you say or what action would you take to carry out this trauma-informed principle?**



# Case Scenario: Ahmed and Sara's family

**Ahmed, Sara, and their three children—Khaled (7), Noora (3), and Kareem (1)—**are refugees from Syria who just arrived in the U.S. one week ago.

Ahmed and Sara are extremely dissatisfied with their new home. During your first home visit, they tell you that it needs to be much bigger, cleaner, and closer to downtown. They do not like the neighborhood they are in and feel uncomfortable with the neighbors they've seen. They demand that you find them a different home.





**How might you establish boundaries with Ahmed and Sara that are clear, safe, and supportive to both them and you?**



# What are you taking away from today's training?



# Questions?

**Type your question in the Q&A**



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Now you are able to...

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02

## Apply

a trauma-informed and compassionate approach to current client and service provision challenges

03



# Help Us Help You!

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

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





# Recommended Resources

## Switchboard

- **Guide:** [Navigating Difficult Conversations with Newcomers](#) (2026)
- **Tip Sheet:** [Connecting Refugee Clients to the Right Resources: 8 Tips for Effective Referrals](#) (2026)
- **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)
- **Tool:** [Sample Housing Onboarding Guide](#) (2024)
- **Blog:** [Managing Newcomers' Housing Expectations](#) (2023)
- **Info Guide:** [Job Development in Times of Economic Hardship](#) (2021)
- **Video and Facilitation Guide:** [Adjusting to Life in the U.S.: Advice from Clients to Case Managers](#) (2020)
- **eLearning:** [Introduction to Working With Interpreters](#) (2023)

## International Rescue Committee (IRC)

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

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connecting resettlement experts

### Navigating Difficult Conversations with Newcomers

When working with newcomers, service providers often need to engage in conversations on sensitive and challenging topics. This guide accompanies Switchboard's [webinar](#) and provides context and tips for calm, effective, and trauma-informed conversations with clients.

**Introduction**

Service providers regularly find themselves struggling to communicate matters out of their control to clients, who can feel disappointed that life in the U.S. does not meet their expectations. Although service providers are not responsible for these challenges, they often serve as the messengers. Economic challenges can feel particularly sensitive to clients, as they are tied to feelings of self-worth and dignity. Meanwhile, providers are managing their own stressors, including large caseloads, prolonged exposure to clients' trauma, and burnout.

**Trauma-Informed Care in Difficult Conversations**

[Trauma-informed care \(TIC\)](#) is crucial in navigating difficult conversations with clients. It helps to build trust, restore safety, and minimize re-traumatization.<sup>1</sup> Applying TIC principles improves engagement in services and enhances client outcomes, **fostering safe, supportive environments for both clients and the staff serving them.**

Below, we detail how to implement TIC principles by establishing a safe setting, demonstrating transparency and trustworthiness with clients, and elevating client voice and choice.

<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2026, February). SAMHSA's trauma-informed approaches and programs. <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/topics/trauma-informed-approaches-and-programs>

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