No to Violence
Leading the change to end male family violence in Australia

Trauma and Violence Informed Practice

Considerations when working with people using violence

What is Trauma and how does it impact people?

Trauma is an emotional response to a stressful event or prolonged exposure to harm such as abuse, neglect, family violence, or discrimination. Potentially traumatic events are usually experiences which are, or may be perceived as, life threatening or pose a significant risk to a person's physical or psychological wellbeing. Reactions to a traumatic event, whether perceived or actual danger, may activate the instinctive survival response, often referred to as fight, flight or freeze.

Not everyone who experiences a stressful or life-threatening event will develop trauma and not every person who experiences trauma will develop symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). An event may have little impact on one person yet may cause severe distress to another. Understanding how individual responses vary from person to person is important and encourages the focus to shift from the event/s to the range of potential impacts it has on the person. Those who experience trauma may have symptoms which range from mild to severe and can result in a range of emotional and physical responses.

Trauma is not limited to individual experiences; collective trauma can affect entire communities, such as groups impacted by natural disasters or by violent dispossession. Intergenerational trauma occurs when the psychological effects of trauma are passed down through families. This issue is particularly relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples due to the lasting impacts of colonisation, racism, and the Stolen Generations (AIHW, 2018). Recognising these forms of trauma is crucial when working with affected populations.

The long-term effects of trauma can adversely impact a person's mental, physical, social, and spiritual wellbeing. The extent of trauma's impact depends on the type of trauma, including its severity and duration, as well as a range of risk and protective factors, such as a strong support network and access to professional help. Additionally, impacts are influenced by individual factors including the person's previous exposure to traumatic events and their confidence in seeking support. It is estimated that 75% of adults have experienced at least one traumatic event (AIHW, 2020). Certain populations,

including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, refugees, LGBTIQA+ people, and those with alcohol and other drug concerns face disproportionate rates of trauma exposure (AIHW, 2020). While not everyone will experience long-term traumatic effects, trauma's prevalence makes it a significant yet often underrecognised problem.

Trauma- and Violence-Informed approaches in practice

Trauma and Violence-Informed Practice (TVIP) is an approach that builds an understanding of trauma, its widespread impact, and acknowledges the role that violence may play in shaping a person's experiences. TVIP does not suggest that trauma is a causal factor in the perpetration of family and intimate partner violence; rather, it encourages services to recognise the possibility of trauma in the lives of everyone they interact with. TVIP emphasises that trauma often stems from various forms of violence—such as intimate partner violence, childhood abuse, or systemic oppression—and can have long-lasting psychological, emotional, and physical effects on individuals. The use of TVIP in specialist interventions with people who use violence is relatively new, continuously evolving, and is paired with the service's approach to response and intervention with those who have enacted harm.

TVIP is not about eliciting or 'treating' a person's trauma history but about developing safe spaces to reduce the potential for further harm or re-traumatisation. Services and practitioners who lack frameworks to understand trauma's complex and lasting impacts can miss opportunities to identify unique coping mechanisms, provide effective services, support engagement, and create holistic and meaningful support plans with clients. Using this approach in practice encourages interventions which prioritise safety, trust and choice while being aware and responsive to the ongoing impacts of trauma (Wathen & Mantler, 2022).

TVIP expands on trauma-informed practice by also considering the structural violence and systemic inequities that contribute to people's adverse experiences, such as racism, ableism, poverty, and gender-based violence. To achieve this, TVIP seeks to minimise the potential for re-traumatisation, promote self-determination wherever safe to do so, and encourage flexible and collaborative support services. TVIP encourages a strengths-based shift in thinking to identify a person's unique strengths to work towards identified goals together (Scott & Jenny, 2022).

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Trauma- and Violence Informed Practice in action

TVIP is conceptually grounded in human rights, cultural safety, Aboriginal self-determination, children's rights, intersectionality, lived experience, and accountability. This encourages practitioners to promote choice and collaboration while adopting a strengths-based approach when working with clients. TVIP challenges practitioners and services to recognise power imbalances and focus on empowering and supporting client's self-determination, where safe to do so.

TVIP has commonly been used when working with victim-survivors of family and intimate partner violence and those who have experienced a range of harm, however, only recently has this approach been expanded to sectors working with people who use violence (Scott & Jenny, 2022). It is important to recognise that adopting a TVIP approach when working with people who use violence can improve interventions, encourage transparency, and support windows of opportunity to meaningfully engage people who use violence. Taking a trauma- and-violence informed approach means focusing on the factors that shape and even enable the person's use of violence and present barriers to change, rather than just the individual and their experience.

TVIP encourages practitioners and services to adopt language which focuses on indvidual's strengths and their capacity to make decisions about their support and their journey. Taking this approach supports individuals to take accountability for their use of violence and their pathway to change, rather than being held accountable by services. TVIP encourages practitioners to engage with the complexity of a person's experience, supporting them to better understand their choices to use violence, and enabling them to collaborate with the person to identify drivers for positive change and actions to take to address their use of violence (Scott & Jenny, 2022).
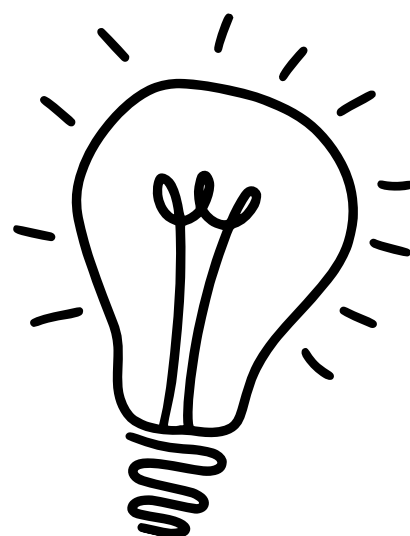
Services and practitioners can take meaningful steps to adopt a trauma- and violence informed approach to practice by:

- Providing transparent service delivery and being clear about practitioner and organisational obligations, such as limitations to confidentiality
- Providing training and professional development for all practitioners and staff members to understand trauma, the impacts of trauma, and the impacts of systemic and structural violence
- Centering an intersectional approach which considers the compounding experiences of marginalisation a person may experience
- Creating physically and psychologically safe spaces for people
- Building trust and rapport with service users
- Modeling respectful relationships
- Taking a strengths-based approach which recognises the person's capacity to make change
- Acknowledging and working against their own biases
- Using the person in their context approach to understand individuals within the larger context of their lives and the various factors that may influence their behaviours, emotions, and experiences

Working with people using violence

While the impacts of trauma on a person's use of violence is unclear, research shows that many people who experience trauma do not go on to use violence in adulthood (Scott & Jenny, 2022). There is no known causal link between trauma and use of family violence, however, trauma can impact and shape a person's behaviours and the ways in which they engage with the service system. TVIP, when applied within specialist interventions considers the trauma experienced by the person using violence but also victim-survivors including children. Adapted TVIP interventions may focus on how trauma influences psychological processes such as emotional regulation, substance use, and attachment - to support a nuanced assessment which avoids misidentifcation. It is crucial to acknowledge the impact of trauma on individuals without assuming it directly causes violent behaviour. Practitioners should maintain a balanced approach, showing empathy for the person using violence while fostering accountability to avoid reinforcing narratives that justify their actions (Scott & Jenny, 2022).

TVIP considers and extends the understanding that experiences of family violence can be both historical and ongoing within a person's life and recognises that people using violence may have the duality of entitlement and disadvantage. Developing a nuanced understanding of these experiences supports practitioners to view the person within their broader context and to meet people using violence where they are at. This means examining the person's individual behaviour as well as considering the structural and systemic factors that influence their choices (Wathen & Mantler, 2022).

When working with people who use violence, an adapted approach to TVIP is often needed due to the mandated nature of engagement. Service providers can make efforts to enhance autonomy to promote client responsibility and ownership of their change journey. Recognising power imbalances in professional relationships is crucial for building rapport with clients who may feel they have no choice about engaging with services. Transparent practice involves providing clear information about the service, expectations, and the consequences of disengagement.

TVIP is not a standalone intervention for individuals who use violence but rather a framework to guide engagement and practice. A core principle of TVIP is prioritising the safety, wellbeing, and needs of victim-survivors including children in all interventions. It is crucial that TVIP neither aligns with or reinforces justifications or narratives that support violence, nor compromise the safety of others. By maintaining a balanced approach and offering clear support to those who have used violence, TVIP aims to foster positive change while fully acknowledging the impact of their actions on victim-survivors.

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