

## CREATING TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES: TIPSHEET SERIES

### Tips for Creating a Welcoming Environment

The environment we create communicates our beliefs about the people we serve. This environment and the way we offer services are critical aspects of our work to increase access to our programs for women who are experiencing psychiatric disabilities or the effects of trauma. Most of us understand what it feels like to be welcomed. It's the feeling that comes when we have a sense that people want to have us around and that the environment is set up in a way that is comfortable for us.

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Offering welcome may mean giving food or drink to a guest, providing a comfortable place to sit, or making sure that the room is not too hot or too cold. In DV programs, we may convey our welcomes by choosing our language thoughtfully (e.g., saying "survivor" rather than "victim" or "client") or by selecting art that reflects the cultures of the communities that we serve. In creating a welcoming environment, it is important that we attend to both physical and interpersonal aspects of our program.

#### 1. Offer trauma-informed services.

*"Our support groups and individual meetings are intended to help you increase safety for yourself and your children and to help you find and use your best resources so that you can have the kind of life that YOU want to have."*

Offering trauma-informed services recognizes the pervasiveness of trauma and its impacts on a survivor's ability to cope, to access our services, and to feel safe in a new environment. When your services demonstrate that staff are comfortable with many kinds of behavior and a wide range of needs, this lets a survivor know that she is welcome *as she is*. Thus, offering trauma-informed services is a critical component of creating welcoming environments in DV programs. We offer trauma-informed services when we:

- Become knowledgeable about trauma and participate in ongoing training on how to offer trauma-informed support.
- Recognize that responses to trauma may include a numbing of feelings, a desire to avoid things that are reminders of previous traumatic experiences, and an increased sensitivity to these reminders, to people, and to the environment.
- Provide information to survivors about trauma and its effects.
- Offer flexibility and choices when possible as to how a survivor can interact with our programs and our staff.

- Take seriously a survivor's trauma responses (e.g., she may be jumpy or anxious, she may have a hard time sleeping, or she may need to avoid a neighborhood that has too many reminders of past experiences).

## 2. Understand symptoms as adaptations.

*"We work hard in our program to make sure that each person is able to make choices about how she contributes to the community while living here. We understand that people have different ways of doing this."*

In trauma-informed settings, we see a survivor's behavior as reflecting adaptations to a world that has not always been safe. Instead of trying to fix a person's behavior, we begin with an understanding that many factors (including a person's genetic tendencies, brain chemistry, and life experience as well as the person's current environment and access to resources) affect how the world looks to her, what feels safe, what she thinks may happen, and how she asks for and uses our services. If a survivor has a mental illness, she knows that she neither has to hide that she has a mental illness nor disclose it in order to get the help she is seeking. Of course, this does not mean that we will not have reactions if a person's behavior is troublesome, disrespectful, or dangerous. It does mean that the way we communicate our reactions should not shame or embarrass a person. Saying, "We want everyone to be safe and comfortable here. You have been shouting for a while and that worries some of us," is better than saying, "You can't keep making all that noise—you need to sit down and be quiet." Both statements let the survivor know that people are reacting to her behavior, but the first is respectful and acknowledges that the survivor is doing the best that she can.

## 3. Adapt the physical space.

*"We have different kinds of spaces here in the shelter—a room where people can sit quietly to collect their thoughts, safe spaces outside to work off some energy, and an area stocked with art supplies for people who want to draw or paint to express themselves."*

When we arrange the physical environment to accommodate a wider range of feelings, interactions, and behavior, we make our programs more accessible to all. If the program staff recognize that anyone might want a quiet place or need to move around more, or that noise or very cluttered environments can be unsettling, it communicates that a wide range of people are welcomed and wanted in your program.

**For more information or for technical assistance**, please contact the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health at [info@nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org](mailto:info@nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org) or 312-726-7020(P) or 312-726-4110(TTY).