

Understanding What the Words Mean: Trauma, Trauma-Informed, & Trauma-Sensitive

What is Trauma?

The word trauma originates from Greek meaning *wound*. Its original usage connected the word with physical wounds, but since the mid-twentieth century, it has become connected with psychological and emotional strains pertaining to difficult experiences. The word trauma has typically been used for the experience of significant catastrophic events, particularly in relation to military service. More recently, individual experiences have begun to be taken into account as differences in responses to catastrophic and personal events were observed. From these observations, the understanding of trauma grew to encompass recognition of trauma as an individual experience.

As such, all individuals may be carrying and living with their own personalized experiences of trauma. Knowing this is essential if educators are to enter classrooms acknowledging that they, and each student, may be living and dealing with a current or past experience of trauma. As such, understanding trauma-informed/sensitive practices can be supportive of shaping classroom spaces.

A photograph of several wooden blocks arranged on a light-colored surface. The word "TRAUMA" is spelled out in large, bold, black letters across six blocks in the foreground. Other blocks with letters like "R", "C", "A", "V", "D", and "B" are scattered around, some in focus and some blurred in the background.

What Does Trauma-Informed Mean?

Informed: having or showing knowledge of a particular subject or situation; or, a decision or judgment based on an understanding of the facts of the situation.

Trauma-informed practices take into account an understanding of trauma in all aspects of service delivery and place a priority on trauma survivors' safety, choice, and control to create a treatment culture of nonviolence, learning, and collaboration. This notably involves some of the clinical aspects of mental health practices such as screening, assessment, and referrals to professional treatment.



What Does Trauma-Sensitive Mean?

Sensitive: quick detection or response to slight changes, signals, or influences.

The term trauma-sensitive is a more experiential term describing the work being done by educators in schools. Trauma-sensitive approaches are more common when referring to educational and school-based training programs and initiatives that aid educators in implementing approaches to education that take into account the emerging support/acknowledgment of ACEs role in education.

Differences in Diction

Espousing a trauma-sensitive approach raises awareness of trauma and of ACEs, which can lead to changes in how classrooms are structured, and how educators interact with their students, while also supporting educators to draw upon the behavioural, social, and health services frequently used in “trauma-informed” settings. When these differences are not made clear, it may add to educators' stress that they feel expected to be therapists and counselors. Trauma-sensitive approaches understand that it is not the role of an educator to diagnose or provide treatment, but to provide support via implementing trauma-sensitive practices in classrooms. These practices can result in early identification, seeking support services, and connection to the resources students need.

Why is this Difference Important for Educators/Schools?

While often used interchangeably, trauma-sensitive approaches and practices remove the pressure that educators might feel to provide professional mental health services. Educators can use their knowledge and experience to shape trauma-sensitive learning environments and engagements that are anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and culturally relevant, and in the process, recognize when students are in crisis. In part, this also includes being present and prepared for disclosures of neglect and maltreatment. Being present and prepared helps educators to support and direct students to school-based and community-based mental health staff, who are trained to implement screening, assessment, and referrals to treatment for students living with trauma.

"In talks with teachers about this approach, I am often asked how they can 'do this'- establish a climate of care- 'on top of all the other demands'. My answer is that establishing such a climate is not 'on top' of other things, it is underneath all we do as teachers. When that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better."

(Noddings, 2012, p. 777)

For all references and more information please see the full report