

An Introduction to Trauma-Informed Research

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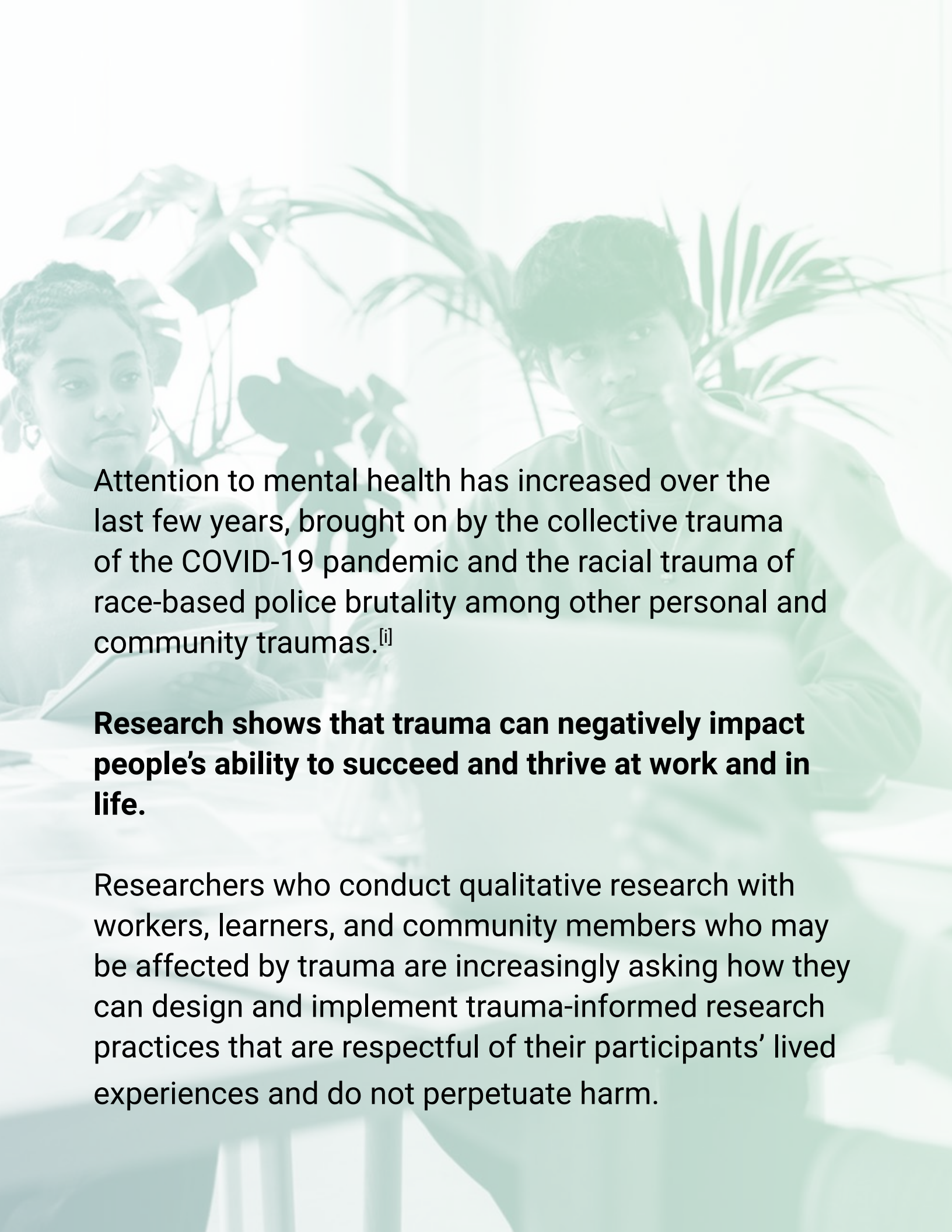


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Attention to mental health has increased over the last few years, brought on by the collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial trauma of race-based police brutality among other personal and community traumas.^[1]

Research shows that trauma can negatively impact people's ability to succeed and thrive at work and in life.

Researchers who conduct qualitative research with workers, learners, and community members who may be affected by trauma are increasingly asking how they can design and implement trauma-informed research practices that are respectful of their participants' lived experiences and do not perpetuate harm.

Why Shape Research to be Trauma-Informed?

Implementing trauma-informed research best practices provides researchers ways to reduce or address the potential harm that could arise from qualitative research. Trauma-informed research also garners more realistic and useful information. If participants feel safe and trust the researcher, they will stay engaged and provide more truthful and richer answers, which can lead to more effective and relevant workforce and post-secondary solutions and programs.

Trauma-informed research also complements and builds on other important approaches researchers are incorporating into their work, including human-centered design, racial equity, participatory research, and cultural responsiveness. The workforce field is continually learning how critical it is to center the voice of participants in research and programs, truly understand their lived experiences, and design research and programs that are grounded in real lives. This requires talking with participants in careful, authentic, and intentional ways, which means taking a trauma-informed approach.



What is Trauma?

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma is:

Trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.^[ii]

A key aspect of this definition is that trauma is an individualized experience: different people may experience trauma differently, depending on their mental health, chemistry, biology, and other life experiences. Researchers should not assume that all individuals who have experienced traumas such as gun violence, poverty, racism, etc., will have experienced them as traumatic events. However, adopting a universal trauma-informed approach to research will be responsive to those folks who have experienced trauma and is a healthy practice with participants who have not experienced trauma.

Another important aspect of this definition is that individuals who experience trauma, or trauma re-triggering, experience it very intensely. Their bodies and brains feel as though they are being attacked, threatened, or harmed. Their automatic physical and behavioral responses may seem over-reactionary. If they are triggered by a research question or a set of questions, their brains may go into survival mode—fight, flight, freeze, or submit—deactivating the logical processing and executive functioning part of their brains. This is not an experience any researcher wishes participants to have and threatens the validity and quality of any qualitative data that researchers may collect.

Two other notable components of the SAMHSA definition are that trauma has lasting effects and can harm an individual's functioning and well-being across multiple life dimensions. Traumatic experiences can continue to haunt an individual and hurt their ability to succeed in life, in relationships, and at work, especially if it is not processed through therapy. On the other hand, traumatic experiences can get buried, forgotten by an individual for years, but then possibly emerge by some sort of trigger and then affect the individual's functioning.^[iii]



How Might Trauma Show Up in Qualitative Research?

Qualitative researchers in the fields of workforce development or post-secondary education may ask participants about their education levels and experiences, income and finances, employment history, justice involvement, familial situation, housing, and other personal information to understand the impact of services and how to improve them. Folks with lower levels of education, living in poverty, struggling financially are likely to have had traumatic experiences on any or all of these dimensions—as children and/or adults.^[iv] Additionally, participants who have experienced discrimination, racism, or harassment in their work and education settings may also have trauma responses to research questions about their past work and learning experiences.

Talking about these challenges in an interview or focus group may re-trigger them, causing a trauma response. For example, if a focus group participant lost their job and experienced homelessness for several months living in their car with their family in a dangerous neighborhood, seemingly simple questions like, “have you ever been unemployed” or “have you ever experienced homelessness” might send their brain into survival mode, impairing their ability to answer the questions.

Our brains and bodies are connected, so trauma responses show up as mental and/or physical conditions or behaviors. Physical responses to trauma triggering interviews, focus groups, or sometimes even survey questions may include increased heart rate, hypersensitivity and scanning for danger, stomach churning, sweating, or fidgeting. These are all signs that the brain and body are preparing to fight or flee danger—in this case, trauma that has been stirred up.

Additional behaviors may show up as one or more of the four common survival mode responses:

Fight

The participant may go into defense mode and put up their guard. Their mind may be racing with questions such as why is this stranger asking such personal questions, what are they going to do with my personal information, are my answers going to come back to hurt me? They may give short, curt, perfunctory answers or respond sarcastically. In rare instances, they may verbally lash out if their brains and bodies are feeling threatened.

Flight

The participant may try to end the uncomfortable or seemingly unsafe situation early. They may be scanning for an escape route, like asking to go to the bathroom and then leave the building or use up time. They may walk out of the interview or focus group.

Freeze

The participant's brain may seize up. It may be so flooded with anxiety and survival mode thinking that the participant may not hear or see the questions being asked or hear them clearly. Their thoughts may be jumbled, producing confusing, conflating, or conflicting answers. They may experience brain fog and answer incoherently. They may not even be able to verbally respond.

Fawn

The participant surrenders to what they perceive as a dangerous situation and just gives up. This may manifest as a "so what" attitude and giving no energy or effort to answering questions intentionally or authentically. Answers provided may be far from the truth, severely skewing the qualitative information.

What is a Trauma-Informed Research Approach?

Trauma-informed research or research that incorporates the tenants of trauma-informed care is an approach that considers principles of trauma-informed care and designs and conducts the research with the awareness that an informant may have experienced trauma. SAMHSA provides a framework for a trauma-informed approach, which is useful for many types of work including research, programming, and even organizational culture change.

Researchers can use this approach to inform trauma-informed research by intentionally considering the following:

Safety

How do you help participants feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe in the research? For example, do they feel safer in a focus group if they sit near the exit? How do you help them feel valued and recognized?

Trustworthiness and Transparency

How do you establish trust with research participants? A key factor in building trust is transparency, so how do you maximize transparency in the research process?

Peer Support

Researchers are intelligent people often from highly respected, sometimes well-known academic institutions. This role has embedded in it much perceived authority and power, which may be intimidating to research participants. And yet, participants are human beings, just like researchers and are providing critical and essential information that without, the research would not be possible. So, how do you as a researcher consider and treat the participant as a peer and support them in the research process as such?

Collaboration and Mutuality

This principle is similar to the one above. How do you collaborate with the participant in the research rather than treating them as research subjects? How do you show mutual respect for the participant and their lived experience expertise?

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Providing a safe space, respecting, and valuing research participants will empower them to share their experiences and knowledge with you authentically. How do you reciprocate and truly listen to their voice and experiences, even if they are different from your expectations, predictions, and possibly even your values and beliefs? Providing choice helps people feel psychologically safe and empowered, so how do you provide choice opportunities for participants, even if it is as simple as which chair to sit in, which pen to use, or the research location.

Cultural Humility and Responsiveness

Do you understand fundamentals about the research participant's cultural background and social identities, i.e., do you ask for gender pronouns, do you know whether the person's culture views looking someone directly in the eye is a sign of respect or disrespect? How do you show respect for and honor the participant's cultural background and personal identities?

How Do I Conduct Trauma-Informed Research?

Workforce and post-secondary researchers should plan for and embed trauma-informed practices throughout the research process— before, during, and after qualitative research activities. Below is a list of suggested steps to take when planning research activities with community members. These steps were informed by other trauma-informed and trauma-responsive research resources, CSW's research, and the research and training of our Trauma and Resilience at Work team. Many of these steps also reflect other research approaches that are heavily intertwined with a trauma-informed approach, such as cultural responsiveness, racial equity, participatory research, and human-centered design.

It should be noted that these steps are appropriate for workforce and post-secondary research with participants who may have experienced trauma. A more extensive protocol and protections are needed for researchers who study trauma and traumatic experiences.



Before the research begins, researchers should consider the following practices:

Consider the research purpose and needs

Be clear at the outset about the purpose of the research and if you and your organization are the right fit to conduct research in this community, or if you need partners embedded in the community.

Understand the community context

Conduct baseline community research to understand relevant demographics and potential traumas participants may have experienced.

Select appropriate research methods

Research activities should be chosen based on fit with the research purpose and consideration of the potential nature of questions and impact. For example, the information sought by the researcher is sensitive, would participants feel safe discussing it with a group of strangers?

Thoughtfully identify facilitators and roles

Consider the number of researchers needed to implement best practices and other possible factors in selection, including personal identities such as gender, race and ethnicity, lived experience, etc.

Use informed consents

Design a consent and outreach process that ensures participants understand what your research and dissemination entail so that they can make informed decisions on their participation.

Determine ethical compensation

Decide appropriate compensation amounts that recognize contributions and time but do not provide undue pressure to agree to a situation that is not healthy or safe.

Select appropriate locations for in-person research

Ensure that the location chosen for interviews, focus groups, or other qualitative research activities will allow participants to feel safe (e.g., not near police station or government building) and that there are areas where they can step out if needed to take a break (i.e., a bathroom, etc.).

Support participants with refreshments

If the research is in-person, offering water can help participants feel cared for. Sipping water can help a triggered person regulate their nervous system. If online, encourage and welcome participants to get a beverage or a snack to help them feel more comfortable and at ease.

Develop protocols aligned to the purpose of the research

Ensure research questions reflect the research purpose only and do not expand the scope merely out of curiosity. Respect the time and information participants are sharing with you.

Develop protocols with members of the community

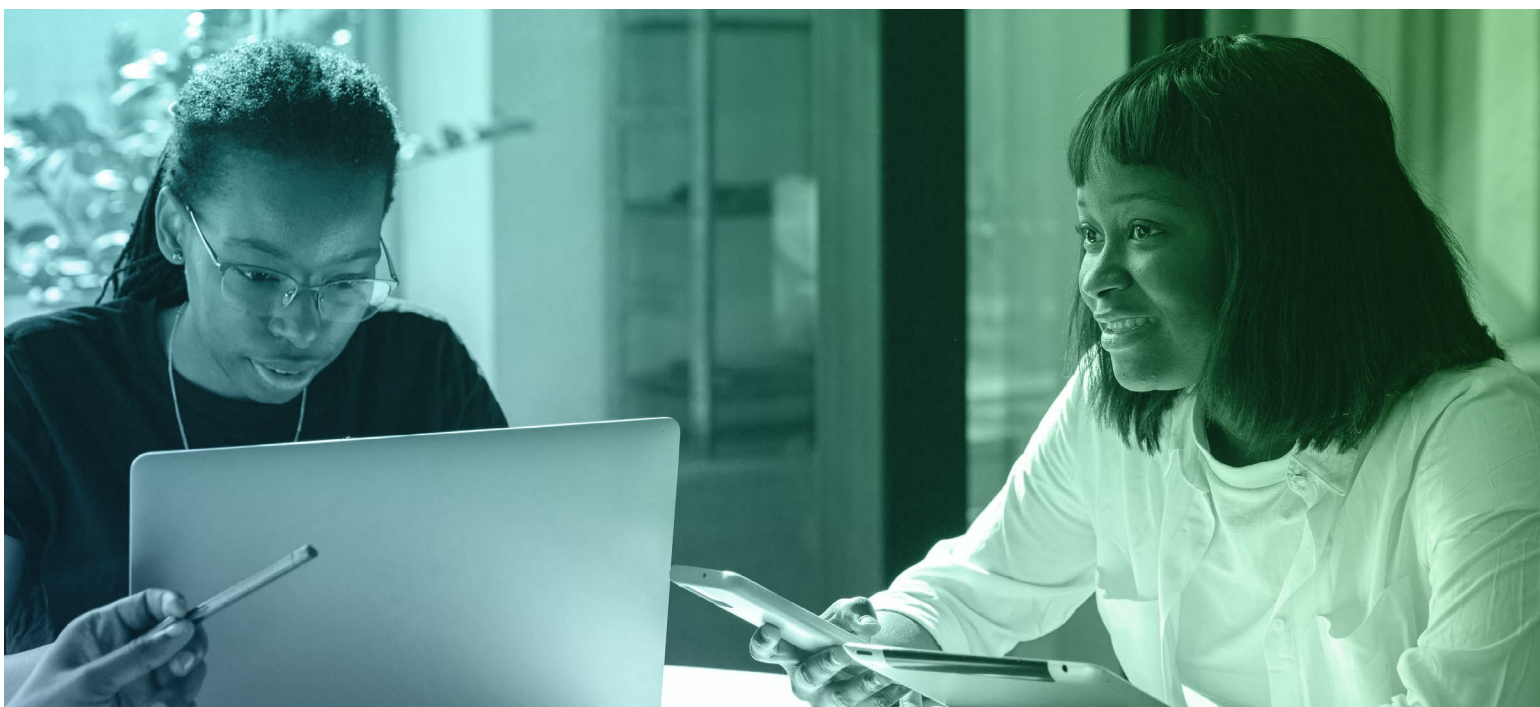
Keep participatory and culturally responsive best practice in mind and co-develop protocols with the community and/or ensure appropriate vetting of the questions and research process. This can be with:

- Partner organizations embedded in the community
- Advisory boards
- Compensated representatives from the community
- Develop an intentional recruitment strategy: Also include partner organizations embedded in the community in recruitment to help increase trust.

Plan how you will provide support if needed (both virtual and in-person)

Design a consistent process for facilitators to identify and intervene if a conflict or situation arises or they notice anyone experiencing the trauma responses covered earlier. This plan should include researching culturally appropriate resources and support organizations in advance for any needed follow-up. The plan might include:

- Asking the focus group to pause, noting that you may be covering heavy content, and suggest a few deep breaths. Doing this as a group helps to avoid singling anyone out, which reinforces safety
- Offer everyone a two-minute break
- Offer water or a restroom break



When conducting the research, researchers should consider the following practices:

Reiterate consent & rights

Reiterate research intent and purpose and remind participants of their right to leave at any time, take care of their needs, or not answer specific questions. Describe the research in a way non-researcher participants will understand. And make sure to ask for questions before beginning.

Remind participants of key locations for meeting basic needs

i.e., exit, water, bathrooms, etc., if in person.

Balance power and maintain a kind presence

Do not react or judge participants' presence, behavior, or answers; be aware of your unconscious bias and reactions; dress thoughtfully and in a way that will not intimidate participants. Exercise empathy.

Begin with a warm-up activity to build trust and rapport

This could include sharing names, pronouns, etc., as well as a short ice breaker activity. If the researcher is asking for a lot of personal information from the participants, it will feel fairer and more comfortable if you share a bit about yourself (this is an example of exercising the peer support principle).

State the topic first before advancing to a new topic and new questions

This provides continual informed consent and allows participants to make choices for themselves. It increases transparency and psychological safety (no surprises).

Use active listening

After a participant has answered a question, you may want to repeat back to them what you heard, mirroring their language as much as possible. This helps them feel seen and heard and avoids the researcher interpreting the answer through their own lens and experiences. This technique also may encourage the participant to expound upon their answer, providing a deeper level of information.

Meet participants' energy levels

This helps participants feel safe and build rapport with the researcher.

Support participants as needed & as aligned to the plan developed during planning

If participants appear to be getting triggered, acknowledge that the content of the discussion can be difficult and that, if participants are feeling uncomfortable or unsafe, that's a completely normal response to discussing difficult topics. Provide options to help them return to a feeling of safety, e.g., break, water, bathroom, discuss other topics in the protocol. Return to difficult topics if and when the participants are ready.



Be flexible

Meet participants where they are. If you can't ask all the questions, need to stop, or adjust protocol, you are engaging in trauma-informed practices.

Communicate with facilitation partner

Have a plan in place for communicating about and enacting safety plans to maintain participant and facilitator safety, e.g., safe words or phrases if a facilitator identifies a potentially triggered participant (or is triggered themselves).

Debrief the research activity with the participants, especially if they appeared impacted

This is a method for helping participants process or metabolize a potentially difficult experience. You can frame the debrief as follows: "I am always looking to improve our research process and would love any comments on what went well today and one or two suggestions for small things I could improve in our process..."

After conducting the research, researchers should consider the following practices:

Follow up with participants

If someone was impacted by the research experience, then it can be helpful to check in later or offer resources depending on the situation.

Follow up with facilitators

If there was a difficult or emotional situation, then it may also be appropriate to follow up with colleagues as well.

Continually confirm the process

Discuss with other facilitators how the process is going and where there may be a need for tweaks to ensure the safety and comfort of all participating, even if this means not all research activities will be uniform.

Disseminate the information collected with care and respect for the participants

Follow best culturally responsive and participatory practices around dissemination to ensure participants' stories and experiences are thoughtfully reported. Consider if the information being shared was about your mother, father, brother, sister, or children, would you describe it in the same way?



Trauma-Informed Pre-Research Checklist

- I conducted baseline community research to understand relevant demographics and potential traumas participants may have experienced
- My research questions reflect the research purpose only and do not expand the scope merely out of curiosity
- Research protocols were co-developed with or vetted by the affected community
- Partner organizations embedded in the community were included in recruitment to help increase trust with participants
- Participants have been informed as to the details of their participation
- I have determined appropriate compensation amounts for participants
- I have reserved appropriate locations for in-person interviews and focus groups
- I have planned for water, snacks, or other refreshments for in-person participants

Trauma-Informed Research Checklist

- I reiterated the research intent and purpose and reminded participants of their right to leave at any time, take care of their needs, or not answer specific questions
- I reminded in-person participants of key locations for meeting basic needs, including bathrooms and exits
- I conducted a warm-up activity, such as sharing names, pronouns, etc., as well as a short ice breaker activity
- I stated the topic before asking questions and introduced the new topic before advancing to new questions
- If participants appeared triggered, I followed our safety plan and offered a break or other support
- I debriefed the research activity with the participants, especially if they appeared impacted, using the prompt, "I am always looking to improve our research process and would love any comments on what went well today and one or two suggestions for small things I could improve in our process..."
- I used active listening, balanced the power in the room, maintained a kind presence, and used effective facilitation skills to ensure participant safety

Trauma-Informed Post-Research Checklist

- I reiterated the research intent and purpose and reminded participants of their right to leave
- I followed up with the participants, offered to answer any questions they had, and provided additional resources
- I discussed with other facilitators how the process went and where there may be a need for tweaks to ensure the safety and comfort of all participating
- I have ensured presentation of the research results is respectful of the participants

Next Steps

There are many different ways that you and/or your team can get started on learning more about and implementing trauma-informed research practices in your workforce and post-secondary education research. Some initial organizational steps include:

- Update any research guides or protocols you have with this information.
- Provide staff training on trauma, trauma-informed approaches, cultural responsiveness, racial equity and inclusion, active listening, and other related strategies and practices.
- Develop organizational protocols and practices around researcher self-care and safety to acknowledge and avoid potential trauma triggering and secondary trauma.
- Develop and implement a process for debriefing research experiences and continually evaluating and augmenting organizational procedures.

Every organization operates differently and with different practices, approaches, and ethical considerations. There may be many other different, or more appropriate, actions for you and your organization to take for your work and the communities you work in. These are meant to be a jumping off point for those in the field looking to get started with trauma-informed research. Some of the many resources out there are included below.



Additional Resources

- Think of Us, [Trauma Responsiveness in Participatory Research](#)
- Urban Institute, [Guidelines to Incorporate Trauma-Informed Care Strategies in Qualitative Research](#)
- Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), [Trauma and Resilience Quick Guides](#)
- InsideTrack & Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), [From Crisis to Resilience: Addressing Trauma and Toxic Stress in Workforce Development and Education Systems](#)
- National Fund for Workforce Solutions, [A Trauma-Informed Approach to Workforce](#)

Sources

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