A Trauma-Informed Approach for Youth Programming Checklist[1]

Introduction and Purpose

This checklist is designed to support local organizations to apply a trauma-informed approach to the design, management, and implementation of programs for youth between the ages of 15 and 35. Structured around the six key principles of a trauma-informed approach, the checklist offers practical and actionable guidance to integrate practices across organizations. Additionally, scenarios and case studies are offered to further illustrate what different principles look like in action.

This list of practices will help guide the implementation of a trauma-informed approach within the specific context of a program. Recognizing the widespread impact of war in Ukraine on mental health, it is important for youth-serving organizations to consider the value and benefit of investing in this approach. Individuals with experiences of trauma need trauma-informed services that avoid re-traumatization and mitigate the effects of trauma.

The implementation of a trauma-informed approach is an ongoing process that requires conscious organizational commitment to deepening staff awareness, knowledge, and skills in this area. It is an *approach* to programming, not a linear step-by-step program model. For this reason, the specific practices may vary depending on organizational capacity, setting and population. However, there are general practices and principles that individuals and organizations can follow to guide their adoption of this approach. This checklist focuses on providing that clear and flexible guidance. The list is not exhaustive nor is it meant to be a substitute for treatment or counseling. While the guidance provided can be applied to different environments, note that this list is tailored to out-of-school programs.[2]

[1] This checklist was developed through the USAID-funded Ukrainian National Identify Through Youth (UNITY), a five-year program that supports youth leadership towards a value-based Ukrainian identity.

[2] If you are interested in receiving guidance for other age cohorts or settings, contact Making Cents International at info@makingcents.com.

You may find some practices below are familiar to you and your organization, which is wonderful! You may also find new practices that you would like to begin implementing. This checklist is intended to guide you through the process of intentionally integrating trauma-informed practices in your work.

Organizations can use this guide to:

- Learn about trauma-informed strategies and practices
- Develop a plan for integrating trauma-informed approaches into programming
- Identify specific focus areas for improvement within your organizational context.
- Develop awareness and training for staff

What is Trauma?

Trauma results from an ***event***, series of events, or set of circumstances that are ***experienced*** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has adverse ***effects*** on the physical, social, or emotional wellbeing and ability to function.[3] We can understand trauma by looking at the three E's: **E**vent(s), **E**xperience, and **E**ffect(s).

- **Event(s)** or circumstances include the threat of collective harm (e.g., war or conflict), or individual harm (e.g., domestic violence). These incidents may be isolated or repeated over a period of time. While trauma can be a single event, it is more often multiple events over time. Ongoing events can include child abuse, gender-based violence, or global pandemic (e.g., COVID-19).
- **Experience** is a critical part of the definition as not everyone who experiences the same event will have the same reaction. It is important to note that trauma is not the event, but rather that way the person experienced it. A particular event may be traumatic for one person, but not another. Therefore, it is about how the individual experiences the event that creates a trauma reaction. Things such as age, cultural beliefs, and social support influence how an individual experiences the event(s).
- **Effect(s)** refers to how the experience of the event(s) effects the individual or community. Some effects can be long lasting, short term, or show up after a period of time. Adverse effects can include distrusting others, difficulty controlling and expressing emotions, being hypervigilant, avoiding reminders of the trauma persistent fear, social withdrawal, or self-destructive behavior.

Trauma is often associated with a sense of overwhelm or powerlessness and may negatively affect the functioning and well-being of individuals and groups in many

[3] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAHMSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication NO. (SMA) 14 – 4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

ways, from minor disruptions to more severe impacts.[4] Individuals with trauma may experience a wide range of symptoms which can take many forms. Factors that influence symptoms include age, personal history, support systems, among other factors. The way an individual is affected is not a reflection of their personal strength, but rather their histories of traumatic experiences or other stressors in their lives.

At its core, the trauma-informed approach is compassionate care that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and attempts to develop or restore a sense of safety, self-efficacy, connection, and empowerment to individuals.

What does it mean to be trauma informed?

Trauma overwhelms the capacity of an individual or community to manage distress and links to feelings of powerlessness and lack of control. Accessing trauma-*specific* interventions such as mental health counselling or therapy is one component of recovery. However, systems that youth interact with and elements from their wider social environment also need to understand trauma, its impact on individuals and communities, and adjust how their programs are conducted.

At its core, the trauma-informed approach is compassionate care that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and attempts to develop or restore a sense of safety, self-efficacy, connection, and empowerment to individuals. This care includes practices such as creating safe and comfortable spaces for participants, validating their feelings, helping them connect with others, and offering information on services in the community.

Who is this checklist for?

This checklist is designed specifically for local organizations that design and deliver programs to youth between the ages of 15 and 35. To offer practical applications, the checklist includes a fictional organization and two fictional staff members who apply a trauma-informed approach to their work. These examples are represented in green text boxes throughout the document.

[4] USAID'S COLLECTIVE ACTION TO REDUCE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (CARE-GBV). How to Integrate Mental Health and Psychosocial Interventions in Gender-Based Violence Programs in Low-Resource Settings, https://makingcents.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CARE-GBV_04_MHPSS_v6-508.pdf

Principle in Action:

Introduction

Go-Youth! is a small social non-profit organization in Kyiv that employs 15 staff members and has been operational for 12 years. Their biggest program is a six-month accelerator program for youth that includes a focus on financial literacy, introduction to entrepreneurship, workforce development, among other topics. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Go-Youth! has shifted to offering both virtual and in-person programming options. Youth aged 15 to 35 participate in programs twice a week and spend two to three hours with each visit.

Similar to other organizations, the escalation of the war has impacted their work and operations in many ways. Before the full-scale invasion, Go-Youth! won a grant to make some needed repairs to their building, however, those funds were not released, leaving the organization to search for new ways to fundraise. Go-Youth! has also been struggling with participant recruitment and outreach to youth. Many of the youth who would attend their programs left the city or moved abroad, and the team is struggling to develop trust with newer participants. They are actively looking to recruit new participants who are internally displaced and want to support them to better integrate into the city.

Meet Kateryna, the Program Manager and Team Lead

Kateryna is the program manager and team lead for Go-Youth! She is 34 years old and manages the accelerator program, which includes a team of six staff members. Kateryna is in charge of curriculum development and training of her team. While she is not in direct contact with youth currently, she started off as a youth worker and is now responsible for developing partnerships and more managerial duties. Kateryna recently attended a training on embedding trauma-informed practices in her organization and is starting to make some changes in Go-Youth!'s program and policies.

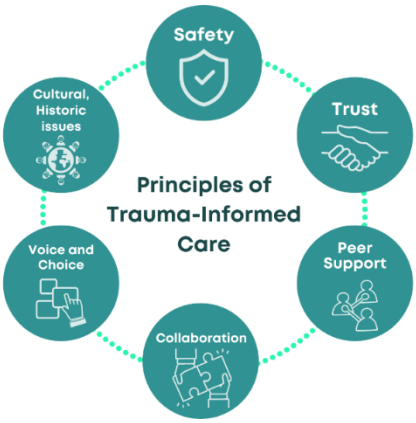
Meet Sasha, the Youth Worker

Sasha started off as a youth participant with Go-Youth! and was offered a full-time position after graduation. He is 21 years old and facilitates sessions with other youth on marketing as part of the incubation program. He is very active and attends different youth-focused events involving other volunteer opportunities. Because of his age, Sasha has an easier time connecting with youth, but struggles with the bureaucratic elements of his role.

Trauma-Informed Practices for Program Staff

There are six principles of a trauma-informed approach:[5]

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and contribution
5. Choice and control
6. Cultural, historical, and gender issues



These principles act as guidance for organizational development and practice improvement, and support in framing concrete pathways to integrating a trauma-informed approach into day-to-day operations. The principles are both holistic and overlapping and are all equally important in the application of this approach. For example, safety and trust are very closely linked because establishing a safe and predictable environment helps build trust between youth and your program.

This checklist can be used to both reflect on current practice and consider new practices for implementation. As this list is extensive, it is recommended to start off by choosing two or three practices to begin implementing and exploring further. These may include practices already in action that can be adjusted, enhanced, and improved upon.

Safety

Creating environments that cultivate a sense of internal (i.e., emotional, psychological) and external (i.e., physical and digital) safety is critical when supporting individuals who are healing from or coping with traumatic stress. Safety is cultivated throughout the organization and focused on both staff and the people they serve.

- ☐ Physical or virtual spaces are safe to access. When gathering in-person, program staff and youth participants can commute safely to and from the programming space. If gathering virtually, the proper security measures are set up to ensure privacy.

- ☐ Staff members approach all participants and colleagues with an empathic and non-judgmental attitude.

[5] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAHMSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication NO. (SMA) 14 – 4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

- ☐ Common areas are welcoming, and privacy is respected. Youth are not asked to self-disclose or share sensitive information unless they express interest in speaking with a staff member or peers.

- ☐ Programs are structured in predictable ways and youth are actively involved in and aware of any upcoming changes.

- ☐ Programs build in opportunities to support youth in coping and self-regulation[6] skill building (e.g., breathing activities, movement, creative expression, journaling, etc.).

- ☐ Staff are trained to recognize signs of distress and support them to regulate their behavior through calming and de-escalation strategies.

- ☐ Locally available mental health referral services are readily available to staff and youth (e.g., posters on display or hotline numbers on websites and activity handouts) in the event professional support may be required.

- ☐ The organization adopts a zero-tolerance policy regarding safeguarding against any form of exploitation or abuse. All staff have access to clear standards of behavior and receive mandatory training on safeguarding, which includes reporting mechanisms.

Principle In Action:

Safety

Kateryna the Program Manager

One of Kateryna's priorities with implementing the incubation program is ensuring her staff feel safe as they are also experiencing high levels of stress due to the war. She knows that when staff are well and supported, programs run better. Kateryna implements a weekly staff development program, where she gathers her team for both learning and staff care sessions. Kateryna begins with a session on self-care and invites a psychologist to facilitate a session on strategies for self-regulation. At the end of the session, she elicits feedback from the team to determine the content and focus of the next session.

[6] Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions. This can include managing more intense and extreme emotions, sensations, and thoughts.

Sasha the Youth Worker

Sasha attended a training session on "The Impact of Trauma" as part of Go-Youth!'s weekly staff development program. Sasha was struck by how predictability and consistency can create a sense of internal safety for youth with traumatic stress. He decided to integrate consistency in his approach through establishing consistent 'opening' and 'closing' activities at the beginning and end of each session. He also wanted to create a sense of predictability, so he started hanging up the schedules and agendas for each session in the room. Sasha also sends a digital copy of their schedule to participants at the start of each week.

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Building and maintaining trust involves making decisions and carrying out operations in a transparent manner, involving youth participants, staff, and other key stakeholders. A common adverse effect of trauma includes hyperarousal,[7] or high alert to perceived threats, resulting in difficulty trusting other individuals and systems and determining what is safe. Promoting transparency is taking the time to explain processes in a clear and understandable way and offering anticipatory guidance along the way.

- ☐ Respectful and professional boundaries are clearly defined and maintained.
- ☐ Codes of conduct are co-created with youth participants and other key stakeholders.
- ☐ Staff expectations of youth is communicated in a clear, positive, and participatory way. Youth are given opportunities to state expectations of staff and the program.
- ☐ Program policies that hold individuals accountable are not punitive and include an understanding of trauma.
- ☐ Staff understand that reminders of past trauma can create a reaction of fear or distress. Staff also understand that these reminders may not always be clear to them, and approach emerging problems by asking questions such as, "What is going on?," rather than resorting to immediate assumptions or consequences.
- ☐ Confidentiality and its limits are stated clearly in organizational policies and respected by staff.

[7] Hyperarousal is a state of increased sensitivity to one's environment where a person can feel constantly 'on edge.' Some common symptoms of hyperarousal include: difficulty falling or staying asleep, irritability, constantly feeling on guard, or startling easily.

Principle In Action:

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Kateryna the Program Manager

Go-Youth! has always had specific expectations of youth behavior as well as consequences if youth violate those rules. Kateryna now understands that behavior that appears challenging or disruptive can be related to a traumatic stress response. She wants to avoid re-traumatization through Go-Youth!'s behavior system and maintain a safe and supportive environment for participants. Kateryna recognizes that they need to revise their set of expectations of both staff and youth to include a trauma-informed approach. She establishes a stepped plan to revise their behavior management protocols, starting with staff consultations and holding co-creation sessions with youth. She hopes that by the end of this process, they will have a different set of protocols that are sensitive to staff, and youth needs and experiences.

Sasha the Youth Worker

Sasha begins his session with an energizer activity. He chooses one of his favorite songs and encourages the group to start stretching and moving to the beat. During stretching, Sasha notices a participant's facial expression change and she abruptly turns around, kicks her chair and storms out of the room. Sasha notices the behavior and asks his co-facilitator to take over the session, explaining to other participants that he would like to check-in with her. He knows that offering her a choice to speak with him or a female colleague is important as some people may feel more comfortable speaking about certain things with a person of the same gender. Sasha approaches the participant and says, "I noticed something upset you in there, and was hoping to check-in with you to see how you're doing. Would you like to share what's going on? You can either speak with me or with Svitlana, and we can find a quiet place of your choosing."

Peer Support

Peer connection and interaction should be strongly promoted and supported through programming. Creating these opportunities allows individuals experiencing trauma to explore building trust, collaboration with others, and connecting with peers who may have similar lived experiences.

- ☐ Positive interactions are encouraged and program staff model supportive relationships.
- ☐ Programs create ample time for relationship building and norm setting.

- ☐ Program design includes opportunities for youth to interact and connect with one another and cultivate peer-to-peer supportive relationships.
- ☐ Organization structure values staff peer support and offers consistent and structured opportunities for staff members to connect and provide mutual support to one another.
- ☐ Programs keep an up-to-date list of other community or peer activities to refer youth participants to where appropriate.

Principle In Action:

Peer Support

Kateryna the Program Manager

Kateryna continues building upon her plan to ensure her staff are well-supported. She decides to create a bi-weekly staff social hour every other Thursday morning for the team to get together and connect. The space is unstructured and when the budget allows, she offers the team refreshments. At times, she includes team building games, which the staff group facilitates.

Sasha the Youth Worker

After learning more about trauma-informed practices, Sasha notices a missed opportunity for participants to connect with one another. He reaches out to other youth workers at the organization and suggests they collectively work on offering a peer social hour every month. His colleagues agree that this sounds like a great idea and suggest involving youth in the planning of the social hour.

Collaboration and Contribution

Trauma can compromise relationships leading to social withdrawal and mistrust of others and organizations. The principle of collaboration and contribution emphasizes that healing happens in relationships where there is meaningful sharing of power and feel included in decision making. In fact, safe connections with others can have a reparative effect for individuals with experiences of trauma. Relationships between program staff and youth participants should be collaborative and based on mutual interest and influence over program direction and structure. Importance is

placed here to levelling of power differences and placing value on meaningful sharing of power in decision-making.[8]

- ☐ Youth are provided a significant role in planning and designing the program structure and activities. Their strengths and interests are both encouraged and incorporated.
- ☐ Youth are given opportunities to help solve problems, give feedback, and make decisions that impact the services they receive.
- ☐ Staff value and elicit youth contribution throughout the program cycle and integrate these contributions into decisions made.
- ☐ Staff are offered opportunities to practice self-care and are able to maintain a healthy balance between their work and personal lives.
- ☐ An asset-based approach is followed where staff and youth strengths and interests are encouraged and celebrated.

Principle In Action:

Collaboration and Contribution

Kateryna the Program Manager

Kateryna wants to intentionally build in youth contribution into decisions made within the organization. She decides to set up a youth advisory board that is comprised of a small group of youth participants. Kateryna works to involve the advisory board in program planning, design of the physical space, and evaluation. She wants to ensure youth feel empowered to voice themselves and affect change within the organization. She also sets up comment boxes across their organization, both in-person and online. Through these boxes, youth can anonymously give feedback and suggest new activities or approaches to programming. Kateryna makes sure to check the boxes on a weekly basis and share back with staff and youth about what feedback they received and how they are responding.

Sasha the Youth Worker

Sasha understands that healing happens in relationships and offering youth structured opportunities to contribute and influence the program is important. While his sessions focus on specific skill development, he decides to carve out time to intentionally create a sense of belonging and solid relationship within the group. He does this in two ways. First, he begins offering participants a few hours a week

[8] Ibid.

where they can drop by the center to have informal gatherings and get to know him and one another better. Second, he begins posting his session plans online for his students to openly comment on the content and structure of the upcoming sessions.

Choice and Control

A common effect of trauma and traumatic stress is the feeling of loss of control and autonomy as well as a sense of helplessness. For this reason, trauma-informed approaches stress the importance of choice and control as key elements to recovery. At all levels of the organization, and in all interactions, individuals' strengths and experiences should be recognized and built upon.[9] Programs and services should be structured in a way that empowers participants to make individual choices and regain some level of control. Staff at the organization view themselves as facilitators and supporters of youth, and do not attempt to control youth decision-making.

- ☐ Individuals are provided with clear and appropriate message about their rights and responsibilities.
- ☐ Individuals are provided with options and choices and their consent should be sought prior to any activity.
- ☐ Activities offer youth multiple opportunities to participate and respond during interactions. Participation is never forced or mandatory, instead, youth are invited to contribute if they so choose.
- ☐ Program staff offer choice points throughout youth interactions with the program.
- ☐ Programs offer youth elements of a program they can control, even if they are small.
- ☐ Staff should avoid insisting upon youth participation or penalizing young people if they miss sessions or deadlines.
- ☐ Individuals are provided with avenues to take on leadership roles such as youth facilitators.

[9] Ibid.

Principle In Action:

Choice and Control

Kateryna the Program Manager

Currently, the *Go-Youth!* program operates by matching youth with trainers and placing them in groups. However, Kateryna knows that choice and control are integral to supporting youth in their programs. With this in mind, she changes their program policy to allow youth to self-select into groups after reading about the facilitators and having a chance to meet them. This way, from the start of engagement, choice and control are in the hands of youth participants.

Sasha the Youth Worker

Sasha has been running virtual mindfulness sessions for the past two months for youth. He has had specific rules requiring cameras to be on and participants to commit to a certain number of sessions. Sasha noticed participation in his group dropping and decided to try applying a trauma-informed approach. He changed the group to be open and accept drop-ins, as well as allowed participants to choose whether their cameras were on or off. He also adjusted his meditation script to offer many choice points along the way. One example included the choice of whether they keep their eyes open or closed.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Applying a trauma-informed approach needs to happen within an understanding of cultural, historical and gender issues. This step means organizations must reflect on how accessible or inaccessible their services are to individuals with diverse social identities (i.e., racial, ethnic, religious, gender, socioeconomic, disability) or from different geographies. Organizations should also invest in learning about the cultural practices and histories of the youth-groups who access services, leveraging the healing value of cultural connection and understanding of any historical traumas. Cultural stereotypes and biases can interfere with accessibility and can risk re-traumatization as that interferes with the restoration of trust and building of relationships.

- ☐ The make-up of staff and students are reflective of one another, and organizations actively seek to recruit a diverse group of participants.
- ☐ Activities and programs celebrate the diverse identities of youth participants.
- ☐ Activities are reflective of the cultural and community backgrounds of youth participants.
- ☐ Staff and participants are aware of and use culturally appropriate and respectful communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

Principle In Action:

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Kateryna the Program Manager

Due to the war, many families were forced to leave their homes to re-settle elsewhere to ensure their safety. Kateryna noticed an increase in the number of participants coming from a temporarily occupied region and was aware that these newer participants of their programs were recently internally displaced. Due to the cultural and historical backdrop, other youth were suspicious of these newer participants and were less likely to trust them because of their different lived experience. To respond to the situation, Kateryna decided to hold a staff meeting to talk through this emerging issue and collaboratively identify the best way to both support youth from temporarily occupied regions as well as create an environment where others are more accepting.

Sasha the Youth Worker

In one of his sessions, Sasha notices several participants staying away from a newer youth participant, Denys. They avoid partnering with him during group work and he is usually the last person selected. Sasha knows that Denys moved to Kyiv recently from Luhansk and that he has been having a hard time making new friends. Aware of his cultural and historical background, he decides to plan a session that focuses on inclusion to help the group accept Denys and get to know him. During the next session, Sasha facilitates activities that focus on acceptance, belonging, inclusion, and empathy.

Helpful Resources

1. Chemonics: Trauma-Informed Approaches to Development Checklist
2. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach
3. Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers
4. Trauma-Informed Evaluation Tip Sheet for Collecting Information
5. Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University: A Guide to Toxic Stress
6. Common reactions to distressing situations and extreme stress, IFRC Psychosocial Centre
7. The well-being guide: reduce stress, recharge, and build inner resilience

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