

An introduction to trauma-informed practice for culturally and linguistically diverse groups



School resources

First Nations peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups (including refugees) face unique issues and stressors that impact their emotions, learning, behaviour, and psychosocial health. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the resilience developed and demonstrated by people within these groups, it is pertinent to consider how this may impact how they experience their education. For First Nations peoples, experiences of ongoing colonisation, discrimination, lack of acceptance, racism, and stigma can significantly negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing¹. In addition, many First Nations people² have experienced historical and ongoing trauma related to colonisation, genocide, the stolen generation, lack of treaty and acknowledgement of the occupation of First Nations land, and ongoing injustices³.

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, particularly those seeking asylum and refugees, experience greater stress and trauma compared to other groups⁴. For people who are refugees, separation from family, displacement, and exposure to long periods of conflict and war in their home countries are often traumatic experiences for these groups⁵.

The experiences, interpretations, and understandings of trauma across culturally diverse groups can also differ from the dominant Western medical model. For example, trauma may be understood as harm to the spirit⁶ or a wound to the soul⁷ among First Nations peoples. It is also important to destigmatise presentations of trauma responses, which can hold different meanings depending on the cultural context⁸, and can look different through different cultural lenses. When striving to implement trauma-informed practice, it is necessary to consider how to do so whilst maintaining cultural sensitivity and appropriateness⁹.

Trauma-informed practice with First Nations students, refugees, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Six key principles of trauma-informed practice have been identified which include:

- promoting the safety of traumatised people
- building trust and being transparent with people impacted by trauma
- providing peer support for people impacted by trauma
- collaboration and showing empathy for traumatised people
- empowering people impacted by trauma to make decisions and share their views
- understanding the impact of cultural, historical and gender issues on people and trauma expression¹⁰.

For First Nations and CALD students, acknowledging culture, historical, and gender issues is particularly important, but this aspect of trauma-informed practice has been somewhat neglected in trauma-informed policy and practice.

Trauma-informed practice with Māori students

From the perspective of Māori, trauma can be understood as harm to *tapu* (sacredness) and *mana* (spiritual life force), impacting one's sense of harmony and balance¹¹. To date, few studies have explored support in schools to help Māori students to overcome trauma. However, one study of Māori approaches in New Zealand to trauma-informed care in schools recommended that schools acknowledge Māori experiences of colonisation, racism, negative stereotyping, discrimination, and higher rates of violence, poverty, and ill health when developing trauma-informed frameworks for these students¹². Furthermore, the inclusion of Māori people in decision-making, training, and implementation of trauma-informed care is crucial to ensure Māori values and beliefs are embedded in practice¹³. Trauma-informed and culturally responsive support for Māori children in schools may encompass the following:

- Understanding of collective and historical trauma¹⁴
- Māori cultural identity at the centre of trauma recovery¹⁵
- Recognition of the *wairua* (spiritual) impacts of trauma¹⁶
- Understanding and acknowledging privilege¹⁷.

Trauma-informed practice with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

An evaluation of the role of schools in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families indicated aspects of school interventions that served to support academic engagement and outcomes among these students¹⁸. These included greater cultural knowledge and understanding in schools, and more staff consultation with First Nations Education Advisors, parents and community members¹⁹. However, a recent review of the trauma-informed literature with respect to Australian Indigenous peoples found that trauma-informed programmes in schools lacked integration of Aboriginal identities, cultures, experiences of discrimination and intergenerational trauma²⁰. A report on trauma-informed care and culturally responsive practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities suggested the following principles for trauma informed practice with First Nations people:

- Fostering relationships and connectedness to promote healing
- Understanding trauma and the impacts of trauma
- Understanding privilege and issues around power and cultural safety
- Creating spaces where staff, people and community members feel physically, spiritually and emotionally safe
- Empowering and supporting people in their recovery from trauma
- Coordinating care to best meet the needs of families and communities²¹.

Trauma-informed practice with Native American and Native Alaskan communities and Canada's First Nations peoples

Native American, Native Alaskan and Canada's First Nations communities are all also impacted by generational trauma²². The following strategies may be used to support Native American, Native Alaskan and Canadian First Nations people communities to heal from impacts of trauma and thrive:

- Practise cultural humility
- Recognise and respect Native American and Alaska Native wisdom, knowledge and intelligence
- Be patient and flexible
- Recognise the impacts of ongoing community trauma and loss
- Try to implement sustainability and consistency²³.

Trauma-informed practice with refugee students

Students who are refugees or from a refugee background also experience difficulties due to their own and/or their families' experiences in their country of origin. A study on trauma-informed practice for refugee students found that the following are important pillars for trauma-informed practice in schools with this population²⁴:

- Understanding trauma-related behaviours of refugee students, including withdrawing, self-harm, selective mutism, challenging authority, disruption in the classroom, destruction of school property, and disengaging from learning.
- Developing trusting relationships between students and teachers through supportive conversations and practical supports of food, clothing, and financial assistance for students to attend school excursions.
- Sharing relevant background and trauma information about students with teachers, which promotes the capacity of teachers to support these students based on their background, previous schooling, and other experiences.
- Supporting students who may be separated from family for indefinite periods, the lack of permanency associated with different visa statuses, and issues around students having different learning, social, and emotional needs.
- Providing support, training and policies for teachers to help them understand how best to support these students, and to understand different cultural backgrounds to create a more inclusive and psychologically safe school setting for refugee students.

Endnotes

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Karen Martin

Karen's passion is to assist with improving the mental and physical health of vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. Over the past 20 years, Karen has undertaken research within schools, prisons and community settings in diverse health fields including trauma and adversity, psychological and post-traumatic distress, and domestic violence. With a team of passionate researchers Karen generated the International Trauma-Informed Practice Principles for Schools (ITIPPS) and created the Thoughtful Schools Program, which is being pilot tested in Western Australia. By sharing knowledge and experience in assisting schools to become trauma-informed using research evidence, Karen aims to ensure that future school environments are places where young people feel supported, cared for and safe.