



What is trauma-informed practice?

School resources

A trauma-informed organisation, such as a school or health service, is one which **'realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; **recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; **responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively **resist re-traumatization**¹. Trauma-informed practice in schools has grown and schools are increasingly implementing educational programmes for teachers and school policies to help teachers to become more aware of the impacts of trauma on students². Trauma-informed programmes and policies are important to support teachers who are tasked with supporting the complex needs of students and families impacted by trauma.

The impact of trauma-informed practice on student mental health

Research about the impact of trauma-informed practice on student mental health and learning is limited. However, recent literature reviews have revealed the benefits of trauma-informed practice in education settings in reducing student levels of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder³. Evidence is also growing on the impact of trauma-informed practice on student learning, school engagement and academic achievement⁴. This is important because the literature is clear that exposure to potentially traumatic events can reduce students' academic performance, intelligence quotient (IQ) scores, executive function, school engagement and school completion, and higher rates of school suspension and exclusion⁵.

The impact of trauma-informed practice for teachers

Less evidence has documented the impact of trauma-informed practice on teacher wellbeing and mental health⁶. Teachers tend to report limited knowledge and confidence in responding to trauma-exposed students before receiving trauma-informed training, although, after trauma-informed training, teachers report that their knowledge, confidence and self-perceived skills improve⁷. Teachers also experience less secondary or vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout after they receive education on how to respond to students impacted by trauma⁸. Secondary or vicarious trauma are terms used interchangeably to describe a teacher's experience of trauma symptoms and emotional distress from repeated exposure to details of trauma experienced by students or others⁹. **Burnout** is another term used in the teaching literature to describe a state of physical and emotional exhaustion and reduced capacity to cope with the everyday demands of one's position¹⁰.

People in helping professions, such as social workers, psychologists and teachers have been found to experience secondary trauma and burnout as a result of their interactions with students exposed to trauma¹¹. Warning signs of secondary trauma for staff include:

- Feeling anxious, hopeless or anger in response to the disclosure of a student's trauma¹²
- Intrusive thoughts about the student's trauma
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
 - Avoiding people, activities or feelings that remind them of the student's trauma

- Lack of enjoyment, productivity or motivation at work
- Trouble focusing
- Physical aches or pains¹³

Trauma-informed programmes in schools

There are few comprehensive trauma-informed programmes in schools, and currently there is limited evidence for their specific effectiveness for teachers and students. Effective trauma-informed programmes typically follow a whole-school, multi-tiered mode of delivery¹⁴. Tier one involves whole school policies and programmes, tier two offers targeted group activities and programmes to at-risk students, and tier three typically consists of individual treatment for students exposed to trauma. There are several trauma-informed programmes that are strengthening their evidence base. These include:

- [Thoughtful Schools](#), an evidence-based trauma-informed programme for teachers and schools. The programme was developed based on evidence and reviews of 20 existing trauma-informed programmes from around the world.
- [The Supportive Trauma Interventions for Teachers](#) (STRIVE), a resiliency-based intervention that is implemented with individual students, teachers and schools. STRIVE aims to improve students' learning environments by increasing teachers' understanding and self-efficacy in supporting the needs of children and young people who have been exposed to trauma¹⁵.
- [Head Start Trauma Smart](#) (HSTS), an early education intervention that is implemented within the classroom setting. HSTS aims to reduce the stress reaction experienced by children and young people who have been exposed to trauma by building students' and caregivers' resources and skills¹⁶.
- [Attachment, Regulation and Competency](#) (ARC), a flexible framework for trauma-informed interventions that aims to integrate students' trauma experiences through strengthening the caregiving system, building awareness and skills in self-regulation, and developing students' resilience¹⁷.
- [Berry Street Education Model](#) (BSEM), an evidence-based model designed to educate teachers and create school environments to foster relationships, self-regulation and students' competencies.
- [Enhancing Resiliency Among Students Experiencing Stress](#) (ERASE-Stress), a whole-school framework that aims to strengthen the resilience and skills of school staff and students, decrease stigmatisation, and enhance the wellbeing of school staff, students and parents¹⁸.
- [Healthy Environment and Response to Trauma in Schools](#) (HEARTS), a school-wide initiative to support the promotion of wellness of the school community by applying the trauma-informed principles of resilience, understanding, safety, empowerment, compassion and cultural humility into educational practices, policies and procedures¹⁹.

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.