

NICOLA LESTER

Trauma informed practice in  
humanitarian crisis

FOUNDATION LEVEL:

INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE

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# AIMS

1. Understanding trauma
2. Understanding the impact of conflict
3. Introduction to trauma informed practice
4. Supporting coping
5. Self-care

# WHAT IS A 'HUMANITARIAN CRISIS'?

Humanitarian crises refers to an event or set of events that threaten the health, safety and livelihoods of a large number of people.

Humanitarian crises can be divided into the following:

- **Man-made emergencies** such as **conflict** and industrial accidents.
- **Disasters** such as tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, droughts, cyclones, hurricanes and health-related epidemics.
- Complex emergencies, which are a **combination of both natural hazards and man-made emergencies** such as **food insecurity** and **displacement of people**.

(Action Aid, 2022)

# TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACHES TO HUMANITARIAN CRISIS'?

The concept of developing a trauma informed approach to humanitarian crisis has a much broader application beyond offering a framework for supporting those affected by conflict.

It can be used across a range of contexts and is simply 'best practice'.

# WHAT IS A TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACH?

A trauma informed approach recognises the widespread impact of trauma and understands what is needed to facilitate resilience and recovery. More importantly, it is 'healing-centred', asking not 'what's wrong with someone?' or even 'what has happened to them?', but rather, 'what's right with them?'.

In recognising the widespread impact of trauma, a trauma informed approach reduces the potential for retraumatisation wherever possible by applying six key principles in practice.

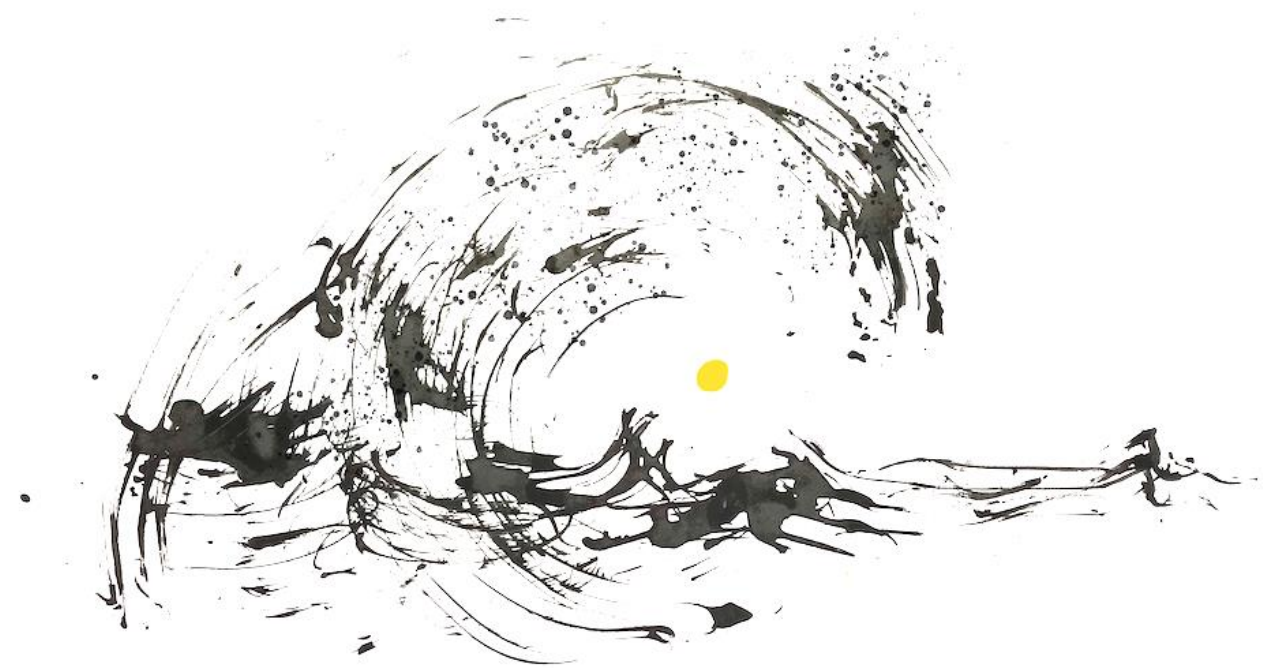
# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC STRESS

- Traumatic stress is a specific type of stress that reflects exposure to emotionally distressing events.
- Traumatic stress is actually a **normal** response to something which has happened which is **not normal**.

# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC STRESS

Traumatic stress can be caused by:

- experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm a person's ability to cope, leaving them powerless.
- circumstances that are outside the realm of normal human experience and shatter our assumptions about the world around us.



# THE 'GLASS JAR' THEORY OF TRAUMATIC STRESS





# DIFFERENT TYPES OF STRESS

## Positive stress (green)

- Normal and essential part of life
- Brief increases in heart rate and blood pressure

Examples: working to a tight deadline, or studying for an exam



# DIFFERENT TYPES OF STRESS

## Tolerable stress (amber)

- The body's alert system is activated to a greater degree
- Activation is time-limited and buffered by access to support

Examples: death of a loved one, natural disaster, divorce



# DIFFERENT TYPES OF STRESS

Toxic stress  
(red)

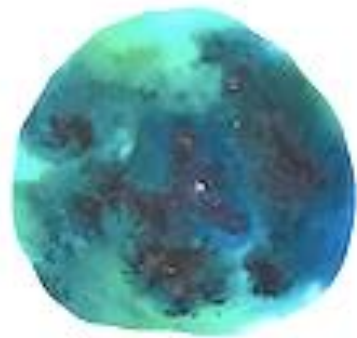
- Occurs with strong, frequent and prolonged adversity
- Limited access to support

Examples: ongoing conflict, situations of ongoing uncertainty and instability

\*Adapted from the Rhode Island Department of Health

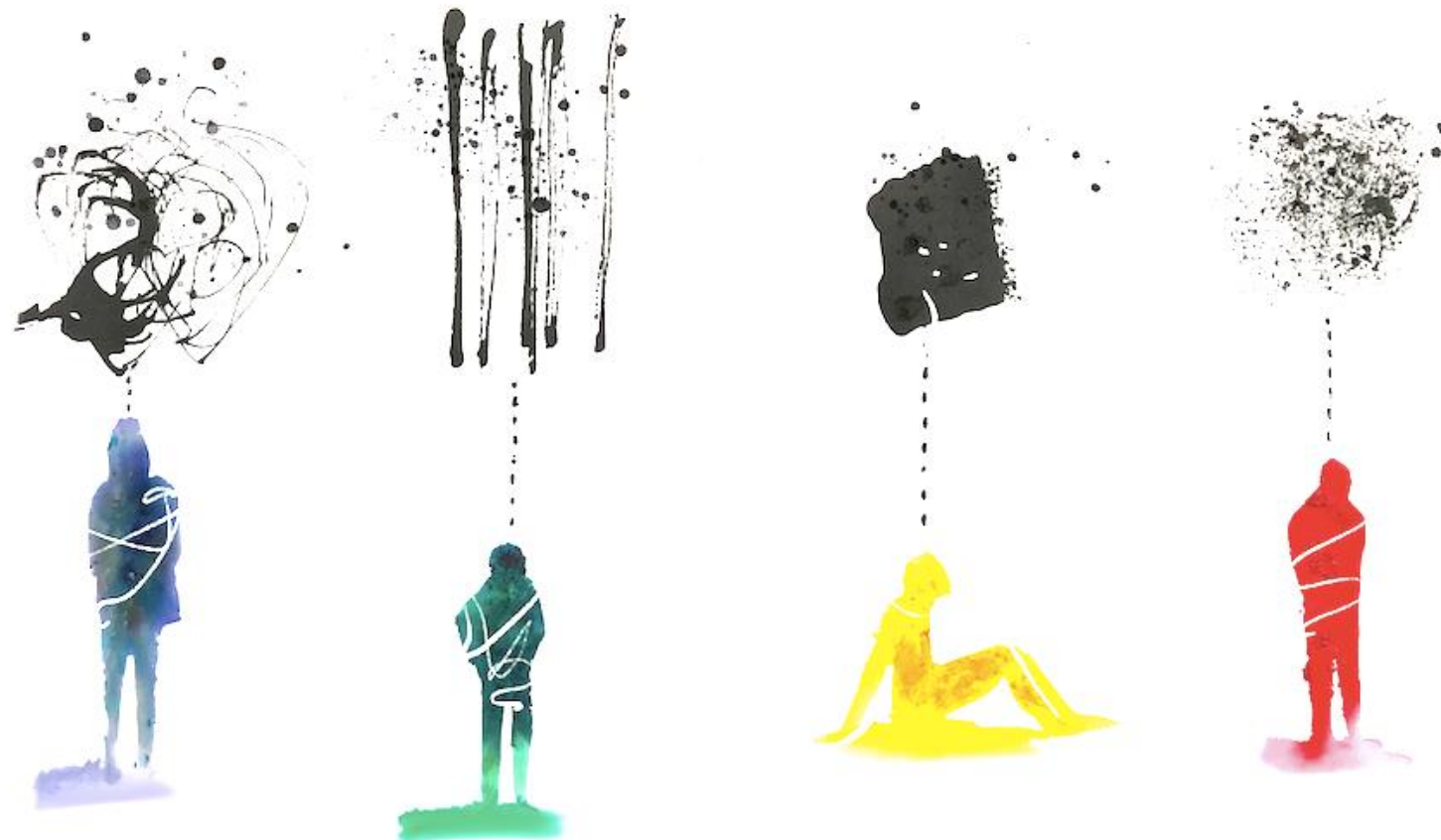


# THEORIES OF TRAUMA: 'SHATTERED ASSUMPTIONS'



# THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

The way we **think**, the way we **learn**, the way we **remember things**, the way we **feel about ourselves**, the way we **feel about other people**, and the way we **make sense** of the world are all profoundly altered by traumatic experience.





# THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

- intrusive thoughts or flashbacks
- nightmares
- having problems sleeping or staying asleep
- not being able to feel emotions (feeling numb and detached)
- not feeling connected to other people (isolating ourselves from others)
- not enjoying the activities that we previously did
- staying away from situations that remind us of the trauma
- feeling anxious, on edge, being startled easily and always on the look-out for threats
- feeling irritable and angry
- difficulties managing emotions

# THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

*After a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment.*

Judith Lewis Herman

# THE IMPACT OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

When someone has experienced trauma they may:

- Be easily overwhelmed and feel frightened and out of control
- Find it difficult to understand, retain and process information
- Find it difficult to focus and concentrate
- Find it difficult to engage with support that is provided



# ACCOUNTING FOR THE IMPACT OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

- Present information in different ways to make it more manageable (for example, writing it down, sending it as a text/WhatsApp message)
- Provide more time and check understanding more regularly
- Be proactive in how you engage someone (remind them of appointments, check in with them if they don't attend)
- Find creative ways of engaging and communicating with someone



# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT

- Death, injury and disability
- Sexual violence
- Malnutrition and illness
- Destruction of physical infrastructure (loss of home, heritage, history and identity)

# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT

- Leaving family behind
- Disruptions to education and employment
- The challenge of accessing education
- Loss of possessions and pets
- Missing home and waiting to go home
- Waiting for 'peace' and difficulties in making decisions about the future
- Guilt, compassion fatigue and burnout
- Living with people you would not otherwise have lived with
- Hate and anger
- Disenfranchised experiences (not feeling entitled to support)
- Vicarious trauma 'it could have been me'
- The traumatising impact of the media
- No access to bank accounts or savings

# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA AND LOSS

There are multiple losses in the context of a humanitarian crisis:

- Loss of home and possessions
- Loss of a way of life
- Loss of identity and nationality
- Loss of employment
- Loss of contact with family and friends
- Loss of life

# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT

- When bereavements occur under external traumatic circumstances they can lead to symptoms of post traumatic stress.
- Those who are bereaved are faced with the dual task of mourning the loss and coping with the trauma that accompanied the loss
- Trauma and grief are interwoven - grief symptoms are overlaid with trauma symptoms.

# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT

When a death occurs under external traumatic circumstances it increases the likelihood of 'complicated grief':

Risk factors for 'complicated grief' include:

- Circumstances of the death
- Context of the death
- Consequences of the death
- Sudden, unexpected, random

# ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES: ATTITUDES TO DEATH

- Remains a 'taboo' subject, often not discussed
- Fraught with assumptions about 'how' people should be, 'what' they should be thinking and feeling and for 'how long' they should be grieving
- There is a need to consider and account for different cultural understandings and assumptions
- Evokes a sense of uncertainty about how to engage with those who are grieving (fear of saying or doing the wrong thing and making it worse)

# UNDERSTANDING COMPLICATED GRIEF

*“Grief transforms. Grief changes you as few other experiences can...it strikes deep, unsettling, breaking apart, shattering what was once stable and secure”*

(Del Rosario, 2004)



# 'GROWING AROUND GRIEF'

In the beginning there is only grief, it is all consuming, crowding out any capacity to experience hope, happiness, joy or colour in the life of those who are bereaved.



# 'GROWING AROUND GRIEF'



People think that grief slowly gets smaller with time as though healing from grief means that it is magically no longer there, disappearing from sight.

# 'GROWING AROUND GRIEF'

In fact, it doesn't ever get smaller, it remains the same shape and size, but slowly life begins to grow around it, you're bigger, stronger, brighter and more resilient, taking up more space around the grief as you reconnect with and rediscover things in life which give you joy, pleasure and happiness.



# INTEGRATING THE LOSS

When someone is experiencing 'complicated grief' they may require additional support to help them to integrate the loss and grow around the grief.

Visualising the process of grief can be useful to help them to understand that healing from grief isn't about it magically disappearing but growing around it.

Often this reduces the sense of guilt that someone may experience in those fleeting moments when they feel happiness, hope and joy again and allows them to start to notice and enjoy these experiences.

# MEANING MAKING FOLLOWING LOSS

*A central process in grieving is the attempt to reaffirm or reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss*

Neimeyer, 2001

Those affected by loss create meaning in different ways and providing the space and time to support them to reconstruct a view of their world, which takes into account the impact of the loss, is an important part of the grieving process.

Examples of meaning making include:

- valuing life and living life to the fullest
- family bonds and valuing relationships

# MAINTAINING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PERSON WHO HAS DIED

Those who are bereaved often do this in a number of ways, such as:

- Talking about their loved one or even speaking to them directly (or writing to them)
- Honouring Birthdays or other significant anniversaries associated with their loved one
- Doing charitable deeds in their honour or even establishing charities in their name
- Creating memory items to foster a continued sense of connection (i.e. memory boxes, blankets, bears, naming a star in their honour)

# SUPPORTING THOSE AFFECTED BY TRAUMATIC LOSS

- Provide the space and time for them to tell and re-tell their stories (the importance of bearing witness)
- Work together with them to understand how they are making sense of the world around them
- Share and explore ideas for maintaining a connection with their loved one
- Provide them with information about theories of loss to help them understand how they are feeling (remember only to make suggestions rather than to tell them this is how they should be experiencing grief)
- Remain curious and try not to make assumptions

# THE SIX KEY PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE

1. Establishing a sense of safety
2. Restoring choice and control
3. Supporting someone to cope
4. Facilitating connections
5. Responding to identity and context
6. Building their strengths



# ESTABLISHING A SENSE OF SAFETY

Good communication skills:

- Being kind, compassionate and caring
- Listening and seeking to understand
- Offering empathy
- Being able to bear witness to someone's distress
- Managing your own sense of helplessness and overwhelm

# RESTORING CHOICE AND CONTROL

- Providing choices wherever possible to help someone regain a sense of control over their lives, it doesn't matter how small these choices are.
- Remember you are working in collaboration with someone, try to think of it as doing things **with** them, rather than to or for them.

# SUPPORTING SOMEONE TO COPE

Try to understand how someone is coping.

- What makes them feel better or a little bit less worse?
- What do they need? What helps them?
- Focus on how they **are** coping rather than how they are not.



# FACILITATING CONNECTIONS

- Think about how you establish relationships with those that you support. Focus on fostering mutual respect, reciprocity and building trust.
- Create connections to the wider community (education, employment, faith, interests and hobbies)

# RESPONDING TO IDENTITY AND CONTEXT

- Try not to make assumptions based on a person's gender, religion, politics, family background, social circumstances, the country they have come from or what they have experienced.
- Take the time to understand how someone has made sense of the world around them and the meaning that they have created from this.

# BUILDING THEIR STRENGTHS

Remember that people affected by trauma are extremely resilient.

Ask not what's wrong with someone, or even what has happened to them, but instead, focus on 'what's right with them'.

A trauma informed approach is not focused on someone's experiences of trauma but instead informed by an understanding of what they need to build their resilience and recover.

# ADAPTATION AND INTEGRATION OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

Occurs when:

- The brain's information processing system works efficiently
- Useful information is extracted from the experience
- A sense of meaning can be created from the experience
- This in turn can lead to wisdom and post-traumatic growth

# RECOGNISING COPING

Reframing and recognising so called 'negative' behaviours as coping.

Everyone copes differently and adapts different behaviours to keep themselves 'safe' in an 'unsafe' world. Start by asking 'what's right?' about these behaviours to understand how they work for someone before thinking about alternatives.

*When I am walking home at night I walk really fast and keep checking over my shoulder as I am fearful of being attacked. I feel weak and powerless.*

*When I am walking home at night, I walk briskly and maintain a ritual of scanning the area around me so that I can monitor the threat level and respond to it quickly.*





# A NOTE ON MANAGING RISK

Trauma informed approaches to managing risk and safeguarding

Key principles:

- Provide choices wherever possible to restore a sense of control
- Support coping (take the time to understand the impact and consider what is needed)
- Connect someone with sources of support
- Remaining engaged (even when referring to another service or professional)
- Honesty and openness, wherever possible
- Explaining actions (saying sorry)

# UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE

'Resilience' isn't the absence of pain or distress or the ability to suppress these emotions

Characteristics of resilience:

- **Sense of control.** Feeling as though you have the power to make choices that affect your situation, your ability to cope and the future. Identifying and connecting with what lies within your control. (i.e. engagement with the media, taking physical safety precautions)
- **Strong social connections and access to support.** Being resilient doesn't mean not needing support from others. In fact, it means knowing when and how to access this support.
- **Problem-solving skills.** Knowing what problems you can solve and being creative, flexible and adaptable to solve them.
- **Emotional regulation.** Developing self-awareness - the ability to recognise emotional responses and to understand what is causing them to support coping.
- **Self-compassion.** The permission to take a break and accept emotions.



# POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

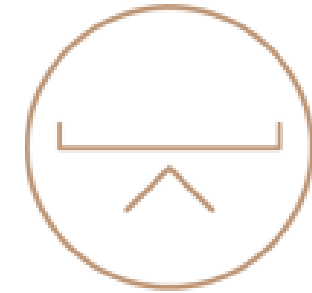
- **A greater appreciation of life:** appreciating the value of life, or appreciating each day in a way you didn't before
- **Improved relationships with others:** you might develop a sense of closeness with others, increased compassion, or the knowledge that you can count on others in times of crisis
- **New possibilities:** such as developing new interests, a new life path, or a willingness to change things that need changing
- **Personal strength:** the knowledge that you can handle difficult things, that you're stronger than you thought, or an increased sense of self-reliance
- **Spiritual change:** A deeper understanding of spirituality, or stronger faith than before

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996)

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# SUPPORTING OTHERS: MAKING SENSE OF TRAUMA



## **Stabilisation:**

Addressing someone's immediate support needs (practical and emotional)

## **Education:**

Providing them with information about the impact of trauma.

## **Normalisation:**

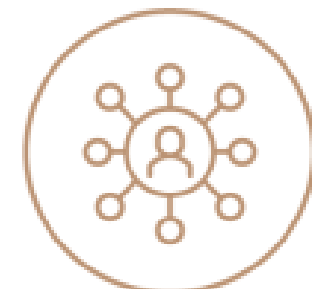
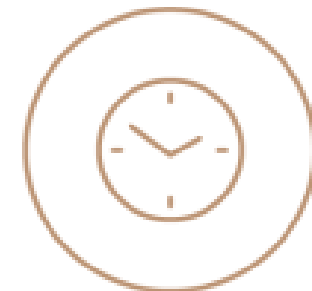
Using this information to provide reassurance that someone is coping and responding normally (this in turn reduced overwhelm and the 'power' of these symptoms)

## **Supporting coping:**

Focus on how someone is coping and think about what they need to enhance their capacity to cope. What is helpful to them?

## **Engagement:**

Be proactive in engaging them with other sources of support. Don't only focus on psychological support, but also other activities which may support coping.



# SUPPORTING OTHERS: GUIDANCE

- Bearing witness to distress and remaining present
- Understanding what you need to do versus what they might need you to do
- Start by asking what someone needs. When someone isn't able to tell you what they need, offer choices, often people can tell you what they don't need.
- Remember that everyone responds to situations differently and it is important to take the time to understand how someone has made sense of what is happening. What does it mean to them? (Rather than thinking about what it means to you).
- Managing your own sense of helplessness, overwhelm, loss and fear. Remember to take the time to look after yourselves, this puts you in a stronger position to support others.
- Focus on what you can do rather than on what you can't.
- Remember that someone's needs will change over time, keep checking and seeking feedback about your approach to support.



# CREATING 'MOMENTS'

- A trauma informed approach isn't about treating trauma.
- It is about creating 'moments' for people.
- Moments of hope, optimism, understanding and connection.

# SUPPORTING OTHERS: THE IMPACT ON OURSELVES

- Vicarious trauma is another form of traumatic stress
- The effect of bearing witness to distress or hearing about experiences of trauma
- Evokes strong feelings of guilt, frustration, helplessness and overwhelm
- Shatters our own assumptions of the world around us (everything we thought that we knew about our world has changed)



# DEVELOPING RESILIENCE: THERAPEUTIC ACTIVITY

Think about your 'trauma jar'

- How full is it?
- What would help to empty it out?

Think about the things in your life which support you to cope

This can include:

- people
- places
- activities
- animals
- affirmations/quotes





# ADDITIONAL TRAINING

**Intermediate level: Integrating a trauma informed approach to practice - key skills  
(Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2022)**

Content:

- Developing therapeutic skills for practice: 'creating moments'
- Understanding context: the role of the media
- Working with interpreters: challenges and opportunities
- Creative ways of working: when words are difficult to find
- Supporting families (including children and young people)

For those who have already completed the Foundation level, please join by 1115.

**Advanced level: Trauma informed interventions in humanitarian crisis  
(Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> May 1000-1500)**

Content:

- Making SENSE of psychological trauma: structuring trauma informed interventions
- Using the SENSE model in practice
- Understanding the impact of complex trauma
- Understanding and responding to vicarious trauma: 'it will never be enough'

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Copy of the PowerPoint presentation
- Trauma informed handbook for reference
- Techniques to manage stress, fear and anxiety
- Using illustrations to make sense of trauma-collection of images

THANK YOU



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