

Trauma-Informed Practice Manual for Settlement Workers

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Trauma Informed Practice

This manual is designed to support settlement workers in applying trauma informed and nervous system aware practices in everyday interactions with clients. It recognizes that trauma does not only live in the past. It is often reactivated through current systems, processes, and power dynamics.

Trauma informed practice helps workers

- Understand how trauma shapes behaviour and engagement
- Respond in ways that prioritize safety, dignity, and trust
- Reduce escalation and disengagement
- Protect their own well being while doing emotionally demanding work



Settlement work places frontline staff and supervisors at the intersection of human suffering, complex systems, and urgent needs. Many newcomers accessing services have experienced trauma that is often layered, prolonged, and compounded by displacement, uncertainty, and systemic barriers.

WHY UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA IS IMPORTANT

At the heart of trauma informed practice is a simple shift
From asking what is wrong with this client, to asking what might have happened and what does their nervous system need right now.

Being trauma informed helps reduce the risk of retraumatization. When workers understand how trauma and the nervous system shape responses, they are less likely to unintentionally overwhelm, pressure, or escalate a client who is already in a state of survival.

Behaviours that appear confusing, resistant, or unmotivated are often adaptive survival responses. When we understand this, our responses change and so does the experience of both the client and the worker.

Trauma informed settlement work is

- Relational rather than procedural
- Curious rather than judgmental
- Grounded in safety, choice, and transparency

A client may move between trauma responses within a single interaction. Stressors such as forms, time pressure, authority figures, or system barriers can quickly shift nervous system states.

Your role is not to eliminate trauma responses. Your role is to recognize them and respond in ways that promote safety and reduce escalation.

Trauma in Settlement Work

Trauma does not only live in memory. It lives in the body and nervous system. When a client is overwhelmed, their nervous system automatically shifts into survival responses designed to protect them.

These responses are not choices. They are automatic and adaptive.

TRAUMA RESPONSES YOU WILL SEE IN SETTLEMENT SETTINGS

Fight Response

The fight response emerges when a person feels threatened and believes they must defend themselves to survive.



Trauma informed responses

- Stay calm and grounded in your tone
- Avoid power struggles
- Acknowledge emotion without validating harmful behaviour
- Slow the interaction and offer clear information

What this may look like in settlement work:

- Anger or irritability
- Raised voice or confrontational tone
- Arguing about decisions or processes
- Accusations of unfairness or discrimination
- Demanding immediate answers or outcomes

What to avoid

- Matching intensity
- Taking the behaviour personally

Trauma in Settlement Work

TRAUMA RESPONSES YOU WILL SEE IN SETTLEMENT SETTINGS

Flight Response

The flight response appears when a person feels unsafe and believes escape is the safest option.



Trauma informed responses

- Normalize overwhelm
- Break tasks into smaller steps
- Offer flexibility when possible
- Clarify next steps in simple language

What this may look like in settlement work:

- Missed appointments
- Avoidance of phone calls or emails
- Leaving appointments early
- Difficulty completing forms
- Appearing rushed or distracted

What to avoid

- Labeling the client as non-compliant
- Overloading with information
- Expressing frustration about missed steps

Trauma in Settlement Work

TRAUMA RESPONSES YOU WILL SEE IN SETTLEMENT SETTINGS

Freeze Response

The freeze response occurs when a person feels trapped and unable to fight or flee.



Trauma informed responses

- Slow the pace
- Ask simple yes or no questions
- Offer grounding options such as pausing or taking a breath
- Reduce demands in the moment

What this may look like in settlement work:

- Silence or minimal responses
- Difficulty answering questions
- Blank facial expression
- Appearing confused or disengaged
- Saying I do not know repeatedly

What to avoid

- Pressuring for answers
- Rapid questioning
- Interpreting silence as lack of interest

Trauma in Settlement Work

TRAUMA RESPONSES YOU WILL SEE IN SETTLEMENT SETTINGS

Fawn Response

The fawn response involves appeasing or complying to stay safe. This response is especially common in people who have experienced power imbalance, chronic fear, or authority based trauma.



Trauma informed responses

- Slow the pace
- Check for understanding rather than agreement
- Offer explicit permission to say no
- Ask open ended questions about comfort and capacity
- Reinforce choice and autonomy

What this may look like in settlement work:

- Excessive politeness
- Agreeing even when confused
- Difficulty saying no
- Over apologizing
- Minimizing needs or distress

What to avoid

- Assuming agreement equals consent
- Moving too quickly through decisions
- Interpreting compliance as readiness

TRAUMA INFORMED PRINCIPLES IN DAILY SETTLEMENT PRACTICE

01. Safety

Safety includes physical, emotional, and psychological safety.

1. Predictable appointments and processes
2. Clear explanations of what will happen and why
3. Calm tone and regulated presence
4. Attention to privacy and confidentiality

02. Trust and Transparency

Many newcomers have experienced betrayal by systems or authority figures. Trust is built through consistency and honesty.

1. Explaining limits of your role clearly
2. Saying when you do not know something
3. Following through on what you say you will do
4. Preparing clients for delays or barriers

03. Choice

Trauma often involves loss of control. Restoring choice supports dignity and regulation.

1. Offering options whenever possible
 2. Asking permission before sensitive topics
 3. Allowing clients to set pace
 4. Respecting when a client says no
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TRAUMA INFORMED PRINCIPLES IN DAILY SETTLEMENT PRACTICE

04. Collaboration

Trauma informed practice views the client as the expert in their own life.

1. Working with clients rather than directing them
2. Asking what has worked before
3. Inviting feedback
4. Framing plans as shared efforts

05. Empowerment

Empowerment focuses on strengths rather than deficits.

1. Naming resilience without minimizing pain
2. Acknowledging effort and progress
3. Supporting skill building rather than dependency
4. Encouraging self advocacy

06. Cultural and Contextual Awareness

Trauma does not exist outside of culture, history, and systems.

1. Avoiding assumptions
 2. Asking about preferences rather than deciding
 3. Understanding impacts of racism and discrimination
 4. Recognizing how migration history shapes nervous system responses
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VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND WELL BEING

Settlement work involves repeated exposure to stories of loss, violence, fear, and injustice. Over time, this exposure can impact workers emotionally, cognitively, and physically.

This is known as vicarious trauma.

Vicarious trauma is not a personal weakness. It is an occupational reality of caring work.

What Vicarious Trauma Can Look Like:

Vicarious trauma may develop gradually and often goes unnoticed at first.

Common signs include:

1. Emotional numbness or overwhelm
2. Irritability or reduced patience
3. Difficulty sleeping after hearing difficult stories
4. Intrusive thoughts or images
5. Feeling helpless or hopeless
6. Over identification with client experiences
7. Withdrawing from colleagues or loved ones

You may also notice changes in worldview, such as seeing the world as unsafe or unfair.

Why This Matters

When vicarious trauma is unaddressed:

1. Burnout increases
2. Boundaries erode
3. Empathy may decrease or become overwhelming
4. Staff turnover rises
5. Client care is impacted

Supporting worker well being is essential for sustaining trauma informed practice.

Everyday Regulation Practices

Small practices throughout the day can help reduce accumulation of stress.

Helpful practices include:

1. Pausing between clients
2. Taking a few slow breaths
3. Orienting to the room or body
4. Creating a brief transition ritual between tasks
5. Naming limits internally such as this story is theirs, not mine

Regulation does not require long breaks or perfect conditions.

Consistency matters more than intensity.

Emotional Boundaries and Moral Distress

Many settlement workers experience moral distress when systems prevent them from helping in the ways they want to.

This can show up as guilt, frustration, or self blame.

Trauma informed care includes

1. Acknowledging limits without shame
2. Recognizing systemic barriers
3. Celebrating small and meaningful impacts
4. Allowing support from peers and supervisors

