

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is an experience that overwhelms one's ability to cope. It is also a response to overpoweringly distressing experiences. As such, trauma is both an event (eg. domestic violence) and a response to an event (Post Traumatic Stress, substance use, mental health crisis) (Covington, 2003).

Trauma has a strong impact on how and why women seek support from VAW shelters and transition houses*. It is important for shelter workers to share a working definition of what trauma means.



Trauma Matters (2013) summarizes trauma in the following way:

Trauma can be precipitated by many types of events and circumstances, including physical abuse, significant personal loss, colonization, displacement, etc.

Traumatic events are more than merely stressful - they are overwhelming. Experiences of trauma are unique and individual to each woman.

Trauma responses can relate to a single event, to repeated events, and to ongoing circumstances across the life span.

Trauma can become an organizing principle that shapes a woman's life and how she sees herself.

Trauma is the sum of:



**for brevity purposes, 'VAW shelter' is being used to encompass the range of women's VAW shelters and transition houses, recognizing the limitations of this term.*



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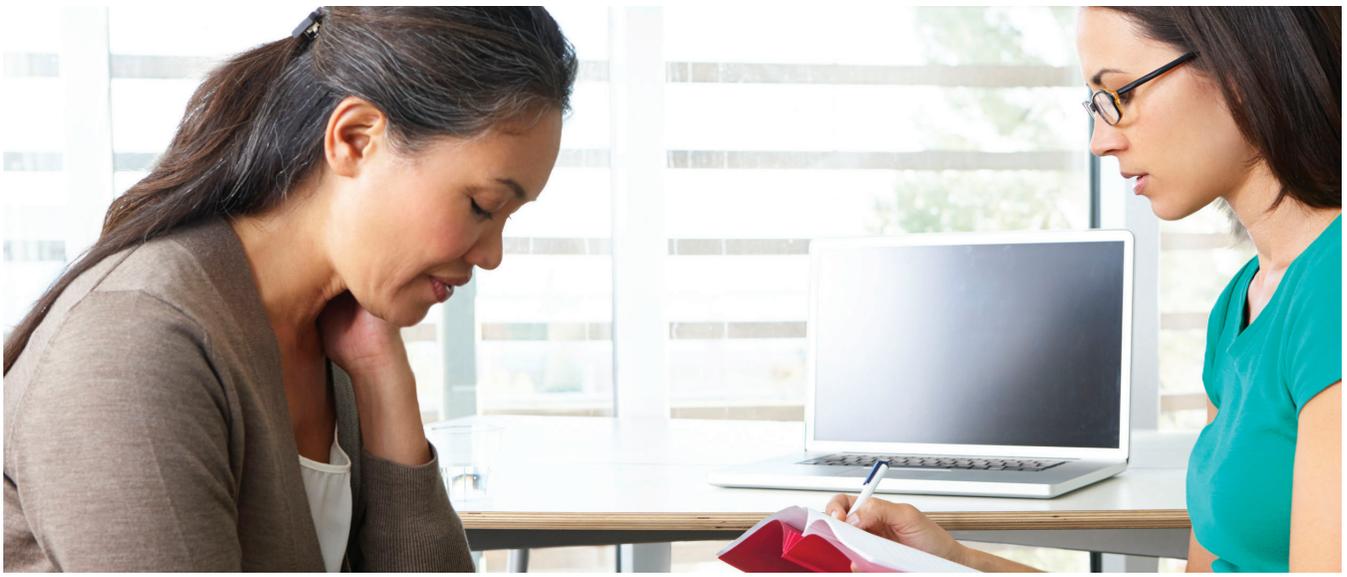


Traditionally, women’s trauma has been diagnosed, medicated or discounted by the mental health and addiction fields, with little recognition for the underlying factors that contribute to women’s experience of trauma.

A feminist, gender-based analysis recognizes the impacts of trauma as normal, adaptive responses to experiences of violence against women. Trauma informed services replace previous top-down approaches to working with women. Instead of relying on outside expertise to determine best practices, trauma-informed organizations take their direction from women-led, strength-based, inclusive, and anti-oppressive perspectives.

This creates individualized practices that are sensitive to trauma issues, instead of relying on mandated rules that are applied across the board.

Trauma-informed VAW services use a full-range understanding of trauma that recognizes the unique interplay of violence, mental health stress and substance use for women seeking their support.



PRE-WORKSHOP READINGS

for understanding trauma in the VAW housing sector



YWCA Canada (2014). Saying Yes – Effective Practices in Sheltering Abused Women with Mental Health and Addiction Issues, 65.

Saying Yes documents changes adopted by violence against women shelters and transition houses to provide wider access for abused women facing mental health and addiction challenges, and reduce their risk of homelessness. The report discusses movement toward harm reduction approaches that are inclusive, responsive, trauma-informed, reflective, flexible, client-led and strength-based and the challenges of transferring effective adaptations to more shelters.



Haskell, R. (2010). Reducing Barriers to Support – Discussion Paper on Violence against Women, Mental Wellness and Substance Use, 45. Retrieved from http://www.bcsth.ca/sites/default/files/reducingbarriersdiscussionpaper_final.pdf

This discussion paper provides some background on a project that looks at best practices for supporting women who experience violence and varying levels of mental wellness and substance use. Set in BC, this paper provides both a Canadian and International perspective, while posing key questions to serve as a jumping off point(s) to start important dialogues. The ultimate goal is to move towards greater collaboration and ultimately Promising Practices for supporting women fleeing violence who have varying levels of mental wellness and substance use.



Guarino, K. (2009). Trauma-informed Care 101. Retrieved from <http://homeless.samhsa.gov/resource/trauma-informed-care-101-46857.aspx>

This on-line resource provided by the Homelessness Resource Center explains how people who experience trauma do not relate to the world in the same way as others. They introduce trauma-informed care, which include understanding trauma and its effects, creating safe physical and emotional space, supporting consumer choice and control, and integrating trauma-informed care across service systems.



Hopper, E.K., Bassuk, E. L., Olivet, J. (2010). Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-informed Care in Homelessness Service Settings. The Open Health Services and Policy Journal, 3, pp. 80-100.

This paper explores the evidence base for Trauma-Informed Care within homelessness service settings. Through definitions and discussion about what is known about Trauma-Informed Care, implications can be made and transferred to services offered in VAW shelters and transition house settings.



Covington, S.S. (2003). Beyond Trauma: A Healing Journey for Women. Center City, MN: Hazeldon.

For women, the experience of trauma often leads to mental health and substance use issues, including eating disorders and self harm. This curriculum explores the interrelationship between substance abuse, trauma, and mental health, through the components of a workbook, video, facilitator guide, and a two-volume facilitator video. Although over 10 years old, this seminal resource is a user-friendly tool that provides a good introduction to how trauma affects women.



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