


# Theme 5: Creating a safe environment through trauma-informed care

Trauma—including but not limited to childhood trauma—is a common factor for people seeking support for gambling and / or substance use harms. In Australia, over 80% of people accessing alcohol, tobacco and other drug services report lifetime experience of trauma.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, childhood and lifetime traumatic events are significantly associated with pathological gambling (according to DSM-IV criteria) and an increase in the number of lifetime traumatic events is associated with an increased risk of experiencing gambling harms.<sup>2</sup>

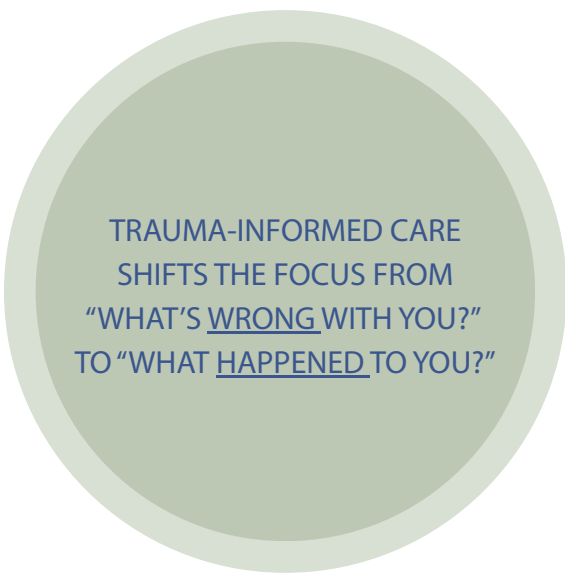
A 2021 review, examining the link between gambling harms and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) found that there was an association between stressful and traumatic life events and the likelihood of gambling harms occurring alongside substance use harms.<sup>4</sup> Experiences of trauma can be life-changing, and may significantly shape a person's views about themselves and the world around them.

Trauma-informed care is an approach whereby services integrate knowledge of the high rates of trauma exposure amongst their service users into policies, procedures, programs and practices to create a safe environment for all service users, including (but not limited to) those with a history of trauma.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, trauma-informed approaches can establish a safer environment for both service users and service providers.



THE DSM-5-TR RECOGNISES TWO MAIN TRAUMA-RELATED DISORDERS: POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) AND ACUTE STRESS DISORDER.<sup>3</sup>

At a service level, a trauma-informed approach crosscuts an organisation. It provides a framework that supports all staff—not just those involved in clinical care—to implement trauma-informed practices in every interaction and process.



TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE SHIFTS THE FOCUS FROM "WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?" TO "WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?"

## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is the response we have to an event, a sequence of events or a set of circumstances that are experienced as physically or emotionally harmful, overwhelming or life-threatening. Trauma can arise in response to a single incident or be complex: having its origins in sustained, cumulative or unresolved events.

## THERE ARE SIX GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR INCORPORATING TRAUMA INFORMED CARE INTO YOUR SERVICE

- 1. Safety:** Ensuring clients and staff feel safe—physically and psychologically. This relates to both the physical setting and interpersonal relations and interactions.
- 2. Trustworthiness and transparency:** Making decisions openly and without secrecy to build and maintain trust.
- 3. Peer support:** Promoting mutual support amongst peers with shared experiences.
- 4. Collaboration and mutuality:** Working together to counter power disparities and recognise the contribution that everyone plays.
- 5. Empowerment, voice, choice:** Recognising and building on individuals' experiences and strengths (including their strength in surviving trauma and seeking help) and helping service users to establish a sense of control.
- 6. Cultural, historical, gender issues:** Acknowledging and addressing the impact of historical trauma, stigma and discrimination, and implicit biases.

It is generally recommended that workers adopt a 'universal precautions' approach, operating on the assumption that all service users have experienced trauma. This does not, however, negate the need to assess service users individually. Trauma exposure should be routinely assessed by suitably trained practitioners. Before conducting trauma assessments, workers should seek training and supervision in dealing with trauma responses, and recognising and managing vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress.



**Vicarious trauma** is the cumulative effect of consistent exposure to hearing about other people's traumatic experiences.



**Secondary traumatic stress** (sometimes referred to as compassion fatigue) is a response that mimics post-traumatic stress disorder and is caused by hearing about another person's firsthand traumatic experiences.

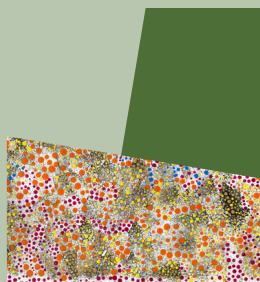
When a service user is experiencing harms from gambling and substance use, they may feel a lack of control over their circumstances. A similar sense of being out of control also characterises trauma disorders. Providing choice in the service setting and allowing service users control over their treatment can be important in building the sense of safety and trust that underpins the therapeutic relationship.

## TRAUMA AND CO-OCCURRING HARMS

Individuals experiencing co-occurring gambling and substance use harms may have more severe trauma histories and a higher likelihood of trauma-related mental health conditions than those experiencing gambling harms only.<sup>6</sup>

Co-occurring gambling and substance use harms significantly increases the risk of suicidality.<sup>7,8</sup>

Given its prevalence, a potential history of trauma (including childhood trauma) is important to acknowledge in the service setting. However, trauma can also have its origins in gambling or substance use. Many of the harms that are associated with gambling and substance use—family conflict, breakdown of relationships, financial losses, involvement with the custodial system, reduced physical or mental health, and suicidal ideation or suicide attempts—can, themselves, be experienced as traumatic. A trauma-informed approach can create a therapeutic space in which these experiences can be safely explored and the appropriate supports put in place, to minimise the impacts of trauma in the individual and their broader network.



**Knowledge point:** Trauma is a common factor in both gambling and substance use and is highly prevalent in people seeking support or treatment for co-occurring gambling and substance use.

**Practice point:** Integrate the principles of trauma informed care into your practice and adopt the 'universal precautions' approach. Be aware of the risk of vicarious trauma and take steps to ensure you have appropriate support and self-care practices in place.