

Trauma-Informed Care in Aging Nutrition Programs

What is Trauma?

Trauma is a word that has several meanings. In medicine, trauma can mean a physical injury to the body. Trauma can also mean an experience or event that causes stress. For this resource, the term trauma is used to refer to the **emotional or mental reaction** to a **stressful or scary event**.

Trauma can happen in different ways:

- From one single event
- From many events over time
- Passed down through families
- Caused by society or community issues
- Seeing something scary happen to someone else

Everyone experiences trauma differently. Two people can go through the same event but feel differently during and afterward. Consider the stories of Sam and Terri, two people who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sam's Story

Sam has heart disease and had a kidney transplant in 2019. She works stocking shelves at a grocery store, and therefore, she couldn't work from home during the pandemic. She was very scared of getting COVID-19 because of her health issues.

Sam also takes care of her aging mother, so she had to keep working to pay the bills. During the pandemic, the store where Sam works was very crowded, and shelves were often empty. Customers were often angry and took it out on Sam and her coworkers. Even now, when life is mostly back to normal, Sam still feels nervous when she hears someone cough, is in a crowded place, or notices empty shelves in the store.

Terri's Story

Terri is healthy, has a strong support system, and works for an insurance company. When the pandemic started, she was able to work from home. She gets along well with her roommate and had safe ways to socialize. Terri didn't worry much about getting the virus because she was hopeful

it would be a minor case. She was also able to afford having groceries and household supplies delivered to her doorstep. Terri never felt forced into situations where she was concerned about being exposed to the virus.

Although both Sam and Terri went through the same event (the pandemic), their experiences were very different. Terri didn't feel the same stress or fear that Sam did. Trauma affects everyone in their own way, and it is not always easy to tell who has been affected and how.

What Does It Mean to be Trauma-Informed?

Being **trauma-informed** means thinking about how past trauma might affect others and being careful not to cause more harm. Trauma-informed is about treating others with care, understanding, and respect.

You can use a trauma-informed approach in your personal life and at work.

Why is a Trauma-Informed Approach Important?

Most people go through some kind of trauma in their lives. When we use a trauma-informed approach in aging nutrition programs, we help participants feel safe and supported. This helps them stay healthy and age well.

How Can Aging Nutrition Programs be Trauma-Informed?

Knowing someone's personal trauma isn't required in order to treat them with care. Here are some helpful ways programs can offer trauma-informed care:

1. Learn

- **Educate yourself and others** — Learn about past and current events that may have caused trauma, especially for older adults in your community.
- **Offer training** — Look for online trainings. One example is from the Center on [Aging, Trauma, and Holocaust Survivor Care](#). The organization offers a free training [Person-Centered, Trauma-Informed Essentials for Aging Services](#).

To learn more or find other trainings online, search for terms like:

- “trauma-informed care for older adults”
- “how trauma affects seniors”
- “trauma in military veterans” (or another group you work with)

- ### 2. Create a Safe Environment.
- While we can't control everything, aging nutrition programs can help people feel safe by:

- **Making the space welcoming** — Use decorations, images, and messages that reflect the individuals in your community. Celebrate different holidays, not just the most common ones.
- **Ensuring physical safety and access** — Make sure people using wheelchairs or walkers can move around easily. Also, give people enough space to eat their meal or participate in an activity without being bumped into or touched by others.
- **Being open and honest** — Clearly explain how to sign up for services and why certain information is collected. Let them know how their information will be used and kept private.
- **Offering to-go containers** — The option to take leftovers home helps people who have experienced food shortages feel more secure.
- **Helping people connect** — Create ways for people with shared experiences (like military veterans, those affected by natural disasters, people of the same religion, etc.) to meet and talk.

3. Give Participants a Voice and Choice

- **Ask for input** — Talk to participants and community leaders when planning new programs or meals. Listening to them helps build trust and improves services.
- **Offer choices** — Whether meals, classes, or other services, options help people feel in control and respected.

4. Focus on the Person

- **Don't make assumptions** — Even people who went through the same event can feel differently about it.
- **Listen carefully** — Listen to what people say — and what they don't say.
- **Be person-centered** — Work with each person to give care in a way that helps them feel heard, respected, and safe.
- **Evaluate the work** — Keep checking in to see how things are going and be open to changing your approach.

By using these steps, aging nutrition programs can better support their participants through a trauma-informed and person-centered approach. Even small changes can make a big difference in helping people feel cared for and safe.

References

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