

# Trauma Responsiveness in an Integrated Workforce Service Delivery System

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) seeks to provide access and opportunities for job seekers who face barriers to employment. While many education, training, and employment services programs are implementing support services to increase access and sustainability for students and job seekers, few address the barriers created by violence and trauma. Trauma can affect how individuals relate to others, process information and their environments, and ultimately impact their ability to pursue pathways to promising careers. Education, training, and employment programs can significantly improve the resilience of students and job seekers within these programs by recognizing that many students and job seekers are affected by trauma and current experiences of violence and implementing trauma-responsive practices.

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61 percent of men and 51 percent of women in the U.S. report being exposed to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime.<sup>i</sup>

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## What is Trauma and How Does It Impact Students and Job Seekers?

Trauma is defined as “an event, series of **events**, or set of circumstances **experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse **effects** on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”<sup>ii</sup> Traumatic events can include near death experiences, the loss of a loved one, witnessing a violent act, experiencing child abuse, histories of oppression, and exposure to gender-based violence and harassment, including domestic violence, sexual violence and harassment, stalking, and human trafficking. Trauma often triggers an unconscious flight, fight, or freeze response in our brain and floods our body with stress hormones.<sup>iii</sup> Without proper support and care, the body’s natural response to trauma can be detrimental to one’s long-term physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being (see Table 1: Common Trauma Responses). The harms caused by experiencing traumatic events may also result in some individuals misusing drugs or alcohol and/or engaging in risk-taking behaviors as a means of coping with their experiences, which can further exacerbate the impacts of trauma.

Table 1. Common Trauma Responses

Emotional	Physical	Cognitive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numbness, apathy, withdrawal</li> <li>• Anxiety, fear</li> <li>• Guilt and shame</li> <li>• Anger and irritability</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Suicidal thoughts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gastrointestinal issues</li> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Sleep problems</li> <li>• Chronic pain</li> <li>• Panic attacks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty concentrating and making decisions</li> <li>• Flashbacks</li> <li>• Attention bias towards threats/ Hypervigilance</li> <li>• Decreased working memory</li> </ul>

The impacts of trauma and exposure to threats or acts of violence can shape how individuals perceive and relate to their surroundings. Underlying structures of power and control in workforce development programs and work environments have the potential to be harmful to survivors by replicating abusive behaviors<sup>iv</sup> such as denying an individual choice and serving as gate keepers to the resources and opportunities needed to support themselves and their families. Moreover, workers who have experienced violence in the past are often exposed to further harm on the job due to the very real risk of workplace violence and harassment – research indicates between 25 and 85 percent of women experience sexual harassment and violence in the workplace.<sup>v</sup>

For individuals currently in an abusive or exploitative situation, workforce development programs and employment provide an important pathway to safety and independence. But because these serve as an important lifeline, abusive individuals, whether partners or traffickers, often seek to sabotage these opportunities – two-thirds of individuals experiencing domestic violence report that their partner interfered with their access to education, training and employment opportunities.<sup>vi</sup>

Trauma and ongoing victimization can severely disrupt an individual’s education, training, and employment success, despite their capacity and desire. Three key areas include performance, engagement, and completion.

- ❖ Poor academic or work performance → students who experience sexual harassment and violence are more likely to have lower grade point averages.<sup>vii</sup> Survivors of domestic violence report that fear and interference from an abusive partner negatively impacts their ability to work.<sup>viii</sup>

- ❖ Diminished program engagement → nearly 25 percent of students with a history of sexual violence or abuse participate less in class and withdraw from activities.<sup>ix</sup>
- ❖ Dropping out → students with histories of child trauma are 2.34 times more likely to drop out of school.<sup>x</sup> A survey of domestic violence survivors found that 17 percent dropped out of training programs because of the actions of their abusive partners.<sup>xi</sup>

Too often, these behaviors these impacts of trauma and violence are interpreted by program staff as character flaws or a lack of desire to succeed. This view fails to realize the prevalence of trauma and its impacts on students and job seekers and focuses on behaviors rather than seeing individuals as a whole. Perhaps most importantly, this view fails to recognize that programs, not individuals, need to change to create spaces that are responsive to these very common impacts of trauma.

### Integrating Trauma-Informed Practices into Service Delivery

Individuals are resilient and are capable of overcoming the harmful impacts of trauma. Education, training, and employment services should strive to create safe and supportive environments that promote accessibility for all students and job seekers and support their resilience. This is not something programs need to do alone. Partner with a victim service agency to provide cross-training for front-line workers, case managers, faculty, and trainers on violence and trauma to develop competency to provide support and trauma-informed services. Maintain a comprehensive network of referral partners, including victim advocacy organizations, with whom you can partner to seamlessly deliver support services. When reflecting on your own programs, consider incorporating these **six principles of trauma-informed practices**<sup>xii</sup> into program design and administration to ensure that students and job seekers with barriers resulting from trauma and violence are able to pursue their career pathways.

1. Promote physical and psychological **safety** (as defined by students and job seekers) by validating their experiences and providing non-judgmental support.
2. Build **trust** by being **transparent** and consistent in sharing what your program can and can't do to help. Describe processes to report harassment or violence and provide information on available accommodations and support services or referrals to community resources that can offer assistance related to current or previous victimization.

3. Cultivate mentors and other leaders who share similar lived experiences, identities, and backgrounds with students and job seekers to help create opportunities for those individuals to connect and provide **peer support**.
4. Foster a culture that promotes dignity, agency, **collaboration**, and respect. This can be accomplished through leveling power differences between staff in all positions and program participants, so that students and job seekers have a meaningful role in shaping their future.
5. Individuals who are impacted by trauma and violence are the experts on their own experiences and what they need to thrive. **Empower** students and job seekers with a meaningful **voice** and information-driven **choice** in determining the education and career pathways that are best for their needs.
6. **Acknowledge histories of discrimination and oppression** due to an individual's racial/ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, religion or other identity that can exacerbate the impacts of trauma. Build equity, inclusion, and opportunities for marginalized communities and students and job seekers with barriers.

These six principles are the foundation of a universal, *human-centered* service delivery system. Through collaboration with victim service agencies, the development of referral partners to meet a range of student and job seekers needs, and the implementation the six principles of trauma-informed practices in service design and delivery will help achieve WIOA's goals of a comprehensive, accessible and high-quality workforce development system that can meet the needs of all students and job seekers.

For more information, or to receive training and technical assistance on integrating trauma-informed practices into workforce service delivery and improving access and opportunities for individuals with trauma and violence-related barriers, visit: <https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/human-trafficking/promoting-employment-opportunities-survivors-trafficking/> or <https://refugees.org/explore-the-issues/our-work-with-survivors-of-human-trafficking/about-project-trust/>.

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