

# TRAUMA-INFORMED WAYS OF DOING RESEARCH WITH PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Read VMIAC's Lived Experience-led Research Strategy  
<https://www.vmiac.org.au/research/>

**Safety**  
 Is your research practice trauma-informed? Have you included adequate support for lived experience researchers and participants?

**EXPERTS IN OUR OWN LIVES**  
 The expertise of people with lived experience of mental health challenges and/or trauma is valuable and needs to be central to all mental health research. People with lived experience must be valued, acknowledged, and paid fairly for our work and contributions to research, whether as participants, advisors, or researchers.

**Ethics**  
 Organisations doing research should have policies to uphold the rights of people with lived experience that outline procedures for safe, fair engagement.

- Rights
- Acknowledgement
- Expertise
- Self-determination
- Choice
- Diversity
- Safety
- Respect
- Fairness
- Information

*Involving stakeholders and community in all stages of research*

*Acting to advance and support social justice, dignity, equity, and safety*

*Taking universal precautions*

*Building trust*

*Being honest without causing harm*

*Monitoring harm collaboratively*

*Skipping questions, ending an interview, taking a break*

**COLLABORATION**

*Ongoing relationships*

*Being clear, open, and honest*

**MUTUAL RESPECT**

*Understanding privilege and intersectionality*

*Embedding informed consent, autonomy, and choice*

**SAFETY & INCLUSION**

*Not getting caught up in the moment*

**SELF-CARE**

*Debriefing*

*Sharing responsibility and supported decision-making*

*Acknowledging people's backgrounds, cultures, and sense of self*

*Recognising and respecting people's autonomy and boundaries*

*Creating safe spaces*

*Finding the right space and conditions together for difficult conversations*

*Calling on a support person*

**RECIPROCITY**

*Informing the community so the community can inform researchers and make decisions about research priorities and processes*

*Supporting people to weigh up risks and benefits of participation for themselves*

*Providing information with time to consider and respond*

*Taking time to listen to our feelings, centre ourselves, and heal*

*Recognising resilience & recovery*

*Being proactive*

**PARTNERSHIPS**

*Listening to communities*

*Recognising and respecting ownership of knowledge*

**SELF-DETERMINATION**

*Ensuring everyone is supported to exercise their power and choice*

*Ensuring everyone has the chance to speak and be heard*

**COMPASSION**

*Acting with kindness*  
*Listening without judgement*  
*Listening to understand*

**Responsibility**  
 Funders, researchers, and stakeholders are accountable for upholding these values and respecting consumer principles

*Making time to prepare, think, participate, and respond*

**PLANNING AHEAD**

*Asking about and providing support for people with lived experience & their supporters*



# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TRAUMA-INFORMED?

Various frameworks have been developed, but trauma-informed practice can't easily be reduced to a specific approach or checklist. Being trauma-informed means staying alert, caring, and aware, and is likely to involve organizational change. On-going reflection, evaluation, and community engagement are needed to develop and embed trauma-informed ways of working.

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## Being trauma-informed means considering ways to prevent and avoid re-traumatising someone with a lived experience of trauma

### PEOPLE WITH TRAUMA

*Have meaningful and purposeful lives*

*Are more than their trauma*

*Play valued roles in the community*

*May seek support to find and use ways to reduce their trauma-related distress and problems*

*Should be supported and empowered to exercise their autonomy and self-determination*

### Recognise & acknowledge

Trauma-informed ways of working recognise that many people have experienced childhood, adult, or intergenerational trauma or adversity, and that trauma can be complex and intersectional

### Adapt & empower

Trauma can have a big impact on the ways people feel and behave, including how they respond to others in research contexts and settings.

### Act with hope & compassion, & uphold consumers' human rights

Being treated with respect, kindness, and dignity, and being supported and empowered to make decisions and choices autonomously, are important for managing and recovering from trauma.

### TRAUMA-INFORMED PRINCIPLES

- Recognise that people's behaviour and responses may have developed to adapt to trauma
- Consider the broader context of adversity and a person's experience of trauma (e.g., culture, history, gender)
- Create safe environments
- Minimise the chance of re-traumatising people by avoiding putting people in the same situation
- Promote awareness and understanding of trauma
- Support and empower people to exercise control, choice and autonomy
- Provide peer support
- Believe recovery is possible
- Build resilience and share hope
- Promote self-care
- Take a strengths-based approach
- Managing and recovering from trauma is a key goal
- Make an organisational commitment to trauma-informed approaches
- Promote trauma-informed approaches & services
- Develop strategies to respond to secondary trauma
- Create collaborative relationships and partnerships
- Be trustworthy and transparent

# RECOGNISING & RESPONDING TO TRAUMA

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SAFETY

AGENCY

WELLBEING

EQUITY

DIGNITY

RIGHTS

AUTONOMY

**A key part of trauma-informed research practice is learning to anticipate, recognise, and respond appropriately to the ways that people embody, express, and work through the trauma they have experienced.**

## Trauma is intersectional

Trauma-informed approaches consider:

- The psychology, behaviour, and lived experience of individuals
- The social context of their everyday lives
- The relationships, community, environment, and social structures that shape the kinds of opportunities, challenges, and adversities individuals experience

## Protection & safety

- Physical and emotional safety
- Human rights, self-determination, and autonomy
- Confidentiality
- Transparency about outcomes
- Provide and offer support, including peer support

## Empowerment

- Agency
- Choice and decision-making
- Self-expression
- Collaboration
- Listening

The experience of trauma is varied, individual, & shared

## Some ethical considerations for researchers

- Have you considered how to implement a trauma-informed approach to your project? Do you need trauma-informed training?
- Have you taken universal precautions to avoid retraumatising people with undisclosed histories of trauma, and acknowledging the scale of trauma in our communities?
- Differentiate between data collection and support roles and processes
- Ask "what happened?" rather than "what's wrong with this person?"
- Anticipate and ask about the implications of your research for participants who have experienced trauma and work with them to find out what accommodations might be helpful (e.g., time, breaks, locations, protocols, access).
- Take intersectional personal and social identities into account – how do gender, culture, or background affect how the research is done?
- Be reflexive and challenge traditional power imbalances in research processes:
  - Are you challenging unhelpful norms and biases about how research should be done, to respond to the needs and preferences of people with lived experience?
  - Is your practice culturally responsive? Is communication open and transparent?
  - Is access to involvement in your research equitable? Is your process collaborative?
  - Are you valuing lived expertise and respecting ownership of knowledge?