



**Why working in a
trauma informed
way is important**

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Experiences of trauma are more common than often acknowledged and it's likely that most of us will experience an event in our lives that could be considered traumatic, but we won't all be affected the same way. It's estimated that 50-70% of people will experience a trauma at some point in their life¹. However, research shows us that compared to the general population experiences of trauma are more prevalent for those experiencing homelessness. In April 2022, research commissioned by Oasis Community Housing to explore the prevalence of trauma among individuals with experience of homelessness in England found that 92% of their respondents had experienced trauma².

Trauma is when we experience very frightening, distressing or stressful events that may be out of our control or are difficult to cope with and can be overwhelming. Trauma can impact anyone at any age, whether from a single event or ongoing experiences.

Examples of trauma can include but are not limited to, experiencing or witnessing physical and / or sexual abuse, child abuse, life-threatening events, sudden death of a loved one, bullying, discrimination, serious illnesses, forms of violence, crime, war, combat or terrorism.

It's important to understand that the effects of trauma vary widely, but if unaddressed it can remain with people and significantly influence thoughts, feelings, behaviours towards themselves and others, and the way that people engage with other people and respond to situations. This applies equally to both customers and staff alike.

Adopting a trauma informed and compassionate approach improves customer relationships and strengthens long-term engagement. Working in this way will also help to create an inclusive environment which allows for more equity in access and support. Customers who feel respected and understood are more likely to return and recommend services, and staff will feel supported, which will also contribute to increased staff retention.

Homelessness and trauma

The impact of trauma is one of the pressures that can build up and push people into homelessness, and homelessness in itself can be traumatic.

1 <https://www.ptsduk.org/ptsd-stats/>

2 <https://www.oasiscommunityhousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/The-prevalence-of-trauma-among-people-who-have-experienced-homelessness.pdf>

The financial and customer service sectors interact with a diverse range of customers on a daily basis, who will all come from varied backgrounds, have different experiences, and will manage emotions in different ways. Customers who have experienced trauma and homelessness may have a heightened sense of vulnerability, anxiety, and distrust due to the challenges they have faced.

Adopting a trauma informed approach can improve interactions and customers will feel respect, heard, and supported, leading to fewer incidents, complaints, and better outcomes for customers, staff, and businesses.

Empathy and understanding

Experiences of trauma have a psychological and physiological impact and affects brain chemistry. People will respond differently to experiences of trauma, but it can make it difficult to regulate emotions. It can affect people's mood, make people feel stressed, vulnerable or anxious, and it can also lead to frustration, anger and aggressive behaviour. Because of the difficulties that people may have when they have experienced trauma, it can trigger a fight, flight or freeze reaction.

If the fight reaction is triggered and a customer is showing signs of frustration, it's important for staff to regulate their own emotional responses during these times, as prevention is always best. A trauma informed customer service approach prioritises empathy and compassion, treating customers as individuals rather than being defined by their circumstances. By doing this, you can intervene as early as possible and diffuse a situation and avoid frustration building up. Staff should be trained and use effective and compassionate conflict management strategies and strive to find the most helpful approach going forward to assist in meeting the needs of the person who is distressed.

By treating customers with dignity, respect and by showing genuine empathy, services can build rapport and trust, allowing customers to feel understood rather than judged.

It's essential to also view interactions through an intersectionality lens too and be inclusive, considering gender and cultural needs while ensuring accessibility for individuals with visible or non-visible disabilities or language barriers.

Trust and safety

If you have experienced trauma, it can make customer service interactions feel overwhelming and intimidating. Customers with a history of homelessness may have encountered situations where they were treated unfairly, dismissed, or not heard and this can lead to a distrust of others. It's important to engage gently and respectfully, to avoid reinforcing negative experiences. Each interaction should be without judgement or assumptions, allowing space and time for customers to talk, respecting boundaries, and maintaining consistency to build trust. Be open and honest about the level of support you can provide, and if you are not able to assist, clearly explain the reasons why and provide alternative options where possible.

Communication

Customers who have experienced trauma and homelessness, may feel anxious, fearful and may struggle to confidently interact with others, and this can create barriers to engagement. Active listening, empathetic responses, and maintaining a calm communication style, can help guide the conversation and lead to mutually beneficial solutions.

This approach can help prevent situations from escalating, defuse tension, resolve conflicts, and help to meet both the customer, and business needs. It's also helpful to recognise that staff experiences inside or outside of work can influence responses. This may include experiences of trauma or current personal or work stresses.

Empowerment and choice

The power dynamic between a member of staff and customer can be complex and influenced by factors such as expertise, access to information, authority, and perceived roles in any interaction. In many contexts, a member of staff holds a position of informational power, often knowing more than the customer does. This imbalance can lead to a situation where the customer feels uncertain, dependent, or hesitant to make decisions confidently.

Adjust communication to meet a customer where they are at that moment in time; this will include active listening, asking open-ended questions, and recognising that customers may need extra time, clarity or support in navigating complicated processes. Offering clear, concise communication, breaking down complex information, and providing flexible options wherever possible can help people feel more in control and empowered during their interactions.

Members of staff may also have experienced trauma, so by taking a trauma informed approach, you are creating a safe, supportive and empathetic environment for everyone, improving a customer's experience while improving staff morale and preventing re-traumatisation.

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