

Clinical Toolkit

Clinical Tips: Alcohol and Other Drugs Trauma Informed Care

The relationship between trauma and substance use

For many young people, trauma and substance use are closely linked. “According to the self-medication hypothesis of substance abuse, people develop substance abuse problems in an attempt to manage distress associated with the effects of trauma exposure and traumatic stress symptoms. This theory suggests that young people turn to alcohol and other drugs to manage the intense flood of emotions and traumatic reminders associated with traumatic stress or PTSD, or to numb themselves from the experience of any intense emotion, whether positive or negative.”¹

Experiencing trauma can put a person at increased risk for substance use problems. There are likely to be a number of reasons for this, including: temporary alleviation of anxiety and dysphoric mood states while intoxicated; dampening down of emotional lability with depressants; and avoidance of painful memories while under the influences of psychotropic substances. Using substances can also diminish people’s capacity to cope with a traumatic experience, both because there is an avoidance of the affective sequelae of traumatic experience without resolution of those symptoms; and because substance use can impair mediating psychological factors including mood, frustration tolerance, mental flexibility and cognitive capacity.

Adolescents with substance use disorders are also significantly more likely than their nonsubstance using peers to experience traumas that result from risky behaviours, including harm to themselves or witnessing harm to others.

Research suggests that up to 59% of young people with PTSD develop substance use issues. Use of psychotropic drugs is also increased among those with poor child–parent relationship and multiple childhood adversities

Many young people who use substances will have a history of trauma. It is essential that young people are not re-traumatised in the delivery of services that they are seeking.

Trauma Informed Care

Trauma-informed care is as a set of principles and practices that inform health care worker efforts in providing safe and effective support, treatment and care.

Within youth health settings, trauma-informed care is defined as “a program, organisation or system that:

- Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery.
- Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system.
- Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.
- Seeks to actively resist re-traumatization”

(SAMHSA, 2018)

The six key ingredients of trauma-informed practice within youth health care settings that should underlie every aspect of the service/system are:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and transparency
3. Collaboration and mutuality
4. Empowerment
5. Voice and choice
6. Cultural, historic and gender issues

In working clinically with young people experiencing substance use difficulties, the five central components of any trauma-informed intervention are:

1. Working safely and avoiding the risk of re-traumatisation
2. Conducting a trauma-sensitive assessment
3. Developing a shared understanding with the young person of the impacts of trauma on their current difficulties

4. Providing psychoeducation
5. Working in a strengths-based way with young people and their families and carers

Further information on trauma-informed care can be found in:

Orygen Clinical Practice Point (2018) [Clinical Practice in Youth Mental Health: Trauma-informed care: what is it and how is it implemented in youth healthcare settings](#)

And in the [Youth AOD Toolbox: What is trauma-informed care?](#)

References

¹ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Making the Connection: Trauma and Substance Abuse

<http://www.youthadtoolbox.org.au/why-trauma-informed-care-important>

Koskenvuo K, Koskenvuo M. Childhood adversities predict strongly the use of psychotropic drugs in adulthood: a population-based cohort study of 24 284 Finns. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2015; 69:354-36

<http://www.youthadtoolbox.org.au/what-trauma-informed-care>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Trauma-informed approach and trauma-specific interventions. SAMHSA; 2018 [updated 27/04/2018; cited 2018 05/04/2018]. Available from: <https://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions>.

Scanlan F., Farrelly-Rosch A. & Nicoll H. (2018) Clinical practice in youth mental health: Trauma-informed care: What is it and how is it implemented in youth healthcare settings?