

## Trauma-Informed Care for Adolescents in Primary Care

Experiencing trauma is a common occurrence among adolescents.<sup>1</sup> A 2016 National Survey of Children's Health ([NSCH](#))<sup>2</sup> study showed that approximately 46% of youth aged 17 and under report experiencing at least one traumatic event. Trauma can be defined as an emotional response to a physically, emotionally harmful, or life-threatening event.<sup>3</sup> An individual's response to trauma may include shock, denial, unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, or physical and somatic symptoms, such as nausea, headaches, or stomach pain.<sup>3</sup> As a result, it is important that primary care settings are equipped to meet the needs of adolescents who have experienced trauma.

### What is **TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE**?

- Trauma-Informed Care is an organizational structure and clinical framework that includes understanding, recognizing, and responding to the impact of trauma.<sup>4</sup> Check out this 3-minute [video](#) from Center for Health Care Strategies for an overview of Trauma-Informed Care in healthcare.
- The framework emphasizes the physical, psychological, and emotional safety of patients and providers, and helps survivors create a sense of control and empowerment.<sup>4</sup>
- Trauma-Informed approaches shift the focus from “what’s wrong with you?” to “what happened to you?” by realizing the widespread impact of trauma, recognizing the signs and symptoms, integrating knowledge about trauma in policies and practices, and aiming to prevent re-traumatization.<sup>5</sup>

### CREATE A **TRAUMA-INFORMED ENVIRONMENT**

- Adolescents with histories of trauma may feel unsafe in unfamiliar environments, which can lead to feelings of anxiety and depression. Paying attention to physical, social, and emotional environments can improve patients' feelings of safety, and create an atmosphere that reduces the likelihood of re-traumatization.<sup>6</sup>
- Review [this](#) fact sheet from the Center for Health Care Strategies for the components of a Trauma-Informed physical, social, and emotional environment.

### Have staff and providers complete training

- Train personnel in Trauma-Informed Care ensures that health services will be provided in a way that promotes understanding, healing, and recovery rather than services that may re-traumatize patients. Access the following training resources below:
  - The Adolescent Health Initiative has a Timely Topics eLearning [module](#) on Trauma-Informed Care that provides an outline of the impacts of trauma on adolescents and strategies for practicing trauma-responsive care in a primary care setting.
  - The Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care at the University of Buffalo has an online module on the Basics of Trauma-Informed Care for all staff.
  - The Michigan Department of Health & Human Services has a [training](#), [toolkit](#), and [handout](#) on Being Trauma-Informed & Responsive in Health Care.
  - The National Council for Mental Wellbeing offers [training and consulting](#) on Trauma-Informed Care for health care providers.

## Screen adolescents for trauma

- Implement a regular process for screening for prior or current trauma.
- Standardize the use of evidence-based trauma screening tools for all new patients. Examples of screening tools include:
  - [Pediatric ACES and Related Life-events Screening \(PEARLS\)](#) Teen Self-Report.
  - [PTSD Checklist-Civilian Version \(PCL-C\)](#).
  - [The Child PTSD Symptom Scale \(CPSS\)](#).
  - [Brief Trauma Questionnaire \(BTQ\)](#).
  - AHI has curated an [Adolescent Risk Screening Directory](#) that compiles risk screening tools across a wide array of topics to be used with adolescent patients.
- Have adolescents complete screening tools confidentially and in a private space. Review the Adolescent Health Initiative's [Risk Screening Starter Guide](#) for more details, strategies, and sample documents to implement confidential risk screening practices.
- Review the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's guide to [Screening and Assessment](#) for more information on screening adolescents for trauma.
- Interact with patients after a traumatic event in the following ways:
  - Listen and encourage patients to talk about their reactions when they feel ready.
  - Validate the emotional reactions of the adolescent.
  - Avoid using overly clinical, diagnostic, and pathological language.
  - Communicate using straightforward terms.
- Respond to positive trauma screenings in the following ways:
  - Refer adolescents to youth-friendly behavioral health services in the community that specialize in treating the needs of survivors of traumatic events.
  - Provide education to help adolescents identify symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression.
  - Offer clinical follow-up when appropriate.
- Have providers review this [informational guide](#) from the National Council for Behavioral Health for strategies on how to respond to and support patients who screened positive for trauma.

## Provide Trauma-Informed physical exams

- Physical exams are a standard component of most medical encounters. While they can serve as an opportunity to establish trust between provider and adolescent, for patients who have experienced trauma, they can lead to negative experiences and risk re-traumatization.<sup>6</sup>
- Read the Canadian Public Health Association's [toolkit](#) for tips and strategies on how to provide trauma-informed physical exams and sexual transmitted and blood-borne infection (STBBI) testing to patients.
- Review the National Council for Mental Wellbeing's [presentation](#) for recommendations and training for how to implement the use of trauma-informed physical assessments in your health care setting.
- Ask the adolescent their preferences for language to use regarding gender, pronouns, and anatomy during the physical exam to create a gender affirming, inclusive, and Trauma-Informed environment. Review the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Transgender Care & Treatment Guidelines [research article](#) on best practices on providing physical exams to transgender patients.

## Respect adolescents' preferences and boundaries

- Ask for the adolescent's preference for provider of a particular gender at the time of scheduling.
- Review the adolescent's chart for trauma-related documentation to avoid asking the patient to repeat this history and to improve visit preparation.

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- Communicate with every adolescent patient their right to decline any questions or parts of the intake process or physical exam that would be triggering or highly uncomfortable. It is important that youth feel empowered to decline and that they can trust they will be met with respect every time.
- Ask for the adolescent's consent when checking vitals and throughout the physical exam. This includes asking permission before administering any part of the exam (i.e., listening to heartbeat, checking reflexes, reproductive health exams, etc.) as well as actively explaining each part of the exam. Demonstrating respect and abiding by informed consent are important components to building relationships with adolescents.
- Review this [article](#) from Bedsider Providers that provides information on informed consent and respectful treatment during appointments especially related to sexual and reproductive health physical exams.

## Special CONSIDERATIONS

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### Provide culturally responsive Trauma-Informed Care

- Trauma intersects in many ways with culture, history, race, gender, SES, and language. Effective Trauma-Informed systems acknowledge the compounding impact of structural inequality and are responsive to the needs of diverse communities.<sup>7</sup>
- Review this [toolkit](#) from the Health Care Toolbox for more information on culturally responsive Trauma-Informed Care and strategies for effective implementation.
- Ask if the adolescent has a gender and/or cultural preference for the interpreter when possible if a language interpreter is being used.
- View this [presentation](#) from the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, & Mental Health on Tools for Transformation: Becoming Accessible, Culturally Responsive, & Trauma-Informed Organizations.
- Deliver AHI's [Spark mini-trainings](#) on Cultural Responsiveness. Sparks are ready to use 15-20 minute trainings that a staff member or provider can facilitate at your site.

### Promote racial equity in Trauma-Informed Care

- Experiencing racism is considered a traumatic experience and should be treated as such in any comprehensive Trauma-Informed Care framework.<sup>8</sup> Building an organizational knowledge of race, racial trauma, and the impact of racism on health care delivery for patients is an essential first step for incorporating a racial justice focus into your Trauma-Informed Care framework.<sup>8</sup>
- Read the Center for Health Care Strategies [brief](#) on Incorporating Racial Equity into Trauma-Informed Care for more information on how to promote racial justice in your practice.
- Check-out [this](#) presentation from Community Action Partnerships for strategies on applying a racial equity lens to Trauma-Informed Care in your practice.
- Review the Racial Trauma resource on [Race-Based Traumatic Stress \(RBTS\)](#) from Mental Health America that includes therapy resources for Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) patients.
- Have all staff and providers participate in implicit bias trainings. Consider viewing these trainings from [MDHHS](#), [AAFP](#), and [Children's National](#).
- SAHM's [Diversity Committee](#) has created this [toolkit](#) to provide access to resources to help adolescent health professionals combat racism, promote racial justice, reduce health disparities, and advance health equity for youth.

- Read the [EveryONE Project](#) from the AAFP's [Implicit Bias Training Guide](#) to promote awareness of implicit bias training among primary care physicians and their care teams and share resources for instructing health care professionals on how to reduce its negative effects on patients.
- Racial/ethnic minorities are often poorly represented among physicians and other health care professionals. Having a diverse staff can increase an adolescent's comfort in the health care setting. Also consider if the makeup of your organization's Board of Directors and/or Advisory Committees is representative of the patient population, not just patient-facing staff.
- Review [Strategies](#) for Diversifying Your Health Care Workforce from New Hampshire Health & Equity Partnerships.
- Check-out this resource from IASP on [Diversifying the Workforce through Policy and Practice](#).
- View this [Diversity and Cultural Proficiency Assessment Tool](#) from the American Hospital Association.

### Create inclusive Trauma-Informed environments for LGBTQIA+ youth

- LGBTQIA+ youth often experience trauma as gender minorities.<sup>9</sup> As a result, providers should consider these specific stressful life experiences when assessing trauma in LGBTQIA+ youth to create an inclusive and Trauma-Informed environment.
- Review this [issue brief](#) from the National Resource Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention for organizational strategies to adopt a Trauma-Informed Care approach for LGBTQIA+ youth.
- Check out this [toolkit](#) from the American Psychiatric Association on ways to address stress and trauma among LGBTQIA+ youth in health care.
- Read The National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center's [presentation](#) for ways to provide Trauma-Informed Care for LGBTQIA+ patients may help your site implement these practices changes and provide more gender-affirming care.
- Review the Transgender-Affirming Hospital Policies [document](#), developed by the Human Rights Campaign, the New York City Bar, and Lambda Legal.
- Choose to facilitate one or more of the [LGBTQ+ Spark mini-trainings](#) and the [LGBTQ+ Starter Guide](#) from the Adolescent Health Initiative.

### Talk to adolescents about confidentiality and mandated reporting

- Set clear expectations about confidentiality with minor patients and their parents to improve communication and decrease confusion about what can and can't be managed confidentially.
- Be clear with adolescent patients about your obligations as a [mandated reporter](#), any relevant laws in your state concerning the limitations of confidentiality, as well as any organizational policies regarding confidentiality.
  - Laws vary from state to state but consider some of the talking points [in this article](#) as a resource.
- Train clinic staff about the importance of guarding adolescents' confidentiality about their medical record, name, appointment, test results, and/or the reason they are seeking care. All staff should know the state's confidentiality laws on contraceptive and pregnancy services, STI testing and treatment, substance abuse treatment, mental health care, and abortion services.
- Complete the Adolescent Health Initiative's two [Spark mini-trainings](#) on confidentiality: one on laws and one on best practices. The Confidentiality Laws Spark is state-specific and will be customized to fit your state's laws. The Spark on Confidentiality Best Practices is universal and not dependent on state-specific laws.
- Display handouts and wall posters detailing state-specific adolescent rights. Review the [AHI website](#) to see if there is one for your state.

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## Additional RESOURCES

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- The Center for Health Care Strategies [Successful Trauma-Informed Care Implementation](#).
- SAMHSA Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative [Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)
- Youth.Gov [Implementing Trauma-Informed Approach for Youth Across Service Sectors](#).
- [Behavioral Health Adolescent Provider Toolkit](#) on trauma and PTSD in adolescents (D26).
- Adolescent Health Initiative [Mental Health Starter Guide](#).
- State of Michigan's [Trauma Informed Care Toolkit](#).
- The Association of American Medical Colleges [A Novel, Trauma-Informed Physical Examination Curriculum for First-Year Medical Students](#).

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.isbe.net/Documents/traumatic-stress-fact-sheet.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/brief\\_report\\_natl\\_childrens\\_mh\\_awareness\\_day.pdf](https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/brief_report_natl_childrens_mh_awareness_day.pdf)

<sup>3</sup><https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org/what-is-trauma-informed-care/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.chcs.org/resource/key-ingredients-for-successful-trauma-informed-care-implementation/>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/resources/stbbi/trauma-informed-exam-tool-e.pdf>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.healthcaretoolbox.org/culturally-sensitive-trauma-informed-care>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mhanational.org/racial-trauma>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.chcs.org/resource/incorporating-racial-equity-into-trauma-informed-care/>