



Fulfilling Lives

South East Partnership

Trauma-Informed Social Research

- A Practical Guide -

Kerry Dowding



ABOUT FULFILLING LIVES

Fulfilling Lives South East is led by BHT Sussex and supported by a number of voluntary and statutory sector partners, providing intensive and tailored support to people with multiple and complex needs, helping the most vulnerable and hard to reach.

We also work alongside people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage, to achieve positive changes in services and make them better connected and easier to access. The Fulfilling Lives South East Project started in 2014 and is funded until July 2022 by the National Lottery Community Fund, and operates in Brighton and Hove, Eastbourne and Hastings.

www.bht.org.uk/fulfilling-lives

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide provides practical advice and tips on applying the principles of trauma-informed practice to your research activities, specifically running focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and service observations. It is suitable for evaluators, researchers, service leads, commissioners, or anyone who would like to find out more about the experiences of people who may have been affected by trauma.

What is Trauma-Informed Practice?

Trauma-informed practice is a way of working that accounts for the impact that traumatic events may have had in people's lives. It benefits everyone but is especially beneficial when working with clients with multiple and complex needs, who have often experienced complex trauma.

The aim of trauma-informed practice is three-fold:

- Raise awareness among staff and services about the wide impact of trauma.
- Prevent re-traumatisation of clients in service settings that are meant to provide support.
- Develop policies and practices that assist healing from trauma.

At the centre of trauma-informed practice are five principles that should be used at all levels to guide service design, policy and practices. These are safety, trust & transparency, collaboration, choice and voice.

Why should my research be trauma-informed?

When participants are provided with an emotionally safe space where they feel in control, it is possible to create useful, respectful sessions which gather high quality information, and are a positive experience for those taking part. This is important for all research but crucial when working with those who have experience of feeling unheard or unsafe in the past.

Gathering better quality data

Building confidence working with vulnerable groups

Participants feel respected and involved

Participants are more likely to work with you again in future

Working in a more collaborative way



SAFETY PLANNING

SAFETY PLANNING TIPS

When conducting research activities, it's important to think about how you might respond in certain situations to keep the space safe, for example, if a participant becomes distressed, or discloses a safeguarding issue that requires following up. Fill in the grid below alone or with colleagues to help you prepare. There is an example below to start you off.

IF THIS HAPPENS...	I WILL...
Somebody leaves the focus group upset because the content was triggering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prearrange for a co-facilitator to follow the person to hear them, provide resources, and see if they would like to re-enter the session• Reassure the group of the actions you're taking and acknowledge the situation• Remind everyone of the plan for if they feel upset or need a break

Keeping Yourself Safe

- ✓ Try not to share identifiable information about yourself to people you don't know. Pets or what you are having for dinner is fine, but the street you live in or a school you went to could put you in a more identifiable position.
- ✓ In the rare event of anyone acting in a way which makes you feel unsafe, you can always refer back to group agreements in focus group settings or suggest a break in a 1:1 setting. Be clear about what will happen next if the actions or language that have been identified continue. Needing to close a session early is rare, but practice kindly but assertively bringing sessions to a close if you need to, so you're ready for anything.
- ✓ If lone working, you should have measures in place so that a colleague can check in with you.
- ✓ Create space to reflect on the emotional impact of the work, alone or with colleagues.

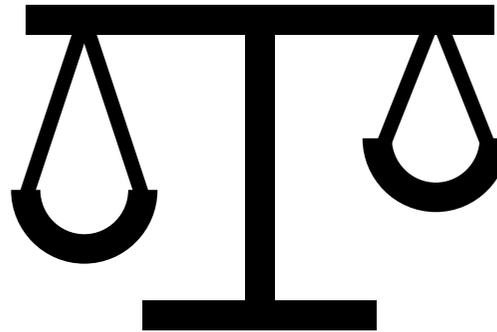
POWER AND RESEARCH

POWER AND RESEARCH

It is normal for participants in research to try to tell you what they think you would like them to say. It is also common for participants to maximise things which make them look good and downplay negatives. This is in part because of the power dynamics at play in a research scenario. We can reduce the impact of these biases on our research by giving equal non-judgemental responses to positives and negatives and being careful not to share our own views on the topics we are discussing in the research.

More Equal

- Some sharing about yourself (see safety section)
- Informal language
- Informal location
- Normal clothes
- On the participant's terms



Less Equal

- Withholding all information about yourself
- Using formal language
- 'Office' location
- Formal office wear
- On the interviewer's terms

We all have our own 'confirmation biases' as researchers - what we are expecting a participant to say because of our pre-judged assumptions. How can we keep an open mind to what they are saying?

What expectations do you have about the people you're talking to and what they might say?

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

The following checklists here are mapped by colour onto our 5 trauma-informed practice principles. There may be others which you feel are important to include:



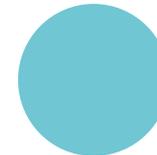
CHOICE



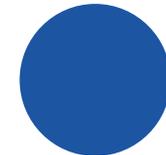
VOICE



**TRUST &
TRANSPARENCY**



COLLABORATION



SAFETY

There is a unique checklist for each of the three research activities:

○-○ **INTERVIEWS**

○-○-○ **FOCUS GROUPS**

📝 **OBSERVATIONS**

Under each activity you will find three sections:

🕒 **BEFORE**

🕒 **DURING**

🕒 **AFTER**

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- INTERVIEWS -

An interview is where a person is asked some questions on a topic by another person, to gather some in-depth information. An interview is a good way to talk about sensitive topics which might be more difficult to approach in a group setting. However, as interviews are often one on one, they can be intense experiences for participants, especially if they are being asked to explore sometimes difficult topics with a person they might not know well.

BEFORE

	Participant preferences have been considered when choosing the physical or online venue
	Any accessibility needs are known and have been met collaboratively
	If you will be discussing sensitive topics, participants have had an opportunity to see the questions in advance
	Participants have received accessible information about facilitator(s), the purpose & what to expect, where & when the session will be happening, & if there are refreshments
	Participants have been offered the chance to meet with the interviewer ahead of the session if subject matter is potentially triggering
	Whether the session will be recorded is decided, alongside how you will ask for consent to record
	Interview questions are checked to ensure each question helps you meet a specific aim - that you are not asking people to share any sensitive information unnecessarily
	Plans are in place if anyone becomes distressed in the session and needs to take a break

Notes

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- INTERVIEWS -



DURING



Introductions, the purpose of the interview, and confidentiality issues explained with opportunity for questions



Participants will be asked whether they are comfortable with being recorded, & will be made aware that they can retract anything they share later on



Participants will be told their options in advance in case they feel overwhelmed & they would like a break



Participants will be made aware of where recording devices are & when they are turned on & off



The interviewer has planned to meet participant's basic needs throughout, including toilet breaks and water



The interviewer is aware and prepared for their role in bringing out a person's story, without filling silences or removing focus from the person being interviewed



The interviewer plans to pay attention to non-verbal cues or discomfort and address them appropriately

Notes

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- INTERVIEWS -

AFTER

	Interviewees are told about opportunities to add anything they feel is important before the session closes, and notified if they can continue to contribute after the interview
	The interviewer goes through any notes made at the end with the interviewee (and keep notes visible throughout)
	Participants have been thanked for their time & energy
	Signposting materials & debriefing options have been shared for anyone who may be impacted by the contents of the session
	Participants have been given an opportunity to comment on any draft reports, or to be informed when a final report is made available
	Participants have been given the opportunity to feedback on the process of being interviewed in person or via email, during or after the session
	The interviewer has created a dedicated space to reflect on the group & to continuously develop trauma-informed practices within interview settings

Notes

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- FOCUS GROUPS -

A focus group is any group of people who come together for a discussion on a specific topic, with a facilitator supporting the session. You might have run a focus group before without realising. A tenants' meeting on how to improve a building, or a group feedback session on a new service could both be considered focus groups. Someone's views and actions in a focus group can impact everyone else's views and actions, which can make facilitating them more complex than running interviews.

BEFORE

	Participant preferences have been considered when choosing the physical or online venue
	Any accessibility needs are known and have been met collaboratively
	The facilitator decides whether the session will be recorded and how consent will be obtained
	Participants have received accessible information about facilitator(s), the purpose & what to expect, where & when the session will be happening, & if there are refreshments
	Participants have been offered the chance to meet with facilitator(s) ahead of the session if they would like to
	If the facilitator will be discussing sensitive topics, participants have had an opportunity to see the topic guide in advance
	Potential power dynamics between participants (like line managers and employees, workers and clients) have been considered & there are plans to keep people feeling safe to share their views
	Each topic has enough time allocated, so that everyone can be heard & can explore their views in detail
	Plans are in place if anyone becomes distressed in the session and needs to take a break

Notes

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- FOCUS GROUPS -



DURING



Introductions, the purpose and confidentiality are scheduled to be revisited with opportunities to ask questions



A group agreement will be made about how everyone is expected to act in the space to keep it feeling respectful and safe



Participants will be told how others in the space (facilitators & participants) handle any information that is shared



Participants will be asked whether they are comfortable with being recorded, & will be made aware that they can retract anything they share later on



Participants will be reminded to be respectful to all people and views, and plans are in place for if this does not occur



Participants will be told about their options if they feel overwhelmed & they would like a break



Participants are told where recording devices are & when they are turned on & off



The facilitator has planned to meet participant's basic needs throughout, including toilet breaks and water



Every participant will be supported to speak & reflect equally



Facilitator(s) are aware of their role to facilitate the group discussion, not to present



Participants will be asked to speak generally rather than ask specific people to feedback (as this could feel pressuring)

Notes

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- FOCUS GROUPS -

AFTER



Interviewees are told about opportunities to add anything they feel is important before the session closes, and notified if they can continue to contribute after the interview



Participants have been given the opportunity to feedback on the process of being in the focus group in person or via email, during or after the session



Facilitator has summarised key points and reassured participants that the information was heard & valued



Participants have been thanked for their time & energy



Signposting materials & debriefing options have been shared for anyone who may be impacted by the contents of the session and anyone who became distressed in the session is individually checked in with



Participants have been given an opportunity to comment on any draft reports, or to be informed when a final report is made available



Facilitator has a dedicated space to reflect on the group & looks to continuously develop trauma informed practices within spaces they facilitate

Notes

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- OBSERVATIONS -

An observation means going into an environment, looking at what is happening and noting down what you see. Observations can either be announced, where everyone knows what you're doing, or unannounced, where only some key organisers might know. Observations are a good way to see how services work in the real-world. However, because they can feel more covert than other methods, it's important to build trust where possible throughout the process.

BEFORE

	Those being observed have been given as much information about the purpose and aims of the work as possible in advance. This includes signs for the general public
	Those being observed have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and it's aims, and are consulted on practical options where possible (for example sharing busy times of the day)
	People who will be in the area have been given a timeframe in which the observation will take place, even if it's not appropriate to give them exact times and dates
	Those being observed have been given the opportunity to share what their thoughts on what observers might find
	An observation schedule has been created. The observer does not need to show this to participants, but when evidence is shared it should be clear about the areas that will be focused on and why
	Whether you intend to record individual staff or client names has been decided, and the fact that that the research is not to provide evidence for any disciplinary action has been communicated

Notes

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- OBSERVATIONS -



DURING



Observe and write in a way that is not overt or easily read by others



The observer has thought about how to place yourself in an area which is non-intrusive but with a good overview of the space



If someone feels uncomfortable with being observed, you are ready to explain the research and be ready to pause if a client wishes not to be observed when getting access to a service



The observer is prepared to write notes neutrally, not to add any assumptions about why things happened or how people felt during interactions

Notes

RESEARCH CHECKLISTS

- OBSERVATIONS -

AFTER



Key managers will have the opportunity to read initial findings and reflect on them

Those who were observed are given an opportunity to reflect on the findings and add their thoughts

Reflections about the research by all parties are shared in final research reports

A dedicated space has been made to reflect on the research & look to continuously develop trauma-informed practices in the future

Notes

USING DIGITAL SPACES

Research is increasingly being conducted online. Some specific considerations these spaces might include:

Notes

Clear joining instructions should be sent out well ahead of time, and support given to join for anyone who might feel anxious about using online platforms

Make sure you and the participant are in a quiet, confidential place with minimal distractions where they feel safe to talk honestly

Cameras should be on if participants feel comfortable to do so, to maintain presence and support lip reading

Be aware of what the participant can see on your screen and take care to be transparent about anything you might do out of eyeshot like taking notes or changing computer settings

In group sessions, consider diverse ways to share information to maximise engagement (speaking, chat box, polling, emojis)

Participants of group sessions know how to private message hosts in chat if they have a question or issue they do not feel comfortable sharing to the whole group

FEEDBACK AND REFLECTION

QUESTIONS TO ASK PARTICIPANTS AND PARTNERS ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH...

You may wish to carry out a more formal evaluation such as an online survey. It's important that any evaluation is proportionate, engaging, and clear about what will happen with the findings and how it will be fed back into your practice.

Questions about confidence:

How confident did participants feel to speak up, that they knew what was going to happen next, that their data is protected?

Questions about feelings:

Did the participants feel in control of the process, listened to, that their contributions were valued?

Open questions:

What would improve the experience? What worked well? Is there anything else the participants would like to share?

Notes

SPACE FOR REFLECTION

It is important for anyone who runs sessions like focus groups to spend some time thinking about what worked well, what could be improved on and how the session made you feel. Here are a few questions to get you started.

1. If I were in the participant's shoes, how would I feel being in that session?
2. How did I feel during the session, and what caused those feelings?
3. What beliefs and assumptions did I have going into the session, and have they been challenged?
4. How do I plan to debrief and recharge after the session, to keep myself well?
5. Were there any cultural, gender or other biases coming through during the session? at all levels to guide service design, policy, and

EXTRA RESOURCES

ONLINE RESOURCES

Mind offers a useful overview of trauma and the links with mental health:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/trauma/about-trauma/>

Homeless Link have published useful resources on trauma informed care and psychologically informed environments that you can access here:

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/trauma-informed-care-andpsychologically-informed-environments>

Safe Hands Thinking Minds has a wealth of creative resources for exploring trauma and helping to explain what it is and the impacts it can have:

<http://www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk/>

Blue Knot Foundation, National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma have published many useful resources on trauma and trauma-informed practice:

<https://www.blueknot.org.au/>

D.C. Roger D. Fallot, Ph.D. and Maxine Harris, Ph.D. (2009) Creating Cultures of Trauma-Informed Care (CCTIC): A Self-Assessment and Planning Protocol. Community Connections; Washington.

<https://www.theannainstitute.org/CCTICSELFASSPP.pdf>

Lankelly Chase is an 'action inquiry organisation', conducting research into severe and multiple disadvantage (or multiple and complex needs).

<https://lankellychase.org.uk/resources/publications/hard-edges/>

<https://lankellychase.org.uk/resources/publications/gender-matters/>

VIDEOS

NHS Scotland have produced a short animated video about trauma-informed practice:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zg8ahtHIRxU>

NHS Lanarkshire 'Trauma and the Brain'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-tcKYx24aA>

BOOKS

Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence-From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror

Basic Books, 1992.

Bessel Van Der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma

Penguin, 2015.

Alan Bryman, Social Research Methods (5th ed.)

Oxford University Press, 2016 (See especially the chapter 'Ethics and Politics in Social Research'pp.120-146).