Being trauma-informed: Principles and actions

A resource for kaimahi and organisations to create safe and supportive spaces

Tū pakari tonu mai e te whare oranga
Let the house of health and wellbeing stand strong

TE RAU ORA LeVa WHĀRAURAU TE POU

A Keeping it Real | Kia Pono te Tika essential level resource

Keeping it real
Kia pono te tika

Trauma is experienced across many communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Recognising and validating people's trauma experiences enhances the strengths of tāngata whai ora, whānau, and communities, inspiring hope.

What is trauma?

Trauma is the impact of an event, a cumulation of events, or circumstances causing adverse long-term consequences on the mental, physical, social, emotional, cultural, or spiritual wellbeing of people, whānau or communities.[1,2]

Trauma can be described in various ways to include interpersonal, historical and intergenerational experiences, one-off acute events, natural disasters, systemic and vicarious or secondary trauma. The effects of trauma are typically worse when they accumulate over time.

What is a trauma-informed approach?

A trauma-informed approach:

- is a whole-system organisational response
- recognises and acknowledges the impact trauma can have on people, whānau, and communities, and that behaviour or reactions may be the result of trauma
- focuses on safety to avoid retraumatising tāngata whai ora.

The culture of an organisation-wide trauma-informed approach means integrating strategies at all levels.

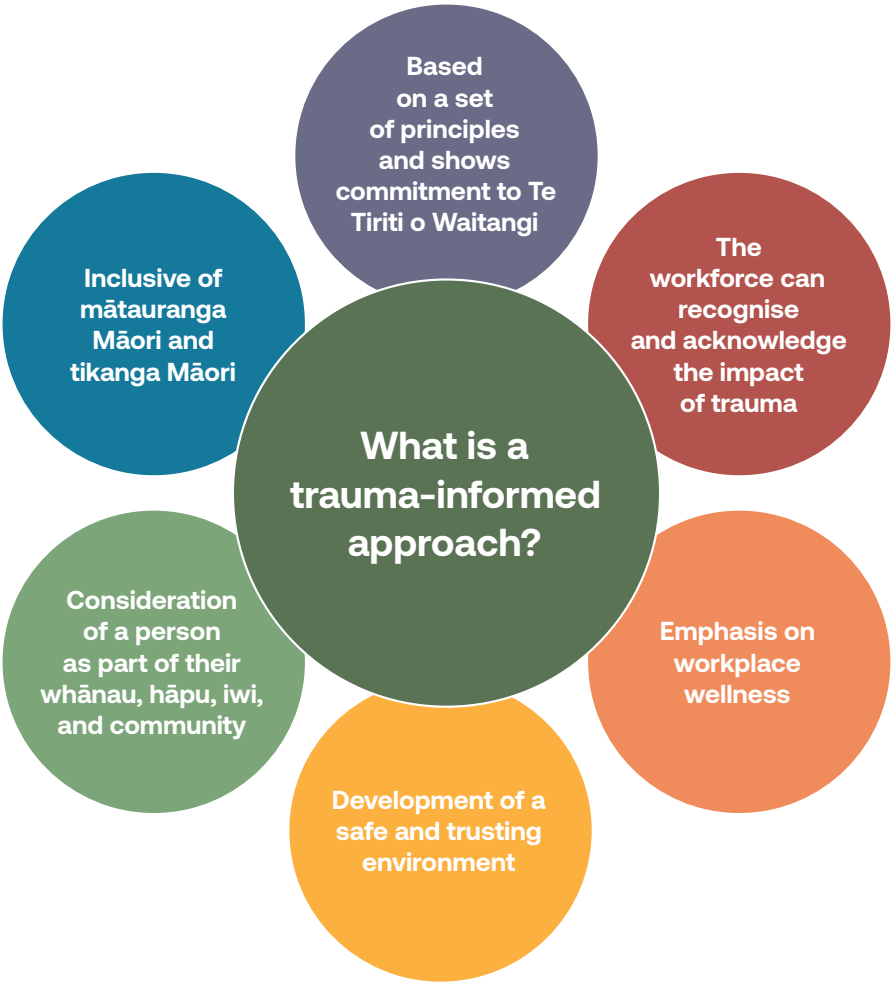
- All kaimahi demonstrate values, attitudes, and skills that maintain a safe environment for tāngata whai ora who have experienced trauma.
- Targeted specialist therapeutic support to address the trauma.
- Organisational change to create an environment that supports a trauma-informed approach.

Many trauma-informed approaches are based on SAMHSA's* principles of safety, trust, choice, empowerment, peer support, and cultural, historical and gender sensitivities.[3] In an Aotearoa New Zealand context this also means:

- considering a person as part of their whānau, hapū, iwi, and community
- including holistic aspects of social/whānau, spiritual, cultural, physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing
- including mātauranga Māori and tikanga concepts and practices such as whakapapa (genealogy, descent), whanaungatanga (relationships), kotahitanga (unity, collectively), wairuatanga (spirituality) and kaitiakitanga (guardianship)[4]
- understanding Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the impact of colonisation on Māori.

*SAMHSA is an acronym for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

A trauma-informed approach within Aotearoa New Zealand



Why is a trauma-informed approach important?

Traumatic events are common in Aotearoa New Zealand

> People and whānau are understood and heard through a compassionate trauma-informed practice that acknowledges what has happened in their lives and journey, including an awareness of the impacts of adverse childhood experiences, significant events, and intergenerational trauma.[5]

The health workforce needs to recognise and acknowledge the impact of previous trauma and understand that a person's reactions may be the result of a cumulative response to trauma.[6] For kaimahi the effects of trauma may be exacerbated by their work environment and other experiences.[7]

Traumatic events are more common among some groups in the Aotearoa New Zealand community. Indigenous peoples experience higher numbers of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)*. In addition, experiences of racism are high among Māori, Pacific, and Asian peoples. Some examples are shown below.

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*ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (from birth to 17 years old). The higher the number of ACEs a person has, the more severe the potential impacts on their health and well-being can be. This relationship is often described as "dose-dependent," meaning that as the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk of experiencing negative outcomes.

Nearly 90% of New Zealand children experience at least one ACE by age 8; around 25% experience two; and around 15% experience three or more[8]

Nearly 80% of Māori adults have experienced at least one ACE[9]

Over 90% of Māori are impacted by racism[10]

Over 40% of Pacific children experience three or more ACEs by age 9—nearly double the national average[11]

Around 50% of refugees internationally experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)[12]

Up to half of women have experienced sexual or intimate partner violence – 1 in 2 for women vs 1 in 5 for men[13]

About 80% of women and men of the New Zealand prison population have experienced some type of violence in their lifetime (including family, sexual, and community violence)

Around half of people in state care are/were abused or neglected[14]

Five out of every seven of transgender people aged 15 and older (71%) have high or very high psychological distress, 56% have seriously thought about attempting suicide in the last 12 months[15]

Trauma can impact all aspects of hauora

> Trauma experienced earlier in life or trauma that is cumulative or ongoing is more likely to have adverse impacts.

> One way of thinking about this is through the notion of a "soul wound"...It's the idea that historical trauma has a huge impact on your sense of wellbeing. And it affects the collective sense of wellbeing, too.[19]

> While trauma is an experience that can impact on all people, Māori experience trauma in distinct ways that are linked to the experience of colonisation, racism and discrimination, negative stereotyping and subsequent unequal rates of violence, poverty and ill health.[18]

Impacts from traumatic events depend on how trauma is experienced

Event/s

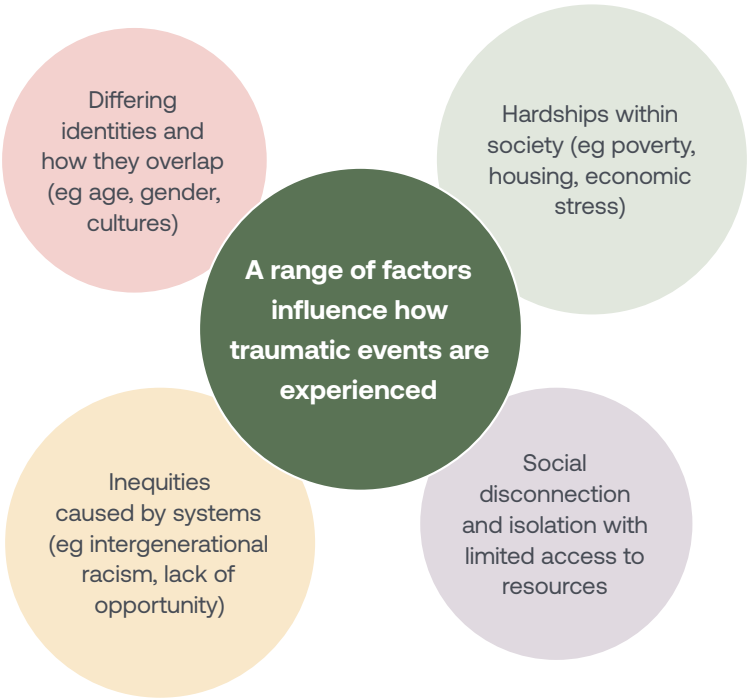
Traumatic events can be one-off, ongoing, and accumulative

Experience

People and whānau experience trauma differently

Effects

The impacts from trauma can vary significantly



Protective factors can mitigate the long-term effects of trauma and help to build resilience[16,17]

- Trauma-informed support and resources
- Strong whānau, hapū, iwi relationships
- Physically and psychologically safe environments
- Connection with culture and identity
- Whakapapa kōrero and connection to tūpuna
- Access to traditional practices and healing approaches
- Whānau led approaches

Potential impacts of trauma[7,20,21]

Emotional/relational

- Loss of meaning or purpose
- Loss of connection with places or people of importance eg whenua, tūpuna
- Soul wounds
- Disconnection from identity and customs including language
- Loss of sense of self
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Negativity
- Difficulty settling or integrating into new environments

Physical/biological

- Fatigue
- Sleep problems
- Physical health problems including long term health conditions
- Increased and use of substances
- Decreased wellbeing
- Mental health challenges
- Unsettled

Social/community

- Changes to structure of whānau and community relationships
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Relationship problems
- Lack of or reduced participation in social activities
- Avoidance or mistrust of others
- Reduced sense of belonging

Cognitive/behaviour

- Changes in behaviour
- Overwhelming thoughts and worries
- Difficulty managing emotions
- Low mood
- Irritability or anger
- Poor concentration
- Avoidance or hyper-awareness
- Difficulty trusting others
- Withdrawing or shutting down

Health workers have a key role in supporting healing and minimising retraumatisation

It is crucial to understand that trauma can impact how people engage with and respond to support.

> “Acknowledgement of historical trauma for Māori is necessary to facilitate individual and collective soul healing.[22]

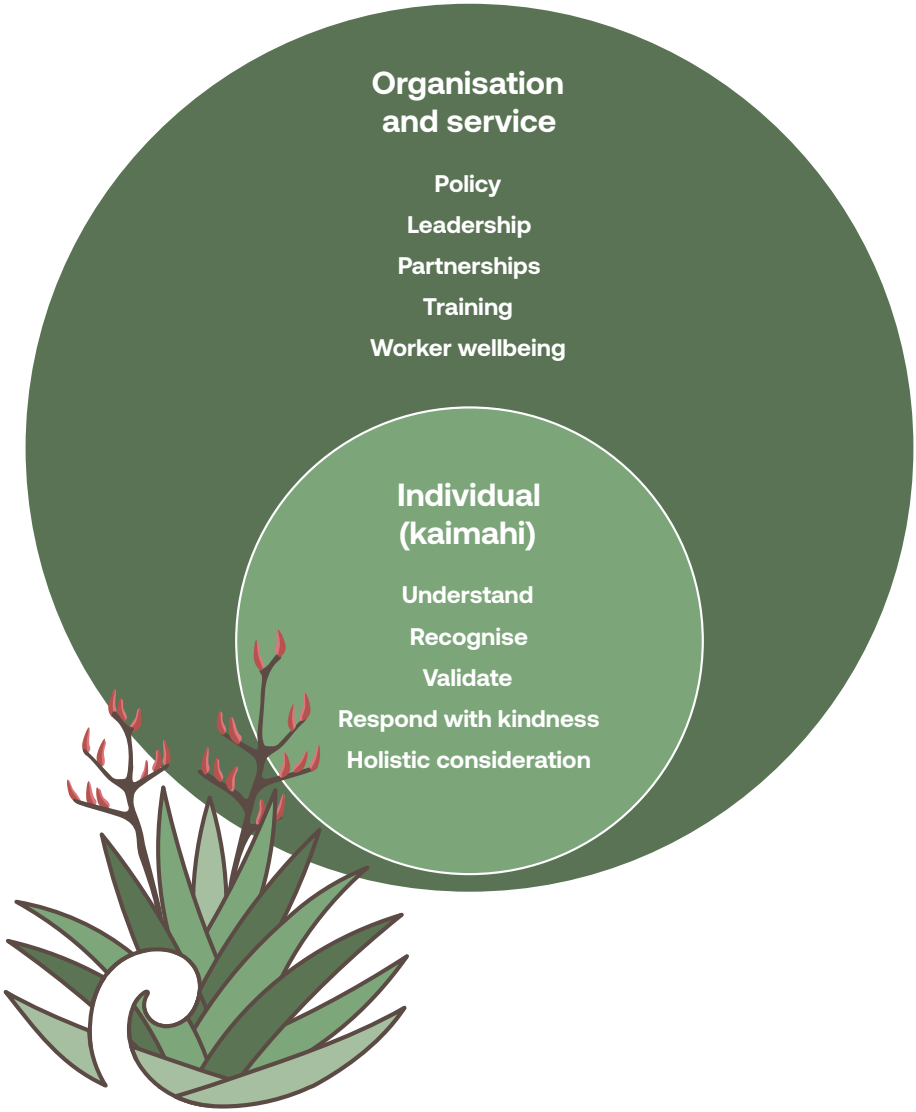
Ensure whānau have access to the resources they need to heal from trauma experiences and reach their full potential

A trauma-informed approach grounded in kaupapa Māori values and beliefs is crucial to addressing the specific needs of Māori communities, recognising the impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma, and valuing cultural protective factors and traditional healing practices.[23]

Supporting the strengths of people, whānau and communities inspires hope and the resiliency to heal from the effects of trauma.

What actions support a trauma-informed approach?

Both individual workers (kaimahi) and organisations need to commit to a trauma-informed approach for it to be successful.



What you do every day can make a difference

Working with people, tāngata whenua, whānau, and communities

Engagement and relationships

- Be welcoming to people by greeting them into the space, use welcoming body language (eg avoid crossing arms, sit to be at same level with people), offer a hot drink or water if possible, and a way to open such as karakia, a poem, or prayer of the person's choice.
- Take the time needed to build relationships, and make space to share whakapapa.
- Show empathy, respect boundaries, and be transparent.
- Take time to develop trust. For example, follow through with what you say you will do.
- Accept the person as the expert of their own experiences – take time to listen and hear their story.
- Do not expect people to share their experiences. If they choose to, validate their feelings and experiences, affirm their strengths and potential, and ensure they are safe.
- Explain what is happening and ensure people and whānau are fully informed to make their own decisions. This helps to empower and uphold people's mana.
- Be sensitive and non-judgemental. People who have experienced trauma may feel shame sensitivity and experience self-stigma.
- Take notice of overall wellbeing including physical health issues.
- If tāngata whai ora disclose their trauma, an environment of trust, validation, empathy, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity is essential.

Language

Language reflects our beliefs and the way we view people.[24]

- Use empathetic language, moving from labelling to trauma-sensitive language. For example, 'take your time and let me know if you need a break'.
- Be curious. Ask 'what happened to you and your whānau?'
- Use simple language, avoid jargon, and check back understanding with people.

Environment – strive to create a safe environment for everyone

- In waiting areas include cultural artwork and resources, and use of different languages on signage.
- Ensure waiting areas are physically comfortable and other areas of the service can accommodate and are welcoming to whānau.
- Consider temperature, noise, lighting, and other sensory aspects.
- Be ready to adapt the environment because what feels safe for one, may not for another.

Culture

- Reflect on your own biases related to different cultures, identities or trauma experiences. Consider how biases might promote recovery or create barriers to equitable care.
- Learn about the impacts of intergenerational trauma for Māori and understand Māori perspectives on trauma and healing.
- Recognise that intergenerational trauma can affect people from many cultures, communities, and whānau.
- Respectfully and where appropriate, apply knowledge of Te Ao Māori in practice. For example, observing tikanga such as karakia or whakatau, making space to share whakapapa, and consider the impacts of trauma on wairuatanga.
- Consider a person as part of a whānau, hapū, iwi and community.
- Ask people what cultural support they need to feel safe including traditional healing practices.
- Use holistic cultural models to explore people's experiences and wellbeing. For example, Te Whare Tapa Whā, Fonofale, or Integrated Tree models.[25–27]
- Kaimahi regularly engage in professional development opportunities to ensure best practice.
- Leaders create a culture of working with holistic health strategies eg understanding trauma experiences may manifest as a somatic or felt experience, or physical health issues.

Organisation and service level support from leaders

- Embed Keeping it Real | Kia Pono te Tika to build knowledge and skills of kaimahi.
- Prioritise time to plan for and implement a trauma-informed approach across the organisation.
- Embed trauma-informed approaches into policy and processes. Model practice across the organisation. Ensure flexibility in policy and process to allow some choice and agency.
- Make kaimahi wellbeing practices a priority in organisational policy, culture and practice. For example, access to reflective practice, debriefing, or formal support programmes, and knowledge and time to implement wellbeing plans.
- Ensure kaimahi know their role within a trauma-informed approach and know what to do and how to do it.
- Provide time and training to upskill kaimahi in areas such as Te Tiriti o Waitangi, engagement, and trauma-informed approaches.
- Embrace Indigenous values and cultural practices within all teams across health settings.
- Put in place mechanisms to collect and use data which shows successes, challenges and what needs to be reviewed to support kaimahi, tāngata whai ora and whānau.
- Employ and support cultural and lived experience expertise in all organisational project and team activities.
- Create partnerships across different agencies and communities to further strengthen a trauma-informed approach in the organisation.

Further resources

Keeping it Real | Kia Pono te Tika recognises the principles of a trauma-informed approach by being values-based, responsive to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and describes the knowledge and skills for kaimahi.

Real Skills Plus is the competency framework for kaimahi working with infants, children, and young people and their whānau and considers a trauma-informed perspective in several areas.

Fenoga Pule is the competency framework for kaimahi working with Pacific peoples in Pacific primary mental health and addiction settings across Aotearoa. Fenoga Pule outlines the values, knowledge, and skills that support a healing centred approach for Pacific peoples.

A recent Te Pou review highlights trauma and other contextual factors impacting the mental health and substance use among children and youth in Aotearoa.

For more resources and information to support trauma informed approaches in your practice or organisation, refer to Trauma-informed resources.

For references refer to this QR code.

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