

# 5 Key Elements to Trauma-Informed Care for IDD Organizations

The experience of traumatic stress is incredibly prevalent, having a widespread impact on persons served and leading to or exacerbating mental illnesses, physical health conditions, and substance use. It is also very common among individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). In order to provide well-rounded and person-centered care, effectively addressing the impact of trauma is crucial.

Unfortunately, despite our best efforts and best intentions, services and systems designed to help people with IDD are often traumatizing or re-traumatizing. Staff at IDD organizations can also be negatively impacted by traumatic stress just through doing their work. Implementing a service system based on Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) can help you address these issues and position your organization to meet the demands of an ever-changing field.

While behavioral health systems, schools, and justice systems have been adopting the TIC framework more frequently, less so is the case for IDD organizations. However, this framework can be beneficial for any organization and has especially promising outcomes for IDD organizations. The TIC framework involves real-time strategies to create staff and organizational wellness and equip organizations with the ability to meet critical outcomes, including reducing staff turnover, decreasing the number of critical crisis incidents, and increasing the engagement of persons served in treatment planning and goal setting.

If your organization would like to learn more about the TIC framework<sup>1</sup>, or is considering implementing a trauma-informed system of care, Relias can help. Here are a few things to consider before you embark on the journey to become trauma-informed.



## Why Trauma-Informed Care?

It is a commonly held myth that trauma does not affect individuals with IDD in the same way as the general population—people with IDD can be affected by traumatic stress just as deeply as any other person. People with IDD are also at a much higher risk of experiencing trauma, largely due to their increased risk for experiencing abuse and neglect. According to the Center on Victimization and Safety<sup>2</sup>, people with disabilities are:

- **3x more likely** to experience rape, sexual assault, aggravated assault, and robbery
- **3x more likely** to be sexually abused in childhood
- **1.6x more likely** to experience abuse or neglect in childhood

The high prevalence of these traumatic experiences among people with IDD provides great justification for implementing a trauma-informed system of care at your organization.

## How Does Trauma-Informed Care Help IDD Organizations?

Empowering staff to practice TIC toward the people they serve can yield many organizational benefits. Several studies<sup>3</sup> have found that when IDD organizations implement and train direct support staff on TIC, they see several positive outcomes, including:

- Reduced use of restraints and seclusion practices
- Increased client satisfaction with services
- Increased staff consistency in implementing counter-aggressive actions between persons served and staff
- Increased staff ability to effectively support persons served with trauma histories



A TIC Framework can also greatly benefit the staff working at your organization. One study of direct support professionals (DSPs) found that 25% in community settings were exposed to aggression nearly every day at work, resulting in traumatic stress.<sup>4</sup> Other studies have found high rates of trauma among DSPs, noting that 75% of DSPs have

experienced at least one adverse childhood experience and 30% have experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences.<sup>5</sup> A fundamental element of implementing TIC involves helping staff recognize their own trauma responses and practice self-care to address traumatic stress.

## The 5 Key Elements of Implementing and Maintaining a Trauma-Informed Framework

### 1

#### **Organizational Assessment**

It is important to conduct an initial or baseline assessment and to continue to reassess and use feedback to improve your implementation.

### 2

#### **Paradigm Shift**

Implementing a TIC framework requires a shift away from “the old way of doing things.” It also requires a shift in perspective away from asking “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?”

### 3

#### **Safety**

The foundation of a trauma-informed approach is creating a safe environment for those you serve and all who work at your organization. This includes creating physical, mental, and emotional safety.

### 4

#### **Wellness and Self-Care**

Your organizational culture needs to prioritize wellness and self-care, not just for those you serve but for all employees and supervisors as well.

### 5

#### **Everyone Is Included**

The TIC framework requires that all individuals at your organization—including persons served, direct care staff, leadership, and community members—be involved in its implementation. If your implementation only focuses on one aspect of your organization, then you are not truly trauma-informed.

## 1. Organizational Assessment

Before you can consider implementing TIC at your organization, you first need to assess where you stand in the process. This allows you to identify a baseline of TIC competencies among organizational leaders and staff, and then regularly reassess to determine strengths and areas of improvement. The self-assessment should be thorough, measurable, and use a proven tool.

Unlike implementing a new program, service line, or evidence-based practice, becoming trauma-informed requires an overall organizational shift in how you view the people you serve. While launching a trauma-specific service or hiring a trauma-informed specialist to offer staff training can be steps in advancing trauma-informed care, these are not effective methods of creating a trauma-informed organization. This is why all aspects of the organization should be assessed, rather than just focusing on staff or one particular program.

### Examples of organizational assessment tools for trauma-informed care:

National Council for Behavioral Health  
[Organizational Self-Assessment©](#)

Traumatic Stress Institute  
[Attitudes Related to Trauma-Informed Care \(ARTIC\) Scale](#)

University of South Florida College of Behavioral and Community Sciences  
[Creating Trauma-Informed Care Environments: An Organizational Self-Assessment](#)

University of South Florida College of Behavioral and Community Sciences  
[Creating Trauma-Informed Care Environments: Organizational Self-Assessment for Trauma-Informed Care Practices in Youth Residential Settings](#)

University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children  
[The Secondary Traumatic Stress Informed Organization Assessment Tool \(STSI-OA\)](#)



*Trauma-informed care shifts the conversation away from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you to elicit this response?”*

## **2. Paradigm Shift**

The trauma-informed approach is the lens with which the entire organization views itself and provides services to its community. It is a strengths-based perspective that reframes maladaptive behavior as something a person has developed out of a need for survival, rather than a need for manipulation. One IDD organization that implemented the TIC framework found a shift in understanding that involved focusing less on controlling or “fixing” a person’s behavior to becoming more aware that the behavior is something that is absorbed in the individual’s brain and body.<sup>6</sup>

For example, an individual with IDD may have a difficult time coping with fire alarms at their day program, sending them into panic attacks or self-injurious behavior. Rather than viewing this response as maladaptive behavior, the TIC framework views this as a normal response—the individual could have experienced a fire when they were a child, or could have experienced another traumatizing event that involved loud sounds and flashing lights. Their physical response is something that their brain and body has very little control over. Staff can best help this individual by providing strategies to cope with the fire alarm, such as deep breathing exercises or leading the individual out of the building before the fire drill occurs.



Most importantly, the TIC framework needs to be fully embraced by leadership. Your organization cannot become fully trauma-informed if TIC is not modeled by the leadership of the organization on a regular basis. As a leadership team, it’s critical to incorporate both formal and informal organizational culture shifts in this process: policies, procedures, and ongoing staff communication must include leadership involvement at all levels. Creating lasting change requires everyone’s commitment and involvement, and TIC is no different than any other initiative that requires organizational change.

### 3. Safety

Safety is one of the foundational principles of the trauma-informed approach to care, and it applies to every person across the entire organization. Safety includes physical, emotional, and psychological safety of those you serve and your employees. It also includes a focus on building deep relationships with the people you serve.

Creating safety begins with an evaluation of the physical environment, ensuring that workplace policies and training to address issues such as sexual harassment, workplace violence, and emergency preparedness are well-established. This is an iterative process, where the overall safety of the organization is regularly evaluated with collaboration from persons served and direct care staff.

Safety also involves making sure your staff and organization practice crisis prevention and de-escalation. Understanding precursors to behaviors that can be dangerous to the person served and preventing these precursors from happening or getting worse is a form of trauma-informed care. Many traditional methods of crisis response—including restraints and seclusion practices—can be traumatizing or could re-traumatize an individual with IDD. These interventions need to be used as a last resort, and after-care for the individual after the incident has occurred needs to be a regular part of the incident reporting and crisis intervention protocol of an organization.

Emotional and psychological safety are also a critical element of this process. Persons served and employees must feel safe going to authority figures in the organization to discuss their concerns without fear of retaliation. Staff must feel comfortable bringing feedback to their supervisors regarding organizational practices or personal concerns. Additionally, supervisors and community members must feel safe expressing their opinions to executive leadership. Creating this sense of safety across the organization is crucial before other elements of the TIC framework can be implemented.



## 4. Wellness and Self-Care

Wellness across all aspects of a person's life (whether it be physical health, spiritual health, emotional health, or mental health) is a critical element of trauma-informed care. It is especially important that trauma-informed organizations prioritize the wellness of their employees.

The impact of secondary traumatic stress on direct care staff and other employees within an IDD organization is huge. Burnout, secondary/vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue are common experiences among those in helping professions, and IDD organizations are no different. Therefore, effective systems of employee wellness and self-care are imperative for trauma-informed organizations.

## 5. Everyone Is Included

An organization working within a trauma-informed model of care must involve all aspects of their services and business. Implementing the TIC framework across an organization cannot rest on the shoulders of one committee, one trauma specialist, or one service line—it must involve everyone.

The reason behind this is that TIC is more than just something performed between staff and persons served. Trauma-informed care begins with someone's first contact with your organization—when a client walks through the door, the appearance and layout of the building, the attitude and demeanor of the administrative staff, and the initial interactions with service providers will either build a bridge of safety and trustworthiness or it will create a sense of fear and unease. TIC needs to be baked into the organizational culture through leadership and staff attitudes, beliefs, physical environment, and policies.

## Some strategies for promoting wellness and self-care to employees include:<sup>7</sup>

- Provide the opportunity for staff to have peer support from others who are in similar positions as them.
- Provide opportunities for staff to engage in organizational events, such as leadership programs, in-service training, or team-building activities.
- Train supervisors in trauma-informed supervision to help staff identify their own risk for burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue. Supervisors should also encourage and support staff with creating their own plans for managing stress and practicing self-care.
- Provide ongoing training on trauma-informed care, crisis prevention, and employee wellness topics (such as healthy eating, sleep hygiene, and emotional intelligence).
- Encourage employees to attend personal counseling. If your organization does not already have one, consider implementing an employee assistance program that can help locate counseling services or will provide free short-term counseling sessions.
- Encourage healthy work-life balance. Work hard to ensure that staff are practicing healthy boundaries between work and home life, and are making use of the organization's paid time off and vacation leave.

Implementing the TIC framework also means that all individuals within that organization must be involved. This is not something the leadership of the organization will perform behind closed doors; it requires input from persons served, their family members, direct support staff, supervisors, administrative staff, and board members. It should also seek input from community members and other organizations that are considered stakeholders in your organization's success. After all, the only way to know if any of your efforts to become trauma-informed are working is to involve those who will be most affected by your implementation activities.



## **Conclusion**

Any significant organizational change can feel overwhelming and challenging. Sometimes initiatives to become trauma-informed are only partially implemented, or are not supported by everyone in the organization. Ongoing communication, staff development and training, and the constant support of leadership must be present in order for the TIC framework to take root.

Implementing the TIC framework is also not a one-time process. It is a framework that has meaningful, long-lasting positive impacts on those you serve and your employees. The future of IDD services in general involves a whole-health approach where the person served is viewed as a complex human being through a strengths-based, person-centered lens. Implementing and maintaining a trauma-informed approach to care is worth the challenge because the benefits are meaningful and produce a better quality of life for people with IDD.

This is simply the first step, and you are not alone in making this change. The [National Council for Behavioral Health](#) has many resources, services, and publications on trauma-informed care. The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) also has multiple resources available to organizations that are looking to implement a TIC framework. Additionally, the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) and the organization [ACEs Connection](#) have resources specifically for IDD organizations.

Ongoing staff training and development are necessary for success, and Relias has helped many organizations develop their direct support professionals and supervisors to improve service delivery and learn more about trauma-informed care.

*To learn more about how Relias can help your organization begin its trauma-informed journey, contact us.*

**GET STARTED**

## About Relias

For more than 11,000 healthcare organizations and 4.5 million caregivers, Relias continues to help clients deliver better clinical and financial outcomes by reducing variation in care. Our platform employs performance metrics and assessments to reveal specific gaps in skills and addresses them with targeted, personalized and engaging learning. Learn more at [relias.com](https://relias.com).

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