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TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES IN LAW LIBRARIES

For more than 20 years I have been a defense attorney for indigent people who are sentenced to death. I have been surrounded by countless people suffering trauma from murder and the death penalty, and have experienced some of it directly. The trauma I have encountered from my legal work is fairly overt, but as law librarians we all may undergo traumatic experiences without even consciously recognizing them as traumatic. We might work in a high-pressure law firm under seemingly impossible deadlines, assist a law school clinic defending international human rights, or provide research support to a judge on criminal cases involving gruesome facts. Regardless of our experiences, we and our patrons could all benefit from law libraries that are trauma-informed.

Trauma-informed librarianship is a service approach where library professionals realize the pervasiveness of trauma in individuals and communities, recognize the signs of trauma, adapt library policies and procedures accordingly, and avoid re-traumatization. Trauma-informed librarianship has been widely discussed in public and academic librarianship but has yet to firmly take hold in law librarianship.

Our profession would benefit from a trauma-informed approach. Although the primary goal of creating a trauma-informed workplace is to improve the quality of life for our patrons and colleagues, the secondary effect of this approach is to improve workplace productivity and work quality. Trauma-informed law librarianship could improve public services and work relationships, which could in turn increase the overall effectiveness of law library service.

What is trauma?

Trauma is more than just a bad or stressful experience. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), an agency in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, defines individual trauma as physical, emotional or life-threatening harm that has lasting effects on a person's mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Trauma may be primary, stemming from an act directly perpetrated on a person, or secondary, stemming from a person's repeated interactions with others who are themselves suffering from trauma.

The impact of trauma may be short-lived or long-lasting. Trauma can impair people physically (e.g. escalated heart rate, cognitive problems), mentally (e.g. excessive worry, preoccupied thoughts, memory gaps), or verbally (e.g. not wanting to discuss

relevant subjects, minimizing fearful experiences). Lasting effects of trauma may include difficulty concentrating or making decisions, an increase in chronic illness, dysregulation of emotions, and difficulty forming social attachments. Not all trauma results in diagnosable Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but the symptoms such as hypervigilance or intrusive thoughts may persist nonetheless. Adverse childhood experiences, such as extreme poverty or physical abuse, can actually alter brain structure, impairing brain development and increasing the risk of mental health conditions or chronic illnesses long-term.

Traumatic experiences can affect people differently depending on their prior experiences and available resources. Some people have intersecting marginalized identities that make trauma more frequent and/or impactful in their lives. For example, people of color may experience both racial trauma stemming from discrimination and historical/intergenerational trauma stemming from collective community experiences that negatively impact more than one generation. However, anyone can suffer from trauma regardless of their social, financial or community status. Research shows that up to 70% of adults have experienced some type of traumatic event at least once in their lives. People in the legal profession are particularly at risk, given the high-pressure work environments and frequent exposure to direct and vicarious trauma. It is no surprise that extensive research demonstrates that legal professionals experience chronic stress as well as high rates of depression and substance abuse. The American Bar Association has even formed a Well-Being Campaign to decrease substance use and improve mental health in the legal profession, with the goal to improve the quality of legal practice.

Despite its pervasiveness, trauma is often invisible. People may widely understand some events as traumatic: enduring a violent assault, escaping a war or living through a worldwide pandemic are all obviously traumatic. However, other events, such as being raised by a neglectful parent or enduring a toxic workplace, may be more difficult for people to recognize as traumatic. Further, societal stigma may discourage people from disclosing they have suffered trauma themselves. For these reasons, it takes conscious effort for workplaces to recognize the pervasiveness of trauma and to ameliorate trauma's negative effects.

[How can law libraries become trauma-informed?](#)

SAMSHA defines an organization as trauma-informed if it realizes how widespread trauma is, recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma, responds by integrating knowledge into practice, and resists doing further harm. SAMSHA further outlines six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- safety (providing a physically and emotionally safe environment),
- trustworthiness (acting in a consistent and reliable manner, conducting operations with transparency, and establishing appropriate professional boundaries),

- empowerment (creating an environment where stakeholders are heard and have some control over their experiences),
- peer support (validating peers' experiences and aiding them in employing trauma-informed practices),
- collaboration (partnering with stakeholders, recognizing their strengths and meaningfully sharing decision-making), and
- sensitivity toward cultural, historical and gender issues (learning about marginalized communities, recognizing implicit bias, and working towards cultural competence).

There are countless ways for organizations to implement these principles. For example, organizations may enhance safety with stakeholders by building rapport before addressing difficult topics and limiting unnecessary retelling of traumatic stories. They may demonstrate trustworthiness to stakeholders by engaging in consistent communication and following through with stated intentions. They may empower stakeholders by allowing stakeholders the choice whether or not to share their experiences and fostering an environment where all participants feel validated and worthy.

But how can law libraries specifically incorporate these ideals in their own cultures, programs and services? Below are some suggestions, although different strategies may need to be employed depending on the user or staff population, environment (urban or rural), and culture of your library.

- **Management**

Creation of a trauma-informed culture starts at the top, with a commitment to learning about and implementing trauma-informed practices. But even though management has the greatest power to effect workplace change, we all can be leaders in adopting some trauma-informed practices, regardless of our position in the organization.

To create a foundation for implementation of trauma-informed practices, management can encourage or require staff to participate in trainings on becoming a trauma-informed library. Management can weave trauma-informed practices into their library's policies, mission statement, and strategic plan. Management can provide a supportive response to traumatic events in the community or workplace, such as forming a listening circle to discuss improvements to safety measures after a dangerous workplace incident.

Although trauma is more than just stress, self-care techniques to cope with stress can also benefit people suffering from trauma. Management can create an organizational culture of care by providing staff with robust health benefits, regular breaks, mental health days, flexible work schedules and workloads that are periodically assessed for reasonableness – all while recognizing that an employee's self-care may not be enough to cope with a traumatic situation, particularly when the trauma stems from a systemic issue.

Importantly, management must commit to fostering equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) for patrons and employees through a range of library policies designed to address oppression, marginalization, and bias. Trauma-informed practices and EDI initiatives are interconnected because oppression, marginalization and bias can cause significant trauma, and trauma-informed practices can help mitigate that trauma.

- Collections

Collection development librarians can expand the organization's collection with offerings about the concept of trauma and about specific traumatic events (e.g. oppressive regimes or hate crimes) in order to increase community awareness and compassion regarding those issues. Those collection items should include narratives of community resilience and triumph over trauma, not mere suffering. Librarians can prioritize purchase of items created by those who have direct experience in the community or issue being discussed (#OwnVoices). Librarians may wish to highlight particularly useful offerings through book displays, blogs or LibGuides.

Where there is derogatory language in the catalog, some libraries are able to adopt more inclusive subject headings. If they cannot change it, libraries can warn patrons about it through a collections statement or signage indicating the language may be triggering.

- Legal Instruction

Librarians with instructional roles can learn principles of trauma-informed pedagogy, including techniques specific to law school classrooms. Some techniques include: giving advance warning of upcoming difficult topics, minimizing assignments involving sensitive topics, creating flexible deadlines, providing different options for assignments, creating predictable routines such as ending each class with the same activity, building course content relevant to empathy and well-being in the legal profession, and re-evaluating the curriculum to prioritize student well-being over high achievement in traditional measures of law student success.

- Legal clinics

Many legal clinics serve clients who have endured traumatic events, including gender-based violence, child abuse, or wrongful imprisonment. Clinicians should learn about trauma-informed practices directed towards their particular clinic population, such as the American Bar Association's "Establishing a Trauma-informed Lawyer-Client Relationship" which focuses on representation of minors, or the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health's "Trauma-Informed Legal Advocacy Project" which focuses on representation of survivors of domestic violence.

Clinicians should employ trauma-informed practices when interacting with clients, to build a relationship of trust with the client and improve access to relevant information. For example, clinicians can enhance transparency about the legal process by taking

clients on an advance tour of the courthouse in preparation for testimony. Clinicians can employ trauma-informed interviewing techniques such as using reflective listening and explaining the purpose of sensitive questions.

Clinics can partner with community organizations to ensure the clients receive appropriate social services. Clinics also can utilize trauma-informed technology, like some limited electronic file-sharing with those community organizations so that the client is not re-traumatized by conveying all of the same information to multiple service providers.

- Reference

As with clinicians, library professionals conducting reference interviews should be trained in trauma-sensitive interviewing practices, to enhance the effectiveness of their service. Additionally, a library could have policies in place enabling reference staff to split the work on reference assignments, so that a member of the reference staff who is trauma-triggered by a particular reference project may opt for other projects.

- Public outreach

Public law libraries have a particular duty to become trauma-informed, as they often serve vulnerable or marginalized populations and are staffed by employees who may suffer vicarious trauma as a result of that work. Public land-grant university libraries have an additional, heightened obligation to serve their communities. Public law libraries should develop relationships with community organizations to ensure the library is providing relevant information to its patrons. They also can empower stakeholders by soliciting feedback on their needs, and demonstrate trustworthiness by implementing appropriate measures in a transparent way. Public law library employees can benefit from training on de-escalation techniques to calm agitated patrons, to avoid the sort of police involvement that could retraumatize patrons or even put them at risk of harm.

- Archives

Archivists in law libraries sometimes oversee archival displays about historical topics involving gender-based, ethnic and/or racial trauma. Archivists can work in partnership or collaboratively with representatives of communities most affected by the archival materials, to create a reciprocal relationship rather than an extractive one. Archivists can communicate openly about the reasons for certain archival processes and empower the community in the decision-making about what, when and how items should be displayed. The organization could implement culturally competent practices for handling and displaying archival materials in order to develop trustworthy and safe spaces, while still recognizing that trust-building may take time.

- Library spaces and services

For some patrons, libraries are already a safe space. But for others, libraries themselves can be triggering, given the history of segregation in libraries and the continued struggles to diversify the library and legal professions. We should be mindful that physical space is a reflection of library values, and take care to create an inclusive environment.

The American Bar Association now requires accredited law schools to provide students with information or services on well-being, including mental health and substance use, and other critical services such as food pantries or emergency financial assistance. Law school libraries can be the repository for this useful information. However, all types of law libraries can create LibGuides and blogs to provide their patrons with resources on mental health and other critical support services.

Libraries can engage in trauma-sensitive programming through special events such as yoga classes, guided meditations, book talks, collaborations with student affinity groups, or pet therapy programs with visits from trained therapy animals.

Physical spaces should incorporate universal design principles to increase accessibility, but accessibility is only a preliminary step in creating trauma-informed spaces. Libraries can create safe spaces other ways such as establishing gender-inclusive restrooms. Some academic law libraries have installed a reflection room to provide a soothing space for meditation, prayer or decompression.

Conclusion

These are just some starting ideas, and I encourage the law library community to engage in conversation as to how these principles could be implemented. Trauma-informed practices can help law libraries create safe spaces, increase mental health literacy, improve access to justice, and better gauge patrons' information needs. By thoughtfully applying these practices, we can improve information environments for our patrons, our colleagues, and ourselves.

Recommended Resources

- Katrina Hagelin, *Moving Towards Healing: A Trauma-Informed Librarianship Primer*, ACRLLog (June 23, 2020), <https://acrlog.org/2020/06/23/moving-towards-healing-a-trauma-informed-librarianship-primer/>.
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- Helgi Maki, Trauma-informed Law, <http://www.traumainformedlaw.org/traumainformed-law-book> (last updated 2023).
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- Myrna McCallum, *The Trauma-informed Lawyer* (2023),
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 - Rebecca Tolely, *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services* (1st ed. 2021), https://www.alastore.ala.org/tiservices?_zs=Rd7Ub1&_zl=K8C07.
 - Villanova University, Charles Widger School of Law, *Wellness Resources: Trauma-Informed Lawyering* (June 21, 2022),
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 - Babak Zarin, *Chapter 26: Balance, Burnout and Mental Health*, In *Introduction to Law Librarianship*, eds. Zanada Joyner and Cas Laskowski (2021),
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