



A Trauma-Informed Framework for Supporting Patrons

THE PLA WORKBOOK OF BEST PRACTICES

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
SOCIAL WORKER TASK FORCE

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THE PUBLIC LIBRARY ASSOCIATION SOCIAL WORKER TASK FORCE develops and recommends a strategic and coordinated approach for PLA related to how public libraries address the social service needs of customers.

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LEARNING ABOUT TRAUMA AND ADVERSITY

can be uncomfortable.

Trauma is widespread in our communities, and therefore it is likely that users of this workbook are survivors of their own traumatic experiences, in addition to witnesses of others' adversities. The authors have made efforts to construct this workbook through a trauma-informed lens. In order to ensure that this book is a valuable learning tool, examples of specific traumas and injustices will be discussed that may elicit strong reactions in readers. Please seek professional support when needed. This workbook is intended to increase curiosity and reflection on how public library work intersects with trauma and adversity in the community.



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INTRODUCTION

No Easy Answers

YOU MIGHT APPROACH this workbook with some apprehension. Maybe you've been working in a public library for years and are at your wits' end for how to handle challenging behaviors. Or you might be newer to the work and have heard "horror stories" about library staff getting yelled at or harmed by patrons. There is a lot of fear and uncertainty that can come with serving the public—after all, there are so many different kinds of people with so many different needs and behaviors! How can we possibly prepare for how to handle every situation?

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. There isn't an "if X, then do Y and Z" formula that can guarantee you success every time. Every person you interact with at the library brings a richness of experience, identity, and personality that shapes who they are and how they exist in the world. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy to use when interacting with library patrons and coworkers.

But before you chuck this book across the room, please rest assured that it will provide a collection of powerful tools to add to your customer service toolbox. Though the topic of trauma can be heavy and emotionally draining, engaging with this material is ultimately a deeply hopeful act. In striving to learn more about challenging behaviors, we can come to see that people are complex and not simply "problems." Doing this work reinforces a belief that library staff can learn skills to be better. We are on a continual journey to become aware of trauma's impacts and to decrease harm. We will never be fully "trauma-informed," but we can increase our competence and ability to act in more skillful ways.

The goal of this workbook is to provide information and a framework for what it means to use a trauma-informed lens. In part I, "Laying the Groundwork," we provide a broader context for this work by discussing what trauma is and how it impacts library work. We offer a framework for how to utilize a trauma-informed lens in your interactions with library patrons. We introduce activities that invite you to reflect on common concerns you see at your library and the policies relating to those issues. In the "Tools and Techniques" chapter, we look at strategies for de-escalation and the impacts of involving law enforcement and banning patrons. In part II, "Strategies and Scenarios," we offer various scenarios that will give you the opportunity to integrate what you've learned and practice responding through a trauma-informed lens. Part III, "Putting It All Together," offers a series of exercises that focus on self-care and self-assessment.

You probably picked up this book because you've seen the impacts of trauma firsthand. At the library, we are uniquely situated among public institutions to interact with a diverse array of human beings. We welcome

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ACTIVITY 0.1 • KNOWLEDGE ENCAPSULATION

Use the chart below to encapsulate both your current knowledge on topics covered in this book and what you would like to know more about. After you have completed the book, come back and complete the last column, "What I Learned."

Topic	What I Know	What I Want to Know	What I Learned
Trauma			
Trauma-Informed Lens			
Behaviors as a Result of Trauma			
Library Policies			
Cultural and Historical Trauma			
Personal Biases			
Annoying Behavior			
Challenging Behavior			
Threatening Behavior			
Patrons with Mental Health Challenges			
Persons Sleeping at the Library			
Persons with Strong Personal Odor			
Persons with a Large Number of Belongings in the Library			

Topic	What I Know	What I Want to Know	What I Learned
Possibly Intoxicated Patrons			
Substance Use at the Library			
Unsheltered Teens at the Library			
Adult Self-Neglect			
Child Abuse/Assault			
Panhandling			
Stealing			
De-Escalation			
Contacting Emergency Services			
Banning/Suspension			
Debriefing after an Incident			
Self-Care			

INTRODUCTION

everyone and encourage equal access to our resources. This means that we embrace individuals who have an incredible depth and breadth of life experience, in the knowledge that some of these life events may have been traumatic.

Trauma is not new. In the library and elsewhere, we have seen, heard, and felt the impacts that traumatic experiences have on individuals, families, and our communities for many years. Research is beginning to show that everyone is likely to be impacted by trauma, either through our own experiences or by interacting with others who have endured harm. By working alongside both coworkers and the public in the library, we are virtually guaranteed to work with people who have been traumatized. Trauma is considered a pervasive public health concern for this reason: It is all around us.

Yet we have all heard remarks such as, “Working in a library must be great! You just get to read books all day!” This is far from the truth: public library work increasingly means working with people. People who need the library for refuge in books. People who need a place to cool off or warm up and get water. Young people who need board books to help explain the death of a parent. People who need help with finding a job or applying for benefits. People who need information on systemic injustice so as to give language to their experiences of oppression. People who need resources on where to get food and shelter. People who need all this and so much more, with all of them looking to the library for help.

While we know that people who have experienced trauma use our library spaces, we also know that trauma can happen in the library itself. Our spaces are not immune to medical emergencies, violence, and even death. We also see the effects of others’ traumas play out in front of us day after day and year after year through continued hardship and requests for help.

Bearing witness to these needs and traumas day in and day out can take its toll. Eventually, librarians may experience a profound shift in their worldview due to this exposure. We can develop symptoms like those of a stress disorder, including exhaustion and other physical ailments, behavior changes, and depression, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness.¹ Library staff are not typically included in the list of those at risk for this trauma exposure, but we are not immune either.

What are library staff supposed to do when faced with such pervasive trauma? It can be overwhelming to consider the scope of adversity our communities face. We often do not feel equipped with the tools necessary to prevent or alleviate harm. It is crucial for us to take care of ourselves and understand that our work impacts our own well-being. Developing a robust self-care routine to cultivate your own personal wellness is one step. Seeking out supportive consultation and supervision around your work is another. Finding professionals, such as doctors, therapists, and peer counselors, who can help you process what you’ve gone through and ensure your own health and well-being is critical. In addition, finding opportunities for learning and reflection, such as this workbook, can help increase your understanding of how library work impacts you.

This work can be tough, but we believe it is valuable, worthwhile, and necessary. Ultimately, wanting to learn about trauma and improving our skills can generate hope for the future of this work and ourselves and other professionals. Thank you for joining us here.

NOTE

1. Françoise Mathieu, *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

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