

Top tips:

Working with people who've experienced physical or psychological trauma

1. What is trauma?

Mind describe emotional or psychological trauma as:

“Going through very stressful, frightening or distressing events... When we talk about trauma, we might mean:

- situations or events we find traumatic or,
- how we're affected by our experiences.

Traumatic events can happen at any age and can cause long-lasting harm. Everyone has a different reaction to trauma.”¹

The UK Trauma Council defines trauma as:

“Trauma refers to the way that some distressing events that are so extreme or intense that they overwhelm a person's ability to cope, resulting in lasting negative impact.”

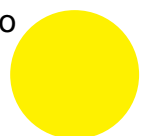
We can also be affected by physical trauma, either before or after birth, which have impacts on our day-to-day life. Physical trauma, such as brain injuries and life changing accidents/incidents, can also affect someone's ability to communicate and participate. Intellect and communication are not the same. There are some brain injuries that affect both intellect and communication, but you should begin from the position that a person's intellect is preserved until you have further information.

2. Is this the best approach?

In reality, you will likely work with many people who may have been traumatised, but who choose not to disclose it/ are unaware of it themselves. These tips are helpful both in these more general situations where you might come into contact with people who have experienced trauma and those you know have experienced trauma whom you are specifically looking to engage.

Consider these issues carefully before beginning engagement:

- Might asking for feedback cause further distress and trigger unwanted thoughts and memories? How are you prepared to support people and create a safe space so that they feel comfortable to share?
- Are you skilled enough to be working in a trauma-informed way? Is it better to seek support or fund community organisations, who have experience of working with those who have experienced trauma, to do this work on your behalf? People who



have experienced any kind of trauma may become quiet and reserved, or on the other hand might become angry and confrontational, and these scenarios be challenging.

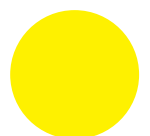
- Will you be able to cope with things that you might be told? You may hear things which you yourself find distressing (vicarious trauma) and without proper support this can have a significant impact on your mental wellbeing.
- If the people you are trying to engage have experienced physical trauma, do you understand what this means for their ability to participate? Sometimes there may be a lack of cognitive capacity to accurately give feedback on their experience.
- Will the people you are engaging with perceive that their feedback could affect their care and treatment? People sometimes fear the consequences of giving negative feedback about their clinicians or caregivers. We also know that many people value the care they have received and feel reluctant to criticise people who have helped them. In these situations, people might not be completely honest or even comment at all.

3. Making engagement work

Considerations such as **when** to ask questions, **who** should be asking the questions, **how** those questions are framed and worded and **where and how** conversations take place are extremely important for people who have experienced trauma.

A. Ensure participants feel safe and are supported:

- Engagement should not focus on what happened to participants for them to become traumatised. Participants may choose to share this information if they feel comfortable, but they should not be asked to discuss this. Engagement should focus on their experiences of accessing services or how services could be better tailored to meet their needs.
- Create safe spaces for engagement. Check with participants what this would look like for them. Staff should be consistent, reliable and use strong boundaries. Some examples might be:
 - physical safety: meeting in spaces within the community and not in healthcare settings (which may be re-triggering to some)
 - emotional or psychological safety: empathetic/active listening, not raising voices and no judgement; body language - not crossing arms, leaning in, standing behind someone who is sitting, or rolling eyes.
- Respect that some participants may choose to withdraw their participation at any time. Withdrawing participation can sometimes be a protective measure for participants to retain control and power over the situation.



- Inviting someone to discuss what may have been very distressing experiences can be draining and re-traumatising. It is important to ensure that these participants are supported before, during and after their discussions with you.
- Give participants time. Let them talk at their own pace – it's important not to pressure or rush people. Explore whether participants would like to be supported to form a peer support group, which could continue after the life of the project.
- Participants may feel that their trauma has been paraded around, with those engaging with them then retreating with the information they have gleaned, without offering support. Ensure that participants are well supported and understand how their information will be used, what difference it will make and what ongoing relationship they will have with you.

B. Remember, building relationships takes time:

- Partner with trusted community organisations who are made up of those people you are hoping to reach – they will be able to help you plan and deliver your engagement work in a meaningful and sensitive way. Recognise that people on the ground know their communities best.
- Engagement should build on previous contributions made by the community from other similar engagement activities and maintain relationships that have been forged.
- Respect the range of experiences and all experiences. However, the voices of the few can often be bridges to the voices of more.

C. Consider how you behave and act during engagement:

- **Be human** and bring your authentic self to the table. This is vital when it comes to inspiring trust. If you want people to give you something of themselves, it pays to give understand trauma affects everyone differently. A few voices do not represent something of yourself too.
- **Create equality in your relationships** - if you are asking people to share their lived experience then you should think about sharing some of your own. Not to negate their experience but to bring the relationship closer to a place of equality. Consider how you dress and how you present – what are the power differences and dynamics between you and those you are engaging with?
- **Focus on listening.** Try to respect what people are choosing to share, rather than asking lots of questions. Consider carefully the number of questions you want to ask so this does not become overwhelming.

- **Accept their feelings.** For example, allow people to be upset about what has happened. Do not tell people to calm down/ minimise their feelings. Instead, support them to find ways to calm themselves. Avoid making assumptions about their experiences based on your own views. Some people may seem unemotional or casual about what has happened to them. This can happen even when they're talking about stressful or upsetting events. They might even smile or laugh. This can seem strange or confusing, but in fact it's very common. Trauma can cause such strong feelings that your mind may 'cut off' or dissociate from your emotions.
- **Be aware of your own emotions and facial expressions.** Be aware of how your mood may impact your expressions and tone of voice and may in turn impact how you speak and your body language. Try to ensure your expression is not completely blank whilst talking to participants as this can also be upsetting.
- **Use the same words they use.** People vary in how they prefer to describe their experiences. For example, it's their choice whether to talk about being a 'victim' or 'survivor' of trauma.
- **Acknowledge their experiences.** This centres around active listening and empathy. It's not about feeling sorry for the person you are working with, but instead understanding what they are saying about their experience and the affect it has had on them. You might say something like: "Thank you for sharing your experience with me - I can see this has been very hard for you. You've talked a lot about how angry this experience has made you. I can understand why you've found it difficult to move forward". This can be very validating. Individuals who have experienced trauma may already see themselves as inherently weak due to their experiences and the way their body has responded to trauma. Remember, people can't choose what they find traumatic or how they're affected.

D. Follow up and through - recognise that engaging with statutory services comes at a significant burden to people who have experienced trauma. If they have participated, they have a desire to improve services and see the difference their feedback has made. It is vitally important to keep in touch with participants about the outcomes of engaging with them in terms of sharing reports of engagement, sharing the outcomes of engagement and whether there are opportunities for ongoing engagement in implementing any changes that have come about as a result of their engagement, insight and views.