

How a trauma-informed perspective can lead to transformation

Life & Work Connections
October 2020

We're about six months into the pandemic now. Every week, we've had to process new information – about how we do our jobs, how our children attend school, how we visit with our families and how we see our friends – in ways we never expected.

As we move through our days, and move forward with plans as best we can, it's natural to experience a stress response – even a traumatic stress response. Understanding trauma and its effects boosts our ability to cope and to build resilience.

In Greek, the word “trauma” means “wound.” Often our wounds are visible, and we understand the physical reason for the ache. Traumatic stress, however, is less tangible. Symptoms may include sleepless nights, headaches, stomach pain, difficulty trusting and connecting, and feelings of fear, anxiety, anger or numbness.

The unprecedented challenges related to child care, finances, and our physical and mental health that have presented in tandem with COVID-19 may seem unending. The day will come, though, when we can hold hands and hug again, and return to a more recognizable schedule.

In the meantime, we have been offered an opportunity to lift each other up in new ways, to learn from what we are experiencing and to explore new perspectives. Here are a few strategies to help us begin coping, healing and transforming together.

Developing a trauma-informed perspective

When a devastating event like a hurricane occurs, the experience is clearly delineated. The skies clear and the waters recede, and there is time for you to reorient, process the loss and changes, and start your recovery. On the other hand, living with continuous, complicated stress can leave you feeling rudderless, struggling to make decisions in a perpetual haze of confusion.

Along those lines, the two major types of trauma are defined as single-incident trauma and complex trauma. Other terms to describe them include “big T” and “little T” trauma ^[1]. Big T trauma is associated with one catastrophic event and its impacts may lead to a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder ^[2]. Little T trauma is often ongoing, undetected and insidious – and in no way small or insignificant.

You can become trauma-informed by learning about the spectrum of traumatic experiences and understanding how many people are touched by traumatic stress, even without meeting the criteria of a PTSD diagnosis. A trauma-informed mindset can help you to navigate through uncertain times and to support yourself and others mindfully and deliberately.

Practicing compassion and self-compassion

Simply identifying and acknowledging your own feelings, honestly and openly, diminishes the intensity of your stress responses. As prominent neuroscientist Dan Siegel advises, “Name it to tame it.” If you prioritize validating your emotions and reactions, you can gain a sense of empowerment and precision, even when everything around you seems unclear.

Cultivating supportive connections in your professional and personal life builds a buffer against stress, and those relationships are among the most important protective factors for traumatic symptoms. If you move away from judging, reacting and making assumptions, you can attune to other people and create trust.

Although your story is unique, you are sharing a collective experience. Recognizing that you are not alone, and sharing your voice with compassion, gives you an opportunity to heal from the pressures you are under.

Recognizing your potential for post-traumatic transformation

Since you've made it this far through a very difficult year, you have undoubtedly developed new coping methods. While it's important to continue to strive and improve, it's also important to take inventory of the resilience that you are growing in real time.

When you are honest and open about your emotions, you can acknowledge that your challenges are significant and meaningful, and that your experiences can improve your capacity to face challenges moving forward.

Unpacking your traumatic experiences allows you to better understand your fears, your triggers for stress and the connection between your mind and your health. This process also helps you better understand your family, friends and colleagues.

According to singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.” When you're

willing to accept the cracks, you can also see the light that is inside you – and all of us.

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Join the Life & Work Connections email list ^[5] to learn more about opportunities to improve your wellness.

A version of this article ^[6] appeared on the Life & Work Connections website.

Source URL: <https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/how-trauma-informed-perspective-can-lead-transformation>

Links

[1] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/trauma-and-hope/201703/different-types-trauma-small-t-versus-large-t> [2]

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967> [3]

<https://lifework.arizona.edu/person/tanya-lauer-mc-lpc> [4] <https://lifework.arizona.edu/events-and-workshops/350-overcoming-and-adapting> [5]

<https://arizona.us9.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=0aeb616343625dbd0d696bf1f&id=de6ad6ff97> [6]

<https://lifework.arizona.edu/news/2020/10/how-trauma-informed-perspective-can-lead-transformation>