

15: UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

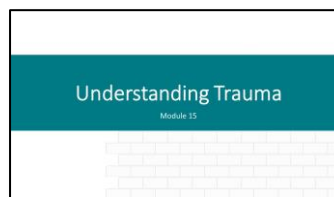
Time:	45 min.
Format:	Lecture, video, discussion
Materials:	PowerPoint, Video: "Raymond Smith: Prison and Trauma," Video: "Trauma and the Brain," flip chart and markers
Competencies:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognize that the correctional setting can mirror or trigger past traumatic experiences of the person who is incarcerated.• Describe contextual stressors that can cause traumatic stress for people who are incarcerated.• Recognize that gender, race, class, age, and other group-level factors may influence exposure and response to trauma.

Description

This is a foundational module that teaches the causes and nature of trauma with both lecture and video about how trauma affects the human brain. A short video explains the profound effect of trauma on the human brain and behavior. This module also covers trauma triggers in correctional facilities with a supporting video from a subject matter expert.

During Training

What Is Trauma?



Set Up

Introduce the module by saying:

Trauma is an important topic to understand for anyone working in the correctional system.

Trauma can come from a variety of sources, including experiences of physical or sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, accidents, war, natural disasters, death or illness of a loved one, or other events. Trauma occurs when an individual is exposed to an overwhelming experience that involves a threat to his or her physical, emotional, or psychological safety (Benedict, 2014). The effects of traumatic experiences may last for days, weeks, months, or years after the event.

Trauma doesn't end with the traumatizing event. After a traumatic event, individuals may re-experience the event through intense feelings, memories, and behaviors. So the event returns again and again in the person's mind and body. This can have a major impact on a person's life.

Transition:

Let's watch a short video that explains the impact of trauma on the brain because that impact can be deep and long-lasting, with many consequences.

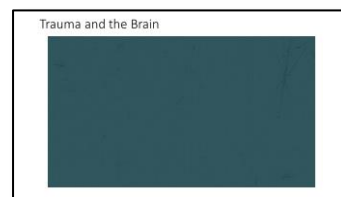


Video

Play the video "Trauma and the Brain."

Facilitate the discussion with the following questions:

- Was anything in this video new to you? What stood out?
- Is trauma easy to "get over?" Why is it important to understand how big of an impact trauma can have on a person?
- Do you see how trauma might be important in the correctional context?



Trauma and Offending

Lecture

Say:

As we saw in the video, trauma's impact can last for years, if not a lifetime. It can alter a person's behavior and can lead to some problematic behaviors. Let's explore some connections between trauma and offending.



Women and girls. There is considerable evidence that trauma may play a role in criminal behavior, particularly for women and girls. For instance, they may begin to use alcohol and drugs to numb themselves to sexual abuse, they may get involved in street life after running away to escape abuse at home, or they may commit violent acts in retaliation or self-defense against partners who beat them (DeHart, 2009).



Men and boys. Trauma has also been shown to relate to antisocial or aggressive behavior for men, as in a recent study of Marines deployed to combat, which demonstrated that those with PTSD were more likely than those without to engage in antisocial and aggressive acts such as physical confrontations and trouble with the police (Booth-Kewley et al., 2010).



During incarceration. Trauma may also be related to some of the behaviors offenders display while incarcerated, such as rule violations, aggressive outbursts, self-injury, manipulative behavior, drug use, and failure to progress in treatment. Such behaviors may stem from reaction to trauma triggers or may be the individual's attempt to cope with a persistent state of traumatic stress or arousal (Benedict, 2014).



Triggers

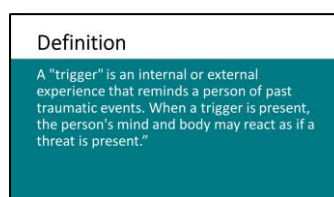
Lecture

Say:

What is a trauma trigger and how does a person with trauma become triggered?



A **"trigger"** is an internal or external experience that reminds a person of past traumatic events. When a trigger is present, the person's mind and body may react as if a threat is present. Such triggers can make it difficult for the brain to "reset" the body from fight-or-flight mode to rest-and-digest mode.



Triggers can be obvious or subtle. For example, a loud noise could be interpreted as a gunshot. And loud noises, like a metal door slamming, often occur in correctional facilities. More subtle and less obvious triggers can be things like a particular sight or smell that reminds the person of the traumatic experience. For example, smelling the cologne that an abuser wore during assault or smelling diesel fuel that reminds someone of a car accident may trigger traumatic stress for a person. Others would never make the connection, but for the person who has experienced trauma, it is powerful and inescapable.

Remember that a trigger is an activation of *past trauma*. A person who is triggered becomes suddenly connected to their past trauma vividly and may have trouble being completely present with current circumstances.

Trauma Triggers in Correctional Facilities

Lecture

Say:

Daily experiences in a correctional facility can include many triggers for traumatized persons. Potential triggers include:

- Conducting strip searches for contraband;
- Transitioning incarcerated people from one place to another inside a facility;
- Supervision by a staff member during personal hygiene, toileting, or dressing;
- Extracting an incarcerated person from his or her cell;
- Placing an incarcerated person into isolation or restraints.



For people who have experienced violence and abuse, some aspects of incarceration (e.g., coercion, bullying) may mirror these experiences, re-creating trauma for those survivors.

Other common stressors include crime anniversaries, parole hearings, and institutional events such as lock-downs or executions.

There are also a number of **routine practices** within prisons and jails that may cause additional trauma to incarcerated people, especially those who may have experienced sexual or physical abuse in the past.

Other stressors may include noises and other factors often present throughout jails and prisons—loud voices, banging doors, buzzers, unfamiliar people, and so on. Sometimes even visits and contacts with family or friends can be stressful and may act as triggers (Benedict, 2014).

And even the experience of being incarcerated itself—being removed from family and placed in a secure, controlled facility—can be traumatic.

This means that a person who is incarcerated may have layers of trauma. They may have **past trauma** that can be **triggered** by experience in prison and they can be **traumatized anew** by **current experience** in prison.

Layers of trauma may account for certain disruptive, self-harming or defeatist behavior that you, as prison staff, see and must respond to.

Remember the Stakes

Lecture

Say:

Are correctional facilities equipped to handle people who have experienced trauma? What about people with mental illness who also have experienced trauma?



Remember that the stakes for preventing or handling crisis are high. The safety and wellbeing of many people can depend on it.

Transition by saying:

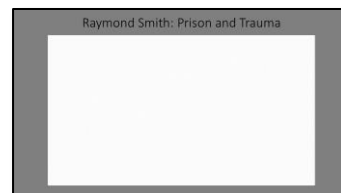
Let's see what Mr. Smith has to say about trauma and life inside.

Video: Raymond Smith

Play the video "Raymond Smith: Prison and Trauma."

Facilitate discussion with the following questions:

- Have you thought of going to a correctional facility as trauma? What do you think of that?



Correctional Mental Health

- Mr. Smith talks about sudden behavior change as a possible sign of a trauma trigger for a person. Have you ever seen someone suddenly go straight into crisis? Might they have been triggered by something you didn't notice?
- How could you apply Mr. Smith's advice about trauma and trigger awareness at work?

Conclude:

Trauma is a common experience among incarcerated people, for many reasons. You don't have to know how they have experienced trauma, but you do need to understand that trauma triggers can affect some people. This understanding helps you anticipate potential crises and maintain safety in the facility.



SOURCES

Module 15

Benedict, A. (2014). Using trauma-informed practices to enhance safety and security in women's correctional facilities. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Assistance, National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women.

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