

A trauma-informed approach can better support underrepresented groups

We want all substance use services in Wales to be underpinned by a trauma-informed approach.



What is a trauma-informed approach?

It is important to highlight what is meant by ‘trauma’ and only then can we start to discuss how this should be appropriately addressed. As outlined in the trauma informed Wales framework, trauma is defined as ‘any experience that is unpleasant and causes, or has the potential to cause, someone distress and/or anxiety. It is important to note that trauma can also be used to refer to the impact of a traumatic event’. [1] We could all experience a traumatic experience at some point in our lives. Research from Public Health Wales (PHW) in 2015 [2] found that 47% of adults in Wales have suffered at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), a ‘stressful experience occurring during childhood that directly harm a child (for example sexual or physical abuse) or affect the environment in which they live’. [2] And there are many other adversities that people can experience during their lives including racism, discrimination, and structural inequalities. Therefore, we all need to understand and talk about ACEs and trauma.

Subsequently, given the widespread occurrences of trauma and the respective impacts it can have on individuals, it is vital that an approach underpins the delivery of services that allows for opportunities and paths for healing and overcoming such experiences, while not retraumatizing via behaviours and interactions, and consequently promoting positive life chances for people.

What does the evidence suggest?

While a significant section of the adult population in Wales has experienced at least one ACE, one in seven have experienced four. The consequence of this is that those individuals are eleven times more likely to have smoked cannabis, sixteen times more likely to have used crack cocaine or heroin and twenty times more likely to have been incarcerated at some point in their life, compared to someone who has not experienced an ACE. [2]

Despite the risks that experiencing multiple ACEs poses, it highlights that there is a significant cohort of people that have experienced traumatic episodes. Therefore, if they access substance use treatment provisions, regardless of where they live in Wales, it is vital services adhere to the trauma-informed Wales framework and deliver a coherent and consistent approach to such matters. By complying with this, services should have the necessary policies and procedures in place that ensure they do not retraumatise those people and subsequently provides an environment that allows them the optimal opportunity to succeed and flourish.

What is also worth noting is that women account for only 36% of all referrals to substance use services in Wales. [3] While women are less likely than men to use substances, when they do, it is more likely to be as a response to

Key facts



47% of the Welsh adult population have experienced at least one ACE.

x4

People who have experienced four or more ACEs are sixteen times more likely to use heroin or crack cocaine compared to someone who has not experienced one.



Women who have experienced domestic abuse are eight times more likely to develop harmful substance use than women who have not.



People who identify as transgender often have a higher rate of experiencing trauma than their cisgender counterparts.

trauma or abuse. [4] The link between women's substance use and their relationships is particularly striking when those relationships feature gendered dynamics of abuse and trauma. [5] Research has identified a particular link between women's substance use and experiencing various forms of abuse, including emotional, physical, and sexual, often perpetrated by a partner or family member. [6] Substance use can also be linked to ongoing abusive relationships in adulthood; Agenda, a domestic abuse charity, found that women who have experienced domestic abuse are eight times more likely to develop harmful substance use than women who have not. [7] What is telling is that services may encounter resource constraints that have an inflexible system in their response to the needs of women with significant trauma. [5]

Such inflexible system responses could also be suggested to that of the treatment needs of people within the LGBTQ+ community. Reports suggest that there are here higher levels of substance use dependency [8] and barriers to accessing support [9] among people within the LGBTQ+ community, compared to the wider population, and people who identify as transgender often have a higher rate of experiencing trauma in the form of sexual violence than their cisgender counterparts. [10] As a result, it is important services are designed with the needs of certain genders and minoritised groups and the associated trauma, at the heart of their delivery, as treatment for substance use is prone to be ineffective unless it acknowledges the realities of certain people's lives. [11]

Why now?

The trauma-informed Wales framework was published in 2022, setting out a structure that facilitates a 'coherent, consistent approach to developing and implementing trauma-informed practice' across the nation, subsequently allowing for the provision of the 'best possible support to those who need it most'. [1] In light of the aforementioned evidence relating to trauma and substance use, as well as the adverse experiences many have endured in recent years linked to the first global mass trauma event in decades, Covid-19, time is of the essence to ensure that treatment services are not only 'informed' about trauma, but their practice is of a standard that both acknowledges the differences and complexities of trauma but also provides an environment for people to thrive without fear of re-exposure to historic or additional adversity. By working in a trauma-informed way, it will enable substance use treatment services to work towards the seven wellbeing goals as set out by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, [12] and therefore develop a more equal and prosperous society for people affected by substance use.

What have Barod done and our next steps?

In 2023, Barod set up the TrACEs working group, that has representation from all our services, as well as colleagues within the PHW ACE Hub, to identify gaps within our service provision and implement recommendations that ensures we deliver services that adhere to trauma-informed best practice. We have also identified areas within our organisation that affect current and prospective employee's, such as our recruitment process and consequently implemented new measures to help enable people to flourish in situations that could alternatively be anxiety and trauma-inducing. We will continue to work with colleagues in the ACE Hub and implement recommendations and measures, in line with set indicators, to ensure we are as trauma-informed in our delivery, as possible.

What do we want?

- We call on Welsh Government to implement core standards relating to trauma-informed practice within substance use treatment services in Wales and build upon the actions as outlined within the revised edition of the Substance Misuse Delivery Plan 2019-2022. [13]
- We call on Area Planning Boards to ensure the substance use treatment services in their localities embrace a whole-system trauma informed approach and for the respective workforce to be adequately skilled in delivering such an approach.

References

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