

National Resource Center

on Justice Involved Women

Jail Tip #2: Take Steps to Be More Trauma Informed

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Adapted from [Using Trauma-Informed Practices to Enhance Safety and Security in Women's Correctional Facilities](#)

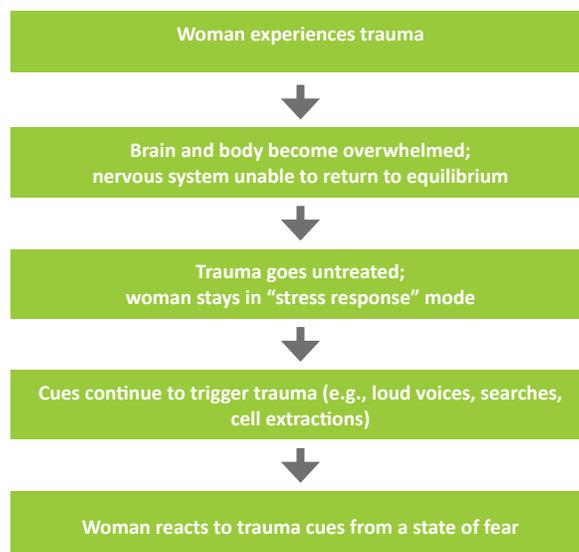
What is trauma and what does it mean to be trauma informed?

Trauma is, by definition, neurobiological¹, and trauma survivors experience psychological and physiological repercussions that are rooted in the brain's response to trauma. Typically, when we experience a threat, the brain cues the sympathetic nervous system, which stimulates a host of physiological and hormonal events that are designed to keep us safe. Once the stressor or threat is no longer present, the body's parasympathetic nervous system is activated, allowing us to "rest and digest." While the human body is designed to handle many stressful events, traumatic events like childhood neglect and sexual assault can overwhelm the human stress response. Trauma research, including brain scan data, shows that many survivors are easily triggered into, or chronically "stuck" in, the body's stress response (they don't rest and digest).

Various events and routines that occur day to day in women's correctional facilities can easily be perceived as threatening (e.g., banging of doors, loud voices, unfamiliar persons, having to talk with someone who is unfamiliar, strip searches, cell extractions, segregation). These events and routines are often experienced as "triggers" and make it very difficult for a woman's nervous system to reset itself. Having a large number of trauma survivors in one facility—each with her own set of triggers and survival strategies—can be extremely challenging. But staff can alleviate women inmates' distress, increase their ability to meaningfully engage in services, and set the stage for recovery from traumatic events just by changing their interactions and operational practices with women. Actively creating a trauma informed correctional environment can reduce unsafe inmate behaviors. When women inmates feel safe and secure in their environment, their behavior becomes more stable and their engagement in services improves.

This tip sheet provides a few key action steps that jail leadership and staff can take to become trauma informed.

Trauma's Impact on Brain & Body



This tip sheet is one in a series.

For more tip sheets, visit <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/jail-tip-sheets/>.

Why is trauma an important issue for jails?

Trauma often plays a role in the onset of women's criminal behavior, is often linked to substance abuse and mental health challenges, and may explain some of the behaviors women display while incarcerated (e.g., rule violations, violent episodes, "failure" in treatment, "manipulation"). Trauma—including childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence—is more prevalent among women inmates than among women in the general population; some studies note that rates of trauma histories among women inmates are as high as 90%.^{2,3,4} In one recent study on a large sample of women in the Cook County Jail, researchers found that the women experienced an average of 6.1 types of trauma in their lifetimes, including being physically attacked by intimates or strangers, or witnessing various traumatic events.⁵

A trigger is an internal or external experience that is a reminder of one or more traumatic events. When a trigger is present, an individual's mind and body respond as if the threat is actually present.

Interviews with jail professionals across the country reflect that they are very much aware that trauma is a significant risk factor for women⁶ and that, as a result, women in jail settings present complex treatment needs and challenging behaviors that must be addressed.⁷ Facilities that have begun to take steps toward creating a more trauma informed culture report:

- Improvements in inmates' ability to fall and stay asleep at night
- Improved attendance and participation in programs and services
- Decreases in disciplinary infractions⁸
- Decreases in conflicts between inmates.⁹

Becoming trauma informed means changing operational practices that can cause further trauma to women.

Action Steps Jail Leadership and Staff Can Take to Be More Trauma Informed

1. Support and train staff to be more trauma informed.¹⁰

- Present basic information on trauma: what trauma is and how it affects the brain and body, trauma related symptoms and behaviors, gender and culturally specific coping mechanisms, and practices to facilitate staff and inmate safety and stability.
- Demonstrate how routine operational practices, such as pat downs, searches, and cell inspections, can be conducted in a trauma informed manner.
- Respond to inmates' disclosures of trauma respectfully and effectively.
- Practice de-escalation techniques during volatile situations.
- Identify and maintain professional boundaries.

2. Adopt trauma informed language, communication, and terms.

One of the simplest changes corrections professionals can make to create a more trauma informed culture is to adjust how they communicate with one another and with inmates, including the words and phrases they use, particularly those used to describe and carry out operational practices.

- Communicate with each other and inmates in a respectful manner.
- Be aware of noise levels: talk softly if possible, and command attention when necessary without shouting or yelling.
- Practice patience and good listening skills.
- Use words and phrases that are more trauma informed (see examples in Exhibit 1).

3. Make existing operational practices more trauma informed.

- Analyze the procedures that are most likely to be significant trauma triggers for women in your facility (e.g., body searches and pat downs, cell searches and extractions, segregation, use of restraints, cross-gender supervision).
- Consider how each procedure can be completed in a more trauma informed manner (see examples in Exhibit 2).
- Wherever possible, replace old procedures with new ones that can achieve the same goal for safety/security without causing further trauma to women inmates.

Exhibit 1. Trauma Informed Language for Women's Correctional Facilities

Instead of:	Consider:
Referring to inmates by their last names, such as "Smith"	Referring to them with respect, such as "Ms. Smith"
Referring to staff by their last names	Referring to them with respect, such as "Sergeant Smith"
Saying "cells"	Saying "rooms"
Saying "blocks" or "walks"	Saying "pods" or "wings"
Saying "shake down"	Saying "safety check"
Saying "lug her"	Saying "take her to a secure area" or "document an infraction"

4. Create trauma informed spaces.

- Create physical spaces within the facility that protect privacy, especially where intake occurs.
- Create visual spaces within the facility that offer positive messages and images, and that cue inmates to rules, expectations, and skills using positive prompts and language.
- Consider posting positive, gender inclusive and culturally/ethnically diverse images; hopeful and encouraging words, phrases, and images; and brief descriptions of self-regulation/relaxation skills.
- Solicit ideas from inmates and staff about how to create spaces that encourage calm (i.e., physiological regulation) versus unrest (i.e., physiological dysregulation).

Exhibit 2. Tips for Making Operational Practices More Trauma Informed

1. Tell the inmate what procedure/activity needs to take place and why (e.g., where to sit during assessment).
2. Briefly describe what the procedure entails. If there are different ways to do the procedure safely, allow the inmate to inform you of her preference.
3. Reassure the inmate that you will conduct the procedure in a way that maximizes her safety and comfort.
4. Invite the inmate to ask any questions and answer them (before you begin).
5. Let her know that you would like to begin.
6. Conduct the procedure with trauma in mind and using verbal cues along the way (e.g., "Now I am going to place the items from your purse onto the table").
7. Let the inmate know that the procedure has been completed.
8. Ask her how she is doing.
9. Thank her for her cooperation.
10. Inform her of the next activity.

Implementing trauma informed practices in a facility setting can be challenging, but it has great rewards. Taking incremental steps toward building an integrated, multi-modal, trauma informed culture can increase inmate stability; promote engagement, recovery, and rehabilitation; and enhance facility safety and security for staff and inmates alike.

This document is one in a series of tip sheets developed by the NRCJIW to facilitate the implementation of gender informed approaches in jail settings. These tip sheets were developed based on recommendations from the Women in Jails Summit held in October 2014. For additional resources on this topic or to access additional tip sheets, visit <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/jail-tip-sheets/>.

Notes

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2. Lynch, S. M., Fritch, A., & Heath, N. (2012). Looking beneath the surface: The nature of incarcerated women's experiences of interpersonal violence, treatment needs, and mental health. *Feminist Criminology*, 7, 381–400. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1557085112439224>
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6. Lynch, S. M., DeHart, D. D., Belknap, J., & Green, B. L. (2012). Women's pathways to jail: The roles & intersections of serious mental illness & trauma. Retrieved from Bureau of Justice Assistance website: https://www.bja.gov/Publications/Women_Pathways_to_Jail.pdf
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8. National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women. (2013, April 17). Interview with Lynn Bissonnette, Massachusetts Correctional Institution—Framingham. Retrieved from <http://cjinvolvedwomen.org/massachusetts-correctional-institution-at-framingham/>
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