More and more professionals who work with survivors of violence use the terms "trauma-informed services" and "trauma-informed care." These concepts grew out of findings about trauma's effects on war veterans. Today, the terms are commonly considered effective approaches for working with people who have experienced other types of trauma, including domestic and sexual violence.

Some domestic and sexual violence victim advocates are concerned, however, about how a trauma-informed approach fits into the grassroots, survivor-centered model that grounds the movement to end domestic and sexual violence.

To understand how the concept of a trauma-informed approach is both viewed and applied in addressing sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking, the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) commissioned a project to capture the national landscape of understanding about trauma-informed policies and practices for OVW stakeholders. The report is now available from the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

The report uses the definition of "trauma-informed" issued by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which has played a leading role in defining and applying trauma-informed approaches.

The OVW-funded team conducted an extensive literature review and interviewed practitioners and survivors, including people from culturally-specific populations. Many of the participants had little information or had misinformation about the definition of trauma-informed care, thus uncovering a critical need to provide a more common understanding of the term.

The major findings of the report:

- Practitioners working in the fields of sexual and domestic violence found that the SAMHSA definition of "trauma-informed" was either a full or partial fit with their work and was enhanced by the inclusion of the guiding principles. However, they commonly noted that SAMHSA’s language did not reflect the language advocates use in working with survivors. In addition, SAMSHA’s language misses a primary focus on addressing the root causes of interpersonal violence, such as the impact of one’s gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, age and disability.

- Practitioners agreed that the phrase "trauma-informed" has been adopted by domestic violence and sexual assault service providers and advocates, but the understanding and application of the concepts are currently uneven and inconsistent.

- While many practitioners said that a trauma-informed approach is consistent with a longstanding commitment to advocacy and social justice, others believe the approach minimizes the reality of an unjust environment and survivors’ cultural background and may contribute to labeling and pathologizing survivors.

Many participants noted that the process of creating a trauma-informed organization or culture takes place on multiple levels and across multiple dimensions and includes an organization’s mission, staff, policies, protocols, procedures, culture and physical environment. The process of becoming trauma-informed needs to be ongoing and requires procedures for organizational and individual assessment, reflection, knowledge building and implementation monitoring.

We hope that the Minnesota report helps individuals and organizations better understand trauma-informed practice and how it can be used to support both survivors of domestic and sexual violence and healthy workplaces.

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