



COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE :  
ADDRESSING YOUTH DATING VIOLENCE

# Trauma-Informed Practices for Teen Dating Violence Programming

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## Overview

1. What is teen dating violence (TDV)?
2. What is a trauma-informed approach?
3. Why take a trauma-informed approach for TDV programming?
4. Principles of trauma-informed practice
5. Applications for teen dating violence programming

### What is Teen Dating Violence?

**Teen dating violence** (TDV) is aggressive, violent, threatening, and/or manipulative behaviour from a partner in a romantic or sexual relationship. TDV puts adolescents at risk for a wide number of physical, mental, and social health problems<sup>1</sup>. The term encompasses psychological/emotional, physical, cyber, and sexual violence by current or former dating and/or sexual partners. Approximately 20-30% of teens have experienced TDV, with increased rates among youth experiencing marginalization<sup>2,3</sup>.

### What is a Trauma-Informed Approach?

**Trauma** occurs after an event, series of events, or set of circumstances is experienced by the individual as harmful or life-threatening, leading to negative effects on the individual's wellbeing<sup>4</sup>. Each year, the majority of youth are exposed to some form of potentially traumatic event, such as violence or abuse<sup>5,6</sup>. While many youth are able to survive and/or thrive despite these experiences<sup>7</sup>, others experience significant negative effects, including impacts on mental health and relationships<sup>8-10</sup>

**Trauma-informed** is a term that describes the ways in which organizations recognize the widespread and profound impacts of trauma, and provide services that are responsive to the needs of all individuals, including those who have experienced trauma<sup>4-10</sup>. When taking a trauma-informed approach, organizations assume that every member of the population they serve may have encountered trauma in their lives, without requiring individuals to disclose this information<sup>12</sup>. Such an approach creates an environment where those who have experienced trauma, as well as all other members of the community, can feel safe and empowered<sup>4-12</sup>. In a trauma-informed approach, steps are taken to prevent **retraumatization**, which occurs when a situation triggers a reoccurrence or exacerbation of trauma symptoms within an individual who has previously experienced trauma<sup>11</sup>.

## Why Take a Trauma-Informed Approach for Teen Dating Violence Programming?

Given the prevalence of trauma experiences among the general youth population, facilitators delivering TDV prevention programs will almost certainly encounter program participants who have trauma histories, such as child maltreatment, dating violence and/or other forms of relational aggression. TDV programs, which explicitly talk about violence, power, and control, may unintentionally trigger trauma memories for some program participants<sup>13</sup>. A trauma-informed approach provides a framework for sensitive practices that minimize the risks of retraumatizing youth.

## Why Take a Trauma-Informed Approach for Teen Dating Violence Programming?

Organizations, including schools and community service providers, can create policies and practices that consider the impact of trauma on the young people they serve. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) identifies four assumptions that form the foundation of trauma-informed practice<sup>4</sup>. These assumptions are summarized below.

Assumption	Description
<p><b>1. Realize</b> the widespread impact of trauma</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program facilitators must have a shared understanding of trauma and how it can affect all aspects of a youth’s life.</li> <li>• Program facilitators should examine the potential role of trauma in the services they deliver, including ways program content may elicit emotional distress.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Recognize</b> the signs and symptoms of trauma among all people</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program facilitators should be aware that the signs and symptoms of trauma will likely differ in their presentation depending on individuals’ identities and experiences</li> <li>• Program facilitators should receive support and training to understand these signs and symptoms.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Respond</b> by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program facilitators must be committed to providing a physically and psychologically safe environment. Facilitators should include program participants’ definitions of safety, which can include such factors as privacy (e.g., ensuring that discussions are not overheard by passersby), supervision (e.g., having trusted adults in the room), and autonomy (e.g., allowing participants to take breaks as needed).</li> <li>• Program facilitators must take a universal approach that provides trauma-informed care to all participants.</li> </ul>

Assumption	Description
<p><b>4. Resist</b> retraumatization of all involved</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program facilitators must recognize that retraumatization can occur when an individual is consciously or unconsciously reminded of past trauma, resulting in a reoccurrence or exacerbation of trauma symptoms.</li> <li>• Program facilitators must be aware of how certain environments, behaviours, or systems can replicate the dynamics (i.e., loss of power/control/safety) of the original trauma and lead to retraumatization.</li> <li>• For example, loud noises, harsh disciplinary practices, public criticism, and victim-blaming language may create an unsafe environment for all students, and for trauma survivors in particular.</li> </ul>

## Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice

SAMHSA outlines six principles for trauma-informed practices. The principles are listed below, along with recommendations that apply these principles to TDV prevention programming.

### Principle #1: Safety

- Description: Trauma-informed programs create environments that are physically and psychologically safe for participants.
- Recommendations:
  - Program facilitators should be trained in science-based prevention approaches, including trauma-informed practice<sup>13,14</sup>.
  - The physical environment should be safe and inviting<sup>4</sup>.
  - Program facilitators should promote a sense of safety in their interactions with youth, such as by avoiding victim-blaming statements<sup>15</sup> and using gender-neutral terminology.
  - Program facilitators should be able to recognize distress among program participants and be able to respond compassionately<sup>16</sup>, and provide appropriate supports, resources, and referrals<sup>15</sup>.
  - Program facilitators should promote healthy relationships, with the recognition that positive relationships with adults and peers are an important source of resilience for youth<sup>16</sup>.

### Principle #2: Trustworthiness and transparency

- Description: Trauma-informed programs make organizational decisions with transparency, in order to build and maintain trust among all those involved.
- Recommendations:
  - Program facilitators should make an open commitment to taking a trauma-informed approach, such as through sharing a mission statement<sup>13</sup>.

### Principle #3: Peer, family, and community support

- Description: Trauma-informed programs promote support from peers, families, and communities, in order to promote resilience.
- Recommendations:
  - Programs can provide youth with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to support peers who are experiencing TDV<sup>15,17</sup>.
  - Programs should explore ways to involve caregivers, with the knowledge that the family environment plays an important role in promoting healthy relationships<sup>14</sup>.
  - Members of the community should be included in programs, particularly where culturally relevant, such as elders in Indigenous communities<sup>17</sup>.

### Principle #4: Collaboration and mutuality

- Description: Trauma-informed programs aim to minimize power differences between facilitators and program participants, recognizing that every individual contributes to the resilience-building environment.
- Recommendations:
  - Programs should collaborate with youth on determining program content and activities<sup>16</sup>.
  - Programs should collaborate with members of the community to ensure that their work is culturally informed<sup>17</sup>.
  - Organizations conducting research on their programs should include stakeholders (e.g., youth, community members) when designing their research questions and outcomes<sup>17</sup>.

### Principle #5: Empowerment, voice, and choice

- Description: Trauma-informed programs recognize and promote individuals' strengths.
- Recommendations:
  - Programs should focus not only on preventing harmful behaviours, but also on recognizing and developing young people's strengths<sup>16</sup>
  - Programs should support participants in goal setting and in developing skills for self-advocacy<sup>4</sup>.

## **Principle #6: Cultural, historical, and gender issues**

- Description: Trauma-informed programs seek to understand cultural, historical, and gender factors that affect youth (beyond stereotypes and biases), and provides services that are responsive to the these identified needs.
- Recommendations:
  - Programs should recognize the impacts of historical and ongoing oppression as a root cause of TDV and other forms of gender-based violence<sup>17</sup>.
  - Program facilitators should be skilled at working with diverse youth and diverse communities<sup>16</sup>.
  - Programs should be culturally informed, with the use of culturally relevant teaching methods and the involvement of community members<sup>17</sup>.

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