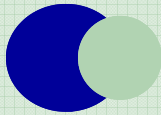


## About this pamphlet

This pamphlet alerts you to the special issues trauma survivors may have in medical and dental settings.

This pamphlet gives concrete suggestions that help avoid common problems and promote emotional well-being.



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## Trauma-Informed Practice Series

# Trauma Survivors in Medical and Dental Settings

## Why is this important to doctors and dentists?

People who have been previously victimized through childhood physical or sexual abuse, domestic violence, or sexual assault, have special issues and concerns in health care settings.

Anxious feelings about an office visit may be amplified for a trauma survivor for whom the visit triggers memories of trauma including physical pain by an authority and unbearably intense emotions.

## Special issues for trauma survivors in medical and dental settings

Coming to a medical or dental office can be anxiety producing to anyone who may fear a painful procedure, loss of privacy, or bad news about their health. The anxiety for the trauma survivor may be so great, she avoids medical care or is so overwhelmed in the office that she becomes uncooperative. A trauma survivor who feels overwhelmed may behave as though she were currently being abused by crying, becoming angry, or shutting down emotionally. She may become unresponsive and unable to give an adequate history or description of her problems.

### Definition of trauma-informed

For the trauma survivor to have the best experience in the office, medical and dental staffs need to be “trauma-informed”, that is, to understand the emotional issues, expectations, and special needs that person may have in a health care setting. Survivors themselves need to understand and honor

their concerns as normal responses that follow the experience of trauma and seek out ways they can feel more comfortable in a health care setting.

An adult who has a history of being abused as a child for example, may have experienced being pinned down, nearly suffocated, and painfully invaded. These feelings can easily be triggered by dental or medical procedures. Even a simple office visit may trigger memories of past abuse; generating overwhelming feelings of helplessness and fear of physical harm. The experience of being traumatized carries with it, by definition:

- \* *Intense, overwhelming feelings*
- \* *Feeling powerless or helpless to protect oneself*
- \* *A fear of loss of life or bodily injury*



The following medical and dental procedures may remind the patient of the original traumatic experience:

- **Examinations:** Being in an exposed, vulnerable position. The close proximity of the doctor, being touched, invasion of privacy when asked about personal habits and family history.

- **Procedures that mimic previous trauma:** Invasive procedures, physical or chemical restraint, mouth blocked open.

- **Student training:** Doctor discussing the “case” with a medical student in front of the patient may be experienced as being treated as an “object”.

### Be part of her emotional healing process

Positive medical and dental experiences can be someone’s process of healing from past abuse. It is helpful to experience a validating authority figure who gives the person as much control and choice about the experience as possible. This empowering experience counteracts the helpless, victim position they may expect to be in.

## *Ways you can help a woman feel safer and more comfortable in your office*

- *Offer a calming, soothing office environment.*
- *Provide relaxed, unhurried attention to the patient.*
- *Talk over concerns and procedures before asking the patient to disrobe.*
- *Give her as much control and choice as possible about what happens and when.*
- *Validate any concerns she might have as understandable and normal.*
- *Be flexible about her having a support person in the room with her.*
- *Explain what each procedure is and obtain her consent.*
- *Ask her if she is ready for you to begin. Be clear that she can pause or end the exam or procedure at any time.*
- *Encourage questions. Ask her if she is worried about any aspect of the exam or medical intervention. She might feel safer with the door open, closed or ajar.*
- *Maintain a personable, friendly manner. Be straightforward and generous with information.*
- *Talk to her throughout to let her know what you are doing and why.*
- *Encourage her to do what makes her feel most comfortable wherever possible such as: wearing her coat, listening to music during the procedure, keeping the x-ray apron on, or negotiating the angle of the dental chair.*

## Resources for more information

**Hayes, K & Stanley, S. (1996)** “The impact of childhood sexual abuse in women’s dental experiences.” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 5, 65-74.

**Saxe, G.N. & Frayne, S.M. (2003)** “Ongoing Management of Patients with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” In Leibschütz, Frayne, & Saxe, (Eds.) *Violence Against Women: A physician’s guide to identification and management.* American College of Physicians: Philadelphia.



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