Utilizing Trauma-Informed Care to Strengthen Your Support Organization

Presentation by Kara Wahlin, MFT
Founder of NICU Healing
What is trauma-informed care?

“Being trauma-informed means being sensitive to the reality of traumatic experiences”
(Bloom, S. & Sreedhar S., 2008)
Getting Started…

- Think about the clients you serve. Imagine what it is they seek when they come to your program.

- Now remember back to when you were in the same circumstance as your clients. Were there any service-providers, friends, nurses or other support systems you worked with during your baby’s hospitalization?
What is trauma-informed care?

- Safety (physical and emotional)
- Self-Regulation
- Sensory Cognitive Integration
- Trauma-Informed Relationships and Environments
- Trauma Integration
What is trauma-informed care?

- **The Sanctuary Model**: a full-system approach designed to help facilitate change in clients who have experienced trauma.
  - **Culture of Nonviolence**—building and modeling safety skills and a commitment to higher goals
  - **Culture of Emotional Intelligence**—teaching and modeling emotional management skills and the integration of thoughts and feelings
  - **Culture of Social Learning**—building and modeling cognitive skills that promotes conflict resolution and transformation
What is trauma-informed care?

- **Culture of Open Communication**—overcoming barriers to healthy communication, enhancing self-protective and self-correcting skills, teaching healthy boundaries

- **Culture of Social Responsibility**—rebuilding social connection skills, establishing healthy attachment relationships

- **Culture of Growth and Change**—working through loss and restoring hope, meaning, and purpose

*Cited from Bloom, S. and Sreedhar, S. (2008)*
What will today’s presentation cover?

- Putting trauma-informed care into practice
- Recognizing that your organization may be the only point of contact for traumatized individuals
- Integrating psychological research into your support program
What will today’s presentation cover?

- The importance of establishing and maintaining safety and containment in your program
- Acknowledging grief and manifesting empowerment with your followers
- Developing connection with your followers, and practicing self-care
- Providing resources to your clients, and highlighting diversity in your programs
"...when given support grounded in trauma-informed care, many can experience posttraumatic growth and develop resilient characteristics that minimize their vulnerability when faced with ongoing or future trauma." Steele & Kuban, 2011
What can trauma-informed care prevent from happening?

- Development of PTSD or postpartum depression/anxiety
- The feeling of disempowerment of NICU parents
- The retraumatization or triggering of NICU parents
- Invalidating families’ experience of trauma
What can trauma-informed care promote?

- Honoring the clients’ strengths and resilience
- Self-reflection that can result in the integration of traumatic events into life narratives
- Connection with others in the community—lifting stigma around trauma
- Reducing levels of anxiety, normalizing coping mechanisms, preventing triggers
Section 1:

SAFETY & CONTAINMENT

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The Importance of Safety in Support Programs

- Safety is the first, most important step towards developing an effective support program.
- Without safety, all therapeutic change can be prevented from occurring.
- Safety is often overlooked due to assumptions that it’s there—important to re-evaluate on a consistent basis.
What are the Components of Safety?

- Preventing/disallowing shame and blame
- Providing clients with a diverse amount of resources representing a variety of experiences and backgrounds
- Discouraging comparisons amongst clients (e.g. comments about gestational age and trauma, etc.)
- Predictability/scope of practice—making your support program predictable in the ways it can be used by clients
“Consistency, reliability, predictability, availability, honesty and transparency are all carer attributes that are related to the creation of safe environments…”

Creating a safe environment online?

- Confidentiality: Do you give your clients the opportunity to post anonymously if they so choose?

- How do you handle internet “trolls” who make inappropriate comments?

- Testimonials: Do you use them to promote your website? Why or why not?

- Awareness of potential triggers: How do you keep abreast of what images or stories may be triggering? Do you still post or do you put a trigger warning?
Creating a safe environment in a hospital?

- How do you create a safe environment, even in a space that in and of itself can be triggering?

- Ground rules and practices that encourage safety (even physical safety)

- Containment when someone shares a lot; how do you know when someone may not be safe to leave a group on their own without added support?

- Tips for grounding exercises/when to refer out
Section 2:

GRIEF & EMPOWERMENT
People have said, “Don’t cry” to other people for years and years, and all it has ever meant is, “I’m too uncomfortable when you show your feelings. Don’t cry.” I’d rather have them say, “Go ahead and cry. I’m here to be with you.”
Making space for grief in a culture that has a hard time coping with it:

- One of the most important factors of trauma-informed care is that service providers acknowledge, respect, and contain feelings of grief and loss (amongst ALL NICU parents, not just those that have actually lost a child)

- It’s important to remember that our clients are likely not acknowledged in their grief in other contexts
Making space for grief~

- Giving language to a difficult subject
- Useful vs. triggering ways of speaking to grief
- When does a client need containment and de-escalation
- Signs a client may need a referral or more help
How does your support program honor grief?

• In your experience as a parent, did you acknowledge the loss or grief that you may have felt in going through the NICU? How? Did it work well for you? What do you think worked?

• Is the acknowledgment of grief a part of your program? How so? Is there anything you’d like to add to the way you approach this subject with your clients?
Empowerment as a means to promote self-sufficiency and advocacy

- Lifting stigma around mental health issues due to trauma
- Recognizing strengths, even “invisible” strengths, in individuals and families
- Minimizing the amount of reliance on the system a client will need
- Strengthening the community
"The ultimate goal of the empowerment model is to expand a [family]'s resources and support network such that the [family] becomes less and less reliant on professional services. This model supports [families] becoming more engaged with others and moving beyond their own healing to, for example, becoming an advocate for other survivors."
(Elliot, D. et al, 2005)
End of Part I
Utilizing Trauma-Informed Care to Strengthen Your Support Organization, Part II

Presented by Kara Wahlin, MFT
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Section 3:
CONNECTION & SELF-CARE
The importance of relationships and connection in the healing process

• “Relationships create the groundwork necessary to change brains” (Cozolino, 2006)

• Strength of therapeutic relationship is the biggest predictor of clinical change

• The “expert/patient” model can be triggering to NICU parents, who have already had to deal with disempowering relationships with authority figures in the hospital environment

• Collaboration in facilitating change is key, and also models ways that clients can connect with others
“From the beginning, the brain is capable of—and in fact, is hard-wired to—make connections with other brains. As we have seen, the core self evolves in the response of the emerging proto-self in interactions with objects, including others in the world.”

Lesser-known reasons that relationship-building is an essential component to support programs:

- Models healthy attachment style, thusly potentially benefitting the parent-child attachment.
- It’s only through relationship that the more “invisible” problems start to surface.
- Making connections with less-acknowledged individuals (dads, teens, etc.) makes space for the healing of critical components of NICU families.
Relationship Building: Your Story

- What brought you to doing this sort of work?
- What are your guiding principles in working with NICU parents?
- How do you bring those principles to life in your program? What helps you hold on to those principles?
- What keeps you doing this work?
Self-expression, healing, and self-care

- As a healer, you will likely be exposed to vicarious trauma in your work.
- Self-care is an innate component of a successful support program.
- Often, service providers have a hard time prioritizing self-care practices due to time constraints, parenting, or not seeing its purpose.
Why is self-care important?

• It protects you and your clients from becoming over-identified

• It give you the ability to model self-care practices for others

• Not having healthy boundaries can harm clients
I am one who...

- Speaking from the voice of the card
- Allowing stream of consciousness to frame what it is you say/write
- Does anything surprise you about your card?
- What component of your life does your card seem to be calling your attention toward?
Section 4

RESOURCES & DIVERSITY
How can resources flesh out a support program?

- Creating a “culture of support”
- Allowing for the notion that clients may identify with specific individuals or programs that resonate more naturally with them
- Different individuals have different preferences in the method of creating their “stories”, or integrating trauma
- Preventing burnout amongst providers
Highlighting diversity of services available for clients

- Honoring the different methods people can seek and receive help
- Recognizing strengths in clients, not focusing on problems and pushing for participation
- Mandating therapy can have the opposite effect on a client looking to heal, and unintentionally retraumatize them
"The team's success hinged on the context for the relationship: the culture that they had created welcomed this family and demonstrated a different way to relate. It is this trauma-informed culture that provides the backdrop for specific interventions, but in many cases IS the treatment."

Becoming a community of providers

- The NICU parent support community is unique because it is populated with individuals who have been through their own NICU experience.

- Getting to know each other and each other’s services greatly benefits our clients and reaches a larger audience.

- Better chance of understanding a diversity of cultural contexts of families needing help.
Becoming a community of providers

“Leaders set the tone for the entire organization by valuing diversity, teamwork and collaboration, as well as supporting a larger focus on transformation…”

(Elliott, D. et al., 2005)
End of Part II
Thank you for participating!