

TRAUMA INFORMED CARE IN DENTISTRY

Why It Matters & How To Get Started



What is Trauma?

Trauma has different meanings in different environments. Physical trauma refers to a physical injury and is often treated in emergency rooms or medical offices. There is also psychological trauma, which can occur from exposure to stressful events or circumstances. A widely known response to this type of traumatic experience is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (*PTSD*).

Perhaps lesser known is that unaddressed traumatic events or experiences in a person's childhood or daily life can lead to long-term adverse effects on physical and mental health, especially if experienced repeatedly or over a long period of time. Examples of such experiences include, but are not limited to: experiencing or witnessing emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, living with a family member who has mental illness or addiction, living in poverty and/or with an inability to obtain needed food, clothing, or other necessities.

What Are The Effects of Trauma?

The more trauma an individual has experienced, especially during childhood, the higher his/her risk is for negative health outcomes and even an early death.

Patients who have experienced trauma are more likely to have chronic health conditions and engage in risky health behaviors such as smoking, substance use or poor diet. Negative health outcomes associated with trauma include diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and depression, just to name a few (*About Adverse Childhood Experiences, 2016*).

What Does Trauma Have to Do with Dentistry?

Individuals who have experienced untreated traumatic events are more likely to engage in health behaviors that negatively impact oral health.

Unfortunately, they are also more likely to avoid treatment and distrust health professionals. Patients who have experienced trauma may be especially wary of dental exams and procedures that place them in vulnerable positions in close physical proximity to a dental professional. This can lead to increased no-shows and poor health outcomes for patients.

How Can I Help Address Trauma in My Patients?

Your dental practice can adopt what is known as a “trauma informed approach to care”. This adjusts the practice environment to be as comfortable and welcoming as possible in recognition that trauma can be affecting many patients. Becoming trauma informed can help ease patient anxiety and may result in lower no-show rates, as well as increased patient comfort, satisfaction, and adherence to treatment plans.

While there are different levels of becoming a trauma informed practice, there are some basic steps that every dental practice can take that are easy and free of cost.

Examples Include:

- **Create a welcoming environment in the waiting room with plants, artwork, quiet soothing music or other comforting elements;**
- **Avoid stressful television programming, e.g. the news, where patients are present;**
- **Make the patient feel comfortable by introducing yourself and conversing with him/her before covering your face with a mask. Explain why you are going to put on a mask before doing so;**
- **Cover the instrument tray with a napkin until the patient is comfortably settled in the dental chair;**
- **Ask the patient how s/he is feeling and offer to make adjustments as needed;**
- **Help patients feel more in control by offering to explain the procedures involved with their visit;**
- **Tell the patient to use a signal, such as raising a hand, if a break is needed during a procedure.**

Want to do More? VHCF is Here to Help!

These are great first steps. You may also want to develop a trauma informed culture within your practice. This requires planning, training, and ongoing participation from all staff. The Virginia Health Care Foundation (VHCF) offers training, tools, and technical assistance to health safety net organizations interested in developing a trauma informed approach to care.

Don't miss out on our **Trauma Informed Care and Resilience Webinar Series** featuring Dr. Allison Jackson, a national expert on trauma and resilience. For more information on this webinar or to learn more about trauma informed care, visit VHCF's Trauma Informed Care resource page at <https://tinyurl.com/Y8AQA3TB> or call (804) 828-5804.

References

About Adverse Childhood Experiences. (2016). Retrieved from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about_ace.html
Sheela Raja, M. H. (2014). Treating patients with traumatic life experiences: Providing trauma-informed care. *The Journal of the American Dental Association*, 238-24.