

Universal Screening and Education

Universal Screening

The universal, trauma-informed education intervention represents a paradigm shift from the traditional model of routine screening. Universal trauma-informed education includes the creation of survivor centered, trauma informed spaces that promote education and normalize conversations about violence with clients. Empathy, competence, and appropriate referrals, creating nurturing spaces and allowing a natural conversation and disclosure for victims is recommended.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, the purpose of trauma screening is to “determine if an individual has experienced or been exposed to one or more traumatic events, has reactions to such events, has specific mental or behavioral health needs, and/or needs a referral for a comprehensive trauma-informed mental health assessment.”¹

Practitioner protocols for screening and assessment have serious implications for the safety, health, and well-being of those being screened, especially as they ensure that individuals are connected with services that will address their individual needs. While exposure to trauma is common, not all individuals respond to, or are impacted by, trauma in the same way. As such, it is important for screening tools to capture a wide array of symptoms, reactions, and other characteristics associated with trauma. To accomplish this, most screening tools include the following:²

- Avoidance of trauma-related thoughts or feelings
- Intrusive memories of the event or nightmares about the event
- Hyper-arousal or exaggerated startle response
- Irritable or aggressive behavior
- Behavioral problems
- Interpersonal problems
- Other problems based on the developmental needs or the age of the child

It is imperative for organizations to develop and communicate a philosophy and a plan for how to approach the universal screening process before it is implemented, and in preparation for any crises that occur during the screening process.

Why Universal Screening is Recommended

Individuals who experience or witness a traumatic event can develop serious mental, emotional, psychological, and physical reactions that affect their daily lives. If left untreated or misdiagnosed, trauma can cause irreparable harm to individuals and their families. Universal trauma screening is one cross-disciplinary tool that practitioners can use to identify and refer individuals who have experienced or been exposed to trauma for appropriate services.

While trauma is universal and many people have experienced or been exposed to trauma, how individuals respond to traumatic events varies widely. What causes trauma for one person may not cause trauma for another, therefore, it is important to approach each individual with the presumption that they have experienced or been exposed to some form of trauma in their lifetime. Universal trauma screening is supported by this philosophy.

Implications for Failing to Screen

Universal trauma screening may uncover an individual's experience with or exposure to trauma, and to ignore trauma (or to disregard trauma-related symptoms and disorders) can have profound implications. For traumatized people who are already engaged in some form of treatment, it could result in an inadequate treatment plan, poor engagement in existing treatment, and the misdiagnosis of a specific condition or disorder. Trauma-related syndromes are often misdiagnosed and individuals commonly receive a diagnosis such as, borderline personality disorder, schizophrenia, and in children, oppositional-defiant disorder or conduct disorders. This leads to inappropriate referrals and ultimately results in inappropriate treatment that does not address the individual's trauma.

Failure to identify and address an individual's trauma has also been linked to an increase in substance abuse disorders as individuals try to find ways to self-medicate and cope with the effects and impacts of the trauma they have experienced or been exposed to.

Universal Education

The universal screening process cannot be successful without universal education about the impact of trauma. Universal education on trauma is important for all victim-serving organizations and professionals regardless of whether they are directly involved in providing treatment to individuals who have experienced or been exposed to trauma.

Universal education on trauma explores how exposure to trauma impacts an individual's physical, mental, and emotional health, identity creation, and ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships. Ensuring that all members of an organization are trauma-informed and appropriately trained creates an environment that promotes safety

and healing. In addition, trauma-informed systems of care are sensitive to the needs of the people that the systems serve as well as to the providers within the systems. Therefore, providing universal education includes education on issues such as:

- Provider training and comfort
- Vicarious trauma
- Secondary trauma
- Responses to disclosures
- Seeking care as a provider

Providing the necessary safeguards for those individuals involved in universal screening is a key component of a trauma-informed system because it demonstrates care and concern for all individuals involved in the screening process.

Additional Resources:

Office for Victims of Crime: [Victim Service Provider Intake & Needs Assessment](#)

Center for Victim Research: [Screening & Assessment](#)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [Trauma Screening](#)

¹ [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Screening and Assessment](#)

² [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Trauma Screening](#)

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