Course Statement

In this mini-course, students will learn the fundamentals of trauma theory and how to translate this into trauma-informed social work practice. We will explore what trauma is and how it shapes people and societies. This will lead us to an understanding of the “trauma model” of deviance, in which we will explore two forms of deviance from a trauma-informed position: mental illness and criminality. In our society, most traumatized people become embedded in the mental health and/or criminal justice systems, which have not been historically trauma-informed. This anti-oppressive “trauma model” deviates from the individual and problem-focused models that have historically pervaded these systems, which ask “what is wrong with this person?” and instead asks three connected questions: what has happened/is happening this person? what survival mechanisms have they developed? And what did not happen for them (what skills or developmental milestones were missed, what needs were/are unmet)?

As social workers committed to anti-oppression, the ability to ask deep and compassionate questions that illuminate the upstream causes of human suffering is imperative. As social workers, we are also “trauma stewards” (a term coined by Laura van Dernoot), people who are professionally committed to bearing witness to and working to alleviate human suffering. Understanding trauma is necessary for effective trauma stewardship. Therefore, this mini-course will benefit students of any concentration or practice method, especially those seeking to work in the mental health or criminal justice systems.

Course Objectives

1. By mastering trauma theory and using it to understand person in environment, students will have the tools to use a trauma-informed framework in order to guide assessment, intervention, and evaluation (for example, using the three trauma-informed...
questions listen in the course description to guide their assessment and find the most appropriate intervention). This mini-course addresses competency 7. The foundational practice behaviors listed under this competency are: 7.1 Use conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation; 7.2 Critique and apply knowledge to understand person and environment.

2. By mastering trauma theory, students will be better positioned to advance social and economic justice (competency 5). The foundational practice behaviors for this competency are; 5.1 Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination; 5.2 Advocate for human rights and social and economic justice; 5.3 Engage in practices that advance social and economic justice. By taking this mini-course, student will gain a cursory understanding of the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination (5.1) – which will be expanded upon once they enter SW 504 – and will be prepared to engage in trauma-informed assessments and deliver trauma-informed services (5.3). Part of the mini-course will involve teaching them the latest evidence-based trauma-informed interpersonal practice interventions (such as trauma sensitive yoga, somatic experiencing, sensorimotor therapy, emotional CPR). I anticipate that some interpersonal practice students (especially those with prior background in the mechanics of oppression) can achieve the advanced practice behavior for competency 5, to “Use knowledge of the effects of oppression, discrimination, and historical trauma of client group to guide the development of socially just planning and interventions.”

Course Overview

Our mini-course on Trauma-Informed Practice will be divided into two parts: in Part One we will focus on Recognizing and Reframing, and in Part Two we will focus on Resourcing and Resiliency. There will be Discussion posts on Canvas, two synchronous Zoom classes in which we will work on group assignments, and one final assignment.

Part One: Recognizing and Reframing

In Part One, we will learn about what trauma is and how it impacts human biology and behavior. Once we understand what trauma is and what it does, we are better able to Recognize the signs of trauma exposure responses in ourselves, in our loved ones, in our colleagues, and in our clients. Once we are able to Recognize trauma exposure responses, we are more easily able to Reframe what we are seeing: instead of seeing behaviors or traits as wrong, bad, insane, unreasonable, or other judgmental words often used to describe traumatized behaviors, we can Reframe the behavior using compassionate trauma-informed language.

Things to read before our synchronous session:

1) “Trauma Stewardship” Introduction; Chapter 3: What Is Trauma Exposure Response? and Chapter 4: The 16 Warning Signs of Trauma Exposure
Response (note: I highly recommend reading the whole book if you have the bandwidth)

2) Skim through this Wikipedia page about the Trauma Model of Mental Disorders

**Things to watch before our synchronous session:**

1) “The biology of our best and worst selves” (16 min) – a TED talk by anthropologist and neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky which dives into the nature and nurture of human violent behavior, and demonstrates how important it is that we take a very deep view of the behaviors we judge as negative.

2) I have created two video lectures for Part One. These videos were created using my University of Michigan Zoom account, so you may need to be logged in to view them (please email me if you have any issues accessing the videos!). Also, these videos have a transcript (visible along the right side of the screen), which may be useful as I have a thick New Zealand accent.

**Part Two: Resourcing and Resiliency**

In Part Two, we will learn about skills and strategies that increase human Resiliency. When we use skills and strategies that soothe the nervous system and support us in reframing traumatized narratives (i.e. reframing stories away from hopelessness and brokenness and toward possibility and plasticity), this is called Resourcing. It means that we are finding and giving ourselves the necessary resources to strengthen and heal. Other terms that are used to describe Resourcing include “coping mechanisms” or “self-care strategies,” but in the field of Trauma recovery, we use the word “Resourcing” as it is the most neutral of all the terms (e.g. the word “coping” implies that there is something negative that must be "coped" with).

**Things to read before our synchronous session:**

This book excerpt titled "Resourcing: Nurturing Skills and Mobilising Coping Strategies"
(Please also read or skim the “Handouts” that are available at the top of this website)

This Wisconsin-based website provides a variety of very useful handouts, all inspired by the book Trauma Stewardship. I recommend the handouts titled “Is this rooted in trauma?” and the “Iceberg of behaviors,” which help you remember to look deeper in order to understand challenging behaviors. I also recommend the handouts titled “Warning Signs” and “Trauma Stewardship Activities,” which are designed to support Trauma Stewards (like ourselves!) in knowing how to recognize and address the signs of trauma exposure as we work.

This wikipedia page about nonviolent communication, an incredibly useful tool for enabling us to Reframe challenging experiences and identify the unmet needs behind interpersonal conflict.
This “Community Resiliency Model” Workbook (note: this workbook also covers some Part One content about recognizing and understanding the signs of trauma)

Please skim the following websites to familiarize yourself with these trauma-informed therapeutic approaches:
- This website about Somatic Experiencing, a form of body-based trauma therapy designed by trauma expert Peter Levine.
- This website about Tension & Trauma Release Exercises (TRE), another form of body-based trauma therapy
- This website about Trauma Sensitive Yoga - they have a short (2 minute) video that explains what Trauma Sensitive Yoga is and why it is valuable in trauma recovery. This website that explains what the Internal Family Systems Model (IFS) is, as well as this brief Psychology Today article about IFS.

**Things to watch before our synchronous session:**

1) I have created two video lectures for Part Two, which build upon the two lectures created for Part One.

2) Please choose **one video** to watch from the Trauma Skills summit I asked you to register for in the welcome announcement. I’d then like you to reflect and share about what you chose to learn about (see directly below).

**Assignments:**

There will be several Canvas Discussion assignments to respond to during the week, and group projects that we work on during Zoom sessions. There is also one final independent assignment called “Humanizing a Fictional Villain.”

**Humanizing a Fictional Villain**

This will be your main/final independent assignment for this mini-course. This assignment – which has no page limit (please write as little or as much as feels appropriate to you) – will be due on August 31st at midnight so that you can begin the Fall semester with a sense of being fully “complete” with SEED week.

Your task is to choose a fictional villainous character from a book, TV show, movie, comic series, or anywhere else in the world of fictional media. You can choose any character you want, though it might be easier if you choose a character who is human or close-to-human (for example, I would advise against choosing an alien like Jabba the Hutt, or an evil-incarnate creature like Sauron, but if you choose a mutant-human like Magneto, or a mutilated-human like Voldemort/Tom Riddle, that would work well).

Once you have your villain, your task is to write them a trauma-informed narrative using the three questions that support social workers in gathering a deep and nuanced trauma-informed assessment of a person’s life story.
What happened to you? (what difficult, traumatic, and violent things were present?)
What did not happen to you? (what necessary things were absent/what needs were unmet?)
What were your survival mechanisms? (what trauma exposure responses are part of your routine behavior? What trauma-centered worldview do you have?)

For some of villains, parts of their backstory is already available. In the examples of Voldemort and Magneto, the books/movies that feature these characters already share some of the answers to these questions. For example, we know that Magneto was a Holocaust concentration camp survivor and that his mother was murdered in front of him, and we know that he does not trust non-mutant-humans at all (he has a HUGE tendency toward the trauma exposure responses of anger and cynicism, grandiosity, sense of persecution, and hypervigilance).

But for other villains, you may need or choose to invent your own trauma-informed backstory. Maybe George Wickham (from Pride and Prejudice) experienced bullying when he was younger? His mother is never mentioned in the book, so maybe she abandoned him?

The point of this assignment is to stretch our “trauma-informed” muscles by challenging ourselves to see the humanity in characters we have grown up hating, fearing, or judging negatively. The point of this assignment is to remind ourselves that there is no such thing as a “good” person or a “bad/evil” person, there are only people, each of us trying to survive with worldviews and behaviors that have been shaped by varying degrees of trauma.

I am hoping that by asking you to humanize a fictional villain, this assignment will also be more fun and creative and allow you more emotional distance than if I asked you to apply this analysis to a real person in the world.

So, choose your villain. Write their story in a way that humanizes them and reveals their struggles and successes and how their environments shaped their worldviews and behaviors. Be creative and make things up, or stick to what you know from the texts/films themselves. And then, post it here so that we can all enjoy and learn from your work!

**Bonus additional activity:**
It would be interesting to me to gear what your process was for doing this assignment, and how it felt for you doing it. If you want to, you might choose to include a “P.S” where you reflect upon the process of writing this assignment. Why did you choose this specific villain? What was it like to apply the trauma-informed questions to their life? What connections did you notice between this villain and your own self, or other people you may know?