

Trauma Informed Principles through a Culturally  
Specific Lens

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Celebrate our cultures  
Apoyar a nuestra juventud

HEAR OUR  
VOICES

Reconocer nuestra fuerza

HONOR OUR  
TRADITIONS

# Trauma Informed Principles through a Culturally Specific Lens

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# Trauma Informed Principles through a Culturally Specific Lens



This document attempts to define the core principles of trauma informed work through a culturally specific analysis. The content of this resource is primarily intended for culturally specific, community-based organizations and seeks to provide practitioners with accessible language to describe the trauma informed/culturally specific overlap of their work. In our experience at Casa de Esperanza, as a national technical assistance provider, we come in contact with many culturally specific organizations that actively implement trauma informed approaches into their daily work but may not identify them as such. This document is an effort to uplift their collective knowledge and commitment to actively resist *re-traumatization*, foster inclusivity, and promote social justice.

The document first begins by exploring relevant definitions in the context of trauma informed work and gender based violence. Through specific examples and tips to organizations, we also highlight core principles that apply to working in a trauma informed and culturally specific manner. We conclude by providing a practice scenario and questions to help organizations think through their capacity, philosophy, and commitment to trauma informed and culturally specific approaches.

## Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, we utilize the following definitions in the context of trauma informed work and gender-based violence:

**Trauma:** *Trauma* is the experience of an event or enduring condition in which the individual and/ or community experiences a threat to life, the psychic, or bodily integrity, and experiences intense fear, helplessness, or horror. A key aspect of traumatic experiences is that the individual and/or community's coping capacity is overwhelmed. Trauma often impacts multiple domains, including physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual.<sup>2</sup> Trauma can take many forms such as collective and community trauma, historical trauma, intergenerational trauma and insidious trauma.<sup>3</sup>

*Casa de Esperanza has chosen to use “@” in place of the masculine “o” when referring to people or things that are either gender neutral or both masculine and feminine in makeup. This decision reflects our commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that both men and women make to our communities.*

<sup>1</sup> Culturally specific community based organizations: Organizations that conduct community-based practice in culturally specific communities. The work is done with and by members of that community.

<sup>2</sup> This definition was adapted from NCDVTMH and can be found at <http://www.vawnet.org/special-collections/DVTraumaInformed-Overview#100>

<sup>3</sup> For definitions of these terms, please visit: <http://www.vawnet.org/special-collections/DVTraumaInformed-Overview#100>

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**Historical Trauma:** The cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma.

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**Trauma Informed Approach:** The manner in which a program, agency, organization, or community thinks about and responds to those who have experienced or may be at risk for experiencing trauma. The term implies a change in the organizational culture to ensure that all components of the organization incorporate a thorough understanding of the prevalence and impact of trauma, the role that trauma plays, and the complex and varied paths in which people recover and heal from trauma.<sup>4</sup>

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Based on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) trauma informed definitions, organizations implement trauma informed approaches in their daily work by applying the principles, or the 3 R's, included below. Based on our experience, we provide a modified version of the 3 R's to help us illustrate how the concepts of trauma informed approaches and cultural specificity merge. The bolded words include what we learned about cultural wellness and resiliency:

1. Realizing the prevalence of trauma **individually & collectively and the presence of strength & resilience (both individual & collective).**
2. Recognizing how trauma affects, directly and indirectly, all individuals involved with the program, organization, or system, including its own workforce **by recognizing how survivors bring to the forefront inner and collective growth.**
3. Responding by putting this knowledge into practice **by learning from community, promoting safety and cultural wellness.**
4. Lastly, seeking to actively resist *re-traumatization* **by drawing from cultural resiliency, traditional healing tools and collective wisdom.**

There are many resources about trauma informed approaches on a theoretical level; however, there is still confusion as to what it entails in practical terms. To that end, this section of our document seeks to clarify how to apply trauma informed approaches from a practical standpoint while utilizing a culturally specific lens.

Please note not all culturally specific organizations are trauma informed. In contrast, we could argue that a trauma informed organization would have the tools to successfully navigate cultural differences with respect while honoring the experiences of survival of all individuals<sup>5</sup> and building on their inner wisdom and strength. Our task is to expand the application of trauma informed approaches in culturally specific contexts to respond to a gap that we encounter in practice. Although most of the accessible trauma informed resources provide an understanding of the trauma informed care universal elements, much of it lacks a cultural analysis. Nevertheless, we hope to elaborate on the cultural-specific aspects of

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.samhsa.gov/traumajustice/traumadefinition/approach.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.vawnet.org/special-collections/DVTraumaInformed-Overview#100>

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trauma informed care by including a list of principles and examples to apply trauma informed approaches at the intersection of culture.

For the purposes of this document, we are including references to Latin@ cultural realities that will help us highlight these intersections. As a clarifying note, we are using the term “culture” loosely in this document, as Latin@s are an incredibly diverse group with many different characteristics. In the U.S. context, we know that Latin@s may exhibit different levels of acculturation within their families and represent as many as 22 countries of origin.

In general terms, we are highlighting some common cultural values and characteristics such as the importance of family as a key element in a person’s identity; the role faith/spirituality may play in an individual’s life; the way of relating to one another by placing tremendous emphasis on interconnection and community. Lastly, we highlight the importance of living in the present rather than the future and the use of storytelling as the preferred method for conveying information.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to cultural values or traits, it is imperative that we consider contextual factors when analyzing the stories of survival and recovery for Latin@s or any other cultural group. The impact of historical trauma, institutional racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, poverty and colonialism compound the individual trauma experiences and require us to not overlook collective trauma and the power of resiliency.

## Trauma-Informed Principles and Culturally Specific Approaches: Applying What We Know

The following section includes trauma-informed principles developed as a result of our work at Casa de Esperanza and from collaborating and learning from other Latin@ organizations across the U.S. Each principle includes practical tips and culturally specific examples to highlight the intersections of culture and trauma-informed approaches.

### **1. Principle: Establish relationships based on mutuality and respect.**

- a. Understand and honor a process that is fluid, where organizations and survivors are constantly learning from one another.

Tip: Be intentional about practices that embrace shared learning and uplift cultural wellness and wisdom.

- » Example: A group facilitator invites participants to share with others any cultural tradition that had an impact in their lives. The facilitator can frame the invitation as an opportunity to share a cultural tradition or value from where they draw strength. Participants and facilitators can use this strategy at the start of each session.

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<sup>6</sup> See Latina Cultural Context and Advocacy for more culturally specific information: [http://casadeesperanza.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/DLLatina\\_cultural\\_context\\_advocacy.pdf](http://casadeesperanza.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/DLLatina_cultural_context_advocacy.pdf)

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- b. Be the change you want to see. The organizational culture reflects the work that it promotes in the communities. Staff and volunteers feel welcomed and part of the team. There is room to voice concerns and share ideas.

Tip: As part of the overall work of the organization, integrate practices that promote self-care, shared decision-making and opportunities for healing and growth across the board.

- » Example: As a member of the team at a Latin@ organization, you have the opportunity to contribute to the decision making process and feel empowered to share your ideas with the larger team. Your voice is heard and you are part of a work culture that truly appreciates what everyone has to offer. When dealing with difficult issues and potential triggers, you have the option to share what is challenging you without fear of retaliation. Your traditions are appreciated by all and the realities of immigrant Latin@ survivors always inform the initiatives that your organization plans to prioritize. There is space to grieve losses and celebrate your successes as an individual and as a member of a larger community.

- c. Be humble. Engage in ongoing self-reflection regarding your own power, privilege, values, history, beliefs, experiences of trauma, etc. to avoid creating the abusive structures that you are trying to dismantle. Resist *re-traumatization*.

Tip: Be prepared to challenge your beliefs. Foster open dialogue amongst staff, volunteers and the individuals whom you work with. Create mechanisms that provide internal feedback and opportunities for evaluating the effectiveness of your program.

- » Example: Every time the organization develops a new resource, works on a campaign or determines new priorities, engage the community you are planning to reach to tangibly influence your process. If for example, Latin@s are your main constituents, create opportunities for open dialogue and compensate participants for their time, provide childcare, and food. This process can take place through the facilitation of listening sessions. Allow enough time for the sessions and make sure the facilitators speak the language of the participants. Institutionalize this practice when seeking feedback from participants, and convene these gathering regularly. Promote opportunities for community engagement and foster the development of community leaders. Keep in mind that community members may distrust others due to their past experiences (i.e. history, lack of role models, immigration status, fear of the unknown, past encounters with systems) and may be weary to get involved. Relationship building takes TIME, effort and patience. Promote non-hierarchical structures and equal access to leadership opportunities. This approach will help the people whom you work with see alternative approaches to those based solely on education, professional experience, class, etc. The result is a truly empowering setting where all are perceived as agents of change.

Tip: Engage survivors and people you serve in processes that impact the overall functioning of your organization.

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- » Example: Your board of directors includes survivors (youth and adults) who have received services from your program in the past. A committee is created to engage them in working on meaningful tasks to inform the overall protocols and operations of your organization. Be intentional about including cultural tips and practices to foster an environment that welcomes everyone in a culturally respectful way. For example, the observance of Columbus Day as a holiday may reinforce the devaluing of entire cultures obliterated by colonizers. Consider renaming or reclaiming this observance.

## 2. Principle: Seek a deep understanding of the communities you work with (socio-cultural and sociopolitical histories, as well as current context, intersections of oppression, trauma, etc.) and centralize this cultural understanding in your work.

- Understand *intersectionality*. Show evidence that your organization understands that trauma arises not only as an experience of isolated violence, but also from systemic oppression, discrimination, and significant hardships that survivors face. Understanding the intersections of these issues is tremendously important.

Tip: Create an environment where survivors are comfortable sharing traumatic events that may be unique to their situation. Do not assume that domestic violence is the most pressing need of all survivors. Do not expect survivors to leave all other issues at the doorstep of your organization.

- » Example: The team working at the shelter interacts with survivors in a holistic manner by honoring that s/he may be facing multiple challenges. If an undocumented survivor comes to you for domestic violence services, understand that s/he could have experienced sexual violence in her/his journey to the U.S.; that the survivor might have concerns about family overseas; or that his/her most pressing worries center around health care, unemployment, or another topic. Recognize that safety planning processes may need to be enhanced to include systems that routinely complicate situations for immigrant survivors. These systems include child welfare, law enforcement, and immigration authorities.

Tip: Do not ask for social security or immigration documentation to survivors seeking your services. The immigration status of individuals seeking domestic violence services is irrelevant to the criteria for accessing these support systems. This is in accordance with federal funding guidelines. Do not seek support from the police in every case. Calling law enforcement in cases when the survivor and/or her/his family are immigrants may put family members in danger of deportation.

- » Example: An advocate calls the police to write a report on a case when she first met with the survivor. When the police arrive, the survivor refuses to provide information because she is afraid of facing deportation and losing her children (a threat her abusive spouse may repeatedly have made). Her knowledge is solely based on what she knows from her spouse and her experience with police in her home country.

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- b. Be ready to challenge your assumptions. Be aware of the diversity within communities and avoid making generalizations.

Tip: Provide ongoing opportunities to have discussions about intersecting issues, cultures and subcultures among survivors, staff, volunteers, and board members of your organization. Your organization gives value to addressing accessibility issues to historically marginalized populations such as LGBTQI, older adults, youth, Deaf individuals, persons with disabilities, etc. and provides space for constant discussion regarding inclusivity.

- » Example: An advocate feels unsure about what to do when a Deaf Latina reaches out for support regarding domestic violence. Having a language access plan in place that includes interpreters for foreign language speakers and Deaf individuals is both a proactive and necessary measure to implement. In this example, assuming that the Deaf person used American Sign Language to communicate could be a mistake, depending on her country of origin and sign language proficiency. Having plans in place in advance and strong collaborative relationships with Deaf advocacy organizations and culturally specific programs are examples of good practices to effectively address these intersections. Waiting for the moment of a crisis to resolve these challenges may be impossible and could place survivors at greater risk, as these situations can be complex and require comprehensive responses and thoughtful planning. Remember that having intersecting dimensions as part of a person's identity is more the norm than the exception in the human experience. While making judgments is a natural response to the unknown, remember that our own biases may cause someone to stop seeking our support.

Tip: Approach each situation with interest and respect. The first encounter you have with a survivor may be the only opportunity to provide resources and support. Avoid making assumptions about Latin@ cultures and other cultures or groups of people. If you make a mistake, rather than providing justification, acknowledge the impact and learn from your mistake. Have a process or ongoing revisions and self-reflection when these situations occur. Remember that trauma informed organizations are learning spaces.

- » Example: A Latin@ survivor seeks legal assistance and requests an interpreter for a mediation session. When the interpreter gets involved, she realizes that although the survivor speaks Spanish, her primary language is Zapoteca and does not understand the legal terminology nor the concepts related to child custody and child support in the U.S.

- c. Use cultural traditions and values for enhancing prevention and intervention efforts to end violence, always being careful not to “romanticize” or deify the culture. For example, a concept such as “Latino men are machistas” is an example used to erroneously generalize an entire group of individuals. Machismo is a form of male privilege which exists in all cultures (not only in the Latino culture).

Tip: Center what's important to the survivors and families you are serving. When working with Latin@ families, consider recognizing that extended family systems may be more common than nuclear family structures. In addition, many Latin@ families may have a tendency



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toward a collective and group identity rather than an individual identity. Decisions may involve the survivor and her/his children; and, in some cases, older parents.

- d. Be flexible and honor the concept of family as defined by the individual. In some cultures, grandparents, godparents, close friends and others are given equal access within the family structure.

Tip: Invite survivors to share their stories and become familiar with how they define “family.” With this in mind, inform survivors about available systems and resources. For some survivors, family comes first and decisions are heavily influenced by this reality.

- » Example: An advocate notified a 25-year-old Latina survivor that she qualifies for a housing program that provides a place for her to live, free of charge, and supports her to go back to college. She is thrilled with the news, but refuses the offer when she learns that her elderly father is not allowed to live with her. She can only take her two children to live with her in this housing program.

### **3. Principle: Understand the origins of trauma including historical, collective, and the inter-generational transmission of trauma. Do not minimize the resiliency, wisdom, and strength of survivors. They have much to teach on how to heal from trauma.**

- a. Approach the work from a social justice perspective and pay close attention to your practices from this lens. This perspective will radically change your stances, ideas, expectations, and approaches to the work at hand.

Tip: Inform and prepare yourself, and the rest of the staff, to address different forms of oppression in addition to gender-based violence. Learn the common elements of oppression and how they intersect in the lives of survivors from different cultures. Not knowing where to start and how to begin this process in tangible ways may seem overwhelming at first. Do not hesitate to seek guidance and support. Be mindful of your own biases and privilege as you address these issues. Remember that dismantling oppression takes commitment, honesty and determination. Examine this situation below from a social justice perspective.

- » Example: Manuela,\* a Latina immigrant survivor, seeks services after a violent incident during the weekend. During the intake appointment she discloses she that she is undocumented. Manuela traveled by foot for five days and four nights to make it to a small town in the southwest area of Colorado. She decided to migrate to the U.S. and flee the violence from the organized crime her partner was involved with along the Mexican border. She knows her relationship with her partner is not ideal, but she is terrified of the possibility of being deported back to Mexico where she witnessed brutal violence. She fears that her life and her family members’ lives will be in danger. She is working at a hotel and financially supporting her children’s education. How would your advocacy change in this context?

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## **4. Principle: Keep the realities of the survivors and their children central to your work, regardless of the specific work that you do.**

- a. Make sure the intervention/prevention efforts reflect the realities of the people who will participate. This requires both knowledge and involvement with the local community.

Tip: Take into consideration the subgroups present within the community (i.e. culturally specific communities, persons with disabilities, immigrants, LGBTQI survivors, etc.). Identify their values and interests.

- » Example: When interacting with survivors, use inclusive language and allow enough time to learn how each person self-identifies. Avoid making assumptions about individuals. Foster an inclusive environment when starting group discussions and within your organization in general. Develop policies that reflect inclusivity and implement them as part of the ongoing work of the organization. For example, have a language access plan in place that is reviewed periodically and train staff regularly on implementing this plan. When applying for new funding, include a line item in your budgets for accommodations. Make sure your facilities are physically, programmatically and attitudinally accessible to ALL survivors. Accessibility is an ongoing journey, and it is impossible to know everything about intersecting identities. It is recommended to seek technical assistance when needed to improve your practices.

## **5. Principle: Your organization alone will not be able to end violence. Believe in the power and collective wisdom of communities.**

- a. Involve participants (including youth) in updating existing programming in addition to developing new topics, activities, research studies, advocacy, community education, and evaluation strategies. Ground your work in the community you are seeking to reach. Implement community engagement strategies where the process for obtaining information and sharing resources goes both ways and where communities and organizations always learn from one another. Avoid outreach strategies that don't produce any tangible results, mainly because the information goes only in one direction.

- b. Create and maintain strong networks with other agencies, organizations, and systems you can collaborate with to enhance the work for social change and justice.

- » Example: A group of progressive organizations with a shared goal of providing trauma informed care join their efforts to advocate for changing institutional issues affecting the community. One shared goal is to provide therapeutic services for people of color referred by the judicial system. The organizations begin documenting detailed information about the referral sources, basic demographics and gaps in available services. They do not make empty referrals and coordinate with one another.

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## Taking Care of Ourselves and Each Other

Those of us in helping professions are regularly exposed to stories of survival. A key component in doing the work successfully, and from a trauma informed perspective, is to pay attention in our response to these stories and to our own individual and collective trauma. Unlike other areas of work, being part of the healing journey with survivors often begins with our own personal journey. Allowing ourselves space and time to recover, step away, and rely on each other for support are all necessary strategies to avoid secondary trauma and burnout. Doing trauma informed work is not limited to how we relate to those who seek our services; it includes how we live in our individual work cultures and spaces. Pay careful attention to the policies and practices that exist within your organization and be prepared to carefully examine and modify them when necessary. Promote caring and supporting environments conducive to your own healing process and that of your colleagues. Implement strategies such as reflective supervision to enhance the daily work experience and manage the impact of regular exposure to trauma.

Many of us were taught to take care of others first and it is much easier to note when others need help. This is often the case for Latina women, and the idea of taking care of themselves may seem foreign and self-serving. Despite our brain wiring, it is worth taking a step back and looking at our whole selves with compassion and curiosity. Remember that we cannot give what we don't have.

*\*Name change for confidentiality.*

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<sup>7</sup>Reflective supervision: <http://multiplyingconnections.org/become-trauma-informed/what-reflective-supervision>

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## Practice Section

The following scenario provides information about a survivor living at intersections of sexual, domestic violence and transphobia. Given the above listed principles, how could you apply trauma informed approaches when responding to her?

Possible red flag: What about our own stories of survival? What about our own biases?

### **Example:**

Ana is a 30 year old, Nicaraguan Transgender woman, (MTF) who identified her sexual orientation as queer. Ana came to the U.S. where she was hoping to live in a country free from the physical, psychological and sexual abuse she was experiencing in her native country as result of her gender identity and expression. Ana is currently undocumented and has just finished a relationship with a heterosexual male who abused her physically and emotionally. He drugged her and exchanged her body for more drugs, sexually exploiting her at the hands of other men. Ana sought services after she was physically attacked by her partner when she refused to allow him to trade her for drugs.

- A) Think about how you would respond to Ana in applying the 3 R's listed above.
- B) What cultural considerations are important to take into account here?
- C) What are Ana's strengths?
- D) What challenges are coming up for you personally, if any?
- E) Is your organization accessible to trans survivors?

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**Special thanks to Virginia Perez Ortega for her contributions to this document.**