# Building a Resilient & Trauma-Informed Workforce
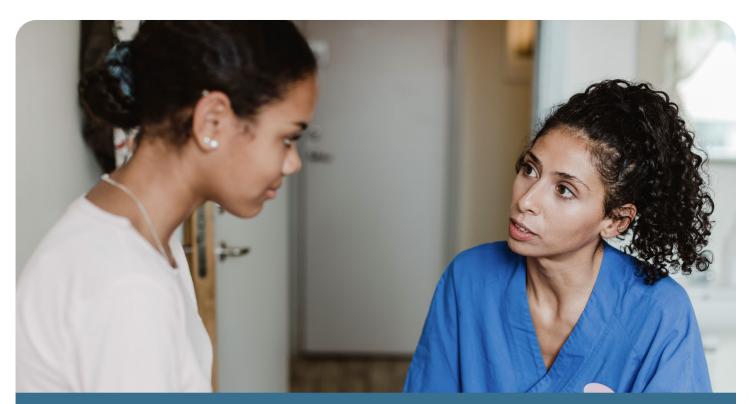
*This factsheet explores the intersection between resilience and trauma-informed organizations*

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## Introduction

The terms **resilience** and **trauma-informed** are both closely linked to burnout, compassion fatigue, moral injury, moral distress, and other mental health struggles in the workplace. Studies indicate that physicians and medical residents have some of the highest rates of burnout and suicide.[i] However, when compared to other professions, they also possess higher rates of individual resilience.[ii] This dichotomy illustrates a salient point—resilience is a process that involves both individual strengths and organizational structures and practices. A deficit in individual resilience does not automatically equate to poor well-being in the workplace. Instead, a lack of support, inefficient processes and practices, excessive workloads, and poor leadership are leading causes of workplace stressors.[iii] Fortunately, organizations that follow a trauma-informed model "demonstrate a commitment to compassionate and effective practices and organizational reassessments," which positively affect workforce well-being, resilience, and satisfaction.[iv]

*Note: This document uses specific terms to speak about well-being; however, language is ever-evolving. While the terms related to well-being may change with new research, the ongoing support for the mental health needs of the workforce is essential and must remain a top priority.*



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## What Is Individual Resilience?

Resilience is the "process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands."[v]

Individual resilience is a skill that can be practiced and strengthened. There are many factors that contribute to individual resilience including how a person views and engages with the world, their access to strong social resources, and their use of positive coping strategies.[vi]

Possessing individual resilience does not preclude an individual from experiencing distress, difficulties, or trauma—in fact, individual resilience is often connected to experiencing significant emotional distress.

### LUCKILY, INDIVIDUALS CAN INCREASE RESILIENCE BY:[vii]

- Building strong social connections and prioritizing healthy, empathetic relationships
- Practicing self-care, mindfulness, and other wellness activities
- Avoiding maladaptive coping mechanisms such as smoking or excessive consumption of alcohol
- Honoring difficult emotions and feelings and finding proactive ways to cope, such as seeing a licensed mental health professional

- Helping others and finding a purpose
- Developing short-term and long-term goals and working to achieve them
- Embracing a healthy mindset that is free of catastrophizing and open to change
- Remaining hopeful for the future and learning from the mistakes of the past

Developing individual resilience is important, but the onus to maintain well-being in the workplace does not solely lie with the employee. It is also an organizational challenge that requires leadership to prioritize wellness and intentionally adjust their culture, policies, and practices to reflect a trauma-informed model.

## What Does it Mean to be Trauma-Informed?

Organizations that take a trauma-informed approach in the workplace develop a culture that "emphasize[s] respecting and appropriately responding to the effects of trauma at all levels." These organizations understand the pervasiveness of trauma and actively work to lessen and/or stop re-traumatization by developing environments that prioritize healing and recovery.[x]

Organizations need to think and act strategically to effectively build a trauma-informed workplace.

**THE FOLLOWING PROCESS OUTLINES SOME KEY PRACTICES TO CONSIDER WHEN ADOPTING A TRAUMA-INFORMED MODEL:[XI]**

- Commit to the creation of a trauma-informed workplace
- Create an infrastructure that initiates, supports, and guides positive change
- Involve staff, leadership, and experts in the field of trauma, those with lived experiences, and other key stakeholders in the process
- Assess policies, practices, and operations to identify interference with a trauma-informed approach (ex: Is the organization maintaining a workplace culture that discourages employees from using their paid time off?)
- If needed, implement quality improvement measures
- Develop an action plan for change that supports an organizational culture rooted in the principles of trauma-informed care (TIC)
- Collaborate with all stakeholders to advance the practice of being trauma-informed in the workplace
- Identify and assess outcomes to ensure the continuous application of trauma-informed practices
- Allocate resources for training, supervision, and the collection of feedback

## Principles of a Trauma-Informed Organization[xii]

| **Safety** | **Trustworthiness** | **Choice** | **Collaboration** | **Empowerment** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Considers and ensures both the emotional and physical safety of all individuals | Provides clarity, consistency, and transparency on policies, procedures, and roles | Provides a voice to all in the organization and ensures that they understand their rights and responsibilities | Flattens hierarchical models and engages individuals in the decision-making process | Recognizes an individual's strengths and skills and offers a supportive and empathetic environment that prioritizes justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) |

- Provide equitable and accessible spaces such as gender-neutral bathrooms, handrails, ramps, or quiet spaces

- Adjust lighting, wall colors, seating, and other décor elements to ensure better inclusivity and an environment that is not overly stimulating or triggering

- Avoid the use of strong smells such as perfumes, cleaning products, or room deodorizers/air fresheners (smell is strongly linked to memory and can easily trigger trauma flashbacks)

- Encourage staff to reflect on important and pressing topics that affect well-being

- Conduct in regular check-ins with staff and talk to them about their well-being

- Educate, address, and act against any inequities or occurrences of discrimination, prejudice, bias, stigma, or microaggressions

- Provide clear and transparent communication about job roles, expectations, advancement opportunities, compensation, and more

- Uphold interpersonal and professional boundaries, remain respectful, and prioritize privacy and confidentiality

- Acknowledge that trust is earned and expressed differently by each individual

- Communicate in a developmentally and culturally appropriate way—this may mean adjusting wording or providing information in multiple languages

- Acknowledge power differentials and the historic marginalization of underrepresented groups

- Develop policies and practices that prioritize JEDI principles such as capacity-building for diverse candidates so they are eligible and competitive for positions of leadership

- Provide inclusive benefits and flexible work schedules (e.g., paid parental leave, transgender medical care, remote/hybrid work opportunities, child care support, extensive behavioral health services, etc.)

- Elicit regular feedback from staff by conducting stay interviews and/or providing anonymous suggestion-boxes

- Practice bi-directional, strengths-based communication and ensure that leadership is accessible to all staff

- Validate and affirm the achievements and strengths of staff members

- Acknowledge individual differences and experiences

- Develop a culture of wellness that validates and supports the emotional, physical, and financial needs of the workforce by:
  o Encouraging movement
  o Offering healthy choices such as fresh fruit and vegetable snacks
  o Providing opportunities for socialization and comradery
  o Hosting learning sessions about workforce well-being
  o Encouraging staff to take breaks, have lunch, go for walks, etc.
  o Providing time for self-care activities
  o And much more

It is important to develop and adopt wellness policies and practices that consider the input and guidance of _all_ staff.

# ⚡ What is Organizational Resilience?

Organizational resilience is "the dynamic capacity of the people within an organization to be mindfully aware of the environment; respond productively to continuous change, adversity, and disruption; and positively adapt and learn from experience in order to drive higher levels of performance over the long-term."[xiii] A trauma-informed model excels in organizations that possess a resilient mindset, as they are better equipped to manage change, crises, and unexpected challenges. Organizational resilience also requires a system to anticipate, adapt, assess, and act when faced with new challenges and opportunities.[xiv]

Ultimately, resilient organizations develop policies that shape the workplace into one that is trauma-informed and centered on the principles of staff well-being.

**This resilient culture is:** [xv, xvi]

- Agile
- Empathetic
- Transparent
- Empowers its employees
- Adopts clearly defined values
- Employs effective and adaptive leaders
- Utilizes psychological safety
- Embraces collaboration across all levels
- Supports multi-directional communication
- Prioritizes the emotional, physical, and financial well-being of all staff.

## Conclusion

Trauma-informed organizations excel in workforce retention, recruitment, satisfaction, and engagement. These organizations intentionally, thoughtfully, and strategically meet the needs of their workforce by developing a welcoming, empathic, and JEDI-focused culture. Turnover rates continue to increase in the healthcare field and it costs approximately $350,000 to $450,000 to lose and replace a provider.[xv] Many factors contribute to turnover and burnout in the workplace, including too many bureaucratic tasks, lack of respect from coworkers, too many work hours, insufficient compensation, and a lack of control/autonomy.[xvi] Trauma-informed organizations address these challenges by developing environments that practice and champion a culture of wellness and resilience.

## Resources

- STAR$^2$ Center – Self-Care for the Health Center Workforce Guide: https://chcworkforce.org/web_links/self-care-checklist/

- STAR$^2$ Center – Burnout Assessment Tool: https://chcworkforce.org/web_links/star%c2%b2-center-burnout-assessment-tool/

- STAR$^2$ Center – Workforce Self-Care Resources Bundle: https://chcworkforce.org/bundle/workforce-self-care-resources/

- STAR$^2$ Center – Financial Assessment for Provider Turnover Tool: https://chcworkforce.org/web_links/star-center-financial-assessment-tool/

- STAR$^2$ Center – The Emotional Toll of Caring for Others: A Factsheet on Supporting Staff Mental Health Through Compensation Equity and Inclusive Benefits: https://chcworkforce.org/web_links/factsheet-mental-health-compensation-equity/

- The Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work – Trauma-Informed Organizational Change Manual: https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care.html (link to request the manual)

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit: https://www.samhsa.gov/resource/dbhis/trauma-informed-organizational-toolkit

- Community Clinic Association of Los Angeles County – Creating a Trauma-Informed Workplace: A Toolkit to Support Planning and Implementation: https://ccalac.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/origins-CCALAC-organizational-toolkit-WEB.pdf

- The THRIVE Initiative via The National Health Care for the Homeless Council – Guide to Trauma-Informed Organizational Development: https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/thrive-guide-to-trauma-informed-organizational-development.pdf

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[v]American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Resilience.* APA Dictionary of Psychology. https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience

[vi]Ibid.

[vii]American Psychological Association. (2020, February 1). *Building your resilience.* https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/building-your-resilience

[viii]Ibid.

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[x]Ibid.

[xv]The International Consortium for Organizational Resilience. (n.d.). Organizational resilience model. https://www.build-resilience.org/OR-Model.php

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