

Recommendations for Trauma-Informed Design

Why Trauma-Informed Design Matters

Trauma-informed design brings the principles of trauma-informed care to life in our everyday environments. This approach realizes how the physical environment affects individuals, recognizes that it can have a physiological and emotional impact, and responds by creating supportive environments that resist retraumatization (Trauma-Informed Design, 2018). While this approach is critically important for health care settings, given the widespread prevalence of trauma, all environments should prioritize and utilize trauma-informed design.

Trauma-informed environments promote physical, mental, and social health. They ensure physical safety from harm and danger. To support mental health, they emphasize consistency, predictability, and personal control. Finally, they facilitate social connection, community building, and participation in the design of the space (Dilani, 2018). This holistic approach aligns with the principles of trauma-informed care to create a welcoming space for staff and guests.

What is Universal Design?

Universal design is a framework utilized to promote environments that “may be accessed, understood and used...without the need for adaptation, modification, assistive devices or specialized solutions” (Definition and overview, 2014). It recognizes that no two people have the exact same abilities and that ability varies depending on the environment or type of activity the individual is undertaking (Benefits and Drivers, 2014). Designers using this approach strive to find a solution that is the most inclusive of all abilities. In 1997, a working group of architects, engineers, and designers developed the seven principles of universal design to guide the design of environments and products:

1. Equitable Use
2. Flexibility in Use
3. Simple and Intuitive Use
4. Perceptible Information
5. Tolerance for Error
6. Low Physical Effort
7. Size and Space for Approach and Use (The 7 Principles, 2014).

Universal design is a trauma-informed approach. It promotes empowerment and reduces barriers to engagement based on accessibility.

Cultural Relevance and Design

Creating an inclusive workplace includes the physical environment. When designing a space through the lens of trauma-informed care, it is important to ensure the environment is culturally relevant. Designers should utilize décor and materials that are respectful and responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of staff, clients, and guests (SAMHSA, 2016). Maintaining cultural competence is an ongoing process that includes continual organizational assessment, strategic planning that involves the community and partners, and regular evaluation of incorporation of culturally competent approaches (SAMHSA, 2016).

Recommendations for Trauma-Informed Design

- Reduce or remove identified adverse objects and stimuli.
- Minimize unnecessary and overwhelming ambient noises.
- Increase natural lighting, access to green spaces, and easy-to-care-for plants.
- Promote opportunity for individual choice in balance with everyone's safety and comfort.
- Limit visual complexity, such as distracting patterns on the walls or flooring.
- Ensure adequate lighting that does not buzz or flicker and that can be manipulated for those with light sensitivities and visual impairment.
- Use color schemes that emphasize cool colors, such as blue, green, and purple. Avoid stark, white walls.
- Provide clear and consistent signage.
- Do not overcrowd furniture and ensure adequate space to navigate around each piece.
- Keep spaces neat and clean.
- When designing spaces and choosing fixtures, refer to the principles of universal design to promote accessibility.
- Ensure décor and design is culturally sensitive and relevant.
- Institute a fragrance-free policy to eliminate synthetic fragrances, especially in enclosed spaces.
- Create a balance between social spaces and private spaces.
- Train staff responsible for greeting guests to serve individuals who speak little or no English and who have other communications needs, such as hearing impairment and limited literacy, with respect and competency.

Resources and Further Reading

The 7 Principles. (2014). Retrieved from <http://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/The-7-Principles/>.

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