

ADDICTION TREATMENT THROUGH THE TRAUMA LENS

Terra Holbrook LCSW, CADC, CSAT

Ascendant NY

Fall Psychiatric Symposium 2025

TRAUMA

*An emotional and psychological **response** to an event or series of events that are experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening, leading to lasting adverse effects on an individual's well being and functioning.*

TRAUMA

Mental Health

Trending

Personal work

Secondary trauma

Specialty

Fear

DO WE WORK WITH
TRAUMA
IN SUBSTANCE ABUSE
TREATMENT?

TRAUMA

60 to 75% of individuals seeking treatment for substance abuse have a history of trauma.

50-60% of individuals with PTSD also meet the criteria for substance abuse disorder

Nearly half of young people who experience a traumatic event go on to binge drink or meet the criteria for a substance use disorder

TRAUMA
DISRUPTS
THE
BODY'S
CORE
SURVIVAL
SYSTEM

ACUTE

CHRONIC

DEVELOPMENTAL

AUTONOMIC
NERVOUS
STATES

HYPERAROUSAL- Persistent anxiety, irritability, panic, hypervigilance

HYPOAROUSAL- Numbness, dissociation, shutdown

FLUTUATION- Instability, emotional unpredictability

NERVOUS SYSTEM DYSREGULATION BECOMES DAILY SUFFERING

- Emotional overwhelm
- Insomnia and agitation
- Intrusive memories
- Difficulty self-soothing
- Feeling 'too much' or 'not enough' internally

ADDICTION
EMERGES AS AN
ADAPTIVE-YET
HARMFUL-
REGULATION
STRATEGY

- *Slows the system down*
- *Reduce anxiety*
- *Create a temporary sense of safety*
- *Shut off intrusive thoughts*

- *Increase energy*
- *Create aliveness*
- *Push the system out of collapse*

- *Addiction is a way to self regulate the swings*

TRAUMA CONDITIONED LEARNING REINFORCES THE CYCLE

Over Time The Brain Learns:

- Substances help me feel normal
- I can't regulate without them

Repeated Use Creates:

- Altered reward pathways
- Impaired stress response
- Increased triggers to sensitivity
- Stronger cravings during distress

IF TRAUMA SHAPED THE NERVOUS
SYSTEM AND THE NERVOUS
SYSTEM SHAPED THE ADDICTION...
THEN RECOVERY MUST INCLUDE
NERVOUS SYSTEM HEALING

TRAUMA
INFORMED
CARE

Why the emphasis?

Trend?

Importance of the concept

What do we need to know
about trauma?

TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

Core principles

- Safety
- Trustworthy
- Choice
- Collaboration
- Empowerment



SAFETY

Ensuring physical and emotional safety for individuals in all aspects of service delivery

TRUSTWORTHY AND TRANSPARENT

Building trust with individuals by
being transparent, reliable and
honest in all interactions



COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY

Fostering collaborative relationships between individuals and service providers, recognizing the individual's strengths and expertise

EMPOWERMENT, VOICE AND CHOICE

- Prioritizing the individual's autonomy, voice and choice in their recovery process
- Responding to cultural, historical and gender-based concepts





PEER SUPPORT

Incorporating peer support and mutual self help into the recovery process



CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, AND GENDER ISSUES

Recognizing and
responding to cultural,
historical and gender-based
contexts of trauma and
recovery

TRAUMA INFORMED CARE VS TRADITIONAL ADDICTION TREATMENT

Traditional

- Focus on addictive behavior
- Client is seen as resistant, non-compliant, in denial
- Provider is expert
- Intense emotions are destabilizing
- Engagement often depends on client's ability to tolerate confrontation or structure
- Relapse is regression

Trauma Informed

- Focuses on person
- Client is coping the best they can
- Provider is collaborator
- Emotions and body sensations are information
- Increased engagement as clients feel safe
- Relapse is a stress response

Trauma informed care emphasizes creating environments that promote reliance, healing, and empowerment while minimizing the risk of retraumatizing.

TREATMENT APPROACHES THAT SUPPORT CHANGE AND ADDRESS TRAUMA

- Mindfulness and grounding
- Holistic approaches to wellness
- Peer support
- Community resource
- Incorporating trauma modalities



TRAUMA MODALITIES IN TREATMENT

- IFS
- Somatic experiencing
- EMDR
- Polyvagal Theory
- Attachment based intervention
- Experiential work

INTEGRATIVE MODEL

Identify the part using the substance
(IFS)

Identify the state driving the use
(POLYVAGAL)

Identify the body pattern being regulated
(SOMATIC)

Identify the memory network activating the behavior
(EMDR)

Identify the attachment wound behind the need for
comfort and escape (ATTACHMENT WORK)

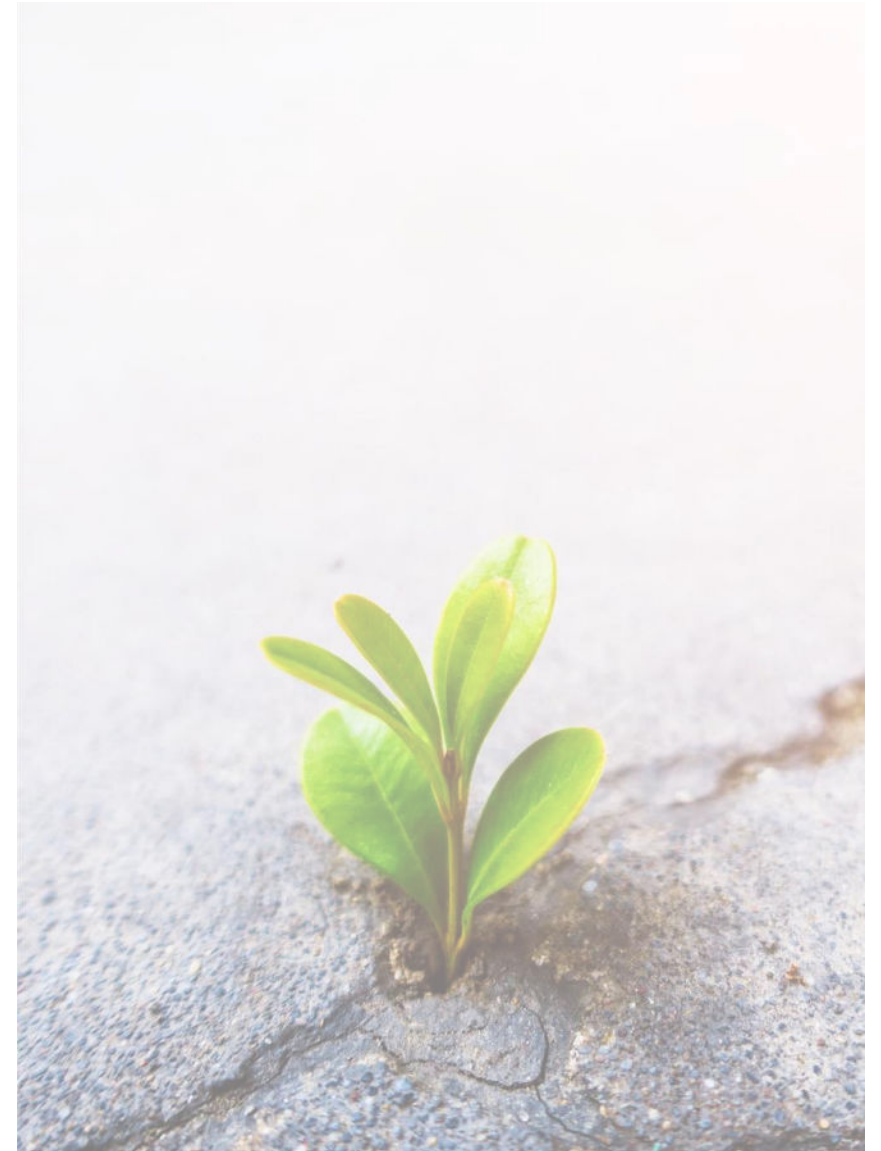
INTERVENTION FLOW

- Stabilize the nervous system
- Strengthen internal leadership and compassion
- Build relational safety and connection
- Process trauma memories when ready

- Replace the substance with internal and relational regulation tools

IMPACT OF TRAUMA IN RECOVERY

- Trauma hinders the process
- Challenges from trauma history
- Treatment goals recognize trauma history



CAN WE DO
BOTH?

- Exploration of the commonalities
- Trauma recognition becomes a thread woven through the work
- Modalities that compliment goals of treatment and recovery

A woman with long, dark, curly hair is shown in profile, looking towards a baby. The baby is wearing a brown sweater and has their hands near the woman's face. They are outdoors, with a blurred background of hills and a warm, golden light from the setting or rising sun. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

SAFETY

Core of all work

ESTABLISHING SAFETY

In recovery

With trauma

HEALING

Recovery

- Arrest the disease
- New beliefs and behaviors
- Health and wellness
- Social functioning
- Building tolerance for feelings and discomfort
- Live self-directed life

Trauma Resolution

- Stabilize
- Understand the story
- Explore the wounds and impact
- Work through relational impact
- Feelings and triggers
- Establish safety

TREATMENT AND TRAUMA WORK

- Can't do treatment for SUD without trauma recognition
- Understanding commonalities that drive treatment goals
- Trauma resolution is establishing safety
- Behaviors change as safety is established
- Substance use disorder treatment requires arresting the disease and building tolerance for discomfort
- Stability and tolerance are required for trauma resolution
- Both require a rewiring of the brain for healing

THANK YOU

Terra@terraholbrook.com