Trauma-Informed Care for People with Developmental Disabilities

Overview

"Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful, or life-threatening, with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."[6] Trauma affects the brain and the body, causing a number of physical and mental struggles. These may include behavioral outbursts, depression, headaches, nausea, and many other symptoms.

> **61%** of men are exposed to a traumatic event at some point in their life[6]
>
> **51%** of women are exposed to a traumatic event at some point in their life[6]
>
> **90%** of clients in public behavioral health care settings have experienced trauma[6]

People with developmental disabilities are 1.5 to 10 times more likely to experience maltreatment than their peers without disabilities.[5] This higher risk of maltreatment means that people with developmental disabilities are at a greater risk for trauma.

Even though trauma affects a large number of people, not everyone experiences the side effects of trauma in the same way. This is why not every person who experiences trauma is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a mental health diagnosis that occurs after a traumatic event that is characterized by persistent, intrusive experiences that interfere with activities of daily living[1]. Trauma can influence people long after they experience the trauma, but it does not necessarily interfere with activities of daily living.

Based on the understanding that many people experience trauma, regardless of disability status, it is important that providers take a trauma-informed approach in their care practices. Trauma-informed care is promoting safety, empowerment, and healing at every step of a person's care[6]. Because trauma becomes so engrained in an individual's story, service providers must understand how trauma affects the brain, body, and how people interact with one another.

Challenges

One of the major challenges in understanding trauma and trauma-informed care for people with developmental disabilities is communication. According to *Diagnostic Manual-Intellectual Disability*, second edition[2], some individuals may be able to verbalize their experiences better than others, and some may express their distress through their behavior. There are efforts to help service providers navigate these experiences. One study in

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particular lead to great strides by adapting the Impact of Event Scale for working with people with Intellectual Disabilities[3]. Because of difficulties with communication, it is also important to include the person's caregiver in the analysis of the mental health of people with developmental disabilities. The caregiver may give additional insight into the event, but it is also important to talk with the individual alone because they are the owner of their story and truly know how something affected them.

This also leads us to another difficulty within this field—professionals are not trained to know how to work with people with developmental disabilities who have also experienced trauma. There are some resources in understanding these issues, but not many service providers are trained in or access these resources unless they have a special interest. Along with this, there is a shortage of mental health workers across the country[4]. This means that there are not enough mental health workers, and not enough of that limited number of professionals have the necessary knowledge to help individuals with developmental disabilities process and work through their traumatic experiences.

Promising Practices and Future Directions

There are several promising resources and organizations that will be important to watch over the years. One of these organizations to go to for trauma information and education is The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (www.nctsn.org). This organization has a fantastic toolkit that focuses on people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who have also experienced trauma.

Some states are seeking to become 'Trauma-Informed States.' This means that they are seeking to improve trauma-related services to help their citizens thrive. If your state is not one of these, please reach out to your local and state representatives to encourage them to think of people with developmental disabilities. Spread information to dispel myths and inform others of the mental health needs of people with developmental disabilities.

Moving forward, you can encourage service providers to get training on these issues and learn about it yourself. Education is the first step in this process of understanding mental health and developmental disabilities.

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