A starting point – "trauma-informed and resilience oriented"

What does it mean to be trauma-informed and resilience-oriented?

In the years since STAR began our learning and teaching journey (in response to a call to respond to September 11, 2001 in the US), many more voices and programs have emerged to build awareness and action plans for building resilience and addressing trauma in individuals, organizations and communities.

Both clinical and cultural perspectives on trauma and resilience have begun to inform our lives in myriad ways. The impacts of trauma – from individual and collective experiences of violence, historical, systemic and structural harms, and environmental devastation – reverberate through families, communities and the world. More people are courageously acknowledging the need to address these impacts. Organizations working in the midst of structural and direct violence are exploring how to trauma-inform their efforts and create more trauma-informed work places. Trauma-informed school and community networks have begun to form. Resilience-based programming is not an uncommon concept whether in education, economic and social development, or peacebuilding. Trauma-sensitive yoga is taught in schools and prisons.

So, what does it mean to be trauma-informed and resilience-oriented?

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky describes a vision she calls "trauma stewardship," which "calls us to engage oppression and trauma – whether through our careers or in our personal lives – by caring for, tending to, and responsibly guiding other beings who are struggling" (2009, p.11). She highlights and questions the common belief that "our commitment to our work may be measured by our willingness to martyr ourselves" (p. 12). Her work describes how trauma stewardship is required to address personal dynamics, organizational tendencies, and societal forces.

Shawn Ginwright sounds caution about resilience-building work: "The pursuit of wellness without fairness will not yield the outcomes individuals and communities need" (2013, p. 147). He shares the frustrated words of a colleague, "Imagine that someone has their foot on your neck and it is very difficult to stand up! Resilience is like saying to young people that I'm going to make your neck stronger, rather than focusing on how to get it off my neck in the first place!" (p. 54).

According to research by Barry Hart, Mikhala Lantz-Simmons, and Daria Nashat (2016), a trauma-informed organization:

- has staff that has received training in trauma and that knows how to identify signs of trauma. Staff incorporates a trauma-informed framework into their interactions with clients, meaning that they understand that people have stories and deserve to be treated with compassion and respect;
- creates structures so that staff can practice meaningful self-care;
- opens space for members of the organization, institution or business to speak about stress;
- fosters a sincerely relational environment where everyone's dignity is respected; and
- provides resources for getting help for those that need it.

At STAR, each participant contributes something to our understanding of what it means to be trauma-informed. While the following list is by no means comprehensive, these are a few additional pieces of the puzzle that we might add around what it means to be trauma-informed and resilience-oriented:

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- **Acknowledgement of the historical and ongoing harms that are influencing the context**: for example, legacies and aftermaths of slavery, apartheid, genocide and colonization. Naming these harms and actively identifying and enacting ways to disrupt and address the dynamics (implicit bias, power imbalances, over-representation of dominant groups, micro-aggressions, to name a few) are a key step to addressing historical trauma.
- **Authentic inclusion**: Making spaces for many bodies to play a role in leadership, decision-making, learning and action processes, with awareness of "who is not in the room" and how decisions and actions will impact people. This might range from considerations where to host an event (accessibility) to who leads activities (do they represent multiple experiential backgrounds, or is it one person from a dominant group?) to what content is included and excluded from the agenda.
- **Prioritization of trust-building and decentralizing power:** Centralization of too much responsibility and power with one individual – due to founder syndrome or perceived resource scarcity or lack of trust – can both burn out that individual and create organizational trauma. When trust-building happens regularly, more people hold power to respond to emerging issues, whether traumagenic events or other shifts.
- **Adaptability around agenda, timeline, and budget:** Because one cannot foresee what resources and possibilities and questions and challenges will emerge (whether during a week-long seminar or a multi-year program), finding ways to build in adaptability is foundational to reducing potential impacts of traumagenic events. Examples range from re-jigging a training schedule to accommodate for questions dear to participants' experience (but not originally on the agenda), to finding ways to acknowledge and support an employee who is suffering from secondary trauma, to building budgets that acknowledge an HIV outreach program with displaced persons might also need to dedicate resources to activities beyond the scope of HIV awareness and treatment. Creating space to address emergent traumagenic events, when they happen, can make the difference between maintaining mobility and getting completely stuck.
- **Creation of space for rest, digestion, and release:** The dynamics of trauma can cultivate a profound sense of urgency and sharp need for control; these can be replicated in individual bodies, educational spaces, crisis response spaces and elsewhere. While the need to respond swiftly to crises is real, creating even small spaces for ourselves or our teams – to rest our bodies and minds, digest what is happening (alone and together), and release a tight controlling grip, stress, anger, frustration and grief – can make a difference in well-being and effectiveness. This can happen through creative work scheduling, or mindfully scheduling time each day for doing nothing or connecting in play or sport or music, or other means.

We share this to begin conversation and invite additional ideas. The journey of trauma-informing our work and life-spaces is ever unfolding.

References
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