

Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach to Sexual Violence in TCD



What is a Trauma-Informed Approach?

Trauma-informed services are sensitive to the pervasiveness of trauma and its impact on survivors, including how trauma affects a survivor's ability to cope, access services, and feel safe both physically and emotionally.

“ In 2020, a survey of more than 6000 Third-Level students in Ireland found that **1 in 3 Female and 1 in 3 non-binary students had been raped** in their time in a Higher Education Institution
Student Sexual Experiences Survey 2020 ”

Why is a Trauma-Informed Approach Important?

1. Trauma-informed care prioritizes **safety and control** for members of our community who have been subjected to sexual violence.
2. If we do not apply a Trauma-Informed approach, we risk creating **Institutional Betrayal**. This can damage the mental health of survivors, and increase their trauma.
3. We are **mandated by the Department of Higher Education** to implement a trauma-informed approach to support and policies surrounding sexual violence.

Where Should a Trauma-Informed Approach be Applied?

A trauma-informed approach should be applied anywhere in the college community where a survivor of sexual misconduct could interact with potentially triggering content. These areas include, but are not limited to:

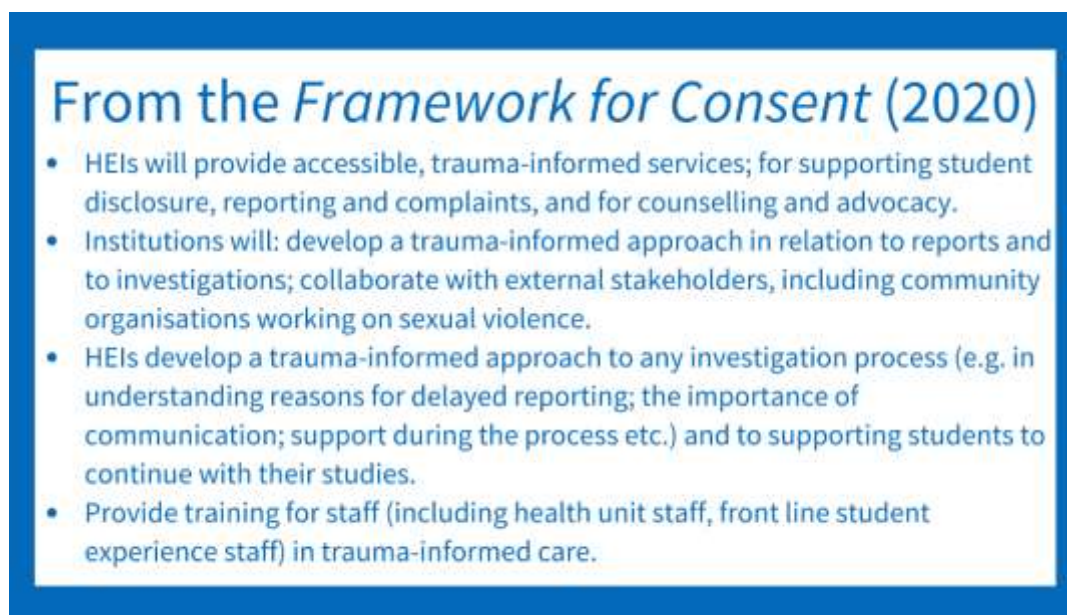
- Teaching, assessment, and contents of curricula
- Internal investigative procedures
- Mechanisms for reporting
- Security and safety on campus and in halls of residence
- Administrative and procedural mechanisms within an institution

How can I help to foster an environment of Trauma-Informed practice?

- Consider how your work interacts with survivors of sexual violence. This can include policies, practices, and also day-to-day things like language usage and accessibility of supports.
- Read up and research the prevalence of sexual violence and its impact. We have some more information in this document, and also some recommended reading.
- Organise and partake in training and workshops which are ongoing in TCD, which can educate you on sexual violence prevention, and support of survivors of sexual violence.

Trauma Informed Approach Document for TCD Dissemination

Trauma-informed approach to services, disclosure, reporting and complaints of sexual violence and harassment is mandated by *Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2020)*, the framework for consent in HEIs.



Sexual Violence and Trauma

What is trauma?

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has **lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.**

What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is an umbrella term used to capture a range of 'non-consensual, unwanted, forces and/or coerced sexual behaviours including, but not limited to, rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault, sexual harassment, indecent exposure, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), stalking and domestic abuse.'¹

Those who have been subjected to sexual violence are generally referred to as *victims*, *survivors*, or *victim-survivors*.

¹ *Addressing Student Sexual Violence in Higher Education: A Good Practice Guide*, Clarissa J Humphreys and Graham J Towl, Emerald Group Publishing, 2020

How common is sexual violence in third level institutions in Ireland?

Experiences of sexual violence while at university extremely high. It has been referred to as both 'similar to a pandemic'² and 'endemic'³.

In 2020, a survey of 6000 third level students in Ireland found that 1 in 3 female students and 1 in 3 non-binary students had been raped in their time in a HEI. 1 in 10 male students reported being raped in the same period.⁴

The TCD student counselling service data showed that over 100 students disclosed an experience of sexual violence to their counsellor in the space of one academic year (2018/2019).⁵ This shows that Trinity is not an exception to a culture of sexual violence. It is important that we recognise how widespread the issue of sexual violence is in our community, so that we can support and protect our student population.

It is recognised that in policy and investigative procedures terms such as '**complainant**' and '**respondent**' are appropriate – but outside of these contexts, and from an institutional perspective, when we are discussing those who have been subjected to sexual violence, it is important to use the **trauma-informed language of 'victim' and 'survivor'** as it recognises the life-long impact of the trauma of sexual violence on those who have been subjected to it.

Further Reading:

[The Active* Consent / Union Of Students In Ireland Sexual Experiences Survey 2020](#)

[Framework For Consent In Higher Education Institutions: Safe, Respectful, Supportive And Positive – Ending Sexual Violence And Harassment In Irish Higher Education Institutions \(2020\)](#)

² <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40038686.html>

³ <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/sexual-based-violence-5284610-Dec2020/>

⁴ 29% of females, 10% of males, and 28% of non-binary students reported non-consensual penetration by incapacitation, force, or threat of force. - THE ACTIVE* CONSENT / UNION OF STUDENTS IN IRELAND SEXUAL EXPERIENCES SURVEY 2020

⁵ TCD SCS Annual Report 2018/2019

What is institutional betrayal?

In third-level institutions, institutional betrayal can manifest as:

- a lack of procedures or policies to adequately address reports of assault, or making it difficult to use such procedures.
- making it seem like the experience was **'no big deal'**.
- punishing the victim in some way (e.g. encouraging them to take time off from education).⁶

Institutional betrayal refers to **institutional action and inaction** that exacerbates the impact of traumatic experiences.

Smith and Freyd, 2014

Institutional betrayal can also result from any other experience that does not adequately address the gravity of the trauma which the victim is experiencing, serves to minimise this, or imply that it is not of importance to the institution.

In this way, when an institution chooses not to act on a report or a suspected incident of sexual violence, intimidation, or sexual misconduct, this can add to the trauma of the members of the institution. Although it may feel like **'not getting involved'** is essentially a neutral act, in reality, this choice has a real and lasting impact on survivors of sexual violence.

Institutional betrayal has been described as the 'second rape' by researchers.⁷ Victims of sexual assault who also experience institutional betrayal at the hand of their universities show **'higher levels of several posttraumatic symptoms'**.⁸ The research has demonstrated that institutional betrayal causes additional harm to sexual assault survivors in terms of anxiety, trauma symptoms and sexual dysfunction.

Further reading:

[Psychological Consequences Associated With Positive and Negative Responses to Disclosure of Sexual Assault Among College Women: A Prospective Study](#)

[Institutional Betrayal as a Motivator for Campus Sexual Assault Activism](#)

["Dangerous safe havens: Institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma."](#)

⁷ Beyond Trigger Warnings: A Survivor-Centred Approach to Teaching on Sexual Violence and Avoiding Institutional Betrayal Nicole Bedera

⁸ **Dangerous Safe Havens: Institutional Betrayal Exacerbates Sexual Trauma** Carly Smith, and Jennifer J. Freyd, *Journal of traumatic stress* 26.1 (2013): 119-124.

What is a trauma response?



Typical responses to a traumatic event are one or more of the following:

- Fear responses to reminders of the event leading to avoidance
- Feeling like you are losing control of your life or your mind
- Re-experiencing the event through flashbacks
- Problems concentrating and staying focused on the task at hand
- Feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame
- Developing a negative self-image
- Depression
- Disruptions in close relationships

The role of trauma in sexual violence responses

Sexual violence is trauma. This means that our brains process sexual violence as a threat to life or safety. Responses to sexual violence generally can be categorised into one of the following



Approximately one in three (30 per cent) women and one in four (18 per cent) men reported that their experiences of sexual violence (either in childhood, adulthood, or both) *had had a moderate or extreme effect on their lives overall*.

Students who were subjected to sexual violence are more likely to have lower grades overall because of their trauma, and dropout rates in university are significantly higher for victims of sexual violence.

Sexual violence has wide ranging and pervasive effects on all aspects of victims lives outside of the university setting also. For instance, those who had experienced attempted or actual penetrative sexual abuse were eight times more likely to have been an inpatient in a psychiatric hospital **than those who had not been abused.**

Further reading:

[The Psychological Consequences of Sexual Trauma](#)

What is a trauma-informed approach?

Trauma-informed services are sensitive to the pervasiveness of trauma and its impact on survivors, including how trauma affects a survivor's ability to cope, to access services, and to feel safe both physically and emotionally.

They take steps to identify potential trauma triggers, reduce re-traumatisation, and attend to the quality of interactions between staff and survivors receiving services.

Where should a trauma-informed approach be applied?

A trauma informed approach should be applied anywhere in the college community where a survivor of sexual misconduct could interact with potentially triggering content. These areas include, but are not limited to:

- Teaching, assessment, and contents of curricula
- Internal investigative procedures
- Mechanisms for reporting
- Security and safety on campus and in halls of residence
- Administrative and procedural mechanisms within an institution

How can a trauma-informed approach to services be applied in TCD?

A trauma-informed approach to services provides for the needs of those who have been subjected to a traumatic event, in this case, an experience of sexual violence or assault. The specific needs of each individual will vary greatly, but in general, the aim of this approach is to avoid re-traumatisation, provide for safety and security, and prevent institutional betrayal.

Trauma-informed policies and procedures for sexual misconduct in higher education

It is important that the lived experience of these survivors of sexual violence is central when devising a college response at individual, community, and institutional level. Any action taken or change made must be compassionate and victim centred.

In the development of new policies and procedures, it is recommended that colleges take a trauma-informed approach.

“Trauma-informed services are sensitive to the pervasiveness of trauma and its impact on survivors, including how trauma affects a survivor's ability to cope, to access services, and to feel safe both physically and emotionally. Trauma-informed services are strength-based and non-pathologising. They take steps to identify potential trauma triggers, reduce re-traumatisation, and attend to the quality of interactions between staff and survivors receiving services.”

HEA Framework for Consent in HEIs, 2020

Trauma-informed care prioritises safety and control for students who have experienced sexual violence. It creates awareness within the college community at large of the impact trauma can have on memory and recall, and on a victim's behaviour after being subjected to sexual violence. This aims to prevent the misinterpretation of responses that seem counterintuitive or difficult to understand which can lead to blaming the victim, questioning their credibility, or assuming they are lying.

Speak Out Online anonymous reporting tool

The Speak Out tool is an online anonymous reporting tool for staff and students across 20 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); the tool is being led by Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education Ireland (PCHEI) and funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The tool is int accessible to staff, students, and visitors to our HEIs.

This tool will be implemented across 20 Higher Education Institutions (HEI's), in the academic term beginning in Autumn 2021.

Staff and students will be able to use the tool to anonymously speak out against the following:

Incidents of Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment, Discrimination, Hate Crimes, Coercive Behaviours, Stalking, Assault, Sexual Assault, and Rape.

This anonymous reporting tool, along with national and internal campaigns and mechanisms for reporting, is a step towards a nationwide, intersectional, trauma-informed approach to sexual violence in Higher Education, as per the recommendations of the *Framework for Consent in Higher Education* (2020).

Further reading:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.

HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884.

Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014

Beyond Trigger Warnings: A Survivor-Centred Approach to Teaching on Sexual Violence and Avoiding Institutional Betrayal

Nicole Bedera (2021)

[Risky teaching: developing a trauma-informed pedagogy for higher education.](#)

[A trauma-informed approach to sexual violence research ethics and open science.](#)

What a trauma-informed approach means:

- Training for all staff and students who are likely to receive a disclosure of sexual assault must include information about the effects of trauma on victims/survivors, to help combat biases, myths and misconceptions about rape and sexual violence. This is currently covered in TCD's First Responder Training, delivered by TCD Together Consent, and continues to be rolled out on an annual basis.
- All messaging in relation to sexual consent and sexual misconduct is victim-centred and trauma-informed i.e., speeches, social media posts, training materials, policies, academic teachings, and readings.
- Investigative procedures must consider the impact of sexual trauma on victims, and staff involved must be trained how to work with and interview victims of sexual violence so as not to increase their distress or cause re-traumatisation. Trauma-informed interview practices include encouraging witnesses to share what they recall about their experience, including sensory details, without insisting they give every detail in chronological order "from the beginning".

What a trauma-informed response does not mean:

A trauma-informed approach does not mean that a complainant in a formal investigation of sexual misconduct must be assumed to be telling the truth, or that inconsistencies in their testimony must be taken as proof of trauma and therefore not be examined. Trauma information must be taught in a way that maintains fairness and balance for all.

Why it's important

- For many students who experience sexual assault, their trauma is deepened by the way they are treated by their college community after the incident. It is the responsibility of the colleges to mitigate the traumatic psychological aftermath by supporting the healing of traumatised students.
- A trauma-informed approach seeks to resist re-traumatization of staff as well as students. Organizations often inadvertently create stressful or toxic environments that interfere with the recovery of students, the well-being of staff and the fulfilment of the organizational mission.

- Staff who work within a trauma-informed environment are taught to recognize how organizational practices may trigger painful memories and re-traumatize students and other staff members with trauma histories.
- Trauma intersects in many ways with culture, history race, gender location and language. Trauma informed systems acknowledge the compounding impact of structural inequity and are responsive to unique needs of diverse communities.

Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach

1

Safety :

Throughout the organization, staff and the students they serve feel physically and psychologically safe; the physical setting is safe and interpersonal interactions promote a sense of safety-understanding safety as defined by those served is a high priority.

2

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Organisational operations and decisions are conducted with transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust for all involved.

3

Peer Support:

Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and utilising stories and lived experience to promote recovery and healing. The term 'Peers' refers to individuals with lived experience of trauma.

4

Collaboration and Mutuality:

Importance is placed on partnering and the levelling of power differences (where appropriate), between staff and students, among organisational staff, to professional staff and administrators, demonstrating that healing happens in relationships, and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision making.

5

Empowerment, Voice and Choice:

The organisation fosters a belief in the primacy of the people served, in resilience, and in the ability of individuals, organisations and communities to heal and promote trauma recovery. The organisation understands that the experience of trauma is complex, however operations, workforce development and services for all, are organised to foster empowerment for staff and students alike.

6

Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues:

Moving past cultural stereotypes and biases for example: race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, gender-identity, geography. offers access to responsive approaches to racial, ethnic and cultural needs of individuals.

Glossary and Key Terms:

Consent: An agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity, or activities. In Trinity, we use the FRIES model of consent, which says that consent must be Freely Given, Retractable, Informed, Enthusiastic and Specific.

Disclosure: When someone tells another person, they have experienced sexual violence or misconduct

Grooming: The process an abuser uses to desensitise someone, to make them less likely to reject or report abusive behaviour. Grooming can happen when there is a power differential within a relationship, which the abuser exploits for their own gratification.

IBSA: Image based sexual abuse (IBSA) is the non-consensual taking, sharing or threats to share nude or sexual images (photos or videos) of a person. This is often referred to as **'revenge porn'** or **'leaking nudes'**,

Institutional Betrayal: This occurs when a trusted and depended-upon institution (schools, churches, universities) act in ways that visit harm upon those dependent on them for safety and well-being.

Rape Culture: A culture in which dominant ideologies, media images, social practices and institutions promote, condone, or tolerate, explicitly or implicitly, the normalisation of sexual violence and victim-blaming. Incidents can be ignored, trivialised, normalised and/or made the basis of jokes.

Sexual Assault: An act or threat of physical, psychological, and emotional violation in the form of a sexual act, inflicted on someone without their consent

Sexual Harassment: Any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature which violates your dignity, makes you feel intimidated, degraded, or humiliated, or creates a hostile or offensive environment.

Sexual Misconduct: Any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature that is committed without consent or by force, intimidation, coercion, or manipulation. Sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and sexual intimidation are all forms of sexual misconduct

Sexual Violence: Any unwanted sexual activity or act including rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and female genital mutilation

Slut Shaming: This is a derogatory term which is generally used as a criticism of a woman for her real or presumed sexual activity, or for behaving in ways one thinks are associated with her real or presumed sexual activity.

Stalking: Persistent and unwanted attention that makes you feel pestered and harassed. It includes behaviour that happens two or more times, directed at or towards you by another person, which causes you to feel alarmed or distressed, or to fear that violence may be used against you.

Survivor/Victim/Victim-Survivor: Someone who has experienced sexual violence or misconduct. Depending on the person, a preference may be had for one of these terms. Unless you know how someone prefers to be referred to in this context, it may be best to say victim-survivor.

Victim Blaming: Blaming the occurrence of sexual misconduct on the survivor instead of the person who committed the assault. Victim blaming can be implicit or explicit. For example, asking someone what they were wearing or what they had to drink before being assaulted is a form of victim blaming. A non-victim blaming response acknowledges that people make choices to violate the bodily integrity of others, and that they alone are responsible for these choices.

Trauma: Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has **lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being**. Sexual misconduct is a form of trauma, but there are many other forms.

Types of trauma include:

- Bullying: Bullying is a deliberate and unsolicited action that occurs with the intent of inflicting social, emotional, physical, and/or psychological harm to someone who often is perceived as being less powerful.
- Community Violence: Community violence is exposure to intentional acts of interpersonal violence committed in public areas by individuals who are not intimately related to the victim.
- **Complex Trauma: Complex trauma describes both children's exposure to multiple traumatic events—often of an invasive, interpersonal nature—and the wide-ranging, long-term effects of this exposure.**
- Disasters: Natural disasters include hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, wildfires, tsunamis, and floods, as well as extreme weather events such as blizzards, droughts, extreme heat, and windstorms.
- Early Childhood Trauma: Early childhood trauma generally refers to the traumatic experiences that occur to children aged 0-6.
- Intimate Partner Violence: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), also referred to as domestic violence, occurs when an individual purposely causes harm or threatens the risk of harm to any past or current partner or spouse.
- Medical Trauma: Medical traumatic stress refers to a set of psychological and physiological responses of people to single or multiple medical events.
- Physical Abuse: Physical abuse occurs when someone commits an act that results in physical injury.
- Refugee Trauma: Many refugees, especially children, have experienced trauma related to war or persecution that may affect their mental and physical health long after the events have occurred.

- Sex Trafficking: Sex trafficking involves the giving or receiving of anything of value (money, shelter, food, clothing, drugs, etc.) to any person in exchange for a sex act.
- Terrorism and Violence: Individuals, families and children may be profoundly affected by mass violence, acts of terrorism, or community trauma in the form of shootings, bombings, or other types of attacks.
- Traumatic Grief: This refers to someone who has experienced grief having ongoing difficulties that interfere with everyday life and finding it difficult to recall positive memories of their loved ones

Acknowledgements and Contact Details:

This document was created by the Together Consent outreach team in Trinity College Dublin. The contributors to this document were:

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If you would like to get in contact with the Together team, you can contact us at togethertcd@gmail.com, or you can email Aoife (grimesa1@tcd.ie) or Ruth (mcmahoru@tcd.ie) directly.

If you are a member of the TCD community and would like to organise a Together Consent workshop, or a First Responder Disclosure workshop for a group within TCD, you can fill out [this](#) form to register your interest.

Together. It's How It's Done.