

**What is Trauma? What does Trauma Awareness mean? WHY DOES IT MATTER?**

This May, Delaware is launching and hosting events, in partnership with public and private partners, in honor of the state's inaugural Trauma Awareness Month.

**Marilyn R. Siebold, MS, Community Counseling**  
**Adjunct Professor, Psychology and Organizational Dynamics**  
**Wilmington University**

**What is Trauma?**

*Trauma is major public health issue affecting the health and wellness of people and families and communities.* Trauma not an event; trauma refers to the impact – the “toxic stress” – on people, families, and communities when their ability to cope in a life affirming way is overwhelmingly compromised. The “toxic stress” of trauma refers to assaults to one's very being that are physically and/or emotionally harmful and that can have lasting adverse effects on an individual's – and a community's - capacity to be mentally, physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually well.

You may have heard about the “fight, flight, or freeze” response with events and individuals, but Trauma Theory is far more nuanced.

Trauma Theory describes a scientifically informed understanding of what happens to people who are living under conditions of toxic stress, including living in unsafe communities, experiencing financial insecurity, or trying to work within the criminal justice system. People who are impacted by trauma understandably feel unsafe, helpless, hopeless, overwhelmed, confused, and depressed, and having survival skills that may not be life affirming.

The Adverse Childhood Conditions studies (ACEs) conducted throughout the nation – including here in Delaware – show a correlation between a life time of poor health conditions and 10 adverse childhood experiences including physical, sexual, and emotion abuse, neglect, AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.

Trauma Theory also describes organizations and systems that are trying to provide services under conditions of overwhelming or toxic stress, and whose staff may understandably feel helpless, hopeless and overwhelmed, and whose capacity to provide helpful services is seriously compromised.

The term “Pair of Aces” applies Trauma Theory to both individuals and systems and helps us understand what we need to do to prevent the worst outcomes of trauma, because “ACES are not destiny!” We CAN make a difference by identifying protective factors including building resilience in individuals, families and communities.

**What does Trauma Awareness Mean?**

Trauma Awareness means to understand how trauma impacts all people, everywhere, because trauma has no boundaries with regard to age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

It means being familiar with the values of a trauma-informed approach in all systems of service, including health care, education, the criminal justice system, and family services and focusing on emotional and physical safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment and sensitively to cultural and gender issues. Trauma Awareness is the first step towards becoming trauma informed. Trauma Awareness leads to trauma sensitivity, trauma responsiveness, and ultimately to the condition of being trauma informed.

We must start with Trauma Awareness by identifying models of Trauma-informed Approaches and linking with individuals, organizations, and systems that can provide resources and the support we need to expand and enhance an awareness of trauma in our community.

### **WHY DOES IT MATTER?**

Within the DV/IPA community, preventing domestic/intimate partner abuse and violence should include an awareness of and support for the principles and values of a trauma-informed approach to services of all kinds. We as a community live and work within systems that can often are not as trauma-informed as we would like them to be and may get in the way of our best efforts to minimize the impact of trauma in families and in communities.

Dr. Carole Warshaw, Director of the National Center on DV, Trauma, and Mental Health, advises that we can start by:

1. Providing survivors of DV/IPA with information about the traumatic effects of abuse.
2. Adapting programs and services to meet survivors' trauma and mental health related needs.
3. Creating opportunities for survivors to discuss their responses to trauma.

### **WHAT NOW?**

In October 2018, Governor Carney signed **Executive Order 24**, making Delaware a **trauma-informed state**. The Executive Order directs the Family Services Cabinet Council to develop tools for training state employees and community partners on the impact of exposure to ACEs, to promote ACE awareness, and to improve services and interventions for children and families exposed to trauma. The Family Services Cabinet Council is leading efforts to ensure that Delaware becomes a trauma-informed state by promoting a Trauma Awareness Month in Delaware.

You can be part of the change we need to have to support communities that are trauma-informed.