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# ENGAGING WOMEN IN TRAUMA-INFORMED PEER SUPPORT: A Guidebook

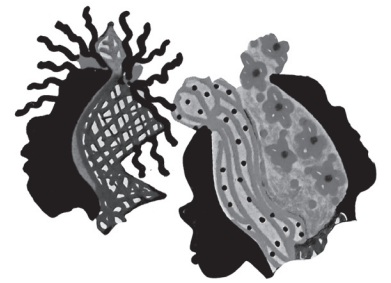
*by Andrea Blanch, Beth Filson, and Darby Penney with contributions from Cathy Cave*



*We Are All Here* by Sharon Wise







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with contributions from Cathy Cave*

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**NCTIC** Center for Mental Health Services  
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## Dedication

This guide is dedicated to the women survivors who participated in SAMHSA's Women, Co-Occurring Disorders and Violence Study (WCDVS), the first of its kind in the nation. Consumers/Survivors/Recovering Women (C/S/Rs) were integrated as leaders in substantive and meaningful ways, including in the design of the research and evaluation methodologies; in peer support and service interventions; and in the Leadership Academy and the Trauma Studies Seminar program. For the first time, women who had experienced violence and abuse were incorporated as instruments of teaching and learning in the fields of mental health, substance abuse, and trauma services and studies.





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# INTRODUCTION

This guide was created for a very specific purpose: to help make trauma-informed peer support available to women who are trauma survivors and who receive or have received mental health and/or substance abuse services. It is designed as a resource for peer supporters in these or other settings who want to learn how to integrate trauma-informed principles into their relationships with the women they support or into the peer support groups they are members of. The goal is to provide peer supporters—both male and female—with the understanding, tools, and resources needed to engage in culturally responsive, trauma-informed peer support relationships with women trauma survivors.

As a peer supporter, you may work or participate in a variety of roles and settings. For example, you may offer peer support services as paid staff or as a volunteer in mainstream behavioral health programs, or in independent peer-run programs. You might also be a member of a voluntary mutual support group organized by people who have received services. Perhaps you work in the homeless services system, in the justice system, or in the veteran's service system. In whatever way you are involved in peer support with women who have received mental health and/or substance abuse services, this guide was written for you.

The guide is organized in three sections: **Fundamentals**, **Cultural Considerations**, and **Moving Into Action**. The first section provides basic information on topics related to trauma, trauma-informed services and supports, peer support, and social factors that affect women trauma survivors. The second section discusses cultural considerations for working with women who are trauma survivors, including race, ethnicity, spiritual and religious factors, and age and generational concerns. The third section focuses on concrete ways to bring an understanding of these issues into active peer support relationships with women trauma survivors.

## FUNDAMENTALS

In this section, you will be introduced to important information about trauma, the principles of trauma-informed practices, and the ways in which trauma and trauma-informed services and supports can impact women's lives. You will learn about some basic values and principles of peer support that are grounded in the experience, research, reflection, and writing of people who have been involved with peer support. This section also provides information about gender politics and the criminalization of women in the context of trauma. The goal of this section is to provide you with basic information and resources that will help prepare you to apply a trauma-informed philosophy to your day-to-day peer support work with women who are trauma survivors.

## CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Race, ethnicity, language and other cultural considerations that impact peer support work with women who are trauma survivors are examined in this section. There is a focus on cultural biases and historical trauma experienced by many ethnic groups, as well as spirituality and religion. The impact of trauma across the lifespan is also discussed.

## MOVING INTO ACTION

The chapters in this section focus on tangible ways that you can apply your understanding of trauma, trauma-informed practices, peer support, and the particular issues facing women who have histories of trauma and who have used behavioral health services. This section shows how peer support is rooted in mutual relationships. The value of self-awareness and self-care for all participants in peer support is described. You will learn about the importance of shared values, a common language, and taking a culturally sensitive, non-clinical approach to peer support. Specific skills that will enable you to engage women trauma survivors in a meaningful way are explored. Crucial information is presented to help you work successfully as a peer supporter within organizations that are not yet trauma-informed. Information is presented about the causes of self-inflicted violence and how to work respectfully with women who self-injure. There is a discussion of





how trauma survivors can become involved in social action and reclaim their power by working for positive change as part of the healing process.

Each chapter includes a list of print and electronic resources that may be used to explore the subject area of the chapter more extensively, and many chapters include exercises or illustrative stories.

## A Note About Language

An important message within this guide is that women have the right to define themselves and their experiences in ways that have meaning for them. To that end, we have tried to avoid diagnostic and illness labels (except when quoting material), as well as jargon specific to the behavioral health system. Instead, we have tried to use descriptive, non-judgmental terms, such as “women who have experienced violence” and “women who are trauma survivors,” while recognizing that some women may not find these terms personally useful, either. In the end, it’s important that peer supporters recognize and support each woman’s way of naming her experiences and talking about herself as part of the healing process.

