

# Trauma-informed Care & Youth Substance Use



**Trauma** refers to the lasting impact of overwhelming stress in the absence of adequate support. It can affect mood, behaviour, cognition, and physical health, and is often about disconnection—from self, body, or relationships.<sup>1</sup> Trauma can arise not only from what happened, such as violence or neglect, but also from what failed to happen: the absence of safety, care, or responsiveness.<sup>2</sup>

**Trauma-informed care (TIC)** is an approach to service delivery that integrates knowledge about trauma into every aspect of organizational practice, culture, and policy.<sup>3-5</sup> It emphasizes that for youth to learn, connect, and heal, they must feel safe—not only physically, but also emotionally and relationally. To foster this sense of safety, TIC emphasizes building relationships grounded in trust, offering genuine choice, encouraging collaboration, and supporting empowerment.<sup>6</sup>



To learn more about Substance Use and Trauma-informed Care read the [Substance Use Practice Brief on Trauma-informed Care with Youth](#) through Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario.



## ***The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration<sup>7</sup> outlines TIC through the widely cited “4 R’s”:***

1. **Realize** the impact of trauma
2. **Recognize** the signs of trauma
3. **Respond** by embedding TIC into practice
4. **Resist** retraumatization of youth



## Summary of Evidence



- Research consistently shows that young people with substance use concerns are much more likely than their peers to report childhood abuse, neglect, or other forms of victimization.<sup>8-10</sup>
- Trauma not only raises the likelihood of substance use, but also contributes to earlier initiation, which is associated with more severe and complex patterns later in life.<sup>11-13</sup>
- TIC is best understood as a vision or philosophy—anchored in principles and values—rather than a fixed set of procedures and translating those principles into action requires ongoing reflection, adaptation, and learning within the realities of each organizational context.<sup>4,14,15</sup>

## Practice-based trauma-informed care considerations when working with youth

Learn about more practice-based considerations with examples by reading the full practice brief using the QR code

- You **don’t need to be a trauma specialist** to have a positive impact on a young person who has lived through adversity. What matters most is whether youth feel seen, heard, and safe in the relationship
- Practitioners should **normalize the challenges and tasks of adolescence** while **being careful not to dismiss trauma** or serious mental health struggles as “just normal ups and downs.”
- **Get to know the whole person** so their strengths, passions, and values can be drawn on as resources during difficult times
- Being trauma-informed is not only about **understanding how trauma impacts youth**, but also about recognizing how your own history, values, and emotional patterns shape your practice.
- **Involve youth in decisions about their care**, ask about their goals and values, and create opportunities for choice and shared decision-making
- **Avoid pathologizing or stigmatizing terms** like “substance abuse,” “addict,” or “maladaptive,” which reduce youth to a problem and overlook the ways substance use may have helped them cope or survive.
- Responding effectively requires structural competence, or the ability to recognize how broader social, economic, and political conditions shape young people’s lives.

## References

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