



A guide to trauma-informed practice at RAILS

This guide was developed as part
of a *Trauma-Informed Project*
partnership between
QPASTT and RAILS in 2025.

What do we mean by trauma-informed practice?

Trauma-informed practice emphasises how a service is provided.

The focus for trauma-informed practice is “doing with” rather than “doing for.”

This approach recognises the impacts of trauma and focuses on ensuring this impact is not exacerbated in our interactions.

Trauma-informed practice is based on the principles of:

- **Safety**
- **Cultural Safety**
- **Trustworthiness and Transparency**
- **Choice**
- **Collaboration and Mutuality**
- **Empowerment**

At RAILS, trauma-informed practice is one element which guides our work.

It provides a framework for how we do the work.

Principles of trauma-informed practice

These principles apply to all aspects of our work - with clients, staff (including volunteers) and partner organisations.

SAFETY

We consider the physical and emotional safety of clients and all individuals; we plan carefully for sessions and check in regularly. Staff are trained in understanding the physical, emotional and cognitive impacts of trauma and how this may show up in interactions.

CULTURAL SAFETY

We aim to create an environment in which all cultural identities are valued, seen, respected, understood and promoted. This means we must be aware of our unconscious bias or barriers which may prevent people from fully engaging with us. At an organisational level this means diverse perspectives get heard in decision making processes.

TRUSTWORTHINESS & TRANSPARENCY

We are transparent in our advice, explanations and processes to engender trust from our clients. Transparency is a key guiding principle in our internal communications and communications with stakeholders.

CHOICE

Where possible, we will provide choice and encourage others to take time to consider options before making final decisions.

COLLABORATION/MUTUALITY

Decisions are made with clients and other individuals, not for them. Through meaningful engagement and collaboration, we agree on the right approach. Our staff understand the importance of people making final decisions and offer appropriate guidance and advice. When we understand each other, we often make better decisions.

EMPOWERMENT

Clients and other individuals are supported to understand their rights and their responsibilities so they can make well informed decisions and feel a sense of agency in navigating the complex immigration legal system or other scenarios.

Why is a trauma-informed approach important at RAILS?

Embedding trauma-informed practice into the core of legal service delivery is critical to supporting our clients to access justice.

Many people who come to RAILS for support have experienced war, displacement, persecution, and torture prior to coming to Australia and some face further discrimination and disadvantage through their settlement experiences.

They may carry deep and complex trauma which can be exacerbated by having to navigate complex and arduous legal processes where they are required to recount traumatic experiences repeatedly to prove credibility and eligibility of protection claims.

We also acknowledge that trauma experiences are not limited to our clients. Staff and partners may also have experienced trauma.

At RAILS, we recognise the need for a trauma-informed approach to be implemented at all levels so we consider how trauma may affect the clients who seek our support, or staff and partners with lived experience of trauma. We consider the impacts of indirect trauma exposure on staff, and we aim to make sure our organisational processes, systems and partnerships reflect this knowledge and our aims.

“Awareness of the differences between implicit and explicit memory, of the effects of stress on memory, and on the social context in which it is generated, retrieved and expressed is critical to being trauma -informed, and to inform pathways to support and justice for those affected by interpersonal trauma.”

Blue Knot 2018

I am a client.

What does this mean for me?

Traumatic experiences can impact the nervous system and brain functioning (including long and short-term memory) and in the context of legal work, can manifest as physical or psychological symptoms.

Staff at RAILS receive training of impacts of trauma on the brain and body. They have an understanding of trauma's impacts on memory, communication, and ways of seeking help and learn practical strategies to support you during appointments.

At RAILS we recognise the courage it takes to present at an appointment and articulate your case. Before you commence work with us we will clearly go through the plan, your rights and responsibilities and the expectation you can have of us. We are also mindful to ensure our language does not provoke shame or fear and instead is a language of choice and collaboration.

Cultural safety means staff will listen carefully to your experience. We recognise the importance of seeking your preferences of interpreter and our communication style.

We know that there are more aspects of your life - we see the whole person and more than simply your legal matter. We endeavour to provide a flexible response which acknowledges cultural differences in ways of engagement.

When making assessments on who we can support, we acknowledge trauma can impact memory, narrative, demeanour and behaviour and consider these thoughtfully when assessing legal prospects and representation.

We aim to make our office environments warm and welcoming. Please let us know if we can do anything to make you more comfortable during your interactions with us.

Finally, confidentiality and consent are important aspects of our approach. Please tell us if you have any concerns or questions about what happens to your information.

I am a RAILS employee/volunteer.

What does this mean for me?

A trauma informed approach is applied to how we work with colleagues, how we develop internal processes, how we provide supervision and how we conduct meetings and consultations.

At RAILS we recognise the impact of indirect, secondary trauma exposure on staff and the risk of burnout that can arise when working in an organisation with finite resources and where demand often exceeds capacity. We acknowledge these issues present a psychosocial hazard within our workplace and we mitigate these risks by having supports in place to address them. We are committed to creating a psychologically safe work environment.

During your induction, you will complete *With You* - trauma-informed legal support training developed by National Legal Aid. This training will support you to understand the ways trauma impacts the brain and body and what this might mean for your interactions with clients. If you work with clients, you will also be provided with external reflective supervision options.

We will encourage you to engage in reflective practice. Reflective practice is encouraged to help us to maintain professional and personal boundaries and recognise the limits to our role. Reflective practice provides you with the skills in dual awareness – what is happening for me in this moment and what is happening around me or for someone else. This helps us to recognise our own feelings, biases, and assumptions which can hinder our capacity to stay open and responsive to someone else's experience and provide good quality legal support.

Supervisors are trained to recognise and respond to trauma responses in clients and to provide supervision from a trauma informed perspective lens. They will support you in preparing for client sessions, managing difficult interactions and supporting clients in crisis. This also applies to how we work with colleagues, and in supervision, meetings etc.

**The skill of reflection is key to effective
trauma-informed legal practice.**

Chris Maylea et al (2023) With You Toolkit: Empowering Trauma-Informed Rights-Based Organisations. La Trobe University

We are hoping to partner with RAILS.

How will this approach shape the way we work together?

Partnering with other organisations supports our reach and effectiveness and aids our clients. We recognise the intersections between mental health and legal stressors, and we appreciate that our staff and clients benefit from additional supports outside of our service delivery.

We encourage you to speak with us if you can support us in identifying pathways and information for supports and referrals and appreciating additional needs outside of legal processes.

We will apply the same principles to all our interactions with our partners and shared clients.

We welcome feedback and value sharing expertise. We will approach all partnerships to ensure they are mutually beneficial.

Further Reading

- With You Trauma Informed Organisational Toolkit: From the Legal Assistance Sector, for the sector (National Legal Aid)
- RACS Toolkit Trauma Informed Legal Practice RACS 2024
- Trauma and the Law: Applying Trauma Informed Practice to Legal and Judicial Contexts (Blue Knot Foundation)
- European Human Rights Advocacy Centre - Guidelines for trauma informed legal practice for lawyers working with adult survivors of human rights violations 2022
- Mental deterioration of refugees and asylum seekers with uncertain legal status in Australia: Perceptions and responses of legal representatives - Mary Anne Kenny 2023
- A Mixed Methods Inquiry into How Legal Professionals Respond to Recurring Trauma and Mental Distress among Refugees and Asylum Seekers with Insecure Visa Status in Australia Mary Anne Kenny, Nicholas Procter, Carol Grech, 2024
- Vicarious Trauma and Burnout in Law: Managing Psychological Stress to Promote Safety, Performance, and Wellbeing in Legal Practice Colin James 2025



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