



Trauma-Informed Care in Occupational Therapy

OTAC Workshop 2024

Presentation Objectives

Understand and define trauma-informed care (TIC)

Apply TIC approach to diverse settings

Adapt and adjust client treatment plans based on trauma-informed understanding

Learn about ways that trauma can impact cognitive functioning and mental health

Let's start off with an activity...

- Turn to the person beside you, and share a small stressor you can think of that impacted a day in your life (ex., flat tire, alarm did not go off, water heater was broken, etc.)
- How did you go about your day? Did you feel more stressed, on edge, etc.?
- What stress management resources did you use (ex., deep breaths, calling a friend or family member, etc.)?

Think about your answers

- Imagine how you might have handled the situation you went through if it not only was a flat tire you had, but if you were behind on your car payments. If your water heater was not only not working, but you were at risk for eviction from your apartment. If not only your alarm didn't go off, but you were a single mom who needed to get to work on time or her kids would be at risk of missing their next meal.
- How much more stress would you carry in your day if these were the larger implications?

Think about your answers

- Next, imagine that you were never taught coping skills to manage stress at a young age, if back to back traumatic circumstances never gave you a moment to decompress starting as a child, and if you did not have strong social connections to support you through these situations.
- How would you navigate these stressors without the tools to work through them?

My OT Background

- Empowering women at-risk of being unhoused
- Parenting, wellness, and community integration activities/workshops



OT Roles in Trauma Care

- Review new applications, and sit with staff on interviews for candidates for Empowerment Village and Hope Family Housing
- Create curriculum for wellness and leadership classes
- Hold monthly wellness meetings to check in with families outside of weekly classes
- Teach weekly classes involving wellness, parenting, leadership, and other various topics important to the women (collaborate with them on what they want to learn)
- Support and empower families, using a whole-person approach and trauma-informed lens



The Impact of Trauma

- For people coming from trauma, they might lack the resources for how to navigate that stressor. A parent may not have equipped them to navigate stress and how to feel safe, their body may hold more stress from complex situations that they have not had the time or resources to work through, etc.
- We often think about how our clients might lack resources for food, housing, and material resources, but we might not think about the stress management resources someone might not have access to a mental health toolkit

Frequency of Trauma

- 70% of people around the world have experienced a traumatic event
- 5.6% of these individuals will develop PTSD



(WHO, 2024)

Appearance of Trauma

- Re-experiencing trauma
 - Many people who have experienced trauma will continue to feel the impact of that trauma, and will have a cycle of remembering the physical and mental effect of that event
 - Re-experiencing trauma can appear in flashbacks, nightmares, etc.
 - Think about: How might re-experiencing trauma impact the work that you do as an OT?

Appearance of Trauma

- Avoidance symptoms
 - Often, people who have experienced trauma will avoid triggers that are associated with the trauma that they have gone through
 - This could be avoiding a place, person, routine, or environments that feel similar to where a traumatic event took place
 - Think about: How might avoidance symptoms impact the work that you do as an OT?

Appearance of Trauma

- Hyperarousal symptoms
 - People who have experienced trauma may have a heightened nervous system, designed to take care of and protect a person after they have experienced something traumatic
 - Children may act out what has happened to them, and will often have feelings of blame
 - Adults may experience associated mental health symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, suicidality, and substance abuse

Appearance of Trauma

- Hyperarousal symptoms (cont.)
 - anxiety, suicidality, and substance abuse
 - Many people will be more vigilant and aware of their surroundings
 - Hyperarousal can impact executive functioning and cognitive skills, since the body is aiming all of its resources at staying safe and protected, rather than learning and acquiring new skills
 - Think about: How might hyperarousal symptoms impact the work that you do as an OT?

Appearance of Trauma

- Most symptoms of trauma appear a month after the traumatic event occurred
 - Body and mind are processing the traumatic event that took place

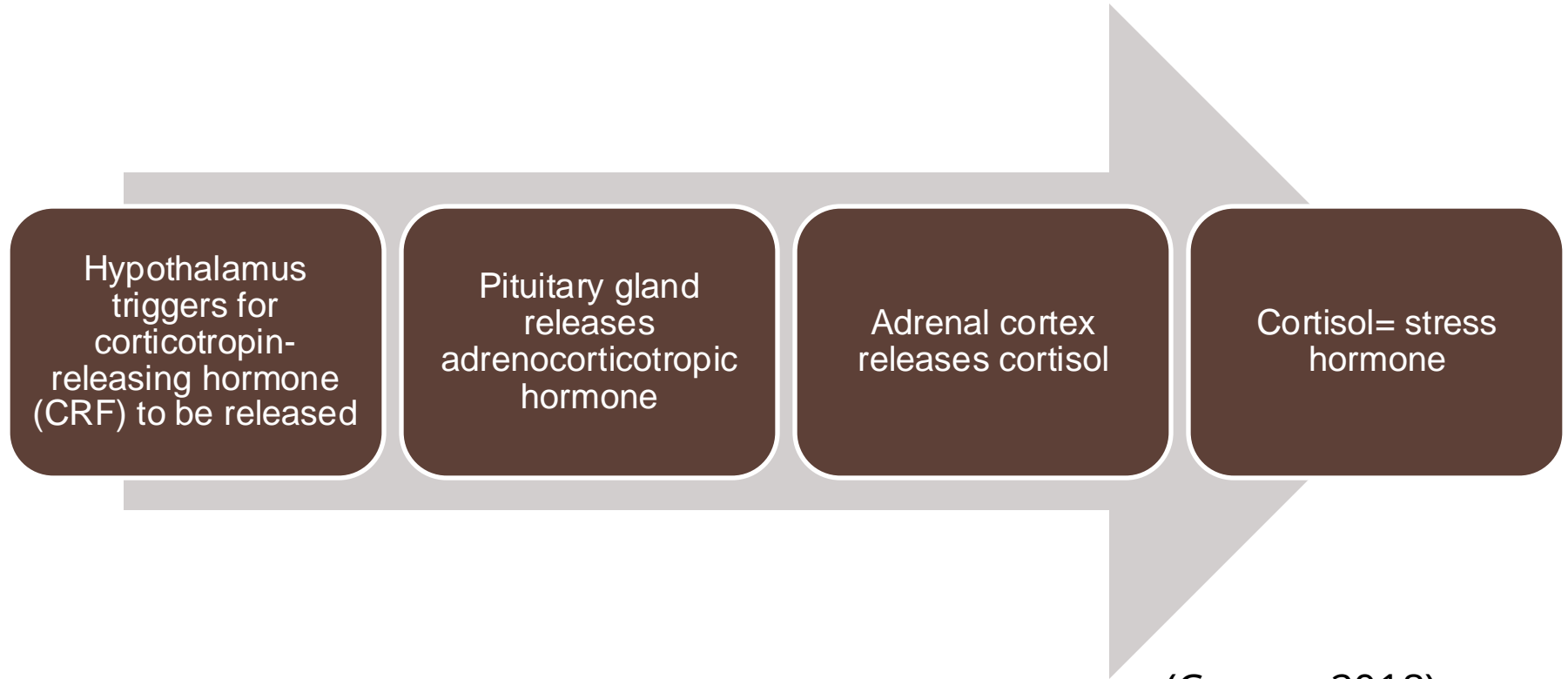
HPA Axis

- The hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis
- Group of structure that respond to stress



(Comer, 2018)

HPA Axis



(Comer, 2018)

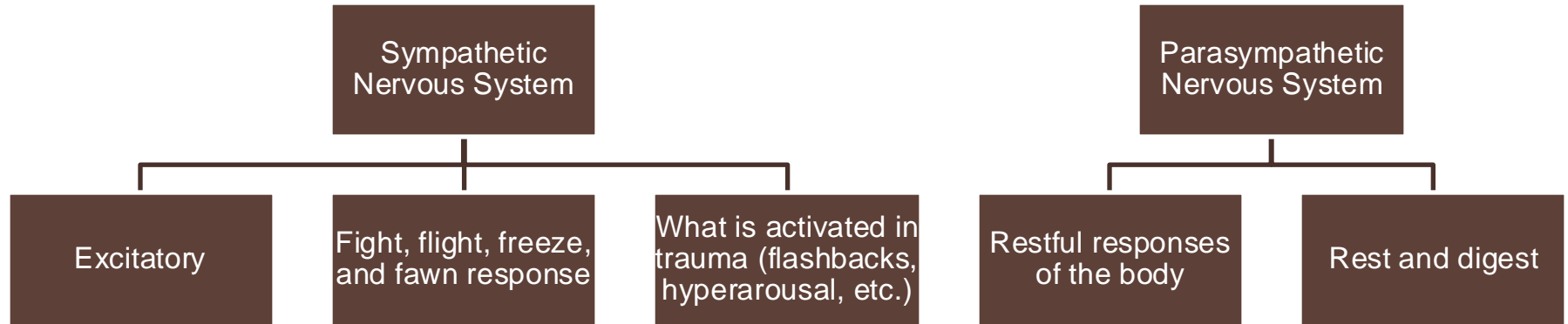
Negative Feedback Loop and the HPA Axis

- Cortisol continues to stimulate the brain, telling the brain to continue to stimulate the response of cortisol
- Breathing techniques, and other mindfulness strategies, can be powerful in breaking this cycle

(Comer, 2018)

Sympathetic Nervous System

Divisions



(Comer, 2018)

Trauma and Complex Trauma

- Trauma is any adverse situation that causes profound mental distress
- Complex trauma is recurring, significant trauma
- ACE (adverse child experiences) can be tied to complex PTSD

(Trauma-Informed Care Implementation
Resource Center, 2022)

Trauma-Informed Care Across OI Settings

- Often, we may think that trauma-informed care is designated to mental health OT work, but utilizing an understanding of trauma is impactful and important across all settings for occupational therapy
- If we understand how common trauma is, this can help us frame how to be as empathetic, supportive, and client-focused as possible
- We have a world of opportunity at our fingertips to be able to support clients, and it starts with an awareness that many of our clients have likely experienced some trauma that can impact their occupational participation

Trauma-Informed Care Across OI Settings

- Settings may include:
 - Hospital based
 - Hand-based OT
 - Pediatrics
 - School-based
 - Geriatric care
 - Private practice
 - Nursing-home based
- Goal may not be to address trauma directly, but to know how trauma can impact a patient's progress
- In any setting, we can be empathetic and attuned to using a TIC approach

Trauma-Informed Care Steps

Begins with safety and building rapport Helping a client feel seen, heard, and cared for is essential

- This includes body language, listening, asking more questions than we answer them, etc.

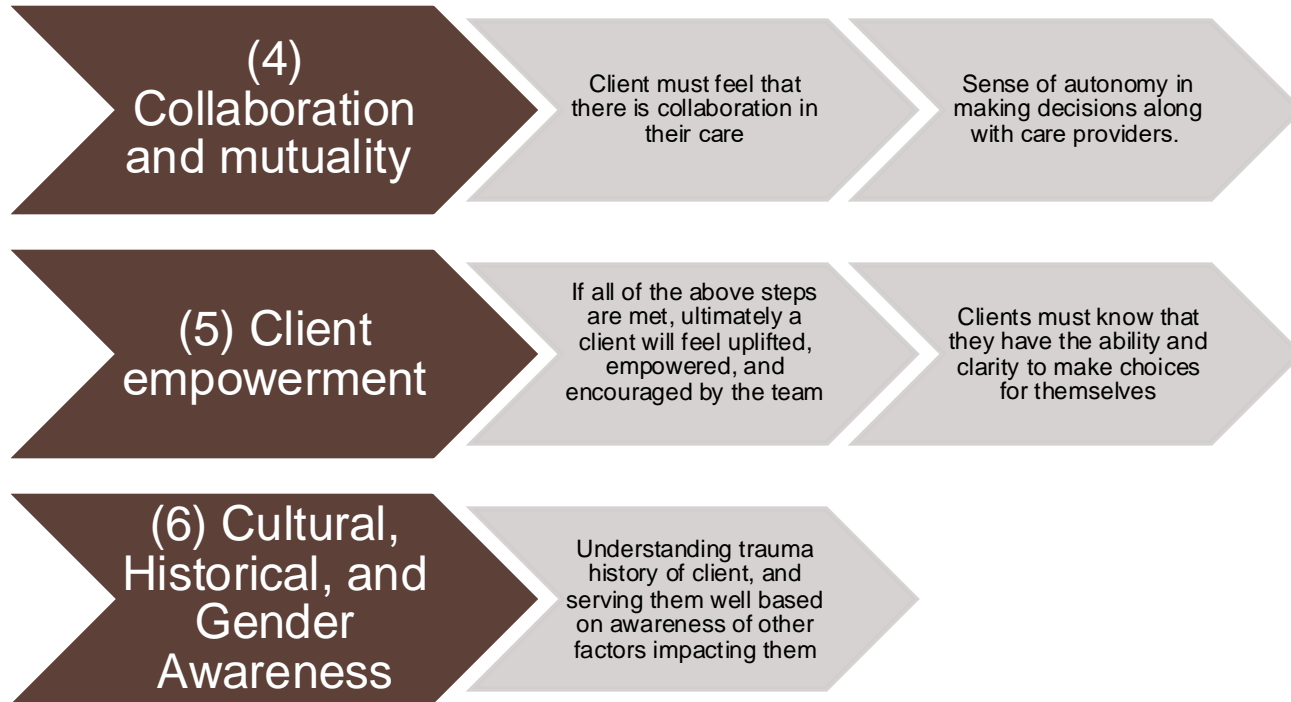
Trustworthiness is key for building rapport

- Backing up what we say in action

Peer support

- Someone can feel connected to and supported by someone who has lived through or is living through what they too are experiencing
- Encouraging clients to seek out support, connect to other clients, join community groups, etc.

Trauma-Informed Care Steps



Understanding the Connection

- Clients who have experienced trauma often need some additional patience and support with tasks (ex., completing paperwork, making an appt, etc.)
 - It is important to meet them where they are at, then slowly help with skill building over time. Balancing autonomy with support
 - We may need to slow down what instructions we provide to tasks as well, or downgrade a task to meet the client's pace
- Our body language, tone, and presence can all make an impact
 - Soft smiles, waiting until a client finishes their sentence to begin ours, leaning in to listen to them, eye contact, and using a calm tone of voice can help someone process their thoughts and feel received by us

Practicing Body Language/Tone

- Let's pair up!
- One person will role play being a client who does not have papers for their upcoming appointment, and is coming into the office flustered after having trouble with parking
- The other person will be an OT seeing this patient for an initial evaluation, and will practice asking questions, listening, and using body language to support client's voice
- After the role play practice finishes, give your partner feedback, then switch your roles and do the same exercise

Client Screening

- Even in medical-based settings, occupational therapy still is a field that addresses the whole-person
- Offering simple screening techniques, such as the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7) scale or Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) can be helpful to use
- AOTA has several links to mental and behavioral health standardized assessments and screening tools that can be reviewed
- Checking with different workplaces to see if these tools can be integrated into other areas of practice could be powerful for client assessments

Client Screening

Mental and behavioral health



- [Brief – Coping with Problems Experienced](#)
- [Evaluation of Social Interaction ++](#)
- [General Self-Efficacy Scale](#)
- [Geriatric Depression Scale](#)
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7)
 - [Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item \(GAD-7\) Psychometrics](#)
 - [Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item \(GAD-7\) Tool](#)
- [Interest Checklist / Role Checklist \(MOHO\) Version 3++](#)
- [Patient Health Questionnaire \(PHQ-9\)](#)
- [Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale](#)
- [The Impact of Event Scale-Revised \(IES-R\)](#)

(AOTA, n.d.)

Client Treatment Plan Ideas

- When appropriate, sharing insights with care team to collaborate can be beneficial
- Downgrading a task, or adding in elements of a task that can bring a client joy, can be helpful ways to be aware of trauma
 - Ex., Finding out the hobbies of an older individual who experienced grief from losing their partner could help you select an activity that could be meaningful to them, such as playing a modified table tennis activity while seated to work on UE ROM

Importance of Self-Care

- The WHO recognizes the importance of self-care routines in trauma recovery
- Consistent health-promoting occupations, such as exercise, leisure time with trusted loved ones, and sleep hygiene are some domains that are highlighted by WHO
- As occupational therapists, we are aware of many other areas we can integrate into our trauma-informed care
 - Advocacy
 - Childcare
 - Employment
 - Leisure participation

(WHO, 2024)

Self-Care Occupations

- Empowering someone to identify self-care that is important to them, such as setting a goal for taking a shower or brushing, can be important after someone experiences a traumatic event
- Building in treatment goals that are client-centered, achievable, and manageable amidst trauma is important to do

Sensory Techniques to Support Regulation

- Flight, fight, freeze, or fawn is common after traumatic circumstances

Sensory Techniques to Support Regulation

- Simple strategies to help calm the nervous system:
 - Meditation/mindfulness
 - Exercise
 - More intense exercise can help with regulation
 - Socializing
 - Singing and Chanting
 - Exposure to Cold
 - Such as holding an ice cube
 - Breathing exercises

Advocacy

- Occupational therapists can serve as client advocates
 - Helping individuals access resources to receive appropriate and comprehensive trauma care
 - Promoting client's voice and identifying needs in co-treatment or care team
 - Referring to appropriate additional services, such as psychologists
 - Making legal calls as needed



(Mehra, 2023)

Advocacy

- Occupational therapists can also work in advocacy, changing and shifting policies within our healthcare system
 - This can include reform within mental health settings, but also in other settings where a TIC approach is important, such as in hospitals



(Mehra, 2023)

Topic Significance

- Trauma-informed care is an integral aspect of occupational therapy practice (Piller & Achord, 2022)
- As occupational therapists are working in the field, instructing students in academia, and guiding the field in advocacy, understanding trauma informed care is critical.

Topic Significance

- Occupational therapists provide both direct and indirect care for trauma (Piller & Achord, 2022), so discussing how to weave trauma-informed care across settings is a critical conversation to delve into.
- Occupational therapists are trained in a variety of different modalities, including sensory integration, that can support clients in their recovery through the unique perspective of providers in this field (Mehra, 2023).

Key Takeaways

- Trauma is very common, especially in the population we get to serve
- We can all help make the world feel more safe, encouraging, and hopeful space. It is the responsibility of each of us to be a safe person regardless of what someone else may have been through

Hands on Activity

- Divide into groups of around 5 attendees, and discuss how you can integrate a trauma-informed approach (TIC) into your daily practice
- After meeting smaller groups, our whole group will come back together to problem solve with them what scenarios you encounter, and how to support a client utilizing this approach
- Wrapping up with Q and A

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