

# TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN

*Our Interior Well-Being*



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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to a journey through Trauma-Informed Design (TID), an approach that seeks to understand and respect the profound impact of trauma on individuals' lives and to create environments that support healing and well-being.

At its core, TID acknowledges that the physical spaces we inhabit can significantly influence our emotional and psychological health.

This booklet is designed to explore how the principles of TID can be applied across various settings—homes, workplaces, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and public spaces—to create environments that are safe, welcoming, and healing.



# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Trauma affects an astonishing number of people, touching lives across all demographics and communities. It can stem from many sources, including personal experiences of violence, natural disasters, systemic inequality, and more.

The effects of trauma can be profound and long-lasting, influencing behaviour, relationships, and even physical health. TID offers a framework for creating spaces that recognise the experiences of trauma survivors and contribute to their healing process.



## What is Trauma?

Trauma is a response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causing feelings of helplessness, diminishing their sense of self, and their ability to feel a full range of emotions and experiences.

Trauma can stem from a single event, prolonged exposure to adverse situations, or even the accumulation of stressors.

**It is not the event itself but  
the individual's experience of these events  
that defines trauma.**

## Effects of Trauma

The effects of trauma can be pervasive, influencing one's emotional, psychological, and physical health. Individuals may experience:

- Emotional and psychological effects, such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and emotional dysregulation.
- Physical effects, including insomnia, chronic pain, and heightened stress responses.
- Impacts on interpersonal relationships and daily functioning.

# TYPES OF TRAUMA

## Acute Trauma

Results from a single, distressing event, such as an abuse, accident or natural disaster.

## Chronic Trauma

Stems from repeated and prolonged exposure to highly stressful events, like domestic violence or long-term illness.

## Complex Trauma

Occurs due to exposure to multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive and interpersonal nature, leading to wide-ranging and long-term effects.

# THE ENVIRONMENT'S ROLE IN HEALING

Our surroundings profoundly affect our mental and emotional well-being, particularly for those navigating the aftermath of trauma. Certain environments can trigger memories of traumatic events, while others can offer a sense of safety and calm.

Understanding the interplay between environment and trauma is pivotal in creating spaces that support healing and well-being. There is an intricate relationship between our surroundings and our mental health.

**There is enough research and evidence to support how our senses play a pivotal role in shaping our interaction with space. Thoughtful, empathetic design choices can significantly influence healing and well-being.**

## The Senses & The Brain

Our senses—sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste—serve as the primary interface between the external world and our internal experiences. They not only help us navigate our environment but also deeply influence our emotions, memories, and psychological states.

**The brain interprets sensory information,  
which can trigger emotional responses,  
including those related to trauma.**



### **Sight:**

Visual cues can significantly affect our psychological state. Colours, lighting, and spatial layouts can evoke a wide range of emotions, from calm to anxiety. For individuals with trauma, certain visual elements might trigger distressing memories. Conversely, visually soothing environments can foster a sense of safety and calm.

### **Sound:**

Sounds can have a profound impact on our emotional well-being. Loud, abrupt noises might trigger stress responses, reminiscent of traumatic events. In contrast, soft, rhythmic sounds can be calming and reassuring. The design of auditory environments is crucial in minimizing triggers and promoting tranquility.

### **Touch:**

Physical contact and textures, influence our sense of security and comfort. Rough or cold surfaces might be unwelcoming or distressing, whereas soft, warm textures can be comforting. In TID, materials are chosen and included carefully to evoke a sense of safety and warmth.



### **Smell:**

Olfactory cues are directly linked to our emotional centers and can evoke powerful memories. Familiar, pleasant smells can be comforting and grounding, while certain odours might trigger traumatic memories. Incorporating neutral or positive scents into environments can aid in creating a healing space.

### **Taste:**

Though less directly involved in spatial design, taste experiences can influence emotional well-being and memory recall. In settings like healthcare or residential care, providing pleasant taste experiences can contribute to a sense of comfort and normalcy.

## **Biophilia:**

### The Human Connection to Nature

The concept of biophilia, proposed by E.O. Wilson, posits that humans have an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. This biophilic design, which integrates natural elements into the built environment, has been shown to have profound effects on health and well-being.

**Understanding the intricate relationship between sensory perception and trauma underscores the importance of Trauma-Informed Design. By creating environments that are mindful of sensory inputs and their potential impacts, we can foster spaces that promote healing, safety, and well-being for individuals affected by trauma.**



# Trauma Informed Design Principles

Creating environments that ensure both physical and psychological safety is priority. This involves:

## **Physical Safety:**

Use of non-slip floors, secure furniture and emergency exits that are clearly marked and easily accessible. This can mean rooms that are designed with multiple exits or clear exit signs, to prevent feelings of being trapped.

## **Psychological Safety:**

Designing spaces that feel welcoming and non-threatening, through the use of soft lighting, warm colours, and private areas where individuals can retreat if overwhelmed. In a workplace, offering quiet rooms or relaxation areas can help employees feel psychologically safe.



Spaces should be designed to affirm dignity and promote empowerment, allowing individuals to feel respected and valued. This can be achieved by:

**Designing with Respect:**

Ensuring spaces are clean, well-maintained, and aesthetically pleasing communicates respect to the users. A healthcare facility that uses high-quality materials and thoughtful design in patient rooms, for instance, affirms the dignity of those it serves.

**Promoting Agency:**

Allowing users to control their environment, such as adjustable lighting and temperature controls, can foster a sense of empowerment. In residential settings, incorporating adaptive technologies can empower individuals with disabilities by enabling them to control various aspects of their living space independently.



Offering choice and control over the environment can significantly enhance a person's sense of autonomy, which is critical in trauma recovery. This principle can manifest as:

**Flexible Spaces:**

Providing environments that can be adjusted to meet the needs of the moment, such as movable furniture in community centers, allows individuals to shape their own interactions with the space.

**Personalisation:**

Enabling users to personalise their space, even in small ways, can foster a sense of control and ownership. For instance, education centers can allow students to decorate their personal space or have a say in the layout of the classroom.





Design must be accessible to all, ensuring inclusivity and equal opportunity for use and engagement. This includes:

**Physical Accessibility:**

Compliance with accessibility standards is just the starting point. Innovative design solutions, like sensory gardens accessible to those with mobility challenges, ensure everyone can enjoy the space.

**Cultural Inclusivity:**

Spaces should reflect and respect the cultural diversity of their users. This could involve including artwork and symbols that are meaningful to different cultures in a community center to ensure all groups feel represented and welcome.





Incorporating natural elements and materials can support emotional well-being and stress reduction, as per biophilic design principles.

Examples include:

**Indoor-Outdoor Connectivity:**

Blurring the lines between indoor and outdoor spaces through the use of large windows, indoor plants, and natural materials can help bring the calming effect of nature indoors. Offices with indoor gardens or water features can reduce stress and enhance employee well-being.

**Natural Materials and Elements:**

Using wood, stone, and other natural materials in design can create a sense of calm and connection to the environment. Offices or a work environment that incorporate these materials in their interiors can make spaces feel more comforting and less clinical.



Designing for social interaction and a sense of community can aid in the healing process, providing support networks and reducing feelings of isolation. This principle can be applied through:

**Communal Spaces:**

Creating areas designed for group activities or socialising, like community kitchens in residential buildings & offices, encourages interaction and builds community.

**Privacy Within Community:**

Balancing communal spaces with private, quiet areas where individuals can have solitude if needed. Community centers with open reading areas alongside private study rooms offer this balance, catering to diverse needs for interaction and privacy.



Spaces should be capable of evolving to meet the changing needs of their users, reflecting the dynamic nature of communities and individuals.

This includes:

**Modular Design:**

Utilising modular furniture and movable partitions in spaces like community centers or schools can allow the space to be reconfigured for different events or activities, accommodating a wide range of needs and preferences.

**Adaptive Use:**

Designing spaces that can serve multiple purposes, such as a café that doubles as a workshop or meeting space, ensures environments can adapt to the evolving needs of the community.



Acknowledging and integrating the cultural backgrounds and experiences of users is crucial in creating spaces that feel inclusive and respectful. This involves:

**Cultural Representation in Design:**

Incorporating art, decor, and design elements that reflect the cultural diversity of the user base. For example, a community health center might feature artwork from local artists of various cultural backgrounds, creating a space that celebrates and respects diversity.

**Engaging with the Community:**

Design processes that involve input and feedback from the community ensure that the space meets their cultural and individual needs. This could mean holding community workshops or focus groups in the planning stages of a new community center to ensure it serves the needs and preferences of the local population.

## Common Environmental Triggers

- **Disruptive Sounds:** Loud noises like footsteps, door slamming, cries of distress, and buzzing from lights or appliances can be jarring.
- **Unpleasant Scents:** Odours such as body odor, mildew, cigarette smoke, and strong perfumes can be disturbing.
- **Security Concerns:** Vulnerabilities like open windows, non-functional security cameras, and damaged furniture can feel unsafe.
- **Visual Clutter:** Poorly marked exits, confusing directions, blind corners, repetitive door patterns, and dirty floors or walls contribute to visual chaos.
- **Physical Discomfort:** Environments lacking adjustable climate control, with narrow passages, uneven flooring, or insufficient ventilation are physically uncomfortable.
- **Institutional Feel:** Overly bright or dim lighting and hard, angular furniture can make a space feel cold and unwelcoming.
- **Clutter:** Disorganised spaces where items are strewn about can create a sense of chaos.



## Key Considerations:

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Tailor the design to resonate with the cultural background of the community. Incorporate elements that reflect and honour diverse cultural identities, creating a space that feels familiar and respectful.
- **Demographic Awareness:** Understand the demographics of the population the design serves. Consider age groups, gender, and other demographic factors to ensure the space is inclusive and meets the specific needs of its users.
- **Inclusive Spaces:** Design environments that welcome everyone, regardless of their background or identity. Avoid creating spaces that may inadvertently exclude certain groups, fostering an atmosphere of acceptance and openness.
- **Community Engagement:** Involve the community in this part of design process. Seek input and feedback to ensure that the final design reflects the preferences and values of the people who will inhabit the space.
- **Representation Matters:** Incorporate visual elements that represent the diversity within the community. This could include art, symbols, or design features that celebrate the richness of the community's heritage.

By embedding cultural awareness and demographic considerations into the design process, Trauma-Informed Design becomes a powerful tool for creating environments where individuals not only heal but also feel a profound sense of connection and inclusivity.



**In maintaining an organized and clutter-free space;  
ensure every item finds its designated place,  
promoting simplicity, accessibility, and a tidy environment.**

**Key Points:**

- **A Place for Everything:** Assign specific places for items in each room, eliminating clutter and making it easier to maintain order.
- **Simplicity and Labels:** Keep things straightforward and label items for quick identification. This enhances accessibility and streamlines the retrieval process.
- **Regular Decluttering:** Remove items unused for over six months. If sentimental or necessary, store them in labeled boxes to keep the space uncluttered.
- **Daily Tidying Routine:** Establish a team or staff rotation for daily cleanup duties to maintain a consistently organised environment.
- **Categorisation for Efficiency:** Categorise items systematically, aiding in easy compartmentalisation. This promotes order, making it simpler to locate and store belongings.

# Application of TID Principles

## Homes

Residential spaces should prioritise safety and comfort. This could include the use of soft, warm lighting to create a calming atmosphere, secure locks that are easy to operate for a sense of security, and the use of soft furnishings and textures to promote a sense of comfort and safety.

### **Personalisation:**

Allowing residents to personalise their space can significantly enhance feelings of control and ownership. Flexible furniture arrangements and the ability to adjust lighting and temperature can make a substantial difference in creating a healing environment.

### **Natural Elements:**

Incorporating biophilic design elements, such as indoor plants, natural light, and materials like wood and stone, can improve mental health and overall well-being by strengthening the connection to nature.



## Workspaces

Workspaces should offer various environments that cater to different work styles and tasks, such as open-plan areas for collaboration, quiet zones for focused work, and comfortable lounges for breaks. Adjustable desks and seating options empower employees to work in ways that best suit their physical comfort and work preferences.

### **Community and Connection:**

Designing common areas that encourage interaction, such as communal kitchens or coffee areas, can foster a sense of community. Incorporating artwork or decor that reflects the cultural diversity of the workforce can enhance feelings of inclusivity and belonging.

### **Nature and Stress Reduction:**

Implementing green spaces, such as rooftop gardens or indoor atriums, and maximising natural light can reduce stress and boost productivity. The use of natural materials and colours can also contribute to a more relaxing and inviting workplace.







## Public Spaces

Public spaces should be designed to be accessible to everyone, with attention to physical, sensory, and cognitive needs. This includes clear signage, wide and unobstructed pathways, and quiet zones for those who might feel overwhelmed by sensory inputs.

### **Flexibility and Community Engagement:**

Community spaces should be adaptable to host a range of activities, reflecting the diverse interests and needs of the community. Engagement with the community in the design process ensures that the space meets their needs and preferences, enhancing a sense of ownership and belonging.

### **Safety and Cultural Sensitivity:**

Public designs must consider the safety and cultural diversity of its users. This might involve designing spaces that are well-lit and easy to navigate, as well as incorporating elements that reflect the cultural heritage and values of the local community.



## Educational Environments

### **Safety and Security:**

Enhance safety by designing secure access points and clearly marked emergency exits. Arrange classrooms and shared spaces to minimise concealed corners and obscured areas, ensuring visibility without sacrificing privacy to bolster security.

### **Sensory Modulation:**

Select calming colours for walls and furnishings. Incorporate texture through materials that can offer sensory comfort, like soft rugs or furniture with pleasant tactile surfaces. Control for auditory stress by incorporating sound-absorbing materials and designing quiet zones for students needing a break from sensory stimulation.

### **Nature and Light:**

Maximise natural lighting and provide views of the outdoors. Incorporate indoor plants and natural elements into classrooms and common areas to enhance biophilic benefits.

### **Flexibility and Choice:**

Design classrooms with flexible furniture arrangements to support various teaching methods and learning styles. Include options for students to work in groups or individually in areas that they find most comforting, providing a sense of control over their learning environment.







## Restaurants

### **Lighting and Ambiance:**

Soft, warm lighting can create a welcoming and comfortable environment, reducing stress and promoting relaxation.

### **Seating Options:**

Providing a variety of seating options, including booths, tables with chairs, and counter seating, allows guests to choose where they feel most comfortable.

### **Acoustic Planning:**

Implementing sound-absorbing materials and designing the layout to minimize echo and noise pollution can help guests who are sensitive to loud environments.

### **Visual Privacy:**

Strategic placement of plants, screens, or high-backed seating can offer visual privacy to diners, making the space feel safer and more intimate.



## Cafés

### **Community and Solitude Spaces:**

Designating areas for community interaction, such as communal tables, alongside quieter areas for solitude, can cater to varying needs for socialisation and privacy.

### **Natural Elements:**

Incorporating biophilic design elements, such as indoor plants, natural wood finishes, and access to outdoor seating, can enhance the overall well-being of patrons.

### **Sensory Considerations:**

Offering options for sensory modulation, such as background music that can be controlled in volume, or areas with sensory toys like stress balls, can be beneficial.





Surf Coffee





## Retail Production House

### **Navigational Ease:**

Clear, well thought-out signage and an intuitive layout help reduce anxiety associated with navigating unfamiliar spaces.

Clear instructions on designs, production details as well as easy ways to maintain a clutter-free organised work space.

### **Flexible Workspaces:**

For staff, having adjustable workstations that allow for both standing and sitting work positions can promote physical comfort and reduce strain.

### **Employee Support Spaces:**

Creating areas where employees can take breaks in a comfortable, non-industrial setting helps in stress reduction and mental health support.

# Checklist for Implementing TID

## **Assessment and Planning**

- Conduct an audit of the current environment for safety and comfort.
- Identify potential sensory triggers that need to be addressed.
- Gather input from users/stakeholders on their needs and preferences.

## **Design and Implementation**

- Incorporate natural elements and consider sensory experiences in the design.
- Design flexible spaces that offer choice and control to users.
- Ensure all areas are accessible and navigation is intuitive.

## **Evaluation and Improvement**

- Create mechanisms for feedback on the environment from users.
- Regularly review and update the space based on feedback and evolving needs.
- Continue education and training on trauma-informed principles for all stakeholders.

## **Glossary of Terms**

### **Biophilic Design:**

An approach to architecture and interior design that seeks to connect building occupants more closely to nature. Biophilic design incorporates natural light, natural materials, vegetation, nature views, and other experiences of the natural world into the modern built environment.

### **Cultural Sensitivity:**

The awareness and consideration of the cultural differences and similarities between people without assigning them value. In design, it involves creating spaces that respect and reflect the cultural identities and practices of those who use them.

### **Empowerment:**

In the context of TID, empowerment refers to design choices that enable individuals to have control over their environment, contributing to their sense of autonomy and agency. This can include adjustable lighting and temperature, flexible furniture arrangements, and personalisable spaces.

### **Flexibility and Adaptability:**

Design principles that allow spaces to be easily modified to meet the changing needs and preferences of users. This includes movable furniture, multipurpose rooms, and technology that can be updated as needs evolve.

### **Inclusivity:**

Designing spaces that are accessible and welcoming to all people, regardless of their physical abilities, age, gender, race, cultural background, or any other characteristic. Inclusive design aims to create environments where everyone feel belonged.

**Natural Elements:**

Components of design that incorporate aspects of the natural environment into indoor and outdoor spaces. This includes the use of sunlight, plants, water features, and natural materials like wood and stone to create a more harmonious and comforting environment.

**Sensory-Friendly:**

Design that takes into consideration how the environment affects the five senses, aiming to create spaces that minimise sensory overload and cater to sensory sensitivities. This is particularly important for individuals with autism, PTSD, or sensory processing disorders.

**Trauma:**

A deeply distressing or disturbing experience that can have long-lasting effects on an individual's mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Trauma can result from single events or prolonged exposure to stressful conditions.

**Trauma-Informed Care (TIC):**

An approach in the field of health and human services that seeks to understand and consider the pervasive nature of trauma and promote environments of healing and support, rather than practices that may inadvertently re-traumatize individuals.

**Trauma-Informed Design (TID):**

The application of principles from trauma-informed care into the design of physical spaces, with the aim of creating environments that support the physical, psychological, and emotional healing and well-being of individuals who have experienced trauma.



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## **Additional Resources**

**<https://www.traumainformeddesign.org/>**

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2019/12/09/the-importance-of-trauma-informed-design/>

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-04-10/how-trauma-informed-design-can-create-healing-architecture>

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*Navigating Trauma. Bridging Hope*