

Case Study: Vicarious Trauma in Harm Reduction Practice

Background:

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), the six principles of [trauma-informed care](#) are:

- **Safety** – physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions.
- **Trustworthiness and transparency** – following through, protecting confidentiality where appropriate, and proactively sharing information about what is or is not possible and why
- **Peer support** – opportunities to connect and work with people who have had similar experiences
- **Collaboration and mutuality** – including sharing power and decision-making
- **Empowerment, voice, and choice** – supporting participants and staff to make their own choices and inform how programs look
- **Cultural, historical, and gender lenses** – recognizing that these identities and dynamics shape how people experience the world, our organization, and our services

Organizations and staff can use these principles to identify ways to make their work more trauma-informed. This case study can help illustrate how the presence or absence of these principles can affect service quality and staff and community experiences.

Instructions:

Read the case study below, then consider the reflection questions afterwards. This activity can be done individually, in small groups, or in a large-group discussion.

Case Study:

Alex, a harm reduction practitioner at a new grassroots organization, is dedicated to supporting individuals who use drugs. In his role, Alex interacts daily with participants who have experienced lots of traumatic events in their lives, and who also face overdose risks and social stigmatization. As Alex witnesses the struggles of clients, experiences the emotional weight of overdose incidents, and confronts societal stigma, vicarious trauma takes a toll on his mental health. He has less empathy for the participants he works with, and even though it's important to him to meet people where they are, he finds himself getting frustrated when

participants don't engage with all the harm reduction resources and options available to them. Alex is also having some nightmares and anxiety and is beginning to withdraw from his close relationships.

Alex's supervisor, Isabelle, starts to notice some of these changes in Alex, but she is also very busy and involved in the harm reduction work, spending most of her time doing boots on the ground work. The organization is new and grassroots and doesn't have clear policies about time off, or health benefits, or resources like employee assistance. All of their funding besides wages and barebones overhead goes to harm reduction supplies and activities. Isabelle isn't sure what she can offer Alex, so she tells him she sees that he's struggling and encourages him to take care of himself.

Alex tries to take it a little easier at work, but he's so affected by his community's traumas that he can't effectively regulate his emotions or behaviors. He gets too overwhelmed and quits his role to do a job in another sector that is less taxing on his mental health.

Reflection questions:

1. As you read the case study below, can you identify ways that this scenario is **not** as trauma informed as it could be?
 - a. How are each of the six principles supported or not supported in the scenario?
 - b. How are staff positively or negatively impacted by the ways these principles are or are not supported?
 - c. How are community members positively or negatively impacted by the ways these principles are or are not supported?
2. Use the six principles to brainstorm ways that the gaps or challenges you identified in question 1 could be addressed or improved.
 - a. How could this scenario be improved or Alex? For Isabelle?
 - b. How might the improvements you brainstormed affect community members who seek services at this organization?
3. If the organization keeps operating in the ways described in the scenario, what do you think the big-picture or long-term impacts would be for the organization's effectiveness and sustainability? For the staff? For the community members the organization serves?