



The ABCs of trauma-informed policing

Katherine J. McLachlan^{*,†}

This article is directly related to the first global Trauma Informed Policing and Law Enforcement Conference held in Melbourne, Australia in February 2024.

ABSTRACT

Trauma-informed care and practice was developed over 20 years ago and is emerging as a way of working for the police, in corrections and courts, and broader contexts such as health and education services. I started my criminal justice career with South Australia Police in 2001. It was not until 2014 that I first heard the term “trauma-informed,” which was regarding victim services. Back then, it was unclear how it might be applied in practice. Soon after, I was appointed to the Parole Board of South Australia in 2015. As a Parole Board member, I have interviewed more than 1,000 adults, many with chronic offending histories and most with trauma histories. In this paper, I draw from local case studies and apply the SAMHSA (2014) trauma-informed practice framework to explore “trauma-informed” policing. Trauma is understood to mean the impact of adversity (i.e., potentially traumatic events and experiences) on an individual’s functioning and well-being. I outline the ABCs of a trauma-informed policing response: (A) trauma-informed policing requires an agenda, (B) trauma-informed policing is broad, and (C) trauma-informed policing is compassionate. Without the ABCs of trauma-informed policing, police responses may be, at best, well-intentioned good practice, but they should not be considered to be trauma-informed.

Key Words Trauma-informed practice; trauma-informed criminal justice; trauma-responsive; compassionate justice; trauma-informed policing.

INTRODUCTION

Three weeks ago, my father had a cardiac arrest. He was staying alone in a beachside caravan park about an hour’s drive from home in Adelaide. That morning, he drove into town to buy a newspaper and collapsed on the footpath. Luckily, it happened across the road from a medical centre, meaning he got immediate medical attention. He was revived, taken by ambulance to the local hospital, and then airlifted to Adelaide. I know this because three and a half hours after the cardiac arrest, I spoke to the local police officer. He had spent a couple of hours identifying my mum and her phone number through family medical records. He had called her, and she had asked him to call me. Over the next couple of days, Senior Constable First Class Andrew Francis rang me. He asked whether we would like the caravan power turned off and the fridge emptied. He took possession of Dad’s car until we could arrange to collect it. He also located and secured Dad’s mobile phone and laptop for us. He kept the local community members

informed of Dad’s progress so that they were aware that their actions had genuinely saved his life.

So, what is the point of this story? Aside from trying to garner your sympathy, the point is that SC Francis’s actions might be regarded as trauma-informed policing. In many ways, they reflect a trauma-informed response. SC Francis was patient and compassionate. He built trust and made me feel safer by answering all my questions (sometimes more than once). He offered choices and solutions and was flexible. He gave us control over the small things when a lot was out of our control.

However, while his actions contain many elements of a trauma-informed policing response, SC Francis has probably never heard of trauma-informed practice. He was just being a good cop and a decent person. In fact, trauma-informed practice is not about simply being “sweet, nice, and kind” (Treisman, 2022). Trauma-informed practice requires a structured approach. Thus, we come to the “A” in the ABCs of trauma-informed policing: A is for Agenda.

Correspondence to: Katherine McLachlan, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia. **E-mail:** katherine.mclachlan@flinders.edu.au

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A: TRAUMA-INFORMED POLICING HAS AN AGENDA

To be trauma-informed, a service or sector must:

- **Realize** what trauma is and the potential impacts of adversity,
- **Recognize** trauma symptoms experienced by the individual accessing the service,
- **Respond** appropriately to the individual’s unique trauma, and
- **Resist re-traumatization** to avoid exacerbating an individual’s trauma or causing secondary trauma through insensitive or inappropriate responses when providing services (SAMHSA, 2014).

This agenda has been articulated as four steps (the 4Rs) by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), as illustrated in Figure 1.

So, how is this model of trauma-informed practice relevant to police work? A trauma-informed police response must strive to achieve all four Rs, such that police:

- **realize** how trauma is relevant in their work (first R),
- **recognize** how trauma may impact someone’s criminal behaviour or the different ways victims of crime may present or when a co-worker appears to be overwhelmed with policing work (second R),
- seek to **respond** (third R) in terms of policies, procedures, and practices to promote the trauma-informed principles outlined above, and
- actively **resist re-traumatization** (fourth R) – the most important of the SAMHSA’s “Rs” – by avoiding responses that exacerbate or compound existing trauma (Gillespie-Smith et al., 2020).

A trauma-informed police response (the third R) requires the application of specific principles that characterize a trauma-informed response: safety, trustworthiness, choice,

collaboration, and empowerment (Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012, p. 12). Specifically:

- Safety relates to physical and emotional safety,
- Trustworthiness refers to establishing mutually understood, clear, and consistent expectations and boundaries for workers and service users,
- Choice involves prioritising users’ service preferences through information, options, and an awareness of their rights and responsibilities,
- Collaboration encourages the involvement of users in the planning and shared decision-making around activities and service settings, and
- Empowerment aims to promote the service users’ skills through a strength-based approach.

The SAMHSA (2014) model also prioritizes peer support and historical, cultural, and gender issues.

In recognizing how trauma is relevant for police (second R), it is important to acknowledge that trauma does not cause crime, but crime may traumatize victims. Many people who offend have trauma. Trauma symptoms and manifestations may be risk factors for criminality. Most significantly, the criminal justice system is inherently traumatic (Cullen et al., 2011; McLachlan, 2024). Let me give you an example.

Fifteen years ago, I interviewed victims of sexual assault about their experiences reporting to South Australia Police (McLachlan, 2007). One woman is unforgettable. I called her “Charlotte.” Charlotte was 16 years old. She had never had sex, and she was asleep in her bedroom when someone broke into her house, restrained her, and sexually assaulted her. Her father interrupted the assault; the perpetrator escaped, and the police were called.

Charlotte said:

A policewoman arrived and she said, “Look, we need you to give your description of what he looks like straight away so we can try to find him if we are able.”

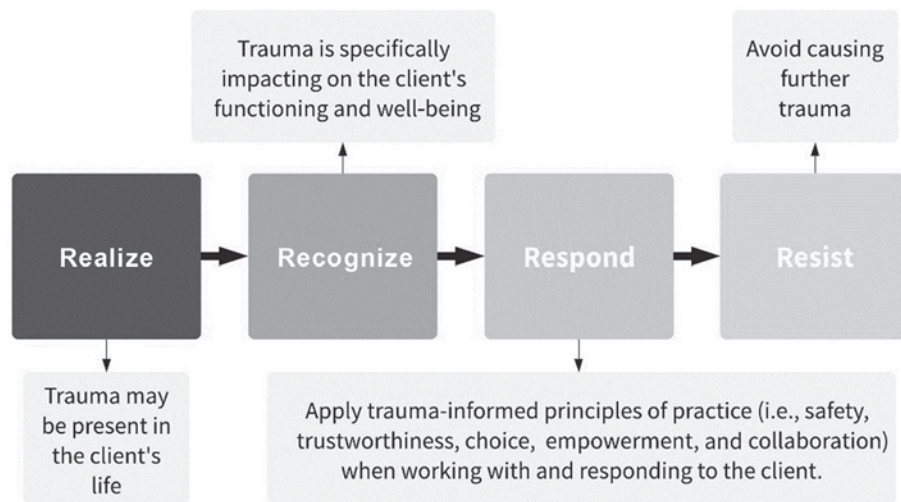


FIGURE 1 The 4Rs of trauma-informed practice (McLachlan, 2022, based on SAMHSA, 2014).

And so, I started giving this description and while he was in my room. I deliberately tried to remember everything I possibly could about him ... And this policewoman said, "You remember so much it's as if you've made the story up."

That was the first thing that she said to me. And I felt really, really bad... (McLachlan, 2007, p. 153)

Charlotte was required to give a statement the same night she had been assaulted after she had undergone a forensic medical. She was not advised that she could have a support person present, nor were counsellors contacted.

A police woman gave me a cup of coffee and she asked me if I'd like a cigarette. And I said no.

And she said, "Well, often women like to have a cigarette after they've been raped." (McLachlan, 2007, p. 120)

The same night, a policewoman said to Charlotte:

"Now that this has happened to you, you're going to probably want to have counselling or they'll offer counselling to you."

And she said, "Be really wary of it ... There are groups around but they are feminist groups."

And I didn't know much about feminists, and she said that "most of them are lesbians", and she said that, "They'll try and make you into a lesbian."

And I didn't even know what a lesbian was. I was going through puberty and I was ... just too self-conscious about sexuality and sex to even, you know, to have thought about any of this.

...And so that is actually why I was really dead against counselling at the time. (McLachlan, 2007, p. 148)

Nothing about that experience was ok. As a result of her experience both as a crime victim and with police, her life trajectory completely changed. She moved away and, like many victims of crime, was re-victimized years later. This is not the police achieving its goal of community protection – it is the very opposite.

Suppose all police officers acted in a way that promoted safety, trust, empowerment, and choice for crime victims. Research relating to procedural fairness tells us that such responses will likely leave a positive legacy that does not re-traumatize (CVWEW, 2011). Police should always reassure victims of a crime that they are respected and not blamed for what has happened to them, and that their concerns have been heard. Police should answer victims' questions and offer time and space to process what has happened.

Yet, individual officers' responses are sometimes influenced by myths and stereotypes about "real" victims (Rich, 2019). Police officers often work shifts and are not always available or able to visit or call a victim of crime promptly. Victims may not understand that sometimes operational demands may prevent timely and thoughtful police responses. However, police officers have a responsibility to consider how their responses, delays, comments, or actions might be

misinterpreted or misunderstood by victims of crime. Police should consider how a throw-away comment might potentially change someone's life. Trauma-informed responses and effective communication are vital to minimize the trauma caused by the criminal justice system.

However, reducing the traumatic impact of the criminal justice system is not just about supporting victims of crime. Thus, we come to the "B" in the ABCs of trauma-informed policing: B is for Broad.

B: TRAUMA-INFORMED POLICING IS BROAD

Trauma-informed policing should be universal and systemic (NES, 2021); embedded in policies, procedures, and practices; and the responsibility of both individual police officers and policing organizations (Senker et al., 2023). Most examples of trauma-informed policing focus on small elements of a trauma-informed approach, such as acknowledging and applying victims' rights. True trauma-informed responses (third R) are provided to victims of crime, people who have offended, and workers too, because a true trauma-informed policing response focuses not just on victims or alleged offenders but on peers and colleagues as well. This brings me to the "C" in the ABCs of trauma-informed policing (and my final story): C is for Compassionate.

C: TRAUMA-INFORMED POLICING IS COMPASSIONATE

Compassion centres around a collective and empathic understanding of human suffering. It is an intentional response aimed at relieving the suffering of others. Hopkins et al. (2022) focus on humanizing the people who offend "to understand the individual and systemic causes of their criminality..." (p. 2). So, let us consider the humanity of someone who has offended, "Max" (McLachlan, 2021). Max was convicted of drug trafficking. His story illustrates why people who offend should always be treated with compassion – because you do not know the depths of adversity some people have experienced. Max's story is told through the words of the sentencing judge.

Your mother was 16 years of age when she gave birth to you. Unfortunately, at that time, she was consuming drugs and was charged and sentenced for drug trafficking not long after your birth.

Your mother only returned to you when you were about six months old. You have never known your father...

Your mother began a relationship when you were about four years of age, and this relationship was marred with alcohol abuse and violence against your mother.

You recall your childhood as not being particularly happy or stable. You were often left to fend for yourself. You remember occasions when you were left seemingly forgotten by your carers in the bush, at parks or at a beach and at times for days. These experiences fostered a sense of abandonment that has followed you throughout your life.

Your younger brother was born when you were six years of age. This was a particularly difficult time for you as you remember the violence within your household escalating. You remember your mother being covered in blood on several occasions. You also remember how you were the victim of severe beatings by your mother's partner. This was done with a stick that had nails attached to it.

While your family was living [interstate], you were beaten so severely that your kneecap was broken, and you spent two months in hospital. You recall this time in hospital feeling quite like you were on holiday as you were treated well, fed well and there was no violence.

Not long after returning home from hospital, you made friends with a person ...[who] molested you.

... Your stepfather began molesting you from the age of nine to 13 years.

While a lot of this was happening in your life, you managed to thrive at school. You were well liked by other students and teachers and were always at or near the top of class... However, you left school at 14 years and began working in an effort to support your mother financially.

... When you were aged 15, your brother's father re-appeared and took your brother away to live with him. This devastated yourself and your mother.

... Aged around 28 years, you were the victim of a home invasion. You were with a friend at the time and while you managed to escape over a balcony, your friend was severely beaten and this ended your friendship and you have carried the burden of guilt ever since.

... At this time you began using methamphetamines to cope with the trauma of the home invasion and your depression. By the time the court case ended, you were heavily addicted to methamphetamines.

... you were sentenced for trafficking in methamphetamines... during this incarceration your mother passed away... from lung cancer.

... your brother moved from [interstate] to join you in Adelaide. He had a severe drug problem... you also lost your brother to suicide in July 2016.

He was unable to cope with the drug debts he had accumulated... a gang that alleged your brother owed them \$100,000 threatened you and made you take responsibility for your brother's debts. You have submitted that it was for this reason that you turned to selling drugs. You knew you should have gone to the police, but from your past experience as a Crown witness, it was too traumatic for you. (R v MAK, 2019; cited in McLachlan, 2021, p. 147).

Max experienced extensive adversity in childhood (i.e., parental substance abuse, absent father, domestic abuse, childhood physical and sexual abuse) and adulthood (i.e.,

physical assault, death of a parent, suicide of brother). These life experiences make Max a victim of crime. They also help contextualize Max's offending.

Traditionally, trauma-informed policing would focus on Max as an "offender." As such, policing organizations might not see Max as worthy of a trauma-informed response. Often when police officers and agencies talk about trauma-informed policing, they are focused on victims of crime (e.g., Lathan et al., 2019). However, if we, as a society and as a criminal justice system, want to stop Max from offending, we must realize and recognize him as a human being and the significance of the past adversity that has led to his trauma and criminality. Taking a tough-on-crime approach and focusing on punishment and specific deterrence just compounds his trauma. It increases the risk of him offending further (Cullen et al., 2011). Focusing on Max as a citizen allows the justice system to formulate a plan for his rehabilitation and reintegration tailored to his specific risks and criminogenic needs to promote community safety (and his safety).

Although this case study is not a policing example, police had interacted with Max in a non-trauma-informed way. Max had contact with police as both a victim and someone who committed offences. He "knew [he] should have gone to the police, but from [his] experience as a Crown witness, it was too traumatic..." (R v MAK, 2019; cited in McLachlan, 2021, p. 147). Max's life undermines the false dichotomies that underpin policing: victims and offenders, goodies and baddies. These dichotomies make it easier to do the job. It is an honourable purpose to catch crooks. However, when responding to the many people who offend who are also victims of crime, or who have mental health issues or disabilities, police should offer compassion. It is possible – indeed imperative – for trauma-informed policing to be compassionate.

CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed the ABCs of trauma-informed policing: Trauma-informed policing has an Agenda, it is Broad, and it is Compassionate. First, trauma-informed policing requires the conscious application of an agenda that reflects SAMHSA's (2014) 4Rs. Many police officers, judges, and other practitioners – such as SC Francis – strive to respond in a way that promotes safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment for the people they interact with in their professional lives. But to be truly trauma-informed, police responses must reflect a conscious application of a trauma-informed agenda. It is not sufficient to strive to be "sweet, nice, and kind" (Treisman, 2022). Second, trauma-informed policing is broad. It applies to how police work and respond to victims, and people who offend, as well as civilians and other coppers. Finally, trauma-informed policing is about the compassionate acknowledgement of the humanity of all people caught up in the justice system.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Criminology, Flinders University, Bedford Park, SA 5042, Australia;

†Parole Board of South Australia, Adelaide, SA 5000, Australia.

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