

A Trauma-Informed Organizational Approach: Integrating the Voice of Victim Advocates

Kyra Jones, DBA

Indiana Wesleyan University / DeVoe School of Business, Technology, and Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Helping professionals are regularly exposed to traumatic events and stories of those they are employed to assist. Addressing the risk of experiencing work-related burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious trauma is a shared responsibility of helping professionals and their employers (Brown, 2020; Wu et al., 2021).

To determine actionable steps, research was completed to explore organizational strengths and recommendations for improvement. Feedback gathered via a questionnaire and interviews expanded understanding of the victim advocate's perspective.

DRIVING RESEARCH QUESTION

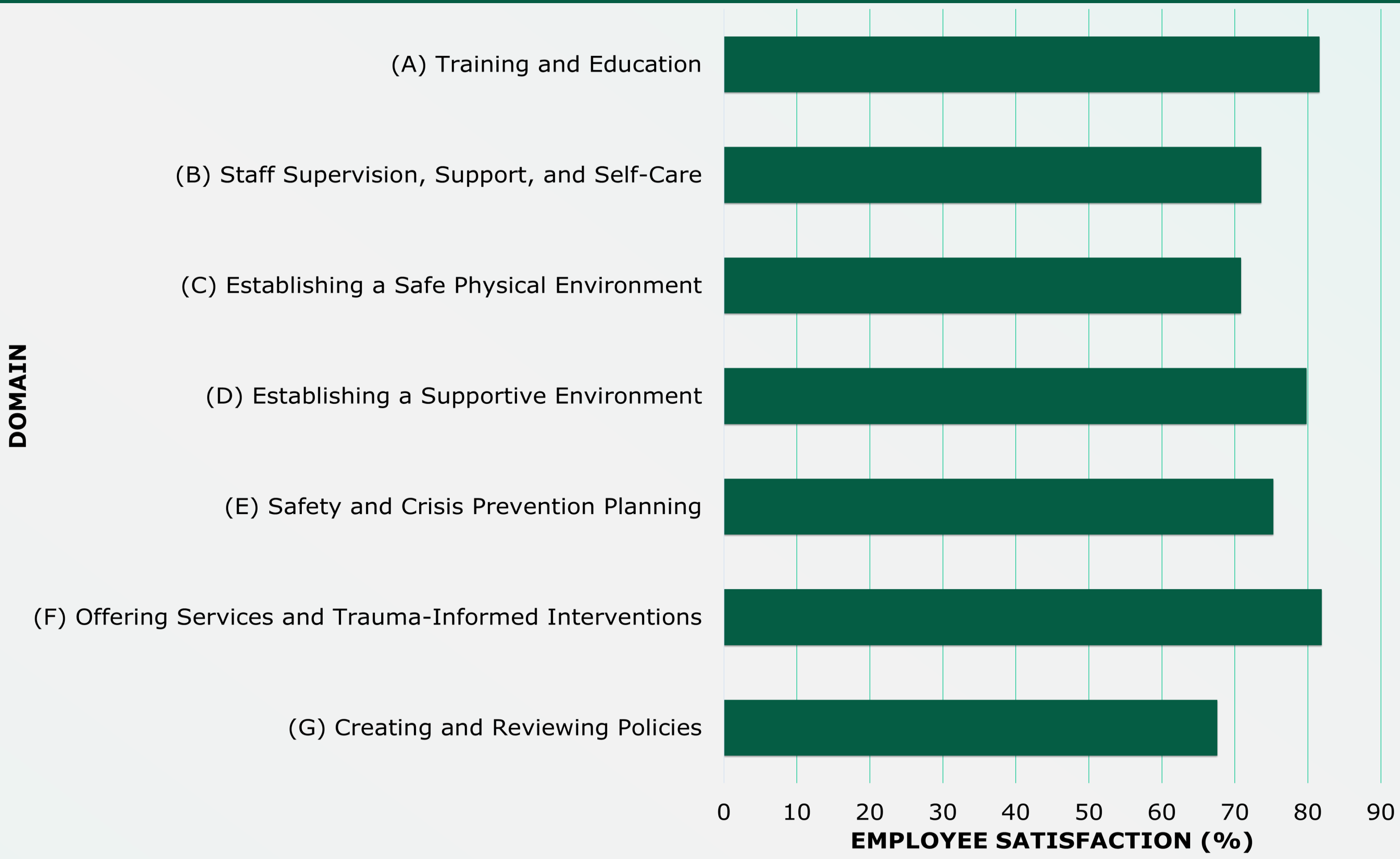
How can culturally-responsive, victim-serving organizations ensure they have trauma-informed policies, protocols, and procedures that mitigate negative impacts to staff by systemically integrating the input of victim advocates?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- Reviewed over 40 scholarly and practitioner articles on burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, trauma-informed organizations and practices, and vicarious trauma related to helping professions.
- Modified and administered the Trauma-Informed Organization Self-Assessment using a Likert-style scale to evaluate an organization's strengths and vulnerabilities regarding daily operations (Guarino et al., 2009).
- Interviewed victim advocates to (a) clarify questionnaire responses that differed from 50% or more of other respondents and (b) further explore organizational strengths and suggestions to further normalize self-care, encourage communities of wellness, and promote the physical, emotional, and mental wellness of advocates.
- Questionnaire responses were clustered by domain with particular attention given to overall strengths and opportunities for improvement in the Staff Supervision, Support, and Self-Care domain.
- Interview transcripts were analyzed for themes to ascertain and emphasize critical needs and recommendations of victim advocates.

RESULTS

Questionnaire Results by Domain



Interview Themes–Recommendations

- Supervision:** 1) Schedule traditional supervision to share information, progress, and concerns, and 2) Offer trauma-informed supervision with a mental health professional to process trauma exposure, triggers, and reactions.
- Team/Agency Meetings:** 1) Prioritize debriefing sessions post-crisis, and 2) Meet quarterly or semi-annually to review and reassess operational processes.
- Self-Care/Wellness:** 1) Empower employees with the flexibility to engage in their unique self-care practices whenever necessary, and 2) Encourage safe spaces by respecting the boundaries of staff members.
- Ongoing Professional Development:** Engage external consultants to 1) train staff on the impacts of trauma on helping professionals and building resiliency and 2) Provide training to managers on best practices and effective strategies regarding trauma-informed supervision.
- Virtuous Leadership:** 1) Create safe spaces for feedback loops, 2) Be open to employee concerns, ideas, input, and recommendations, and 3) Follow through on staff recommendations by providing feedback, regular updates, and intended implementation steps.
- Principles to Integrate:** Consistency * Inclusivity * Safety * Timeliness

CONCLUSIONS

- Trauma-informed organizations integrate staff feedback into decision-making and daily operations, fostering an inclusive and supportive culture.
- Supportive supervision includes permitting staff reasonable flexibility to practice self-care and consistently scheduling opportunities for communication.
- Employers of helping professionals should provide timely opportunities for staff members to address trauma-related impacts from their daily responsibilities without loss of pay or added cost to employees.

IMPLICATIONS

Recommendations can be modified and applied to other helping professionals including, but not limited to: educators, first responders, hospital staff, legal practitioners, mental health specialists, and social workers.

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For more information on this study contact:
Kyra Jones, DBA
kyra.jones@myemail.indwes.edu