



TRAUMA-INFORMED PASTORAL CARE

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Objectives For Today's Retreat

Participants will be able to:

- Define trauma as an inner injury to body, mind, and spirit
- Describe the key components of trauma
- Describe the signs and symptoms of trauma
- Identify and describe the deep impacts of severe trauma
- Integrate trauma-informed practices into spiritual care
- Describe special ways in which chaplains can promote healing from trauma and post-traumatic growth



“Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering” (Mate` 2022, 21, citing Peter Levine 1999, 5) It pervades our toxic culture (Mate, 20)

However, “the traumatic wounds of the past can become places of life-changing blessings” (Wardle)

What Is Trauma?

“Trauma is not what happens to you, but what happens inside you” (Mate`, 20).

Trauma is an inner psychic injury that is lodged in an individual’s nervous system and creates a rupture within the self. It deeply affects an individual’s body, mind, and spirit, and it continues to affect an individual long after the originating traumatic experience.

Unresolved trauma constricts an individual’s view of reality. It underlies and contributes to all types of illnesses, including most autoimmune disorders (Mate`, 21).

Recognized Types of Trauma

Capital T- Trauma- involves the injury to self (including automatic nervous system responses and mind-body adaptations) to specific, identifiable, hurtful, and overwhelming events, whether in childhood or later:”

- ❑ Adverse Childhood Experiences- greater risk of psych issues, substance abuse, heart disease, cancer, reduced life expectancy (Post 2025, 100)
- ❑ Natural Catastrophies
- ❑ War Experiences- PTSD
- ❑ Major Accidents and Injuries
- ❑ Severe Losses (Mate’ 2022, 22)

Unrecognized Types of Trauma

Small t- Trauma- involves the disconnection from the self that also occurs when core emotional and spiritual needs are not met – may be an almost universal experience in our current society .

- ❑ Can include bad experiences, such as repeated harsh comments by a parent, teacher, spouse, or other significant person
- ❑ Can also include unintentional neglect, such as not being seen and accepted as a unique individual, even by loving parents (Mate`, 21-22)

Core Emotional and Spiritual Needs

- ❑ To be loved and accepted
- ❑ To feel seen and heard
- ❑ To have a sense of belonging and interconnectedness
- ❑ To have a genuine sense of self-worth not dependent on achievement, attainment, acquisition or valuation by others
- ❑ To have a sense of freedom and control in one's life
- ❑ To trust- to believe in a kind universe and to have access to the personal and social resources to sustain one throughout life, (Mate, 287-288)
- ❑ To have a sense of purpose, meaning, and transcendence- a connection with the Source of all Life and Love- to know oneself as part of creation and as part of something larger than an isolated, self-protective, and separate self

Key Components of Trauma

Wound(s) - Injury to self- varies among each individual- important to understand the factors shaping and individual's experience of the traumatic event(s)

Effects – Impacts of trauma upon a person's body, mind, and spirit (Athens, 4)

Event(s)- need for a compassionate trauma-informed approach that views an individual's behavior as a response to surviving a traumatic event or events

Ask “What has happened to you” rather than “what is wrong with you?” (Athens 2023, 8)

Underlying Dynamics of Trauma

Trauma involves a constellation of hardships, composed of the wound(s) itself and the residual burdens that woundedness imposes upon one's body, mind, and spirit: including repressed feelings, distorted beliefs and ideas, repressed and suppressed emotions, defensive coping mechanisms, harmful physical effects, and a very constricted and stressful way of living. (Mate',20)

Susceptibility to Traumatic Events

Some people have had life experiences that enable them to be very resilient. Other people in our culture may be more subject to traumatic events and may respond differently based upon sociodemographic and psychological factors like:

- gender
- age
- disability
- race – prevalence of unrecognized racial trauma
- ethnicity
- sexual orientation (Athens 17-21)

Racial Trauma

Race - a social construct that was developed during the late 18th century by European capitalists who sought to enrich themselves by exploiting and enslaving indigenous peoples from Africa to North America.

“Though racism impacts are real, in physiological and genetic terms, race does not exist .” (Mate’ 314)

Racial trauma has had devastating, but often unrecognized, effects upon African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and other ethnic groups in our society.

Research has shown that the internalization of racial bias and the repression of emotions created by racism has led to major health problems and shorter lives.

Multigenerational effects of racial trauma

Responses to Traumatic Events



May be emotional, physical, cognitive and/or behavioral



May be acute or chronic, mild or severe



May be temporary or prolonged



Vary among individuals
(Athens, 13-17)

Responses to Traumatic Events

Emotional Responses- may include panic, shock, helplessness, anger, fear, sadness, guilt and shame; may also include feelings of numbness, disorientation and detachment

Physical Reactions- autonomic nervous system may have a fight, flight or freeze reaction- may become hypervigilant and have tremors, sweating, rapid heartbeat, nausea or faintness- symptoms may persist for years after a traumatic experience has occurred and trauma survivors may experience chronic health conditions, like autoimmune diseases, gastrointestinal issues, chronic pain, and cardiovascular and neurological disorders

Vary among individuals (Athens

Responses to Traumatic Events

Cognitive Responses- may include difficulty concentrating and remembering, ruminating or intrusive thoughts, impaired decision-making, and excessive or inappropriate guilt

- Trauma often distorts one's view of reality:
 1. View world and people in it as dangerous, unpredictable, and untrustworthy
 2. Believe things will never change and view future as hopeless
 3. View oneself as damaged and/or incompetent

Responses to Traumatic Events

Behavioral Responses- may include restlessness, irritability, agitation, angry outbursts, argumentative behavior, withdrawal, self-isolation, high risk or self-injurious behaviors, and increased use of alcohol, drugs and tobacco

- ❑ In response to childhood or repeated trauma, some people cope by becoming people pleasers who prioritize the needs of others over their own, have difficulty setting personal boundaries, and tend to avoid conflict (Athens, 13-17)
- ❑ Some individuals develop an idealized self-image and expect themselves to be “perfect”

Impacts of Severe Trauma

Separates individual from his/her own body-
represses and disconnects from own feelings,
including gut-level feelings

Limits flexibility and ability to choose how
individual responds to life events- becomes
stuck in automatic defensive reactions,
especially under stressful circumstances

Fosters a shame-based view of self-
individual perceives self as a fundamentally
deficient human being- believes that he or she
is “not enough”- may be unconscious and
masquerade as very high self- regard
(narcissism)

Other Impacts of Severe Trauma

Distorts perception of the world
and other people

Prevents person from being able
to enjoy living in the present
moment and from becoming who
he/she was created to be

Epigenetics- Can affect gene
activity and be passed down
through generations

(Mate' 25-35)



QUESTION FOR FIRST GROUPS

How does recognizing that trauma is an internal injury that affects a person's body, mind, and spirit enhance your ability to relate compassionately to your own self and to other people?

Healing as a Spiritual Journey

A hand is shown from the bottom, held palm up, with fingers slightly spread. The hand is positioned behind the text, and its light color contrasts with the darker background. The background is a blurred, warm-toned landscape, possibly a sunset or sunrise over a field or forest. The overall mood is serene and hopeful.

Empowered Living as Authentic Self

Experience of Love, Freedom, Peace and Comfort

Forgiveness – may occur over time

Non-judgmental Acceptance of Self and Others

Truth –recognition of distorted perceptions

Healing of Wound(s) – feeling and surrendering of painful emotions

The Healing Journey

Healing Processes Within the Body

“Human beings are the only species on earth who have the ability to self-regulate by becoming aware of and selecting our thoughts, feelings and emotions and other epigenetic factors. Our everyday experiences of thought, feeling, emotion, belief, breath and focus are triggers that can set in motion a cascade of chemical reactions that we’re typically unaware of. Yet, these are the very events that can fill our lives with health, healing, and ease, or conversely with disease, suffering and despair.” (Braden 2025, 112).

Healing Processes Within the Body

Epigenetics – “Genes are units of strands of DNA which are located within the 23 pairs of human chromosomes that are located in the nucleus of the approximately 50 trillion cells that compose the human body. They are tuned into the energy field that underlies the world around us”

- ❑ Discovery that “the 24,000 genes that compose the human genome are not static or fixed segments of DNA that perform only one task; rather, they are dynamic and malleable and they react to the surrounding environment”
- ❑ “The genetic plasticity of our DNA empowers us to free ourselves from the hurt, suffering, and trauma that may be programmed into our genome through epigenetics and epigenetic factors.” (Braden 2025 114-115, 117)

Healing Processes Within the Body

Neuroplasticity- neurons are nerve cells that are most concentrated in the brain but are also found in other parts of the body, including the heart

- ❑ Neurons use electrical signals to share information generated by our thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs, as well as chemical signals, called synapses, that move across the cells.
- ❑ Mirror neurons – are located in the part of the brain that relates to key functions and they respond to our own lived experiences (and to experiences we see someone else having) by sending signals to the brain and body to support those experiences
- ❑ “The way we view ourselves in our own imagination triggers are mirror neurons to signal our body chemistry to support that self-image” (Braden, 120)

Core Principles of Trauma Informed Care

Safety- includes both physical and emotional safety

- ❑ Freedom from shame and humiliation
- ❑ Ability to express thoughts, beliefs and feelings without fear

Trustworthiness and Transparency- includes establishing trust by maintaining appropriate confidentiality, respecting boundaries and by being nonjudgmental, reliable, accountable, honest, transparent, and reliable

Collaboration and Mutuality –includes encouraging active participation in considering options and making informed choices

Core Principles of Trauma Informed Care

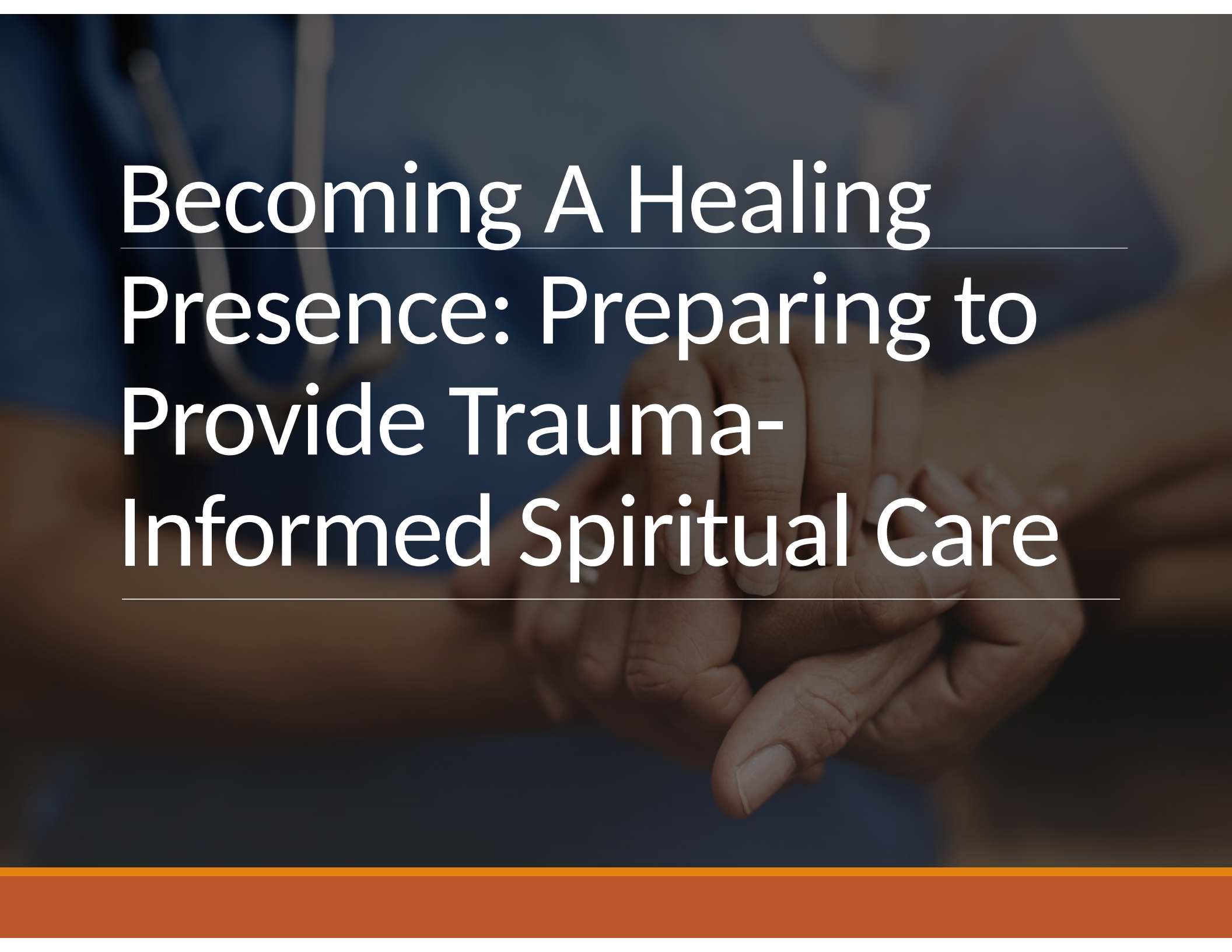
Empowerment – includes giving an individual an opportunity to share his/her own truth and story while showing empathy, respect, and compassion and using active listening, curious and gentle probing, and affirmation to validate the individual's own strengths in coping with the trauma

Cultural Awareness – includes avoiding making assumptions about an individual's cultural or gender identity and respecting an individual's cultural, ethnic, and/or spiritual needs

Responsiveness- includes being patient and remembering that every individual heals in his/her own way and time (Athens, 22-32)

QUESTION FOR SECOND GROUPS

How does understanding that healing from trauma is a dynamic inner process that involves transforming a person's body, mind, and spirit affect your understanding of your role as a chaplain?



Becoming A Healing Presence: Preparing to Provide Trauma- Informed Spiritual Care

Four Essential Characteristics

Authenticity and Honesty- involves being aware of one's own inner reality (including feelings) and being able to honestly express your own thoughts and feelings when struggling to understand the values and/or experiences of others.

A genuine non-possessive love for others (derived from the Source of all Life and Love) which accepts people just as they are and desires the best for them

An open-minded and non-judgmental attitude that respects others lived experiences, beliefs, values, and standards.

An understanding that the Spirit of God is working within each person, and that each person has the inner ability to resolve their own problems and move toward wholeness (Williams and Sturzl 1992, 89-90)

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Trauma- Informed Spiritual Care

The chaplain can serve as a compassionate “wounded healer” who understands that healing is a dynamic inner process involving an individual’s body, mind, and spirit, and who promotes post traumatic growth by:

Enabling a traumatized individual to experience the unconditional love and acceptance that derives from the Source of all Life and Love

Helping the individual to understand that feelings are “messengers” and to accept and express all of his/her feelings, including anger and healthy grief

Encouraging the individual to embrace his or her real identity by reconnecting with his/her authentic True Self

The Chaplain As A Healing Presence

Listen	Listen attentively, without interruption or distraction
Respond	Respond compassionately and ask questions for clarification
Focus on	Focus on the person's feelings and experience
Avoid	Avoid redirecting the conversation
Offer	Offer affirmation rather than assertions or answers
Value	Value moments of silence especially after the person has shared deep feelings (Post 2025, 114)
Build	Build trust by being authentic, non-judgmental, trustworthy, and by respecting confidentiality



Questions/Discussion

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