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Archdiocese of Los Angeles - Our Lady of the Angels Region

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### Protecting God's Children for Adults

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### Being Trauma Informed

By [Heather Banis, Ph.D.](#)

**What does it mean to be "trauma-informed?"** A daunting question in many respects, but one people are asking



themselves as awareness of—and encounters with—people living with trauma increases in our daily lives. It is also, in some ways, a deceptively simple question, that will be addressed in this article.

To be a trauma-informed (or trauma-sensitive) person means that you cultivate an awareness that trauma is a far more common experience than we would like to imagine and one that can take many forms in a person's life, including but by no means limited to:

- child sexual abuse or other types of abuse,
- genocide,
- combat experience in war, and
- domestic violence.

Further, it means that you recognize that trauma can have profound and lasting effects on those impacted—effects that are normal, predictable reactions to the traumatic experience. It means you understand certain things. Such as, sometimes, the ways in which a person,



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#### Heather Banis, Ph.D.

Dr. Banis is a clinical psychologist who has specialized in trauma, particularly in the lives of children. A graduate of Occidental College she went on to earn her Ph.D. at the University of Southern California, completed a post-doctoral fellowship at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, and in 2019 completed a master's degree, in Theology and Leadership, from Gonzaga University. In 2005, while teaching at Occidental College, she began working with the

who is living with trauma, is coping with that experience, may impact their comfort in interacting with others, and can significantly impact their faith and belief in God. Importantly, to be trauma-informed does NOT mean you are a trained professional with responsibility to address all the needs and issues that may arise.

**Trauma, by its very nature, threatens the very foundations of our lives**—child sexual abuse, commonly categorized as a "betrayal" trauma, violates the child's growing understanding of the world, their safety in it, and their capacity to trust others. This is frequently because most abuse is perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the child. Depending on who the perpetrator is/was and how those who care for the child protected and responded to the child, child sexual abuse threatens the child's most basic sense of safety in this world. It also threatens their confidence that people can be trusted.

The subsequent feeling of profound vulnerability may not be restricted to the setting or context in which the abuse occurred, but may extend throughout the child's world and into all their relationships. Trauma survivors commonly experience a profound loss of this essential feeling of safety, and that loss can persist for years, even for a lifetime. Hence, to be trauma-informed/trauma-sensitive, means that you are intentional in striving to foster a sense of safety in your interactions with others, regardless of whether you know of a person's history with trauma or not.

**On a practical level, what does being trauma-informed look like?** How might you strive to manifest trauma-sensitivity in your everyday interactions, with family, coworkers, or friends? Here are some suggestions:

- You are mindful of how you speak to others—you recognize that certain topics may be sensitive and possibly trigger a trauma memory, so you speak with care about such things that may pop up in a news cycle or simply in conversation.
- You are mindful of making light of or joking about certain topics. Perhaps both the topic and the vocabulary you use may be disrespectful and even cause further trauma. A common example could be an off-hand comment about survivors, who are suing an institution for abuse damages. Insensitive comments characterize survivors as exploitive and seeking an easy way to get money from "deep pockets."
- You consider the circumstances and the ways in which you touch others, knowing that even the most innocent well-intentioned "pat on the back" may be

Archdiocese of Los Angeles in Victims Assistance Ministry as a consultant. Since 2016 she has served as the coordinator of that ministry. Dr. Banis is the past Board Chair of the Board of Directors at Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center and McKinley Children's Center. A frequent public speaker, Dr. Banis was honored to speak at the USCCB General Assembly in November 2018, addressing all the Bishops from the United States regarding their pivotal role in responding to victims of clergy sexual abuse, and, to her esteemed colleagues on the subject of Radical Accompaniment and the Vocation of Victims Assistance Ministry, at the annual Child and Youth Protection Catholic Leadership Conference in Tulsa in June 2021. More recently, in June 2022, she spoke to the clergy in the Archdiocese of Seattle on Sacred Spaces, Sacred Stories - and in October 2023, she spoke at the Canon Law Society Annual Meeting, also about how to be trauma-sensitive in ministry. Since 2021 Dr. Banis has served as a consultant to the USCCB Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People and as a member of the North American Continent Working Group of the International Safeguarding Committee. Her favorite role, however, is that of grandmother to her two granddaughters.

an unwelcome touch for someone whose body has been violated.

- If you are in a position of power or influence, you reflect on how you lead, with intentional thought toward how direct you are or how you exert authority over others, with respect, rather than impunity.
- You recognize that trauma is not something you "just get over," but it is something you get *through*. So, you strive to be patient and supportive knowing that the significant losses of safety and trust are not easily restored. In fact, for someone who has lost those senses or had them violated, their very survival can feel at risk in even the simplest interactions with others.

**Conversely, even the most well-intentioned person can be trauma-*insensitive*.** Comments such as "oh, but that was so long ago—you're an adult now," or, "my child would never be in a situation where they could be abused," or "why can't you just forgive and move on," inflict harm by dishonoring the profound and lasting impact of a betrayal trauma on the survivor's capacity to trust. As trust is at the core of all healthy, healing relationships, comments such as these signal danger to the survivor, who yearns for safety and may already struggle to trust others.

### **What should you do, to be trauma-sensitive, if an adult discloses their trauma history to you?**

Be present, gentle and thoughtful in your response. It is not your job to "fix" things for adult survivors, and you certainly cannot erase the trauma.

When it comes to hearing disclosures of abuse from children, we must remain calm and actively listen to them. Then we must report what was disclosed to us to the appropriate child protection agency or local law enforcement, per our diocesan and state requirements.

Know that, particularly for adults:

- You are ministering in a trauma-sensitive way by ***listening***, attentively and without judgment or a rush to fix for adult survivors.
- You are ministering in a trauma-sensitive way by ***holding space*** for the person living with trauma to catch their breath, regroup, pause and center themselves. You are ministering in a trauma-sensitive way when you assist the person living with trauma to carry their sacred story forward as appropriate, whether that is by making a report to civil authorities, and/or our Church, or disclosing to someone in their family or circle of friends.

- Sensitivity to trauma and its impacts also means that you understand that each survivor is unique, even those who have experienced the "same" type of trauma.
- Survivors will not always behave the way you might expect them to behave, and that is OK.
- Survivors can and do heal and thrive.

If you are in a position or profession that requires an additional response, first be present, then demonstrate your trustworthiness by following through.

Survivors can and do heal and thrive, and you can contribute to this healing. Being a safe adult doesn't extend just to how we interact with children—it also impacts how we journey with survivors along the way. Respectfully asking what you can do to be supportive and follow through demonstrates your trustworthiness and helps to fulfill our responsibility to serve one another. When we prioritize safety for everyone, and let survivors take the lead in what does, or does not, help them to feel safe, we are contributing to an environment of hope and healing.

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**1) What are some practical ways in which you can interact in a trauma-informed way?**

- A)  Being mindful of how you speak to others, recognizing that certain topics may be sensitive and possibly trigger a traumatic memory.
- B)  Don't worry about how you make jokes with others-any topic is okay and no one should be triggered if you are clearly just joking about something.
- C)  Consider the circumstances in which you touch others, knowing that even the most innocent well-intentioned "pat on the back" may be an unwelcome touch for someone whose body has been violated.
- D)  All of the above.
- E)  A and C only.

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