

Project summary: Guidelines for Trauma-informed Mental Health Complaints Resolution



Acknowledgement of Country

We would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin nation as the Traditional Owners/Custodians of the land on which we conduct our work. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and the emerging leaders of the future.

Acknowledgment of lived and living experience

We acknowledge people with lived experiences of mental and emotional distress as consumers, family members and carers, including those who have gone before us or are no longer with us. It is only by being informed and driven by the voices, collective experience, and wisdom of those with lived experience that we can create meaningful change.

Authors acknowledgements

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The Mental Health Complaints Commissioner (MHCC) is an independent body established under the Mental Health Act 2014 to safeguard rights, resolve complaints, and recommend improvements to Victorian public mental health services (MHCC, 2023). The organisation upholds consumer and carer rights to complain, ensuring they feel supported and empowered to do so. The complaint processes are driven by lived and living experience (MHCC, 2020).

Recent research suggests that many people who access mental health services are likely to have experienced trauma (Isobel, et al., 2021). In recent years, there is an increasing attention to 'trauma' in mental health research and practice (Isobel, et al., 2021; Kezelman, Gallagher, & Schmiedgen, 2020; Krupnik, 2019). While there are various definitions of trauma, it is generally considered as an event, series of events, or set of circumstances "that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (Huang et al., 2014, p. 7).

Trauma may influence a person's experience of using mental health services as well as making complaints about the care received. It can impact how a person feels about making a complaint, the process of complaining, and the outcome of their complaint. Services that are aware of and understand these impacts, and take active measures to address them, are referred to as being 'trauma-informed' (Sweeney, et al., 2018). In the reformed mental health and wellbeing system, all services – including the MHCC – must act to better meet the needs of people who are affected by trauma (Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, 2021). To achieve this, the MHCC has undertaken a research project to define how their work can be trauma informed.

Why a research project about 'trauma-informed' practice?

Many mental health and human services in Australia and internationally have trauma-informed guidelines and practice principles that support them to work safely and sensitively with consumers and families impacted by trauma (Huang, 2014; Kezelman & Stravopoulous, 2012; McKenzie-Mohr, Coates, & McLeod, 2012; The Bouverie Centre, 2013). While there is a lot of literature on principles describing how mental health services can be trauma-informed, there was little information that explore how the process of making a complaint about mental health services can be trauma-informed.

To support the MHCC to establish a trauma-informed complaints process, research that explored the impact of trauma in this process was needed. The aims and objectives of the research would contribute to:

- Reducing/preventing the risk of a person being traumatised when making a complaint
- Finding and addressing areas for improvement in the mental health and wellbeing system
- Developing a set of trauma-informed guidelines and practice supports that assist MHCC staff and mental health service providers to work with people making a complaint, who may be impacted by trauma.



Trauma informed

What did the research project do?

MHCC partnered with The Bouverie Centre of La Trobe University to co-design and co-produce a research project that would support people impacted by trauma to issue a complaint in a safe and supported way. The research project firstly reviewed a selection of relevant literature and publications on trauma-informed practice guidelines currently operating across the mental health sector. It then engaged a broad range of MHCC staff and stakeholders to ensure the research collected diverse perspectives to inform and shape practice improvements. Figure 1 shows the work context and who participated in the research project.

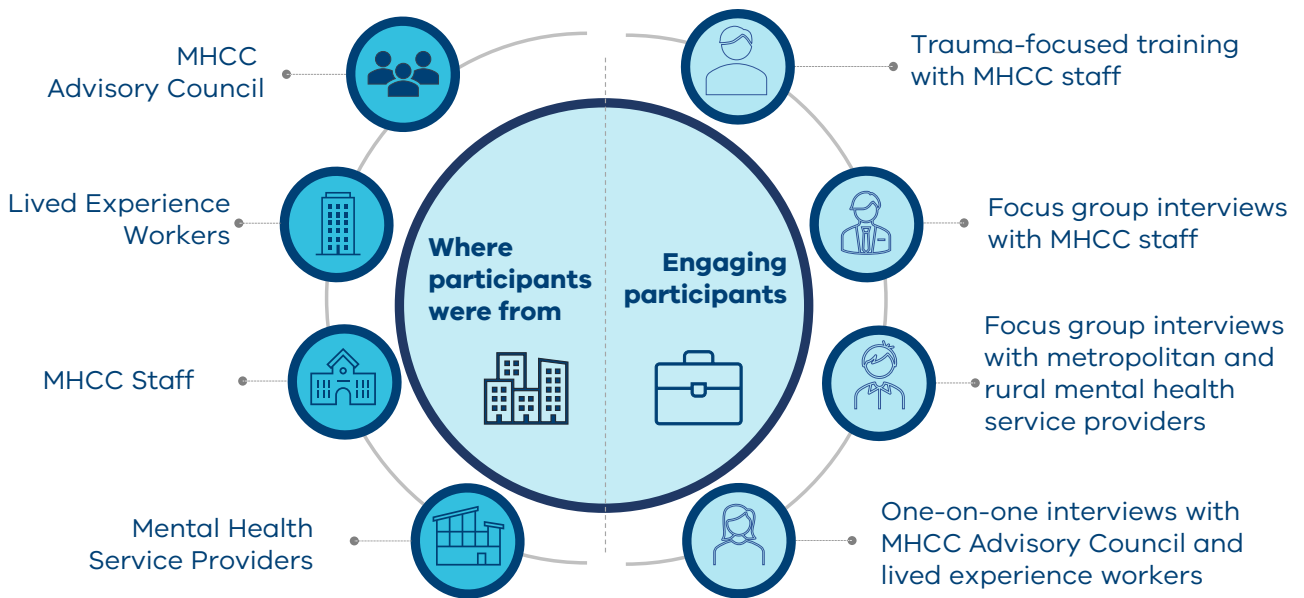


Figure 1: Research participants

The Bouverie Centre and the MHCC received approval from La Trobe University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC22239) to collaboratively carry out:

- **Focus groups and one-on-one interviews.** Consultations were conducted with key stakeholders and MHCC staff. The purpose of these consultations was to learn about people's perceptions of a trauma-informed approach to addressing complaints made about mental health services in Victoria, as well as areas in which current complaints processes could be improved. Crucial to this process was the engagement of lived and living experience voices, to advocate and inform service elements that foster trauma-informed practice. The interviews and focus groups were conducted with:
 - members of the MHCC Advisory Council including consumers, carers and individuals who have made complaints, to the MHCC or to services directly,
 - Senior Lived and Living Experience Advisors,
 - MHCC complaints resolution officers, and
 - Staff in public mental health service providers across Victoria.
- **Trauma-focused training for MHCC staff.** In addition to the consultations, staff at the MHCC attended a half-day training session that explored the impact of trauma on individuals, families, and communities. The training included a survey of all participants before and after the training. The purpose of the surveys was to identify what participants' learning needs were prior to training, and what competencies were developed following the training.

What did the research project find?

The qualitative data collected from the consultations provided important insights and suggestions that were developed by the MHCC into guidelines to embed and sustain trauma-informed practices in the complaints resolution process.

A thematic analysis revealed the key themes from the consultation for practice development, these included:

- Enhancing awareness and sensitivity about people's lived and living experience of trauma,
- Delivering tailored and person-centred responses,
- Setting expectations and boundaries in the process of upholding the rights of the person making a complaint,
- Addressing institutional structures of injustice and power imbalances in the mental health system
- Having multicultural and intersectional awareness and sensitivity
- Providing support during and beyond the complaints process, including peer support and the importance of social support
- Seeing complaints as learning opportunities and pathways for service improvement,
- Promoting staff wellbeing to ensure they are sufficiently supported to do the work.

These themes were the basis on which a set of guidelines were drafted. The guidelines underwent a second stage of co-production with members of the MHCC's Advisory Council and the Senior Lived Experience Advisors from the MHCC with the purpose of ensuring the language used was appropriate and the practice tips were relevant to the experience of making a complaint about mental health services.

Data collected from the training highlighted that current MHCC complaints resolution staff gained further knowledge and increased capacity to manage the complaints process in a trauma-informed way. The findings from these surveys also further justified the value of guidance being developed for trauma-informed complaints resolution both for current and future MHCC staff.



Person centered

How has the research project enhanced trauma-informed practice at the MHCC?

Findings from the reviewed literature, the stakeholder consultations, and the training were collated and workshopped. The findings were then translated to form the foundation of a new set of trauma-informed practice guidelines for the MHCC (see our trauma-informed guidelines). Each guideline is accompanied by a set of practice tips; stepping out ways in which MHCC and Mental Health staff can action each principle in their day-to-day work.

Throughout the development of these guidelines, we learned that people who make complaints about mental health services want to be heard, believed, understood, and supported. These trauma-informed guidelines were developed to improve the experiences and outcomes of persons making complaints.

These guidelines contribute significantly to practice change and capability uplift at the MHCC. They enhance the ability of the MHCC and Mental Health staff at services to consider the impacts of trauma when receiving complaints, as well as step out active measures to avoid re-traumatisation (Huang, et al., 2014). Further, the guidelines uphold the MHCC's philosophy of honouring and respecting the voice, expertise, and wisdom of people with lived experience of distress or trauma (MHCC, 2020). Collectively, these outcomes strengthen the MHCC's ability to ensure consumer and family stories contribute to building an improved mental health and complaint system, now and into the future.

Lived experience led

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