

# The Guiding Principles: Person-centred and Trauma-informed Approaches to Safe and Respectful Workplaces

August 2023

New provisions in the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) place a **positive duty** on organisations and businesses to take reasonable steps to eliminate the following behaviour as far as possible:

- discrimination on the ground of sex in a work context
- sexual harassment in connection with work
- sex-based harassment in connection with work
- conduct creating a workplace environment that is hostile on the ground of sex
- related acts of victimisation.

We refer to these behaviours as '**unlawful behaviours**' in this factsheet.

Being **person-centred and trauma-informed** is one of four **Guiding Principles** the Commission expects organisations and businesses to consider and apply when taking action to address unlawful behaviours. This factsheet provides information about what it means to take a person-centred and trauma-informed approach to creating safe and respectful workplaces.

Being person-centred and trauma-informed is important for:

- protecting the safety and dignity of people affected by unlawful behaviours
- increasing confidence and willingness to report unlawful behaviours
- supporting the healing of people affected by unlawful behaviours
- preventing further harm of people affected by unlawful behaviours.

## What does it mean to be 'person-centred'?

Being '**person-centred**' means putting the individual who has experienced or reported the unlawful behaviour at the centre of any response to the behaviour.

It is about listening to and supporting people. A person-centred approach keeps the person at the centre of decision-making and planning and gives that person choices about how the organisation or business will respond. Transparency and accountability underpin this approach.

A person-centred approach is different from a service/system-centred approach. A service/system-centred approach puts the *organisation or business* at the centre, instead of the person who has experienced or witnessed the unlawful behaviour.

The table below explains the differences between a person-centred approach and a service/system-centred approach:

Person-centred	Service/system-centred
Talking with the person, using supportive language	Talking about the person
Listening to the person with empathy	Directing and instructing the person
Planning with the person, focusing on harnessing their strengths and abilities	Planning for the person
Focusing on the person's needs, wishes and circumstances in a way that considers the individual's whole identity	Focusing on the person's environment, weaknesses and impact on the organisation
Finding solutions that work for the individual, tailored to their specific circumstances	Applying broad and blanket solutions tailored for the organisation
Understanding a person's context: specifically respecting and responding to the individual's cultural, linguistic, and other social and environmental needs	Applying broad contextual/organisational understandings of the situation
Viewing the person as equal and accepting difference	Consideration of positional hierarchy as a factor in determining a solution

## What does it mean to be 'trauma-informed'?

Being '**trauma-informed**' means:

- understanding trauma and its impacts
- promoting safety
- supporting choice and control for the person affected
- fostering safe and trusting relationships where disclosures of trauma are possible and are responded to appropriately
- understanding that recovery is possible for everyone.

Trauma describes events and experiences which are so stressful that they can be overwhelming. The word 'trauma' also describes the impacts of these experiences.

Trauma is common and can happen after a single event or multiple events. While people who experience trauma often have similar reactions, each person and their experience is unique.

Experiencing or witnessing unlawful behaviours at work or in connection with work can cause psychological and/or physical harm. The effects can be profound and long-lasting.

The impacts of trauma may surface at any time, for example, when the affected person is asked to speak about their experiences, or when similar experiences are shared by others. Trauma can affect memory, making it difficult for people to tell their story in a clear and complete way.

Being trauma-informed also involves understanding how the person's whole identity and cultural context influences perception of, and response to, traumatic events and the recovery process.

A trauma-informed approach recognises that the diverse factors making up a person's identity – including (but not limited to) age, First Nations background, ethnic background, class, sex/gender, disability, and migration status – may increase the impact experienced. Being trauma-informed means being respectful of every person's cultural background.

## What actions should an organisation or business take to be person-centred and trauma-informed?

A person-centred and trauma-informed approach will look different in each organisation or business. However, there are some key actions that organisations and businesses can take:

- consult and collaborate with workers to develop policies, processes, and other initiatives
- provide for the safety needs for both staff and customers (both physical and cultural safety needs)
- make sure that policies and procedures respect the diversity of workers and customers
- build trust and maintain transparency with workers.

## Reporting and responding to incidents

Organisations and businesses can be person-centred and trauma-informed when responding to incidents of unlawful behaviour by following the principles below:

- prioritising the safety, privacy and wellbeing of the person affected by unlawful behaviour and ensuring that confidentiality is maintained
- ensuring all affected workers have access to appropriate support(s)
- listening to the person affected in a compassionate, non-judgmental and sensitive manner
- giving the person affected by unlawful behaviour input and choice, including the choice not to pursue a report. For the person who wants to report the unlawful behaviour, offer a range of options (e.g., anonymously, over the phone, in-person) and choice about how to resolve a report
- handling reports fairly, impartially and reasonably in accordance with procedural fairness principles
- ensuring that all participants in the process have clear information about the process and how procedural fairness will be provided
- ensuring that responses are provided in a timely manner.

Being person-centred and trauma-informed does not always mean doing what the person requests. It means genuinely considering their wishes and the impact that decisions may have on them.

*\*This factsheet draws on resources from the Blue Knot Foundation and the Mental Health Coordinating Council.*

**Remember:** When workers feel unsafe to make a report, or organisations and businesses fail to respond appropriately, unlawful behaviours will likely persist.

You can find more information about the positive duty under the Sex Discrimination Act on the Commission's [website](#). Resources include [Guidelines for Complying with the Positive Duty](#), an [Information Guide: Relevant Unlawful Conduct, Drivers, Risk Factors and Impacts](#), a [Quick Guide](#), [Small Business Resource](#), and other [factsheets](#).