

# Facilitating with a Trauma-Informed Lens

By Eva Jo Meyers

[www.evajomeyers.com](http://www.evajomeyers.com)



Someone in tears, another unable to follow the conversation, someone else not showing up at all - we have all experienced these scenarios in our virtual meetings. As we struggle through the constant stream of stressful news, the uncertainty of what the next quarter will look like, and the sheer exhaustion of conducting all of our interactions through a screen, our overwhelm can easily lead to extreme anxiety and burnout.

One powerful response to mitigate this lies in using trauma-informed practices in our virtual meetings. Originally developed to support PTSD in veterans of the Vietnam War, the practices are designed to help foster resiliency and recovery in groups and individuals who have experienced extreme distress<sup>1</sup> (not dissimilar to our current reality).

By integrating these practices into our meetings, we can positively impact our collective well-being - rather than compound our overwhelm - each time we launch our communication platform.

<sup>1</sup> <https://oxfordre.com/socialwork/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.001.0001/acrefore-9780199975839-e-1063>



## Practice: **Safety**

Are we thinking about how people are feeling?



Create a warmer, more accessible environment.

Try greeting everyone by name as they join the meeting, designate one person to help with tech issues, offer closed captioning, or run an opening check-in question. Hold a moment of silence before you launch into your session to give people a chance to breathe, collect their thoughts, and acknowledge pain and suffering. Pause periodically throughout the engagement to give people an opportunity to stand up, stretch, and process what has been covered.



Create a set of norms so that everyone feels clear on how to participate.

Consider and collectively create expectations around speaking order, “video on,” side conversations, chat, etc., or let people pick an “intention” they want to hold for themselves during the session.



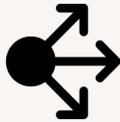
Allow us to show up as we are.

We have an incredible number of competing priorities weighing us down during this time of crisis. Do our meetings and engagements allow us to bring our full selves (and our kids in the background) into the engagement? Have we addressed the additional stress that our black colleagues are experiencing through yet another (and another) case of police brutality? Are we aware of who is being personally affected by illness or death? It is important to create time to talk about these issues and not simply gloss over them because we are only seeing each other via a screen.



## Practice: **Choice**

Create opportunities for people to choose areas they want to focus on, conversations they want to have, and events they want to be at to help everyone feel more in control. Instead of full group meetings, consider:



Groups that meet by specific issues as brainstormed at a prior meeting, (e.g. long-term strategy, short-term goals, or upcoming deadlines). This can also be done as breakout groups during the engagement that report back after developing a set of key points.



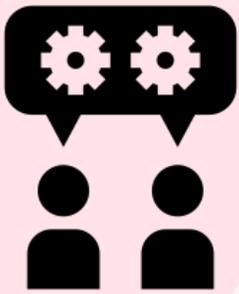
Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) that meet by affinity or identity, (e.g. parents, women, people of color); Communities of Practice that focus on improving areas related to life or work; or professional learning book clubs on topics selected by the group.



Job-alike groups that meet across departments to engage in peer-led problem-solving directly related to everyone's role, (e.g. managers, data analysts, etc.).



Note: If you notice someone who is resisting attending mandatory sessions or is highly distracted during sessions, offer the option to participate in a different way, like via an email or phone call later on; or ask for feedback on what would make the meetings more manageable for them (e.g. changing the time, size of the group, etc.).



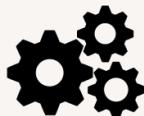
## Practice: **Collaboration**

Do your meetings feel “top down” with one person screensharing slides and doing most of the talking?



### Share meeting leadership roles.

Invite participants to sign up to serve as the advisors for upcoming sessions to do anything from providing input on what should be covered, to actually (co)facilitating the meeting. Rotate who takes notes, who keeps the time, who leads discussions, so that everyone has a chance to be hands-on.



### Use an interactive platform.

Instead of a slideshow, use a shared virtual space (like editable Google Slides, Jamboard, Miro, or Mural) to allow participants to contribute to the content in ways that are visual and representative of ideas in real time.



### Let people talk to each other.

Encourage cross-collaboration by using breakout rooms for brainstorming work and to connect more deeply on specific topics (rather than just listening to a series of updates from management). Whole group sharing can cause stress (and silence); pair people up, divide people into small groups, and allow some quiet think-time before inviting people to share, in order to ease the tension.



## Practice: **Trustworthiness**

Does everyone trust each other to do their job and work as part of the team remotely?



Be mindful of delegation and task-assignment during meetings.

It is easy to end up overcommitted when we are collaborating virtually - and to drop balls when we are stressed. Allow more time to complete to-dos, or offer the option to bow out altogether later; we all need to be cut a little more slack right now, and plans that have wiggle-room and are fluid may be more realistic, and are certainly more humane, than adding stress by blaming people when they are unable to follow through.



Get clarity in real time.

Since we can't walk over to your desk to ask a follow up question (and will instead need to launch another inbox-cluttering message or just move forward in the wrong direction), it's particularly important to slow down and set aside time for clarification questions during meetings.



Teambuilding is still important.

Just because we can't meet up for drinks or lunch doesn't mean we don't still need to build relationships. Find ways to bring teambuilding moments into your virtual meetings through check-ins, games, and humor, or schedule one-on-one virtual coffee chats with a handful of people to build stronger relationships in a smaller setting.

## Practice: **Empowerment**

Are you helping people connect and stay motivated during your meetings?

Create space for people to share their successes and progress.

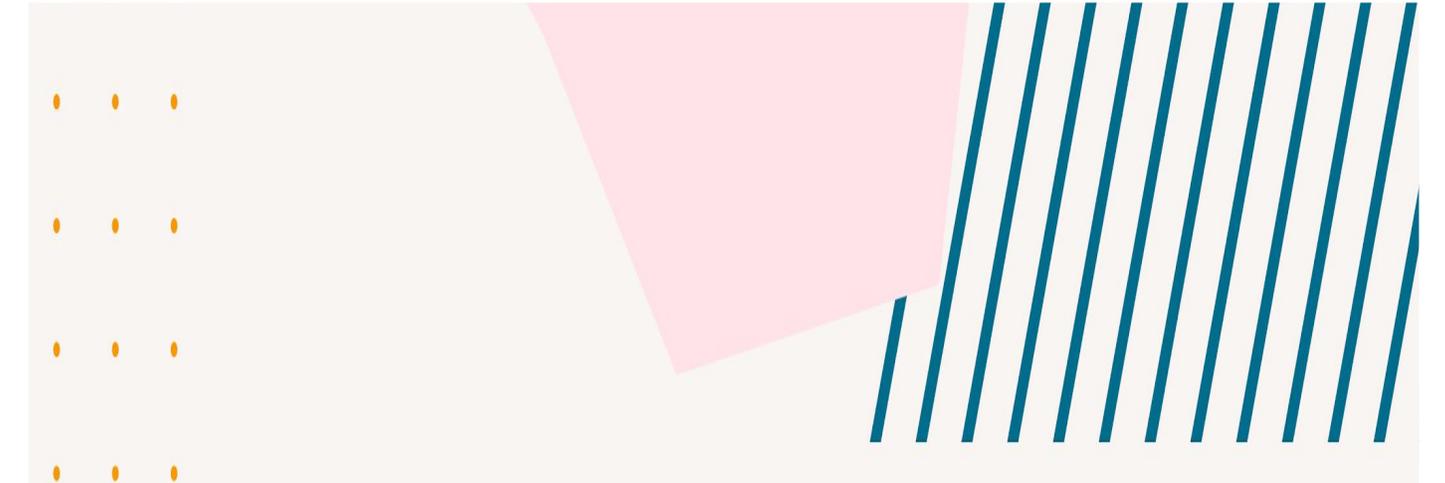
We have a societal tendency to focus on failure and gaps. Set aside time at meetings for people to share things that have been working, make wins explicitly visible, or give kudos. If you don't have an opportunity to do this during a meeting, send a quick email afterwards sharing your positive feedback.

Set up an accountability partner or peer-coaching system.

Allow colleagues to pair up during meetings to help each other explore ways through roadblocks, or help them connect via email or phone-number exchanges so they can talk and offer each other support later on.

Speak up and speak out.

If you see bullying or other disempowering behavior, call it out. There is nothing that will erode the bond between a team - and cause anxiety and burnout - like staying silent when someone needs an ally or when power dynamics are making people feel miserable. If someone is taking up too much air-time or talking over people during an engagement, interrupt or call them aside and remind them to be mindful of the harm this is causing to the group dynamic - and individual well-being.



Healing from this pandemic and dismantling the systemic oppression it has pushed into the spotlight will take time, and will leave us all with a range of emotional memories. Using a trauma-informed lens when interacting and meeting with our colleagues will not erase the traumatic effects of what we are experiencing; it is not a panacea. However, it may open up a path to ensuring that we are not adding to that trauma by mindlessly acting as if our professional engagements can just carry on like business as usual.

**I encourage you to try even just one of the suggestions here to begin to mitigate some of the anxiety, tension, and stress we are all carrying.**

I think you will find that not only will the people you work with feel more ease - you will, too.

