

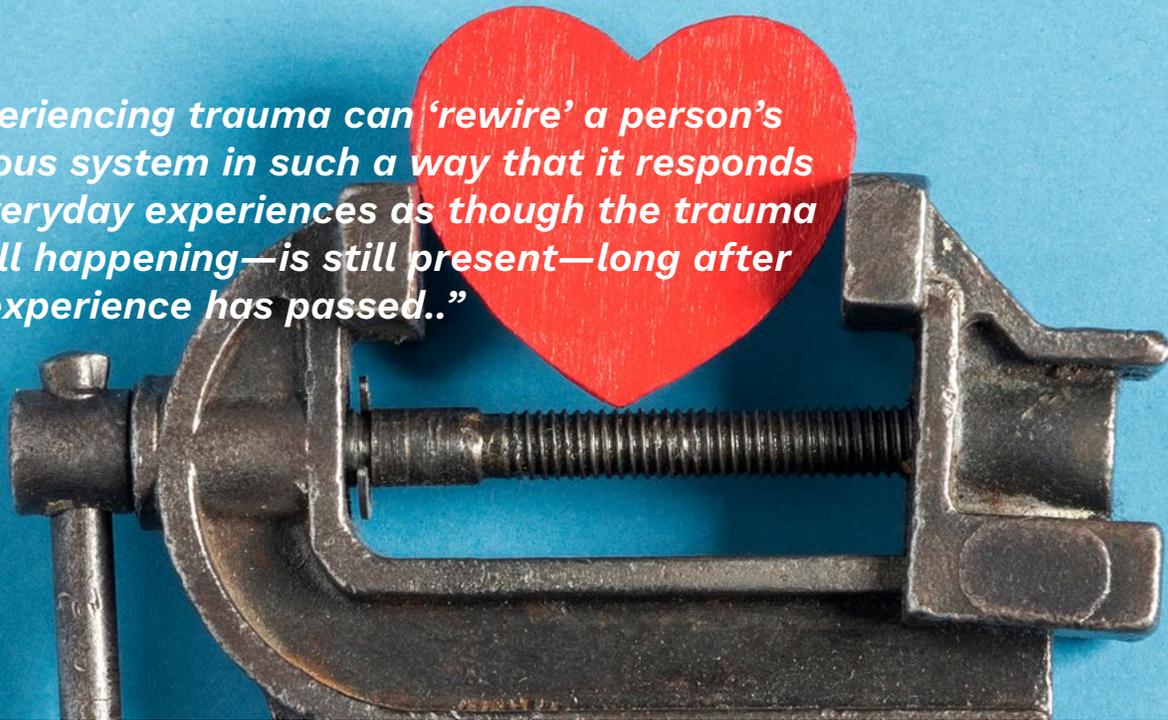


oaap
Oregon Attorney
Assistance Program

inSIGHT

Thrive in Law, Thrive in Life • ISSUE NO. 127 • SUMMER 2025

“Experiencing trauma can ‘rewire’ a person’s nervous system in such a way that it responds to everyday experiences as though the trauma is still happening—is still present—long after the experience has passed..”



Recognizing Signs of Traumatic Stress in Clients

By Bryan R. Welch

Being able to recognize and adapt to the needs of a client who is impacted by their traumatic experience is critical to helping them participate effectively in their representation. The trauma may be the direct reason for your client coming to see you, or it may be the result of an unrelated past or present experience.

Experiencing trauma can “rewire” a person’s nervous system in such a way that it responds to everyday experiences as though the trauma is still happening—is still present—long after the experience has passed. As a result of this rewiring, the client has organized their cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses around threat detection, protection, and safety in the present moment. Think of their “fight,

flight, freeze, fawn, and faint” system as being locked in the on position. Here some things you might notice when working with a person who has suffered a trauma. They may:

- be easily angered, frustrated, or irritated;
- have a flat affect, little emotion in their face or voice, or a fixed look or stare;
- be easily startled by loud noises, fast movements, people behind them, etc.;
- react defensively to what seems to you a neutral interaction;
- have difficulty focusing or concentrating;
- experience challenges with following through on tasks or following instructions;
- show signs of dissociation, such as incoherent timelines in recalling facts, unaccounted-for time, or difficulty with memory—especially around emotionally charged content;
- find it difficult to rest or restore, or might experience flashbacks, nightmares, trouble eating, difficulty falling or staying asleep;
- report any of a variety of physical complaints, such as headaches, body pain, gastrointestinal issues, fatigue, chest pain, dizziness, or changes in heart rate and blood pressure;
- develop negative changes in perspective or worldview, self-doubt, shame or self-blame, cynicism, pessimism, or changes to spiritual beliefs.

Being able to provide **trauma-responsive services** to clients reduces the risk of re-traumatization and helps both you and your client manage their case in a healthier, more productive way. ●

– **BRYAN R. WELCH**
JD, M. Coun., CADC I
Attorney Counselor, OAAP



OTHER WORKS BY BRYAN WELCH AT OAAP.ORG

inSight

- The Case for (and Against) “Mocktails” (Fall/Winter 2024)
- Canaries in the Coal Mine: Working Together to Reduce Burnout in the Legal Profession (Spring 2024)
- The Heartfelt Importance of Social Connection During the Holiday Season (Winter 2023)

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

“Trauma Informed Oregon,” (website), Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://traumainformedoregon.org/>.

“Common Reactions After Trauma,” National Center for PTSD, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, updated on March 26, 2025, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/isitptsd/common_reactions.asp

“The Sanctuary Model,” The Andrus Sanctuary Institute, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://www.thesanctuaryinstitute.org/about-us/the-sanctuary-model/>.

“Trauma-Informed Legal Advocacy (TILA) Project,” (website), National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://ncdvtmh.org/resources/legal/trauma-informed-legal-advocacy-tila-project/>.

Alexander S. Rusek and Aylsh B. Gallagher, “An Introduction to Trauma-Informed Lawyering,” Michigan Bar Journal, August 2023, <https://www.michbar.org/journal/Details/An-introduction-to-trauma-informed-lawyering?ArticleID=4671>.

“Trauma-Informed Prosecution,” Institute for Innovation in Prosecution at John Jay College, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://www.prosecution.org/trauma-informed-prosecution>.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach, SAMHSA Publication No. PEP23-06-05-005. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023. <https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep23-06-05-005.pdf>.

van Dernoort LipskyLaura with Connie Burk, Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009). <https://traumastewardship.com/inside-the-book/>.

van der Kolk, Bessel. The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma (New York: Viking, 2014).