Authentic Trainings, LLC

PRACTICAL, RELATABLE, & COMPASSIONATE

Greetings!

Welcome to your monthly dose of expert insights for professional development in SUD. It's a short list of articles and evidence-based tools to help you foster high engagement and retention and nurture the ideal conditions for lasting change. I've also included a self-care tip to help you kindle joy and excitement in your work.

If so moved, please forward this email to another SUD professional who could use it.

For Wounded Warriors

The current instability, whether economic, political, social, or related to global crises, can have profound effects on human service providers, especially those who carry their own history of trauma.

Here's how it may be impacting you or people on your team

Reactivation of Personal Trauma

Instability can trigger unresolved or partially healed trauma. Providers who have lived through adversity may find their nervous systems more reactive during periods of heightened stress, leading to symptoms like hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, or fatigue.

Compromised Boundaries

When systems break down or resources become scarce, human service professionals often stretch themselves to meet needs. This can erode boundaries, especially for those with trauma histories who are more vulnerable to:

- Over-identification with clients
- Guilt for saying no
- Difficulty prioritizing self-care

Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

Ongoing instability intensifies the emotional toll of the work. Trauma-exposed professionals may experience:

- Increased empathy fatigue
- Secondary traumatic stress

- A sense of hopelessness or helplessness, especially when structural issues (housing, healthcare access, safety) cannot be immediately solved

Moral Injury
During unstable times, providers may feel forced to operate in systems that conflict with their ethics or values. For someone with trauma, this disconnect can feel particularly harmful, amplifying feelings of powerlessness or re-traumatization.

Isolation and Disconnection
When systems are strained, supervision, peer support, and reflective practice often take a back seat. For providers with trauma histories, this can:
- Reinforce beliefs of being alone or unsupported
- Reduce access to regulation through co-regulation
- Increase emotional and professional risk

Resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth
On the flip side, providers with lived experience of trauma may bring deep empathy and strength to the work. Some find renewed purpose in responding to instability, using their experience to build rapport and offer hope to clients navigating similar storms.

When an individual is exposed to sustained or intense stress, two interconnected but distinct physiological and psychological phenomena can arise: **cognitive overload** and **allostatic load**.

Cognitive Overload
Cognitive overload refers to the state in which the **demands placed on the brain's processing capacity exceed its available resources**. This often occurs in high-stress situations where the individual is required to manage complex tasks, process excessive information, or make critical decisions under pressure.

Key Features:
- Reduced attention span and focus
- Impaired working memory
- Slower decision-making or poor judgment
- Increased likelihood of errors
- Difficulty switching between tasks (cognitive flexibility diminishes)

Causes Under Stress:
- Multitasking during crises (e.g., emergency responders)
- Information bombardment (e.g., during war, disaster, or exams)
- Sleep deprivation, emotional strain, or anxiety, which diminish cognitive capacity

Neurological Basis:
- Overactivation of the **prefrontal cortex** impairs executive functions.
- Elevated **cortisol** levels disrupt memory encoding and retrieval processes.

Allostatic Load

Allostatic load is the **cumulative physiological wear and tear** on the body due to repeated or chronic activation of the stress response system (the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, or HPA axis). The term "allostasis" refers to the body's ability to achieve stability through change, adapting to stressors.

However, when this adaptation is prolonged or inefficient, the system becomes taxed. This is allostatic load.

Key Features:

- Chronic elevation of stress hormones (e.g., cortisol, adrenaline)
- Immune system suppression
- Hypertension, cardiovascular strain
- Sleep disturbances
- Mood disorders (depression, anxiety)

Consequences of High Allostatic Load:

- Increased risk of metabolic syndrome, diabetes, and heart disease
- Brain structure changes (hippocampal shrinkage, reduced cortical thickness)
- Accelerated aging and telomere shortening

Interaction Between the Two

While cognitive overload primarily describes **acute cognitive strain**, allostatic load captures **long-term biological stress**.

However, the two often interact:

- Sustained cognitive overload can contribute to elevated allostatic load by prolonging stress response activation.
- High allostatic load can impair brain function, reducing resilience and increasing susceptibility to cognitive overload.

This interaction forms a vicious cycle, especially in individuals who experience chronic stress without recovery, such as caregivers, frontline workers, or people living in poverty or unstable environments

Here's how to use this information with clients. ⬇

When explaining cognitive overload and allostatic load to adults with trauma or chronic stress, it's important to use **clear, compassionate language**, **avoid jargon**, and connect the concepts to their **lived experiences**.

Here's a trauma-informed explanation tailored to adults who may be struggling.

[Download the handout to use with clients.]

Cognitive Overload (Mental Exhaustion)

What it is:

Think of your brain like a computer. It can handle a lot, but only up to a point.

When too much is going on, like too many thoughts, decisions, worries, or demands, it can "freeze," crash, or slow down. That's **cognitive overload**.

How it feels:

- You forget things easily.
- You can't concentrate.
- You feel mentally foggy or stuck.
- You get overwhelmed trying to make decisions or finish simple tasks.
- You might feel irritated or shut down completely.

Why it happens in PTSD/stress:
Your brain is in **survival mode,** constantly scanning for danger. That uses up the energy you'd normally use for thinking, remembering, or solving problems.

Allostatic Load (Body Burnout from Chronic Stress)

What it is:
Your body has a stress system that helps you survive. It releases hormones like **adrenaline** and **cortisol** to protect you in emergencies. But if you're under stress for too long, ike after trauma, your body stays in high alert, even when you're safe. Over time, this wears your body down. That's **allostatic load**.

How it feels:

- You feel tired all the time, even if you sleep.
- You get sick often or have pain with no clear reason.
- You have high blood pressure, weight changes, or digestion issues.
- You feel anxious, depressed, or emotionally numb.

Why it happens in PTSD/stress:
Your body keeps trying to adapt to constant stress, but it's like revving an engine without rest. Eventually, it breaks down.

How They Connect

- Cognitive overload is your brain struggling to keep up.
- Allostatic load is your body struggling to cope.
- Both can make you feel like you're failing or broken, but you're not. Your body and brain are doing their best to protect you.
- Healing involves learning how to feel safe again and slowly teaching your brain and body that they don't have to stay in emergency mode.

Gentle Tools That Can Help

- Grounding techniques (like deep breathing or sensory exercises)
- Safe routines and breaks from overstimulation
- Sleep, movement, and nourishment
- Therapy, especially trauma-informed approaches like EMDR or somatic work
- Self-compassion and not blaming yourself for how your body responds to trauma

Why does this matter?

- **Burnout Rates:** Burnout prevalence ranges from 30% to over 60% in helping professions, depending on the role and setting.
- **Turnover Intentions:** Many professionals report high intention to leave due to chronic stress, moral injury, and emotional exhaustion.
- **Impact of COVID-19:** The pandemic significantly worsened conditions, especially among ICU nurses and mental health providers.
- **Gender Disparities:** Women in caregiving roles report higher emotional exhaustion and job withdrawal symptoms.
- **Protective Factors Lacking:** Resilience training, emotional support, and job autonomy are often absent, driving people out of the field.

Is your team struggling with cognitive and allostatic load? Reach out. Let's design a custom training to give your team the tools to meet this moment with grace and resilience.

As always, thanks for reading.

Sandy

PS. Does your team need professional development in

- *embracing families,*
- *motivational interviewing, or*
- *trauma-informed care?*

Get a workforce development design to meet your organization's needs. *Email me to get started.*

On-Demand MI Training

Motivational Interviewing: A Step-by-Step Guide to Empower Others Toward Positive Change and Growth

Looking for general motivational interviewing training or a refresher? Take our introductory course, Motivation Interviewing: A Step-by-Step Guide to Empower Others Toward Positive Change and Growth.

Inside, get the practical conversation skills to transform...

- discord into collaboration,
- ambivalence into motivation, and
- blaming into empowerment.

Imagine empowering your clients toward better futures they truly want for themselves and their families.

Explore Motivational Interviewing: A Step-by-Step Guide

Motivational Interviewing (MI) for Criminal Justice Professionals

This on-demand **Motivational Interviewing (MI) course** is designed specifically for **criminal justice professionals**. This course teaches the core components of MI, empowering those in the criminal justice system to effectively engage and motivate individuals toward positive change.

This training is an excellent resource for anyone working in criminal justice settings, including professionals in

- *treatment courts,*
- *family courts,*
- *substance use disorder (SUD) treatment,*
- *mental health services, and*
- *other allied fields.*

Key Features:

- On-demand, flexible learning
- Tailored specifically for criminal justice and allied professionals
- Based on the latest edition of the MI guidebook, updated in August 2023

Enroll today and start using proven MI techniques to drive better outcomes in your professional practice.

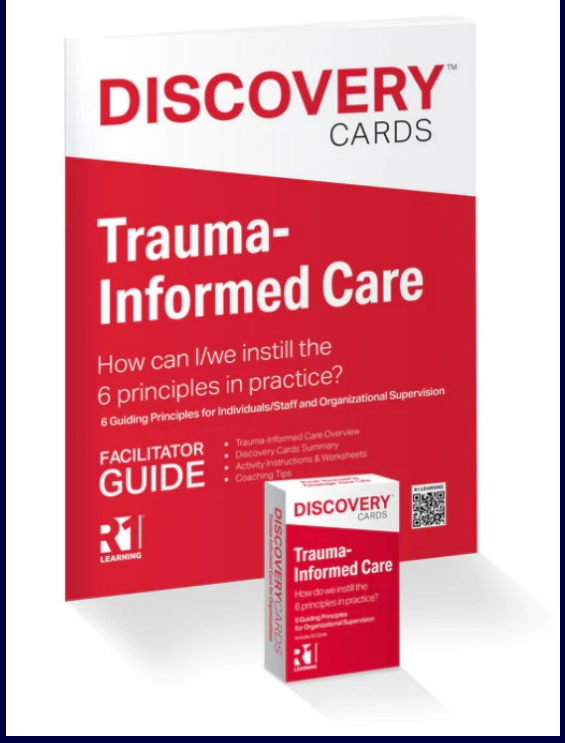
Want to buy this training for your staff? or white-label this training? *Get started today. Email me.*

Explore Motivational Interviewing for Criminal Justice Professionals

R1 Learning Discovery Decks

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) Adopting a TIC approach is not accomplished through any single technique, training, or checklist.

Effective trauma-informed care requires



constant awareness, attention, caring, sensitivity, and possibly a cultural change at the organizational level.

On-going individual and organizational assessment of the 6 Guiding Principles will help embed this approach into daily practices.

The purpose of this R1 Learning topic is to help organizations, staff, and practitioners assess services in conjunction with SAMHSA's TIC 6 Guiding Principles and improve the outcomes for individuals served.

Topic Kit includes one Discovery Cards deck and one Facilitator Guide – everything you need to run an effective session.

Buy additional card decks to match your typical group size. Using behavior-based and color-categorized cards, group members will gain a deeper understanding of 6 Guiding Principles and 3 Environment Types.

The Facilitator Guide provides group leaders with everything needed to run structured, action-oriented sessions, including activity worksheets, and coaching tips. Discovery Cards increase engagement, participation, and self-discovery and spark great discussions in group settings.

Buy today, and improve your engagement and outcomes.

Use the code **SANDY10%** to save on your own **R1 Discovery Trauma Informed Care Deck.**

Explore the TIC Discovery Deck.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) Topic Kit

This deck helps individuals identify which of ten (10) ACEs they experienced and which of the seven (7) Resilience Practices helped/help them endure, survive, and thrive.

Topic Kit includes:

One Discovery Card Deck (one for each group member; buy additional decks to match your typical group size). Card decks include:

- Sorting cards
- Category model definition cards
- Activity cards with questions to explore

One Facilitator Guide, which includes:

- Model overview
- Card deck summary
- Activity instructions and worksheets
- Coaching tips

Use the code **SANDY10%** to save on your own R1 Discovery ACES Deck.

Explore the ACES Discovery Deck.

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