



## Personal Working Environment Review for Remote Workers

Trauma-informed care (TIC) is based on growing knowledge about the negative impact of trauma. Trauma is pervasive in society and among service recipients and the workforce. The physical environment (e.g., parking lot, offices, lobby, outdoor spaces) can retraumatize individuals, affecting their willingness to participate and engage. When implementing TIC at an organizational level, it is important to consider how the personal working environment of remote workers can promote or hinder safety and well-being. The personal working environment can be anywhere you commonly work, including a home office, your kitchen table, or your local cafe. Other aspects of the work environment, including the social or virtual space, can also contribute to how individuals can feel valued and welcomed. The document below is a guide to reviewing your personal working environment for activation.

For most environment reviews, we recommend those impacted by the environment to be part of the environment review for feedback related to visible safety concerns and perceived safety concerns. However, for those working from home, gathering feedback from others might be difficult. Requesting feedback for a working area tied to home and personal life can be a vulnerable experience. Though we encourage all personal environment reviews to gather other perspectives in whatever way possible (e.g., a coworker, a family member, a service recipient), this tip sheet is specifically designed to guide individuals who may receive limited feedback from others.

Staff might be limited by what can be changed in their personal working environment due to family, financial, and cultural factors. Organizations recommending a personal working environment review should consider what organizational support can be provided as a result of this review.

**How often should you review?** Designing an environment to be trauma informed is not accomplished through a single event. It requires ongoing review and modification. Even if your environment remains unchanged, your life experiences are ongoing and might inform how you perceive your environment differently. Therefore, we recommend conducting a review of your personal working environment at least once a year.

**From what perspective should I review from?** There are two general perspectives that should be considered during your personal environment review. First, while many individuals you work with may not enter into your personal working environment regularly, they may still interact with it in the virtual environment. Consider the following areas that might shape their perspective of your working environment:

- Your background in a virtual environment
- Your camera angle
- Your distance from your camera

- Your lighting
- Background noise

Your perspective, as the individual who interacts the most with your personal working environment, is also significant in this review. For remote workers, it is important to consider where your designated working space is within the larger environment (e.g., a bed in your home, a corner in a cafe) in addition to other areas of potential activation.

**What are physical safety concerns?** Physical safety refers to a state in which preventative measures are in place to eliminate hazards and risks in the physical environment. Physical safety is essential for a healing environment staff and service recipients can thrive in. Risky behaviors and interior structural issues can undermine this environment. Physical safety concerns in personal working environments can include, but are not limited to:

- Ability to focus on work (e.g., taking a virtual work meeting while driving)
- Able to address interior problems (e.g., leaks, working next to an unsecure bookshelf)
- Having an emergency response protocol (e.g., personal earthquake safety plan)
- Trauma Response Protocols (e.g., how to manage work activation at home)

**What are emotional safety concerns?** Emotional safety refers to a state in which staff and service recipients can safely express their emotions and thoughts and feel confident in engaging with the organization. Emotional safety is important for impacted individuals to feel connected, respected, and have a sense of belonging to the environment. Emotional safety considerations can support factors that promote belonging, predictability, and welcome full identities. Emotional safety considerations can include, but are not limited to:

- A designated place for work separated from personal living and emotional regulation
- Accessible, organized information and resources
- Colors, textures, and other interior elements that support emotional safety
- Trauma Response Protocols
- Well-lit areas and natural lighting where applicable
- Space and time for regulation and co-regulation
- A quiet area for work

**What are virtual inclusivity concerns?** Virtual inclusivity is the practice of providing equitable access and a sense of belonging to the virtual space for individuals who might otherwise be excluded or underrepresented. Inclusivity when designing a virtual space can be reviewed both in the technological sense (e.g., captions) and the socio-emotional sense (i.e., identity representation). An inclusive virtual environment is about creating a welcoming space for all individuals to thrive, addressing historical and institutional oppression, and equitable opportunities to engage in that space. See [“Hosting a Virtual Meeting Using TI Principles”](#) tip sheet for more information. Inclusivity considerations can include, but are

not limited to:

- Invite (don't require) people to customize their profile name and add pronouns.
- Offer breakout rooms or additional time for peer to peer/affinity group connection
- Offer a small group connection based on certain identities.
- Provide captioning or a transcript of the meeting for accessibility.
- Enlarging the size/text of materials
- Providing technological support (e.g., different video meeting platforms and devices)
- How a virtual caller might appear in an in-person meeting

## Instructions:

1. *Select the area you most commonly work. Invite others to review with you if possible. For remote workers, review your environment first from your perspective and then from a virtual environment perspective.*
  2. *As you move through the space, ask...*
    - *What stands out to you here? (e.g., office in the bedroom, messy, tripping hazards, clean, organized, etc.)*
    - *How do we feel here? (e.g., stress, safe, excited, focused, confused, etc.)*
    - *What tends to happen here? (e.g., children running, lawn mower outside, watching movies, movement, etc.)*
    - *What changes can be made?*
  3. *Shift to your virtual space (if applicable) by turning on your camera and examining what your camera depicts. If you primarily work over the phone, consider what noise inputs a service recipient might hear. (We highly recommend getting input from someone who regularly enters your virtual space here.)*
    - *What stands out in your background? (e.g., bright light from the window, camera angle only shows head, plants in the background, a pile of laundry on the bed, etc.)*
    - *How do we feel here? (e.g., stress, safe, excited, focused, confused, etc.)*
    - *What tends to happen here? (e.g., phone calls, yelling, intake, movement, etc.)*
    - *What changes can be made?*
- If your occupation requires frequent virtual meetings, turn off your camera and consider the following questions. (We highly recommend getting input from someone who regularly enters your virtual space here.)*
- *Do you have a photo, your name, your organization's logo, or anything else once your camera is off?*
  - *How does that feel? What information can viewers obtain about you from what is displayed when your camera is off?*

- *What noises are picked up (and are more noticeable) when your camera is off?*
  - *What changes can be made?*
4. *Reflect on what factors lead to a positive response that could be used to improve areas with negative or mixed responses.*
  5. *If your spaces receive negative or mixed responses, consider how the space can be redesigned for both people served, the people you work with, and yourself. These solutions can include immediate solutions and long-term solutions.*

## Factors to Consider When Reviewing for Activation

**Perception:** Sensory information (visual, auditory, tactile, smell etc.) comes into the brain and is processed for meaning. In most cases, this processing is accompanied by memories and context (supplied by the hippocampus) and rational thinking and judgment (supplied by the frontal lobe). With individuals who have experienced chronic trauma or stress, the information provided from the memory areas, and frontal lobe may be missing or inaccurate. The interpretation of incoming information will be influenced by prior experience and knowledge (perceptual expectancy), which, in the case of trauma and toxic stress, is often related to threat. Further, sensory input will be intensified, meaning sounds will be louder, smells will be stronger, etc. Strategies to aid in perception can include being mindful of the possible intensity of sensory input and the potential connection to threat. Communication regarding people's perceptions is important.

- *When reviewing your environment, pay attention to any overwhelming sensory information. Can you hear footsteps from a family member next door? What mood does your personal working environment create? Is a pet frequently visiting and leaving your personal working environment? Was the floor recently cleaned, creating a distinct smell?*
- *For virtual spaces, consider if there is a policy for muting other participants or not and what images people have displayed if their cameras are off. When cameras are on, consider lighting and what shows up in people's backgrounds.*

**Attention:** individuals who have experienced chronic trauma or stress often struggle to *control* their attention (selective attention). They have been primed to observe all sensory information in order to avoid danger—thus, they have a difficult time not paying attention to everything that's going on around them. They can get easily distracted, and overwhelmed by stimulation. Because survival is a priority, attention will be automatically directed toward sensory information with a threatening nature. Strategies to focus attention should include the elimination or reduction of competing distractors and the awareness of potential threatening stimuli.

- *When reviewing your environment, pay attention to what stimulation might be distracting. How is the flow of traffic in this room? Is where work begins and ends visually defined? Where is the calmest part of the space?*

- *For virtual spaces, pay attention to your ability to focus when you feel when using “gallery mode” or “speaker mode.” Do people have the choice to turn on/off their camera when feeling overwhelmed? Does poor Wi-Fi connection disrupt the flow of the conversation frequently?*

**Memory:** Chronic trauma or stress can damage the memory area responsible for our recollection of facts, details, and episodes (the hippocampus)—those things that we are able to consciously “declare”. Therefore, when trauma survivors struggle to remember information or stories change, we shouldn’t jump to the conclusion that they are lying. It simply may reflect impairment in that brain area. It’s possible that the information never made it into long-term memory, or that the memory is fragmented and incomplete. In contrast, a trauma survivor’s memory for threat and danger is often quite strong. This implicit memory happens outside of our conscious awareness and can easily evoke a stress response.

- *When reviewing your environment, pay attention to what information you are receiving. Are there signs of work outside your personal working environment? What does art, colors, and imagery in your personal working environment remind you of?*
- *For virtual spaces, pay attention to moments where you might feel overwhelmed by information. Are there any pauses or documents used to maintain memory and attention to the present?*

**Executive Function:** The frontal lobe is responsible for the cognitive processes known as executive function. Among these are impulse control and self-regulation, decision-making, judgment, and planning. These functions are often impaired with individuals who have experienced chronic trauma or stress and can be the root of many problematic behaviors. Fortunately, people can learn strategies to compensate for impaired function. Further, when the stress response areas of the brain (amygdala, hypothalamus) are less active it allows the frontal lobe to be engaged. Reducing stress and trauma is helpful in this regard. Strategies to aid with impaired executive function should focus on building skills around decision making, controlling impulses and planning. Sometimes, however, these individuals will need us to act as their frontal lobe.

- *When reviewing your environment, pay attention to how your personal working environment is organized. Is it clear where everything you need is? Are there too few or too many choices to make?*
- *For virtual spaces, are people new to the space informed of how to navigate the program (e.g., Zoom, Teams, etc.) with clear and easy to follow directions?*

**Attachment and Bonding:** Social support is key to an individual’s ability to be resilient in the face of trauma and toxic stress. Healthy attachment and bonding offer a buffering effect for stress and promote beneficial prosocial behaviors. In the brain, tactile stimulation, through positive touch, is associated with a release of oxytocin and serotonin—both influencing mood, pleasure, and happiness. Imitation and the ability to attribute mental states to others (theory of mind) are fundamental to the development of

empathy, but rely on human interaction. Disrupted attachment is not uncommon among trauma survivors, and is prevalent within the child welfare system, therefore it is important to promote consistent and reliable relationships and positive social support.

- *When reviewing your environment, consider how the spaces “humanize” you. Do you have a comfortable seat? Do you feel welcomed and yourself in your personal working environment? Can you access movement and joy in your space?*
- *For virtual spaces, is there designated time for people to feel welcomed in the space? Can people see each other or are cameras turned off?*

*See also [Agency Environmental Components for Trauma Informed Care](#) or p. 5 of [Key Ingredients for TIC Implementation](#) for suggested factors to consider.*