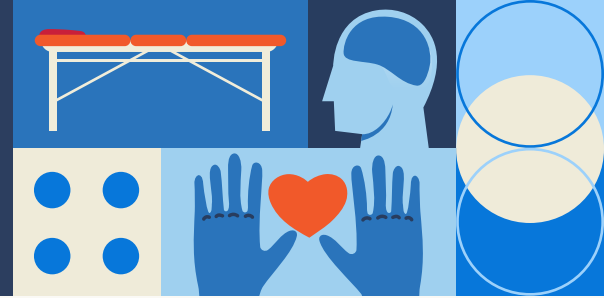


Trauma Informed Approach in TCI-Massage



Forced migrants often experience multiple forms of trauma, including torture, which can shape how they access and experience massage therapy. Experiences of trauma can affect how safe people feel in their bodies and with others. When safety has been repeatedly violated, clients may become more vigilant, cautious, or wary of others. Common protective responses include heightened awareness of potential threats, avoidance, withdrawal, difficulty trusting others, or dissociation. This hypervigilance is often accompanied by increased muscle tension and pain. These responses reflect the body and mind's effort to prevent further harm.

Healthcare settings, including massage therapy, can trigger these responses. Massage often involves elements that may resemble aspects of past trauma, such as being in a small or enclosed space, closed doors, close physical proximity, touch, or physical exposure. Working with an unfamiliar provider or in a new environment can increase this sense of risk. In addition, trauma can lead to ongoing autonomic nervous system dysregulation, where the body remains in a heightened state of threat even in safe conditions and may require support to help regulate.

TCI-Massage Trauma Informed Principles



Physical and emotional safety



Client choice and control in all aspects of the massage



Consistency and follow-through to build trust over time



Clear, ongoing communication between clients, massage therapists, and interpreters

TCI-Massage Trauma Informed Practices

TCI-Massage embeds trauma-informed care through structural features that shape how services are delivered. These elements vary in how easy they are to implement and depend on the setting and available resources.



Message in an Integrated Care Context

TCI-Massage is delivered within a clinic that provides psychosocial services (typically including psychotherapy and social work services). Clients are already familiar with the clinic's environment and have established relationships with staff. This familiarity helps to build safety and trust over time. While the massage therapist and the massage process may be new, the setting itself is known, which helps facilitate client engagement in massage. Both clients and clinicians noted that many clients would be unlikely to access massage in an unfamiliar setting as a standalone service. Offering massage within a familiar environment and existing relationships, such as a trusted treatment center, provides continuity that makes engagement more accessible and acceptable.

The integrated setting also provides clinical support. Psychological, social work, and nursing services are available as needed, and clinicians are on-site if a crisis arises during a massage therapy session. Massage therapists can also review relevant information in the electronic health record and consult with other providers to coordinate care. This is particularly important for clients with complex physical and mental health needs. Clinic staff also contributed to the trauma-informed design of TCI-Massage. The massage team consulted with clinicians to develop safety protocols and practices that support clients' physical and emotional safety.



Consistent Therapeutic Relationships

When trust has been violated through human rights abuses and other traumatic experiences, rebuilding trust takes time. TCI-Massage supports this process by pairing each client with the same massage therapist for ten weeks. This continuity allows trust and relationship-building to develop gradually and gives clients the space to move at their own pace during massage.

Working with the same therapist also allows the therapist to develop a deeper understanding of the client's history, needs, and preferences. This consistency supports a predictable experience for clients, which can increase feelings of safety. It also helps ensure that client choices are remembered and implemented across sessions.



Detailed Intake Process

At least thirty minutes of the first massage session is dedicated to an intake discussion. The goal is to ensure clients understand what massage is, know what to expect during a session, and feel supported in expressing preferences.

In the first session, the massage therapist uses a body outline handout or references to their own body to explain where massage can be provided and elicit the client's preferences. They also make use of the body outline handout to help clients identify areas of pain, discomfort, injury, or other concern and rate them from 1 to 10. This process is done slowly, with encouragement to set boundaries, and clients are reminded that they can change their preferences at any time.

The intake also includes discussion of preferences related to massage materials and the environment, such as lighting, music, body positioning, and bolstering. This allows the massage therapist to create a space that feels safe and comfortable for the client. It also provides an opportunity for clients to practice expressing their preferences, which can be difficult for clients who have experienced trauma, particularly when interacting with someone in a position of authority or in an unfamiliar setting.

The intake process itself supports autonomy and choice. Having control over how one's body is touched can help clients re-establish a sense of control and create conditions for safe, consensual therapeutic touch. Explicitly telling clients that the massage is for them, that they will be asked about pressure and pacing, and that they can stop the massage at any time is an important part of informed consent.





Fully Clothed Massage

TCI-Massage is typically provided over clothing to account for trauma histories, cultural considerations, and individual preferences. For some clients, particularly those who have experienced sexual assault or torture, remaining clothed can serve as a signal of safety during the session. Many clients also come from cultural contexts where the removal of clothing or direct contact with certain areas of the body may not be acceptable.

Although some clients may feel comfortable with or prefer draped unclothed massage, offering a fully clothed option makes massage more accessible for clients with a range of trauma histories and backgrounds. Providing clients with a choice between clothed, partially clothed, or draped massage is an alternative option, which supports autonomy and allows the approach to be tailored to individual needs. A top sheet and blanket are used for draping to provide an additional layer for warmth and a sense of containment.



Massage Chair Option

TCI-Massage offers clients a choice between a massage table and a massage chair. Chair massage can increase accessibility for clients with physical limitations that make lying on a table difficult. It can also be helpful for clients who experience hypervigilance, as reclining may feel unsafe or uncomfortable. A seated position may allow clients to receive massage while

maintaining a greater sense of control and awareness of their surroundings. For some clients, this may support a gradual reduction in vigilance over time. Chair massage may also be preferred for clients who tend to fall asleep when prone, as it can support wakefulness and engagement in the TCI-Massage experience. Including a chair option broadens access and allows massage to be adapted to individual comfort and needs.



Interpreters in Massage Sessions

Clients need to be able to express their needs and preferences during massage, especially related to pressure, technique, and body areas touched or to pause or stop a session at any time. When a language barrier exists, core elements of trauma-informed care, such as communication and autonomy, are compromised. Clients may not be able to communicate discomfort, set boundaries, or make informed choices, which can increase risk and contribute to a sense of loss of control. Because many forced migrants have limited English proficiency, interpreters are a central component of TCI-Massage. Interpreters support real-time, two-way communication, allowing clients to understand what is happening, express preferences, and maintain their autonomy throughout the session. If a client is sufficiently able to express themselves without an interpreter, even with limited English, interpreters may not be necessary or can be called in if needed.

Massage Therapist-Level Practices (What Providers Do)

In addition to structural elements, trauma-informed care is enacted through specific practices during each session. These practices can be integrated into any massage setting to encourage clear communication, reinforce client choice, and support safety.



Self-Regulation

Clients who have experienced significant trauma are often sensitive to the emotional and physiological states of others. A massage therapist's level of calm and regulation can directly influence a client's sense of safety. To support this, therapists are encouraged to begin each session in a regulated and grounded state whenever possible. When therapists feel dysregulated, they can incorporate simple grounding practices that support both themselves and the client, such as slow diaphragmatic breathing, gentle stretching, guided imagery, or mindfulness practices. Attention to presence and regulation should continue throughout the session. Taking time before, during, and after the session to create a calm, predictable environment can help support a client's sense of safety.



Moving Slowly

Slow, predictable movements are easier for clients to track and anticipate, which can support a sense of safety. For clients with trauma histories, sudden or unexpected movement may increase startle responses or discomfort. Massage therapists can incorporate slower pacing in multiple aspects of the session, including moving around the table, placing hands on the client's body, and moving across the skin or clothing. Slowing the pace of speech and gradually introducing new techniques over time can further support predictability and safety.



Communicating Movements

When a massage therapist communicates their physical movements to the client, it helps the client understand what is happening and about to happen. For example, a therapist might say, "I am going to place my hand on your back," or "I am going to move to the other side of the table." Clients who are hypervigilant are closely monitoring and highly responsive to their surroundings. Clear, ongoing communication can reduce hypervigilance by helping clients understand actions that may be outside their view. This can help lower cognitive load and support a greater sense of ease during the session.



Using a Tell-Show-Do Approach

Another way to support predictability and client choice is through the Tell-Show-Do approach. This technique helps clients understand what to expect before a new technique is introduced. First, the therapist explains the option. For example: "There is a massage technique I would like to offer. It involves light to moderate tapping, often on areas like the back. It can help stimulate circulation and increase alertness." Next, the therapist demonstrates the technique, either on the massage table or on their own body. Finally, with the client's consent, the therapist applies the technique to the client, starting gently and adjusting based on the client's feedback. This stepwise approach allows clients to anticipate what will happen, ask questions, and make informed choices.



Frequent Check-Ins and Inviting "No" as an Acceptable Response

Checking in is a common part of massage and is especially important when working with clients who have experienced trauma. Frequent check-ins help clients anticipate what will happen next and create opportunities to express preferences or request changes. Examples include asking whether the pressure feels appropriate or whether the client is warm enough. This practice supports continuous consent and shared control throughout the session. It also helps build trust by demonstrating that the therapist is attentive and responsive to the client's needs. Therapists can use check-ins to reinforce safety and maintain a collaborative experience.

Check-in questions are often phrased in ways that make it easiest to say "yes." For example, "Is that pressure okay?" often leads clients to agree, even if they are uncomfortable. A trauma-informed approach to communication actively creates space for choice. Massage therapists can do this by asking questions that invite a range of responses, such as, "Would you like more or less pressure?" This makes it easier for clients to express preferences.



It is also important to normalize saying "no." Therapists can explain that part of their role is to understand when something is not working and that hearing "no" helps them provide better care. Framing "no" as helpful and expected can reduce pressure to comply.

Providing clients with language can further support this process. For example: "If something feels uncomfortable, you can say, 'I want less pressure in that area,' or 'Please stop working in that area.'" Offering simple scripts helps clients move directly to expressing what they need without having to find the words in the moment. Therapists can also model saying "no" by describing how they communicate their own preferences in similar situations. Repeatedly inviting and reinforcing clients to say "no" helps clients practice self-advocacy. This supports safety during the massage and builds skills that can extend to other areas of life.



Repeating Key Information

When someone is experiencing the effects of trauma, it can be more difficult to process and retain information. For this reason, it is helpful to repeat important information throughout the session. What may feel repetitive to the therapist may be necessary for the client. For example, a client may not remember details discussed earlier about how today's session will include new material. Without clear and repeated communication, these changes may feel unexpected or unsettling. Repeating key information supports understanding and reinforces transparency. Even when it feels redundant, repetition can strengthen trust and reduce the likelihood of surprise.

Taken together, these elements summarize some key strategies to integrate trauma-informed care into massage therapy. For many clients who have experienced trauma, including torture, harm has involved physical contact and violations of bodily autonomy. As a result, touch-based services can feel threatening. With trauma-informed design and intentional practice, massage can instead become a space where touch is predictable, consensual, and safe. In this context, massage offers a unique opportunity to support healing through safe, respectful physical contact. By prioritizing communication, trusting relationships, client autonomy, and predictable experiences, massage therapists can create the safe and supportive conditions necessary for healing.

➔ [Learn more about the research: cvt.org/what-we-do/advancing-research/](https://cvt.org/what-we-do/advancing-research/)