



care for the public

trauma-informed service design

rachael dietkus, lcsw

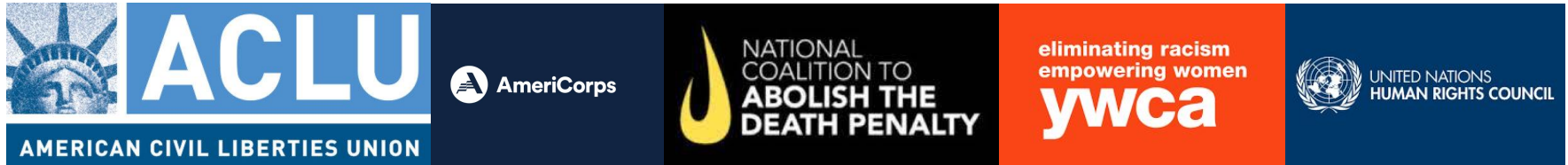
founder, social workers who design

thursday, 18 september 2025

25 years...

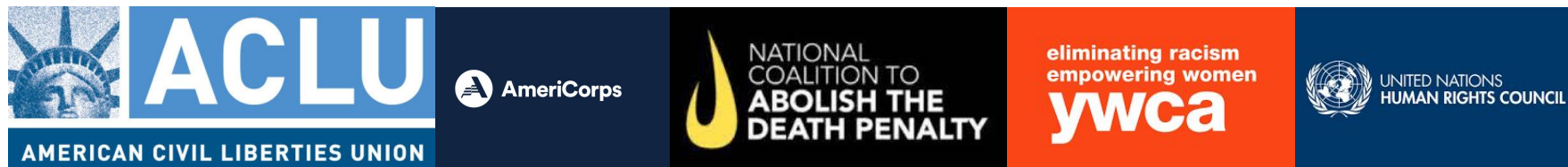
25 years...

1998 - 2008 (pre-social work)



25 years...

1998 - 2008 (pre-social work)

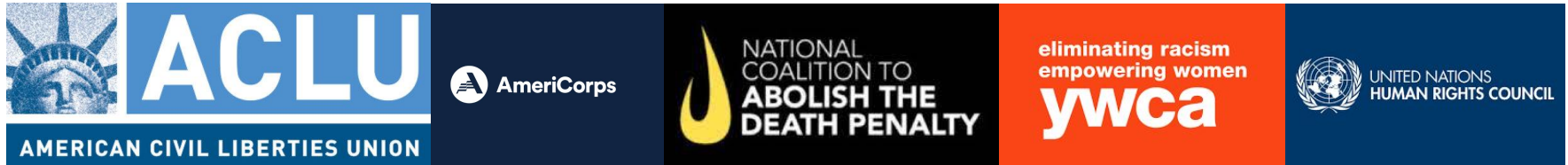


2008 - present (since social work)



25 years...

1998 - 2008 (pre-MSW)

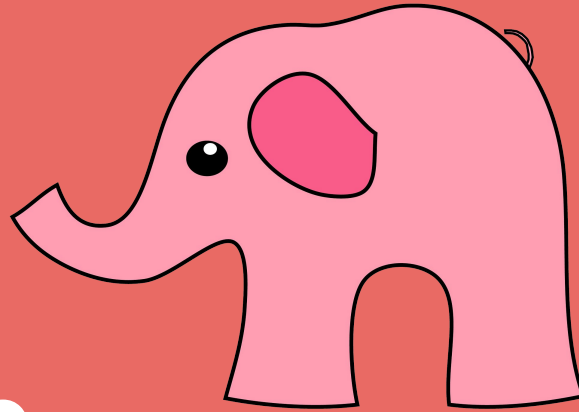


2008 - present (post-MSW)



as we begin...

**the chaos
is not
normal.**



hypernormalisation *noun*

pronounced: HY-per-nor-mal-i-ZAY-shun

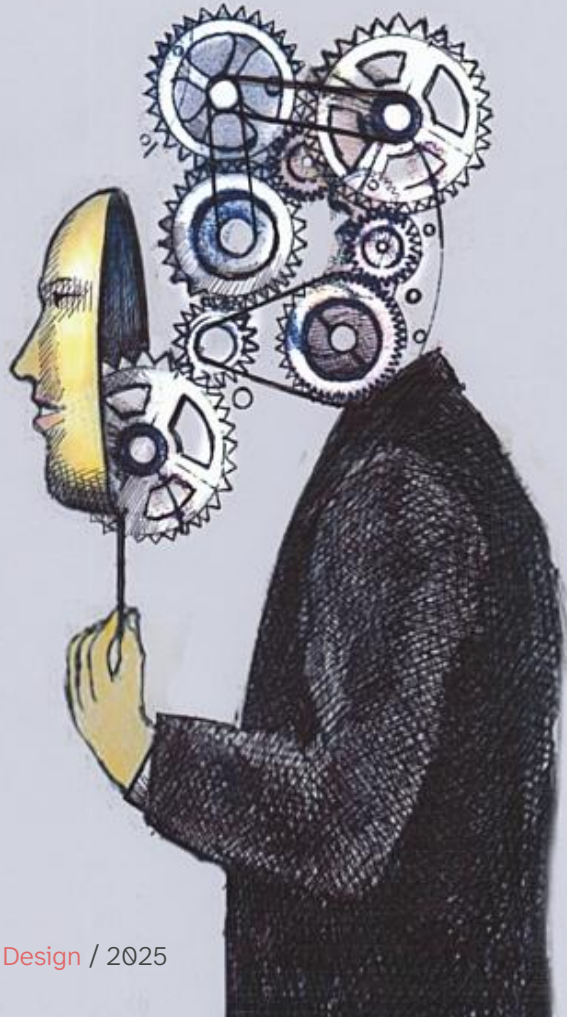
The collective acceptance of a distorted or false reality, often characterized by a growing sense of unease and a disconnect between what people know is true & how they are supposed to act.

hypernormalisation *noun*

“It’s ‘the visceral sense of waking up in an alternate timeline with a deep, bodily knowing that something isn’t right – but having no clear idea how to fix it. **It’s reading an article about childhood hunger and genocide, only to scroll down to a carefree listicle highlighting the best-dressed celebrities or a whimsical quiz about: ‘*What Pop-Tart are you?*’**”

- **Rahaf Harfoush**, digital anthropologist
as quoted in *The Guardian*, 22 May 2025

True Self



False Self

The psychoanalytic concept of the "true self" and "false self," developed by **Donald Winnicott**, provides a powerful framework for our current understanding of the individual and collective psychological toll of hypernormalisation.

**can we sit with
discomfort?**

**how will we
care for the
public?**

where we're going together

- Public service design at a crossroads
- Care as infrastructure
- Trauma as a context for design
- From throughput to trust
- What we can carry forward

It's a beautiful day

in this neighborhood,

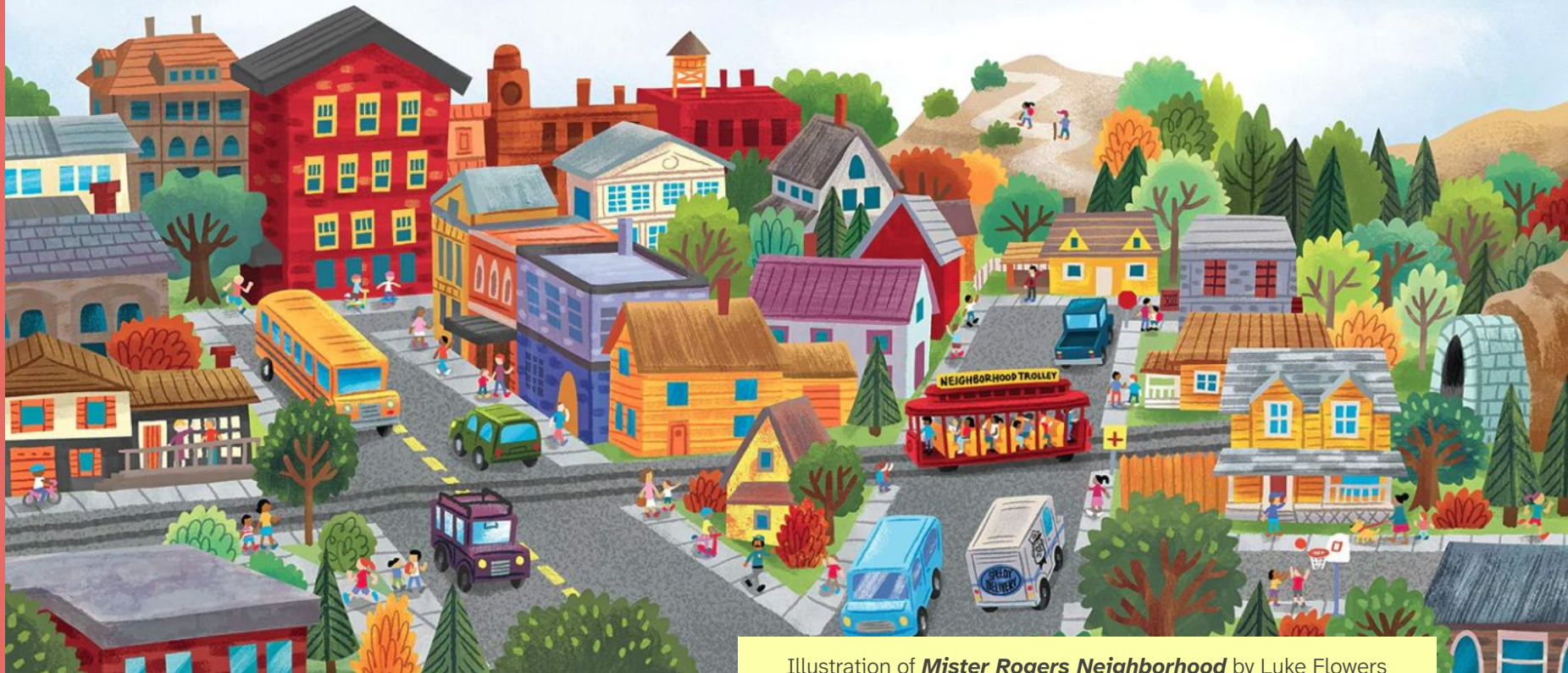


Illustration of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* by Luke Flowers



Rogers with one of the show's regulars, François Clemmons. Photograph: John Beale

**who has cared
for you?**

public service design is at a crossroads

where do we go from here?

**reality +
hope +
care as
infrastructure**



**“You can’t be
neutral on a
moving train.”**

– Howard Zinn

Aerial view of tracks
by Getty Images

**is this not
trauma by
design?**

**slowing down
and taking the
time that's
necessary can
become the acts
of resistance**

**Move Carefully and Fix
Things** sticker by Bill Hunt

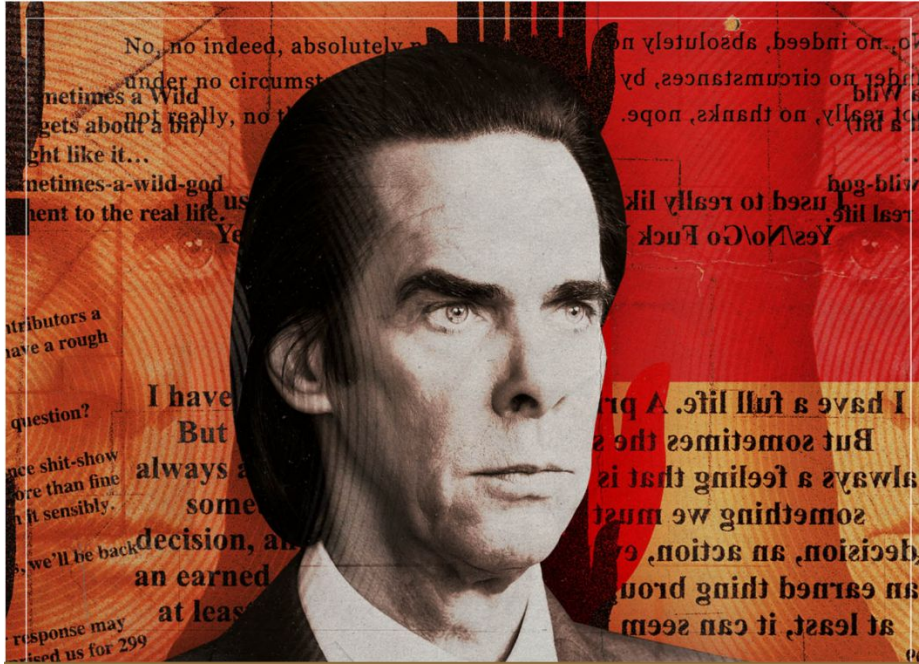


a few thoughts on hope + care

hope-full design

inspired by Chayn: www.chayn.co

- Radical hope plays a pivotal role
- A hopeful practice is meeting people where they are
- Growth, resilience, and healing are in constant relationship with hope



“Hopefulness is not a neutral position—it is adversarial. It is the warrior emotion that can lay waste to cynicism. Each redemptive or loving act says: the world has value. People have value.”

**what role is
hope playing in
your work right
now?**

cultures of care

inspired by the Othering & Belonging Institute: belonging.berkeley.edu

- **Care is developed through the many seemingly small moments in daily life:** Care isn't a huge pronouncement, a grand gesture, or a declaration of right or wrong.
- **Standpoints of care:** Care must be looked at from various perspectives – from the standpoint of **receivers** of care as well as the **takers** and **givers** of care.
- **We can build a culture of care in our services**

**where is more care
needed in your
work and within
your agency?**

trauma as a context for design

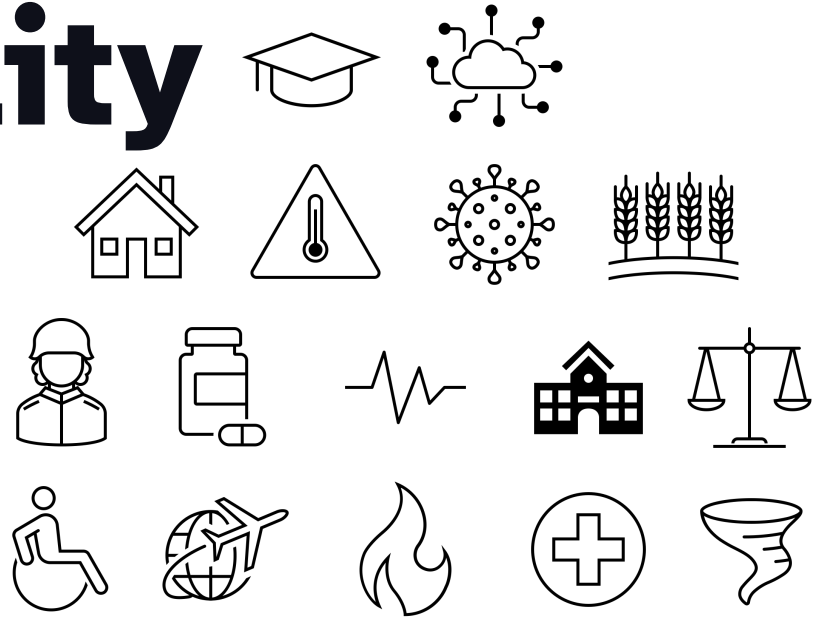
“Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, untreated, and misunderstood cause of human suffering.”

– Peter Levine

stress +

vulnerability

Most people are interacting
with government services
during **the** most upsetting,
overwhelming, and stressful
times of their lives



Case Study: civilrights.justice.gov

Designing with Empathy: transforming the way DOJ Civil Rights collects, sorts, and responds to civil rights complaints

Role:

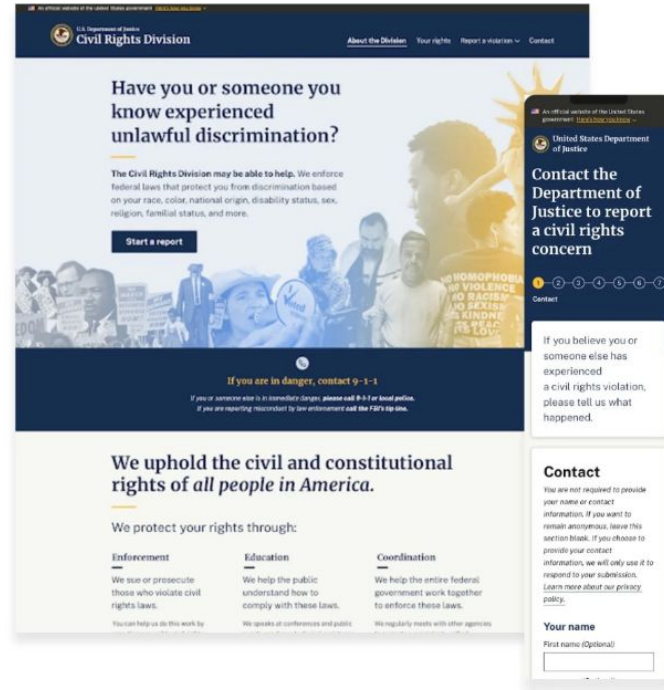
Product / Visual Design Lead at 18F

Partner/Client:

Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division

Methods & Tools:

Sketch, Photoshop, in-person and remote service and design workshops, remote user feedback and interview sessions



Department of Justice Civil Rights case study
created by **Aviva Oskow**, a former designer at
18F: www.avivaoskow.com/civilrightsjusticegov

designing with empathy

- **Simplifying complexity:** unified a messy, confusing intake process
- **Humanizing communication:** centered on empathic language and transparency
- **Caring for staff, not just the public:** examined the internal systems too
- **Designing for equity and inclusion:** one size fits all / most can deepen harm

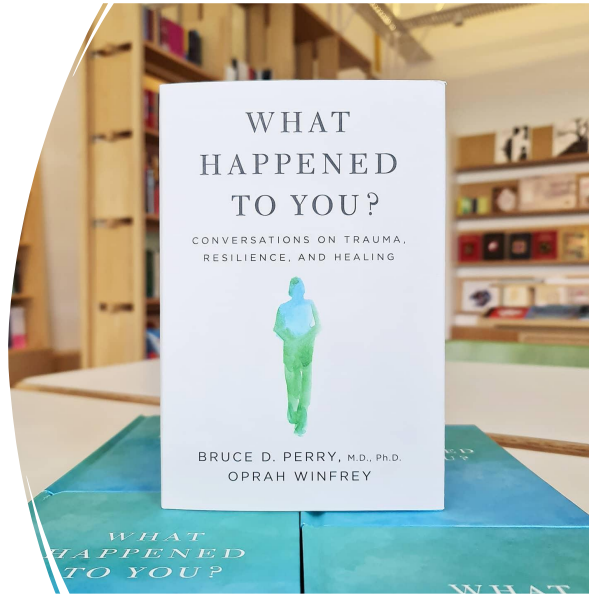
a social model of

inspired by Karine Bell, Resmaa Menakem, Bruce Perry
trauma

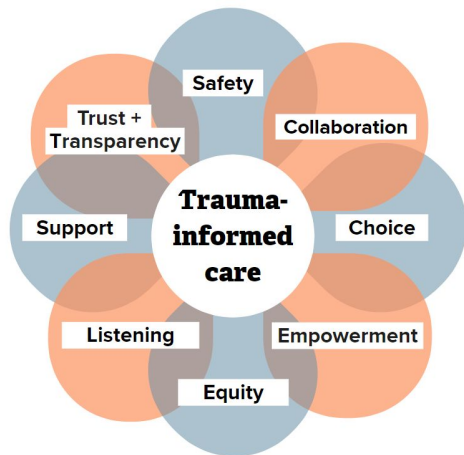
1. **The Event:** Trauma is a response to anything that's overwhelming and that happens too much, too fast, too soon, and/or for too long
2. **The Experience:** It is coupled with a lack of protection or support. It lives in the body and is stored as sensation – pain or tension – or a lack of sensation, like numbness
3. **The Effect:** Context is key in order to acknowledge and understand that what may impact one person may not impact another in the same way

what happened to you

excerpt that captures the three Es of a traumatic event



samhsa's principles



Listening

You will be heard

Support

You can get the help you need

Trust

You will be treated fairly and with dignity

Safety

You are safe here

Collaboration

You are not alone

Choice

You have choice

Empowerment

You are capable

Equity

You will not be discriminated against

Transparency

You can get the information you need

1.

Safety

People must feel emotionally, physically, and psychologically safe (or safe enough) in order to participate in design processes, activities, or to take steps toward healing.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR WORK?

How will our designs support safety?

Do we have a safety plan for before, during, and after conducting participatory research or co-design?

How will we create and sustain a physical design environment that is safer — or safe enough?

What will we do when things don't go to plan?

2.

Trust + Transparency

Design decisions will be transparent in order to build and sustain trust with everyone involved. This includes anyone who might utilize and/or interact with what is being designed.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR WORK?

How do we demonstrate our trustworthiness?

How are we transparent?

Are we intentional about building inclusive, intersectional, and diverse teams?

How have teams, partners, or organizations historically connected to the community and what we're building?

What will these relationships look like during and beyond the “work”? How will we nurture these relationships?

3.

Peer Support + Mutual Aid

We encourage and support people to involve their peers and the people and pets they care about. We recognize that mutual support is essential to establishing safety, building trust, and sustaining relationships in community.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR WORK?

How can we involve a person's care/support/peer network and community?

How can our care approaches, design research methods, and buildings help make people feel heard and supported?

How could we ensure that experiences in these environments are supported and encouraged by others, their peers, and their communities?

4.

Collaboration, Belonging, & Mattering

We understand that healing happens through conversations, compassionate inquiry, and meaningful sharing of power and decision-making. We also recognize that repair and ongoing recovery can occur when we are inclusive, accessible, and continuously practicing with an ethic of care.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR WORK?

What does it mean to involve 'the public' and include their living experiences?

In what ways will we ensure that systematically overlooked and underrepresented voices are present in sharing lived and living experiences?

How will we ensure that participants and collaborators are centered (over contractors or bureaucratic institutions)?

How is power being shared, built, or given up?

5.

Empowerment, Voice, + Choice

We acknowledge that each person's experiences are unique and worthy of being honored and recognized as valuable. We intentionally amplify and uplift the lived and living experiences of the people and communities we are introduced to, invited into, and welcomed.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR WORK?

How will our designs empower people and communities?

How are methods centering and honoring people's lived experiences and fostering a sense of agency and choice? Who decides what this looks like?

What forms of power are harmful or helpful to individuals or communities?

In what ways are the voices and experiences of community members and collaborators consistently amplified?

6.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Social change moves at the speed of trust, collaboration, and integrity. A culturally responsive design practice acknowledges and addresses structural barriers, biases, and cultural stereotypes while recognizing the legacy impacts of generational trauma.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR WORK?

Are we able to explain what a culturally responsive practice means?

How will we challenge systems and structures and redesign them or build new ones? How might we design for a commitment to recovery?

Who else needs to be a part of this work? Whose voices are and are not represented in the room?

What does our relationship to the community look like? Are there established or trusted relationships present? Can these be forged? (And are we the right team to do this work?)

7.

Hope

Hope fuels resilience and recovery. A trauma-informed design practice nurtures optimism and belief in the possibility of healing and positive outcomes, empowering individuals and communities to envision a future where transformation is not only possible but within reach.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR WORK?

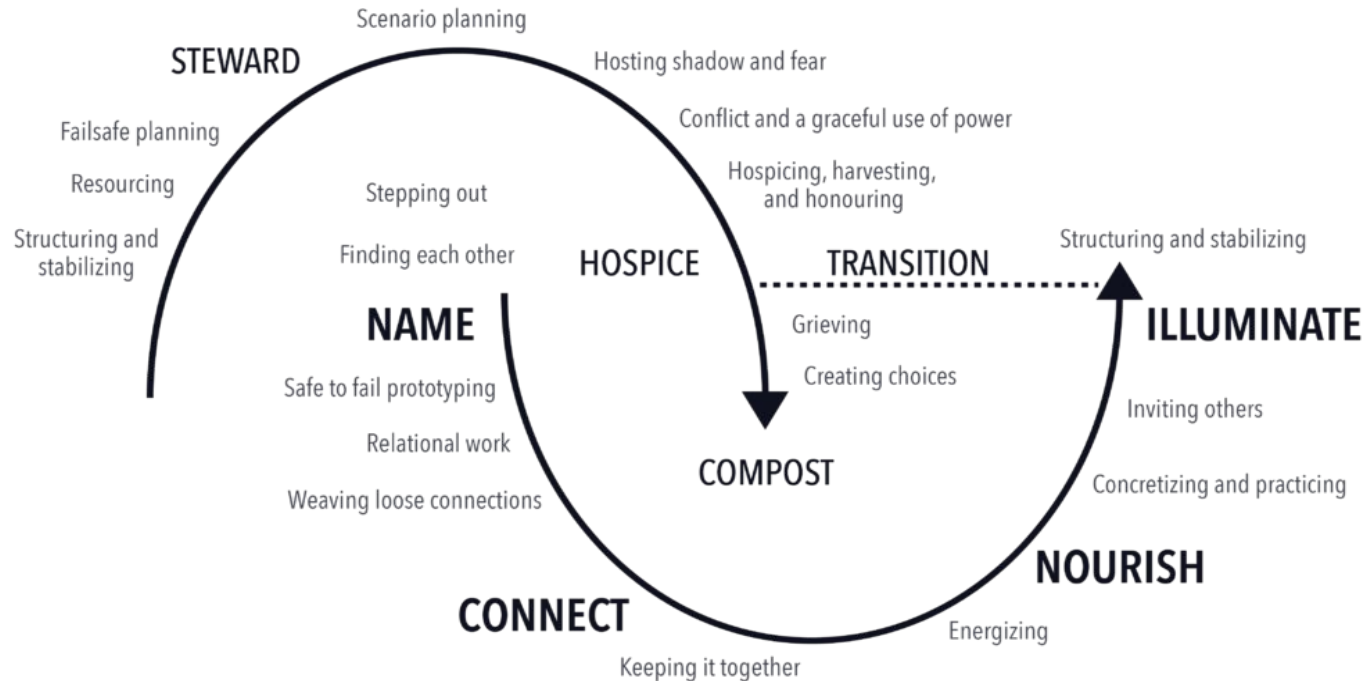
How do we ensure that hope remains – especially during crises?

What role does hope play in empowering people?

How can we design to foster hope in communities facing trauma and structural exclusion?

How can we assess whether hope is being effectively nurtured in trauma responsive systems?

TWO LOOPS MODEL



Two Loops Model from the **Berkana Institute**:
berkana.org/resources/pioneering-a-new-paradigm

two loops model

1

The Old System

Traditional research prioritizes efficiency, scale, and speed over engagement and community care, treating researchers as neutral observers rather than stewards.

two loops model

1

The Old System

Traditional research prioritizes efficiency, scale, and speed over engagement and community care, treating researchers as neutral observers rather than stewards.

2

The Decline

Extractive methods that gather insights without reciprocity are facing scrutiny, with increasing awareness of their harm.

two loops model

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The Old System

Traditional research prioritizes efficiency, scale, and speed over engagement and community care, treating researchers as neutral observers rather than stewards.

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The Decline

Extractive methods that gather insights without reciprocity are facing scrutiny, with increasing awareness of their harm.

3

The Emerging System

A new model of research is taking shape – one that is trauma informed, participatory, and accountable. Advocates and practitioners are pushing for reciprocity, transparency, and care-centered research.

decision-making

decision-making

1. Who benefits? Who is harmed?

decision-making

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2. Does this align with my values?

decision-making

1. Who benefits? Who is harmed?

2. Does this align with my values?

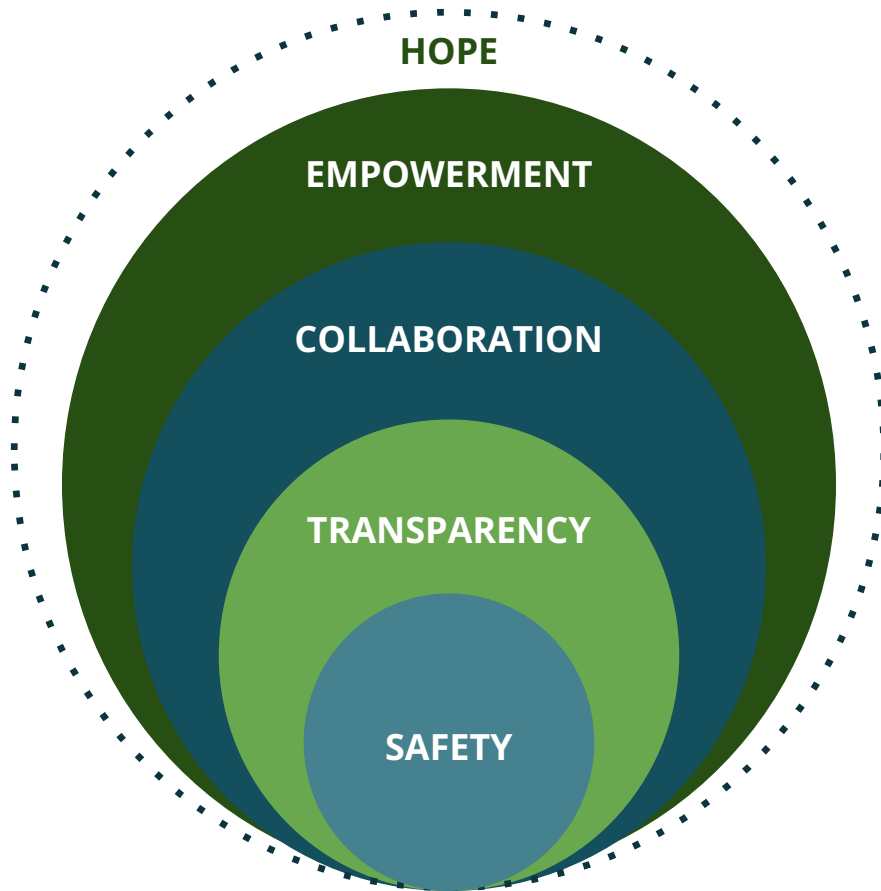
3. Could I justify this decision publicly?

decision-making

1. Who benefits? Who is harmed?
2. Does this align with my values?
3. Could I justify this decision publicly?
- 4. Are there alternatives that center care and fairness?**

decision-making

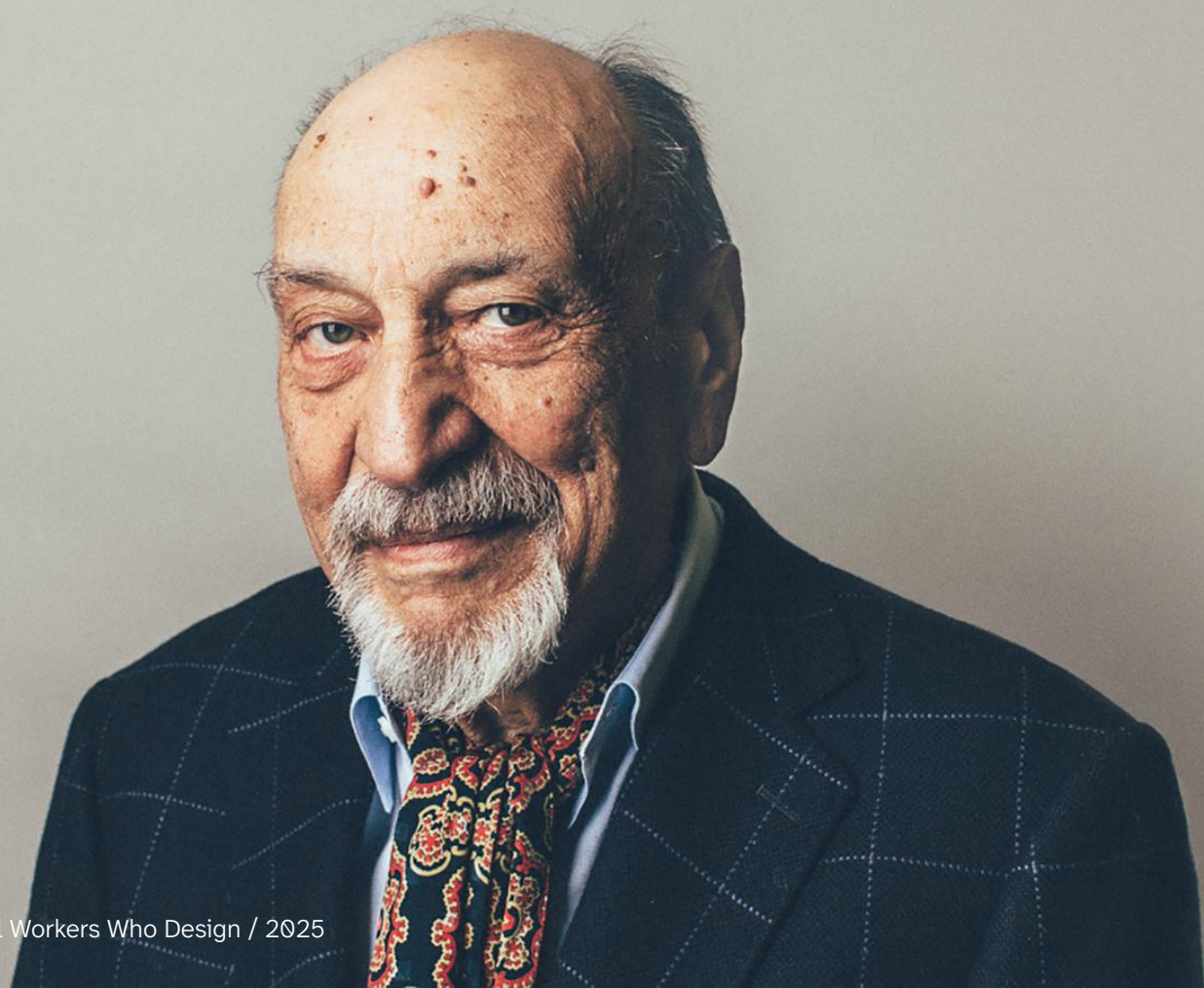
1. Who benefits? Who is harmed?
2. Does this align with my values?
3. Could I justify this decision publicly?
4. Are there alternatives that center care and fairness?
5. **What accountability, visibility, and responsibility measures are in place?**



we need trauma informed civic care interventions

(that go *beyond* digital services)

**we need a
global
code of
care**





“In the world of advertising and marketing, they don’t regard the public as anything except a large mass to manipulate in a way where they’re willing to buy something they don’t really need... **That’s why, the question of what is my effect on the public has to be raised now more than ever. It is too dangerous to ignore it.**”

– Milton Glaser
(1929 – 2020)



care *for the* public .

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www.SocialWorkersWhoDesign.com

Sign up for the *Design Care* newsletter!



Trauma-Informed Practice: A Toolkit for Scotland



Scottish Government
Riaghaidh na h-Alba
gov.scot

Scottish Government TID Toolkit

Blog

Justice Digital

Organisations: [Ministry of Justice](#)

This blog post was published under the 2015-2024 Conservative Administration

Trauma-Informed Design: How we worked together to develop 'Exit this page'

Rob King and Hannah Jump, 1 November 2023 - [cross-government collaboration](#), [exit this page](#), Our services

This blog post highlights how, at the MoJ Digital, we took a collaborative, open, and evidence-based approach to help keep people safe online.

Let us rewind



Back in March 2020, I identified a high-risk gap in the service where users could be put at risk when seeking Legal Aid support for Domestic Abuse.

UK Ministry of Justice 'Exit this page'



Trauma-Informed Design

Quick Reference Guide

Organizations Leading the Way in Trauma-Informed Practices

SAMHSA

- [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)

Trauma Informed Oregon

- [Trauma Informed Oregon \(Oregon Health Authority\)](#)
- [Trauma Informed Oregon – Standards of Practice](#)

Missouri Department of Mental Health

- [The MO Model](#)

Trauma-Informed Practices

Research & Design

- [Implementing a Four-Phased Trauma Informed Design Process](#)
- [Building a Trauma-Informed Research Practice](#)
- [Practicing Without a License: Design Research as Psychotherapy](#)
- [The Call for Trauma-Informed Design Research and Practice](#)
- [Trauma-Responsive Design Research: A New Model for Change](#)
- [Responding to Collective Trauma](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Design: Understanding](#)

Addressing Secondary Trauma

- [Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others](#)

Interviewing Practices

- [Successful Trauma-Informed Victim Interviewing \(IACP\)](#)

User Experience Design

- [Is Your Website Trauma-Informed?](#)

Physical Space Design

- [Creating Trauma-Informed Correctional Care](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Design Evaluation Tool for K-12 Schools](#)
- [Architectural Principles in the Service of Trauma-Informed Design](#)

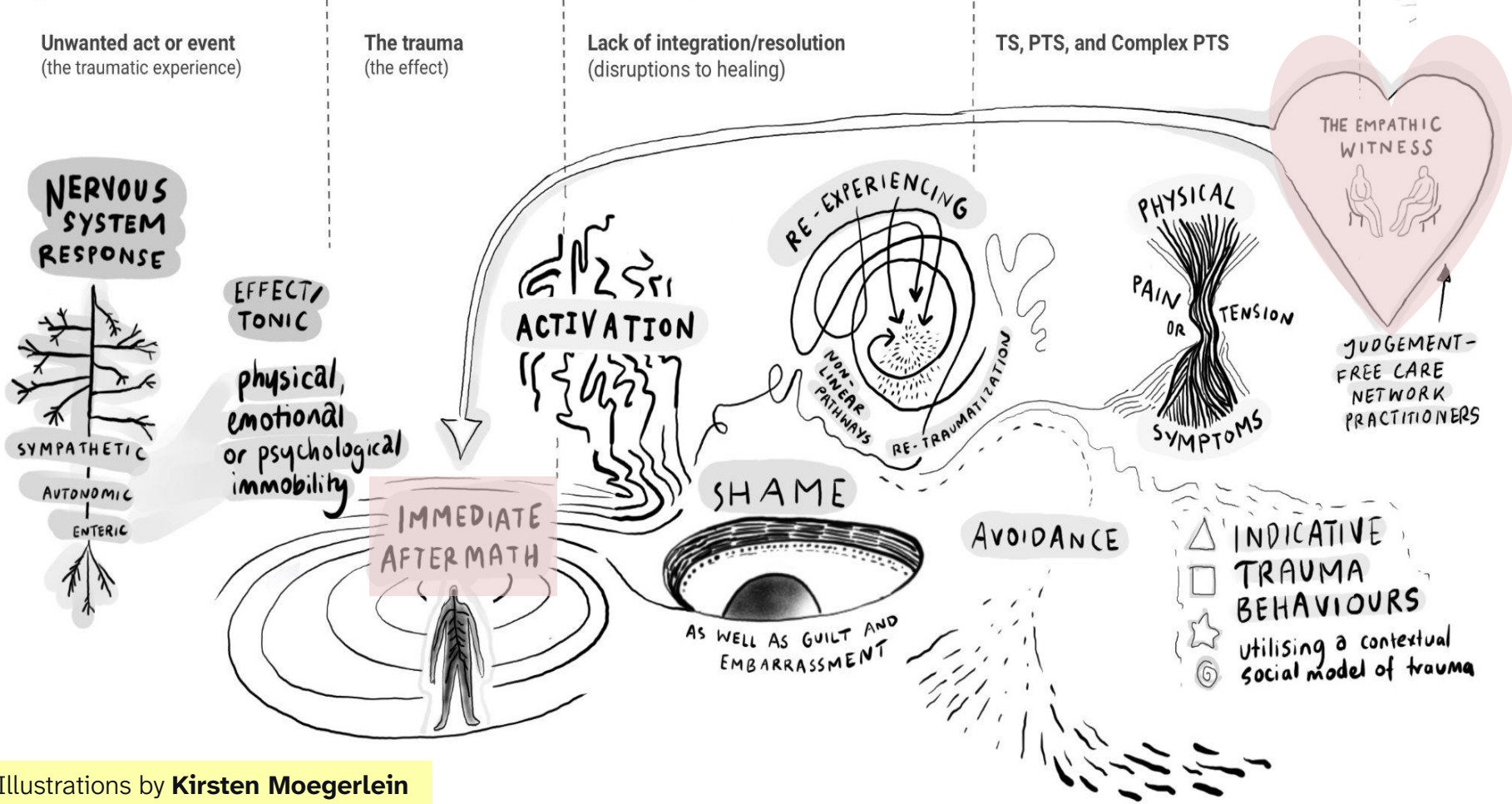
Healthcare Practices

- [What is Trauma-Informed Care?](#)
- [Creating Cultures of Trauma-Informed Care \(CCTIC\): A Self-Assessment and Planning Protocol](#)
- [Central Activities and Program Components of a Systems-Level Trauma-Informed Approach \(HHS Study\)](#)

Trauma-Informed Communities

- [SAMHSA Interagency Task Force on](#)

TID Resources for HUD (U.S.)



Illustrations by **Kirsten Moegerlein**