

## **Trauma-Informed Librarianship: 2026 Redux**

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## **Trauma Informed Librarianship for STEM Librarians: 2026 Redux**

## **Abstract**

In early Fall 2025, the author's academic library experienced two swatting events that increased stress levels throughout the library as well as across campus. Such events are, unfortunately, increasingly common in higher education settings. When combined with other new causes of stress and trauma, such as grant cancellations, visa challenges, and the capricious actions of the federal government, swatting can increase the chances that STEM librarians work with students and colleagues who are experiencing impacts from trauma and emotional distress. This conference paper addresses how trauma-informed practices (TIP) can help librarians create more inclusive, welcoming, and safe library services and spaces that support all members of our communities, including those who are dealing with the impacts of trauma. TIP are most critical for supporting certain groups, such as individuals with marginalized identities, those who are directly impacted by targeted political actions, or those who have a prior history of trauma. This overview of TIP in the library and information science literature focuses on the value of trauma informed practices and librarianship for STEM librarians, who regularly work with a wide variety of students, faculty, staff, and researchers.

## **Introduction**

In early Fall 2025, the University of Colorado at Boulder was one of many college campuses around the nation that experienced swatting events during the first few weeks of the academic year [1]. The first incident consisted of a false report of an active shooter and the second was a bomb threat [2]. In both cases, many people—including staff, faculty, and students—in the library and in other adjacent facilities were impacted. As authorities investigated the threats, some individuals were ordered to shelter-in-place for hours, while others were evacuated with no time to gather their belongings. Even those not directly involved experienced worry, fear, and uncertainty during and after these events.

“Swatting,” or the false reporting of emergency situations that cause an urgent police and emergency services response, may seem trivial, but such incidents create dangerous situations that threaten the safety of individuals, institutions, and communities and cause fear, distress, and confusion [3], [4]. Swatting has become both more common and harder to discern from actual emergencies, which may be due to widespread access to increasingly powerful AI tools that can facilitate such deceptions [5]. Concurrently, due to the frequency of gun-related incidents and threats across communities and K-12 schools in the United States, an increasing number of people on college campuses have already experienced traumatic events in their lives before coming to their institution. Such experiences may make these individuals more likely to have intense, adverse reactions to swatting incidents [6], [7].

In the aftermath of the swatting events, I worried about my colleagues, our student workers, and all the faculty, staff and students across campus. I was particularly concerned about the impact of the events on those with a history of trauma, who come from historically marginalized

communities, or who were new to campus and already stressed and overwhelmed as they adjusted to the pressures of academic life. In the University Libraries, our leadership encouraged personnel to seek out campus mental health resources and even brought in professional counselors to library spaces to encourage library employees to access support. Although helpful, these resources did not equip us with skills to provide ongoing support and understanding for one another in our workplace or to create safer library spaces for our students and broader academic community.

Looking for guidance on these issues, I revisited the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature about trauma-informed practices I had found (but not read) during the COVID-19 pandemic. I quickly realized that I had only a perfunctory understanding of trauma informed care (TIC) and that I had not considered how to incorporate the principles of trauma-informed librarianship (TIL) into my work. Like many of my colleagues, I hadn't had the bandwidth during the height of the pandemic to engage with these ideas in a meaningful way, and as the stress and panic of that time slowly faded, I had suffered a degree of burnout. It took the recent swatting events to remind me of the value of this topic; given the exceptional level of stress and uncertainty many people feel in the current political climate, trauma-informed practices are certainly relevant and most likely will be for the foreseeable future.

In this paper, I will provide an overview of trauma-informed librarianship (TIL), relying on prior literature regarding the incorporation of such practices in the everyday activities of academic librarians. I will specifically address the value of such efforts for STEM librarians, who often work with students who are seeking degrees in competitive and stressful disciplines and therefore may be significantly impacted by the increased stress brought about by traumatic experiences during their educational experience [8]. Additionally, students and scholars who have minoritized and intersectional identities are more likely to experience a variety of mental health challenges due to several factors, such as being exposed to bias and prejudice in their programs [9], [10], [11], [12], a lack of supportive mentorship [13], and an increased risk of having experienced trauma previously [14], [15].

As someone who is interested in disability inclusion, I believe that TIL is similar to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in that it can contribute to the development and maintenance of inclusive library services and spaces [16], [17]. Much like UDL, TIL encourages library workers to develop an understanding of factors that impact many people [18], [19], and offers a complimentary framework for bringing empathy and understanding of trauma and its impacts to library work. This knowledge allows librarians to better support each other and their communities [20], [21], which is particularly important during challenging and uncertain times such as the current moment, when many people experience stress and personal impacts from political polarization [22] and vulnerable groups are at increased risk of encountering discrimination, persecution, and other forms of trauma [23], [24], [25], [26].

## **What is trauma?**

According to the American Psychological Association [27], trauma is “[a]ny disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning.” Traumatic events may occur once, such as with severe injuries, natural disasters, school shootings, intense illness or hospitalization, the death of a loved one, an isolated instance of sexual or physical assault, or they may be experienced repetitively over an extended period of time, such as in war, famine, pandemics, ongoing physical or mental abuse, gang violence, addiction within the family, or from systematic or structural oppression of marginalized groups [28], [29]. Some individuals experience multiple types of trauma (polyvictimization), which significantly increases the negative impacts on survivors’ physical and mental health and puts them at higher risk of traumatization [14].

Additionally, trauma may be experienced firsthand, or it may be experienced due to witnessing traumatic events, listening to the personal narratives of survivors [30], or from other sources, such as social media feeds or news reports [31], [32]. An indirect experience of trauma is referred to as “secondary” or “vicarious” trauma; research shows that secondary trauma is experienced widely in many helping professions and among support personnel [33], [34], including librarianship [35].

Unfortunately, traumatic experiences are common. The National Council for Behavioral Health [36] estimates that more than 70% of the US population will directly experience at least one traumatic event in their lives. Children and people from marginalized or vulnerable groups are particularly at risk of enduring trauma. The Centers for Disease Control [37] estimate that at least 1 in 7 children experience child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, neglect), noting that such statistics are likely underreported. Additionally, research shows that individuals who have minoritized identities in regard to gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status have a higher risk of mental health issues and of incidence of trauma in children and young adults [9], [38], [39], [40].

Among college students, mental health has been a significant concern for some time [40]. A recent study at the University of Alabama shows a “notable rise” in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and acute stress disorder (ASD) in a national, cross-sectional study of college students in the period between 2017 and 2022, which the authors attribute to pandemic-related stress and other traumatic experiences, including campus and school shootings and racially motivated violence [41]. This research supports similar studies showing increased stress, trauma, and poor mental health in college students and the need for increased mental-health services and the development of supportive environments in institutions of higher education [20], [42], [43].

## **Impacts of trauma**

Research has clearly established that exposure to trauma can have lasting impacts on an individuals' physical and mental health, social relationships, and performance in education and professional settings [44]. Trauma survivors are at higher risk of anxiety, poor sleep, depression, anti-social behavior, low self-esteem, substance abuse disorder, and suicide [45], [46].

Every individual responds differently to trauma. Research suggests that this response is based on social, environmental, and biological factors, such as an individual's level of familial support, mental health history, access to treatment, as well as the type and severity of the traumatic event [12], [47], [48]. Common responses to trauma include a sense of detachment, an inability to concentrate, anxiety and nervousness, startling easily, hypervigilance, upsetting dreams or memories, trouble navigating relationships, controlling behavior at work or school, and avoiding things that evoke memories of the trauma [49]. As mentioned above, some groups of people are more vulnerable to experiencing trauma more acutely than others. For example, people who have multiply marginalized identities are more likely to experience trauma than their peers and are also at increased risk of developing a more intense response to it, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [50], [51].

Traumatic experiences can negatively impact an individual's life [52]. In educational settings, experiencing trauma can undermine a student's resilience under stress, impair executive functioning and planning, and create significant barriers to building trust and social relationships [44]. These difficulties can further disrupt an individual's ability to succeed academically, particularly in intense, competitive STEM disciplines where underrepresented students already experience barriers to academic success that decrease their mental and physical health and lead to increased rates of attrition [53], [54], [55].

In professional settings, individuals who have experienced trauma may face significant barriers to success and advancement. Research shows that trauma survivors often have increased physical and mental health issues that contribute to increased absenteeism and reduced capacity for work [56]. Additionally, trauma survivors may have trouble trusting their supervisors and colleagues, which can lead to interpersonal workplace issues and impede individuals' ability to self-advocate [57]. Significantly, many symptoms of burnout, which has been identified as a major issue in the American workplace [58], may stem from workers' experiences of trauma [59].

### **Trauma-informed care**

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Trauma Informed Care is based on six principles: the creation of a physically and psychologically safe environment; the development of community and peer support; organizational trust building; minimizing power differentials between individuals; recognizing and countering systemic and historic discrimination and bias; and honoring the choices, decision-making power, and agency of individuals as essential to their success, healing, and growth [60].

Designed to help create environments that provide better support for individuals who have experienced trauma, TIC is often implemented in medical/healthcare, K-12 education, and social work settings [61]. Such institutions invest in creating policies, procedures, and practices that actively avoid traumatizing their clients, students and patients and which promote recovery for survivors [62], [63]. TIC practitioners in these settings receive extensive training and education about trauma and its impacts, which enables them to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma and know how to help when someone is exhibiting signs of struggling with the impacts of trauma [64].

### **Trauma-informed librarianship in the LIS literature**

TIC principles have slowly been incorporated into library contexts and received increased interest during the COVID-19 pandemic [62]. Despite a notable lack of official professional guidelines for providing TIC or TIL, several of the major LIS professional organizations provide their members with access to resources about TIL. For example, the American Library Association (ALA) has a variety of educational resources available through their website, such as on-demand courses [65], [66], books [67], printable PDFs [68], [69] about trauma-related issues, and blog articles. The Public Library Association (PLA), offers a one-page summary of trauma-informed care created by its Social Work Taskforce [70] entitled, “Public Library Social Work—Overview of Trauma-Informed Care,” which defines trauma and provides an overview of best practices for working with those experiencing trauma, including people-first language, a strengths-based perspective, compassion, focusing on specific behaviors instead of judging a person broadly, and creating welcoming spaces. The PLA also published a workbook that provides an overview of best practices for implementing trauma-informed practices in public libraries [71]. Similarly, *Knowledge Quest*, the journal of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), featured a 2019 special article that summarized how student behavior can be impacted by trauma and what school librarians can do to create safe learning spaces [72]. The Medical Library Association (MLA), offers a course about TIL [73], and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) has published blog articles [74] and scholarly and news articles on trauma and related topics in its journals (*College & Research Libraries* and *College & Research Libraries News*) and about trauma-informed care in academic libraries [75], [76], [77].

Several publications provide comprehensive and practical guidance for librarians who are interested in learning how to incorporate trauma-informed practices in their libraries. In her monograph, *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services*, Rebecca Tolley [67] presents a wide-ranging overview of trauma, a discussion of TIC principles, as well as suggestions and considerations for implementing TIL in a library. Tolley emphasizes that the goal of TIL is the development of a trauma-informed culture and argues that libraries must begin by realistically assessing their institution’s “readiness” for such a change [67, p. 114]. Based on this assessment, libraries can plan the steps towards implementation, beginning with the education of their staff about TIL and TIC. This process enables library leaders to support and guide their institution as

they collectively examine and revise policies and procedures to create more flexible, empathetic, inclusive, and safe spaces for patrons and employees alike. Similarly, Crum and Ketchum's [78] edited volume focuses on the role of library leadership in the implementation of TIL, covering issues such as how leaders can incorporate a trauma-informed approach to managing organizational change, hiring and advancing staff, and developing an inclusive culture in their libraries. A number of chapters in this volume offer insights into the practical implementation of TIL; for example, a chapter by Lema et al. [79] provides a case study of the incorporation of TIL at the University of Arizona Libraries. Additionally, the Public Library Association's workbook, *A Trauma-Informed Framework for Supporting Patrons: The PLA Workbook of Best Practices* [71], provides a deeper look at TIL in public librarianship, offering a practical but trauma-informed approach to dealing with a wide range of difficult patron interactions and encourages the development of empathy and understanding to guide librarians' responses in such situations.

Additionally, several articles in the LIS literature offer helpful insights and information about TIL. Stephanie Founds [62] provides a robust literature review of TIL, including library-specific versions of TIC principles, which include: physical and psychological safety; methods for communicating trustworthiness and transparency with staff and patrons; encouraging peer support and collaboration; championing individual empowerment and choice; and promoting librarian awareness of cultural, historical, and gender issues. Conley et al. [20] describe how they worked with institutional partners to provide holistic and trauma-informed support for their campus community by developing a student center that combines academic-support center programs, accessibility services, and library services into one trauma-informed hub at Hampshire College. Dudak offers a quick but thorough overview of TIL [80], and Peet [81] writes about the traumatic experiences of urban public librarians, who often receive little support as they encounter difficult situations and threats to their safety in the course of their work. In addition to articles that specifically address TIL, many authors address related issues such as the impacts of racism and other harmful aspects of the profession for librarians themselves [75], [82], [83], [84], [85], as well as for patrons [86], [87], [88].

### **Diversity, equity, and inclusion**

One of the more significant themes regarding TIL in the LIS literature is the role of trauma-informed practices and principles in the cultivation of diversity, equity, and inclusion within libraries. For example, in *Trauma Informed Librarianship: Seeding Change in Higher Education*, Kimberlie Sullivan [89] advocates for libraries' incorporation of trauma-informed practices as a way to comprehensively address the systemic racism, ableism, and other discrimination within the profession. She writes:

Trauma-informed librarianship extends beyond mere accessibility adjustments for patrons who have undergone trauma; it embodies a commitment to acknowledging humanity



within library spaces, fostering an environment where individuals can authentically embody their full self. The implementation of trauma-informed librarianship requires a comprehensive understanding of the deeply entrenched whiteness and ableism within library systems, as addressing these embedded biases is essential to fostering inclusive and supportive environments for all patrons.

This aspect of TIL is highly relevant for STEM librarians due to their daily work with students, faculty, and researchers who are under significant stress due to the competitive and challenging nature of their disciplines. These “regular” stresses may be exacerbated by factors such as world events and national politics, as well as an individual’s environment, social support, disabilities, mental health and ability to access resources. For example, of the more than one million international students that enroll in academic programs in the US every year, the majority (57%) study STEM fields [90]. International students have an elevated risk of experiencing anxiety, stress, traumatic experiences, and suicide due to a variety of factors, such as social isolation, language barriers, racism, a lack of knowledge of their host country’s educational and health systems, and encountering bias when interacting with institutional personnel [91], [92]. International students may also avoid asking for help or seeking care due to fears of being misunderstood, not knowing what kind of help to ask for, and not realizing that services or help is available. The resulting lack of support makes them more vulnerable to increased negative impacts of trauma [93].

Additionally, the current sociopolitical climate in the United States has added a new dimension of stress for many STEM students, researchers, and librarians. Across the country, STEM faculty and researchers have lost grant funding, research opportunities, and graduate student funding due to changes in the priorities of the federal government, which has cut funding and imposed punitive measures on many institutions of higher education [94], [95]. These governmental actions have resulted in lost opportunities for STEM fields, including a decreased capacity for research; increased precarity for faculty, staff, and researchers; as well as a chilling-effect on intellectual freedom and research efforts that are considered to be related to diversity, equity and inclusion, as these values are rejected by the administration [94], [96]. Cumulatively, federal actions have resulted in widespread instability, fear, and disruption throughout many engineering, science, and medical fields [97].

Further, the federal government’s immigration and anti-DEI policies have directly impacted the quality of life, educational experience, and safety of international and minority individuals, including students and researcher in academia [23]. Research from Trump’s first term suggests that his biased rhetoric ushered in an era of increased hate crimes and more open expression of prejudice [98]. Now in the second Trump presidency, increased attacks on immigrants and non-white communities are impacting the entire country [99], with increased negative impacts on immigrants themselves, including international students [100]. Research has clearly established

the wide-ranging, negative impacts of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, religious intolerance, and other forms of discrimination on the academic success and mental wellbeing of students with marginalized identities [53], [54], [91], [101]. In this stressful environment, engineering librarians are in a unique position to offer academic support services and welcoming spaces to all students and researchers. Trauma-informed practices can provide a framework for librarians to be better able to make these spaces and services more accessible and safer for patrons and colleagues who have experienced trauma [102].

## **Getting started**

Implementing TIL may initially seem overwhelming. Much like UDL, TIL offers a set of principles to guide practitioners to improve their spaces, services, and perspectives to become more inclusive for all people; some practitioners see the two frameworks as complimentary and propose using them in tandem [103]. To begin implementation, TIL requires librarians to invest time and effort educating themselves about trauma and trauma-informed practices, then assess how they can use TIL principles to inform changes in their work. Because incorporating TIL into a library can take time, emotional labor, and cultural change, proponents may need to implement trauma informed practices and procedures incrementally over time [80].

I was unable to find literature that specifically addresses trauma-informed librarianship in STEM libraries or for STEM librarians. However, as mentioned above, there is significant literature about TIL more generally, as well as literature and other educational materials that address aspects of TIL in engineering and science contexts. More broadly, many STEM researchers and authors have written about the impact of trauma on STEM students and professionals and emphasize the need for awareness of cultural humility, marginalized identities, self-care, and burnout in STEM spaces, including libraries [42], [73], [104], [105], [106].

## **Safety first**

One of the most important principles of TIL is to create an environment that promotes physical and psychological safety for both patrons and library workers. Lyric Grimes [107] argues that libraries should provide “third spaces” for communities, where people can connect, learn, and access resources. Grimes notes that such spaces require physical, psychological, cultural, moral, and social safety for all members of the community; a sense of safety helps all patrons to feel comfortable, respected, welcome, and free to be themselves in library spaces. This foundational principle is important for STEM libraries due to the high-pressure environment in many STEM fields; the library can provide a safe, calm space for students to study, relax, and work collaboratively. Even students who may not feel comfortable approaching librarians may be able to make use of safe-feeling spaces.

To create such spaces, some TIL scholars argue that a first step is to establish clear and equitable rules and policies. Although perhaps counterintuitive—as rule enforcement can seem confrontational or uncomfortable to some librarians—Wahler [19] argues that setting behavioral expectations and policies provides patrons who have experienced trauma with a sense of safety, knowing what to expect, and understanding of how things work. However, Wahler emphasizes that such policies are only effective if consistently and fairly enforced.

For staff, creating a safe environment involves a variety of layers, many of which an individual librarian cannot change by themselves. On a basic level, Pierard and Schultz [108] argue that a sense of safety in the workplace requires the development of emergency protocols. Such procedures provide guidance for staff on what to do in difficult or unusual circumstances and give personnel a guided course of action when they may be experiencing fear, uncertainty, or shock. Additionally, Pierard and Schultz [108] recommend that libraries support the efficacy of such policies by holding regular trainings for various challenging situations and emergency protocols for all library employees. Although individual STEM librarians may not be able to institute the development of such protocols and safety plans, they can advocate for their development to their supervisors and encourage collective discussions, training for implementation, and updates to these policies.

Along with physical safety policies, TIL practices can also be used to address psychological safety in library spaces. Psychological safety can be understood as “creating an environment where people feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, admitting mistakes, and proposing new ideas without fear of embarrassment or punishment” [75], [109]. This sort of environment is essential for creating a safe and supportive workplace, especially in academic libraries, which tend to be hierarchical in structure [110]. However, for larger libraries, the creation of an inclusive and safe culture is beyond the control of any one librarian or group and requires the advocacy and effort of leadership as well as a dedicated group [19]. If library leaders are not involved, individual librarians can begin to advocate for institutional change through educating their colleagues. By learning about trauma and its impacts, librarians can engage with colleagues and patrons with empathy and understanding; many of the resources mentioned above are a potentially good place to start. By exploring different forms of safety and examining our individual positionality and power dynamics, we can work towards creating spaces in which we treat each other more fairly and with kindness. However, broad adoption of TIL and changes to work culture must involve leaders and managers, who can choose to dedicate resources and institutional focus towards TIC. Such work often involves repair from past issues and leadership problems, as well as organizational trust building and addressing the existing power differentials between people and groups within the organization [111].

STEM librarians can also use TIL principles to create environments where students feel comfortable getting help and asking questions. However, despite librarians’ best efforts, some

individuals who have experienced trauma may find talking to a librarian intimidating and off-putting. Librarians can provide for these patrons in a variety of ways, such as creating well-advertised guides to library services as well as providing a chat service, email address, or other asynchronous or anonymous means to ask questions.

### **Empowering the individual**

Empowering individuals (“Empowerment, Voice, Choice”) is a basic principle of TIC [60]. Trauma-informed practitioners strive to encourage and honor people’s agency, opinions, and choices and to avoid prescriptive solutions that may not meet the person’s needs. In the TIL context, librarians can empower students and researchers by allowing them to have agency in their learning and information seeking processes. This requires librarians to provide people with a variety of options for access to resources and services. Nelsen et al. [112] discuss how they incorporated trauma-informed practices in library instruction sessions, which involved allowing the students to collaboratively set the rules and expectations of the class, as well as the ability to select the modality of their final project. In many ways, Nelsen et al.’s work mirrors the practices recommended in UDL [113], [114], such as giving students choice in how they learn, flexibility in how they express their understanding, and a focus on accessibility. TIL and UDL complement each other; librarians interested in pursuing a trauma-informed approach would benefit from also learning the principles of universal design.

### **The importance of self-care**

Librarians, like many in helping professions, are often passionate about their work and may be willing to go the extra mile—regardless of personal cost. As many LIS authors have noted, librarians are often overworked, burdened with vocational awe, and suffer from burnout [83], [115], [116], [117]. Many in our profession have experienced trauma in their lives, both outside of work as well as within libraries.

We must take care of ourselves and each other. Trauma-informed approaches can help by offering a different way to approach people and our work, through a lens of empathy and collaboration. Through this work we can collaboratively discuss solutions to issues that impact us all, such as burnout, job creep, and stress due to societal unrest, political polarization, and national and international events.

However, librarians are not therapists, and few of us are highly paid. Oftentimes, we do not get much recognition for the work we do. To make changes to ourselves or our institutions, we need the help and support of our leaders, colleagues, and friends. Through a trauma informed perspective, we can find the peer support and encouragement necessary for this work as well as connection with those who think similarly to us.

### **Conclusion**

Trauma-informed principles can help STEM librarians create welcoming spaces and services for those who have experienced trauma; however, implementing TIL in a comprehensive way is beyond the ability of the individual librarian. This means that library leaders need to explore how to bring TIL principles into libraries to help create inclusive, welcoming, and safer spaces for all members of their campus communities. Such efforts are especially important during difficult, emotional times and can help all of us feel more resilient in the face of intensely stressful events.

Further research and exploration of how TIL can be implemented in engineering and science libraries would help establish this framework within the profession. Additionally, research to collect staff and student feedback and insights regarding trauma-informed principles in library spaces and services would help guide our efforts to implement this framework.

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