

Trauma-informed work-oriented counselling: protocol for a scoping review

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Abstract

Objective: The objective of this scoping review is to investigate the published peer-reviewed literature addressing a) the extent of trauma awareness among employment counsellors and b) how work-oriented counselling services address the trauma-related support needs of their users. The research questions are: 1. How do work-oriented counselling services recognise and respond to the impact of trauma on job seekers? 2. What trauma-informed strategies do they integrate to support individuals in obtaining, retaining, or returning to employment?

Introduction: Exposure to trauma is increasingly recognised as a significant public health concern. Trauma is associated with high level of disability and reduced productivity; and has a negative impact on employment and career development. There is growing recognition that trauma awareness should be integrated into such sectors as education, justice, labour and welfare.

Inclusion criteria: Population: Service users who receive services or participate in interventions aimed at improving employability, defined as obtaining or retaining for paid work, and whose inability to secure or maintain employment could be linked to trauma.

Concept: Initially non-medical support, intervention or counselling that consider trauma-related barriers of their users to obtaining or maintaining paid work in the services. **Context:** Work-oriented services worldwide, including welfare programs, social services, interventions, and counselling (publicly or privately funded), aimed at assisting individuals in obtaining or maintaining paid work. **Types of sources:** Peer-reviewed articles in English reporting on primary studies, published between 2015 and 2025.

Study identification and selection: A systematic search will be conducted in SCOPUS, EBSCO (Academic Search Elite, CINAHL, ERIC, MEDLINE), OVID (EMBASE, PsycINFO, AMED), PTSDpubs, and PubMed. References will be managed and duplicates removed using EndNote and Rayyan, and then double-screened using Rayyan, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Full-text sources that meet inclusion criteria will have their reference lists searched for additional studies.

Data extraction and synthesis: Data extraction will include key contextual data and the TIDIER-Rehab Checklist. The PRISMA-ScR framework will guide the review's presentation. Reporting will include a descriptive collation of study information relevant to the research questions and, as appropriate, a thematic synthesis of this information to address the research questions.

Key words: trauma-informed; work; employment; career; PTSD; ACE

Introduction

Despite the prevalence of activation policies in welfare states, modern work-oriented counselling increasingly emphasises importance of the personalisation of services (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007; Whelan, 2024). Research suggests that tailoring support to individual needs not only improves employment outcomes but also enhances overall well-being (Menchetti & Garcia, 2003). However, counselling for individuals affected by trauma appears to be insufficiently explored, highlighting a gap in the literature (Powers & Duys, 2020; Rittberger & Monczunski, 2020).

The objective of this scoping review is to investigate what is available in the peer-reviewed research literature addressing a) the extent of trauma awareness among employment counsellors and b) how work-oriented counselling services address the trauma-related support needs of their users.

The research questions guiding this scoping review are:

1. How do work-oriented counselling services recognise and respond to the impact of trauma on job seekers?
2. What trauma-informed strategies do they integrate to support individuals in obtaining, retaining, or returning to employment?

In our study, we chose the term "**work-oriented**" due to its broader scope compared to more commonly used concepts of employment or career counselling. This term encompasses not only the process of securing new paid work but also the support required for individuals to return to or retain their current positions, particularly in situations where trauma may threaten job stability.

There is ambiguity in defining trauma, with researchers highlighting a tendency to classify a wide range of adversities and stressors as traumatic (Leotti & Wahab, 2024). Krupnik (2019) highlights that the concept of trauma ranges from its clinical classification as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to a broader framework that encompasses 'much if not most of human sufferings' (Krupnik, 2019, abstract). In our study, we adopt the definition provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in the United States, which has become a widely recognized reference in research on trauma-informed care and interventions:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

With ongoing conflicts and wars globally, the growing wave of refugees, and increasing awareness of mental health issues, more attention is being given to how trauma shapes the life course of those who have experienced it. A study conducted by Benjet et al. (2016) in 24 countries showed that over 70% of population globally report on experiencing of a traumatic event, while 30.5% were exposed to four or more. Exposure to trauma, given its costs to both individuals and society, is increasingly recognised as a significant public health concern (Magruder et al., 2017).

While trauma-informed approaches have been widely addressed within health services, there is growing recognition that trauma awareness should also be integrated into other sectors, including education, justice, welfare, and labour. (Fondren et al., 2020; Magruder et al., 2017). As Bach et al. (2021) points out, being a trauma survivor often intersects with membership in marginalized groups, which can create additional barriers to accessing and benefiting from services. As a result, these individuals may be underserved by formal support systems. Such groups include people identified as disabled, people living with mental health conditions, people belonging to ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities, indigenous peoples, financially vulnerable populations, older adults, and people struggling with substance use.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) contribute to long-term physical and psychological issues, resulting in harmful emotional, behavioural, and biological consequences throughout life and predispose individuals to adult post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bailey et al., 2025; Velasquez Jr et al., 2023). Individuals often experience disruptions in environment adaptation mechanisms and self-regulation, resulting in a diminished capacity to manage psychological and physiological arousal. Consequently, they may exhibit aggressive behaviours or social and emotional withdrawal (Van der Kolk, 2003). Trauma-affected youth are more likely to face exclusionary disciplinary actions at school, increasing their risk of involvement in criminal activities in the further life course (Fondren et al., 2020; Ranu et al., 2023). Trauma negatively impacts academic performance and educational attainment, associated with unemployment and long-term sickness and disability (Hardcastle et al., 2018), reduced productivity negatively impacts on career development processes, career decisions, and job-seeking behaviours (Lai et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2022; Magruder et al., 2017).

According to previous research, trauma-informed counselling encompasses a comprehensive framework of attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to effectively support individuals affected by trauma (Mahon, 2024). SAMHSA's concept of a trauma-informed '4R' approach outlines key components of such counselling, including **realising** the broad impact of trauma and potential pathways to recovery, **recognising** its signs in both service users and staff, **responding** by integrating trauma awareness into policies and practices, and actively working to **resist re-traumatisation**. It requires alignment with core principles such as safety, trust, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity (Der Sarkissian & Sharkey, 2021; Vo & Purkayastha, 2023). Empowerment, user engagement and involvement, where the service user's voice is heard, allow the service to be adjusted to the user's needs and feedback, promoting constructive behaviour (Liu et al., 2024; Mahon, 2024).

Given the information above, it is reasonable to anticipate that trauma-informed work-oriented counselling would also recognise the complex ways trauma can affect individuals' ability to obtain, return to, or retain employment. It involves identifying the signs and effects of trauma and integrating this understanding into work-related interventions, while fostering an environment that emphasises safety, trust, and empowerment. The significance of this approach lies in its ability to address the trauma-related needs and barriers faced by service users while also preventing re-traumatisation.

By fostering workforce participation among potentially marginalised individuals, this approach not only would promote their economic self-sufficiency and sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020), but also contribute to the broader goals of sustainable community development and the economic stability of the state.

Method

As an evidence synthesis approach, this scoping review is conducted to explore the breadth of existing peer-reviewed literature, systematically identifying the available evidence on trauma-informed counselling across context of work-oriented counselling. By employing systematic methods, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing knowledge base and inform future research directions (Munn et al., 2022). In conducting this scoping review, we will use the guidelines developed by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI)- JBI Manual for Evidence Synthesis (Peters et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2021).

Search strategy

To develop the initial search strategy, first, a search was conducted in SCOPUS to identify studies on trauma-informed counselling across various contexts. Following this, a search strategy was developed and search for existing systematic and scoping reviews on trauma-informed work-oriented counselling was conducted, using multiple databases, including PROSPERO, SCOPUS, EBSCO (Academic Search Elite, CINAHL, ERIC, and MEDLINE), supplied with search in Google Scholar. This step also allowed to assess the existing evidence base and allowed us to further refine the search strategy. The initial systematic search was conducted on 12 February 2025 using the predefined search strategy.

Based on the initial search results, the strategy was refined and adjusted to improve relevance. A Volda University College librarian was consulted to guide the final selection of databases and optimize the search strategy for identifying peer-reviewed primary research articles published in English (Table 1).

Table 1 Search blocks

Trauma-informed Trauma-responsive Trauma-aware Trauma-sensitive Trauma-focused “Posttraumatic stress” OR PTSD Adverse childhood experiences OR ACE	career counselling career development career construction career agency employment services (supported) employment interventions vocational rehabilitation vocational training job coaching work oriented
Proximity candidates	
career job employment vocational occupation	counseling guidance agency services interventions construction training development
trauma	informed responsive aware sensitive focused

Databases: SCOPUS, EBSCO (Academic search elite, CINAHL, ERIC, MEDLINE), OVID (EMBASE, PsycINFO, AMED); PTSDpubs, and PubMed.

Methodological considerations and limitations

Scoping reviews are guided by the PCC framework (Population–Concept–Context). To ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature on trauma-informed work-oriented counselling, we initially mapped population groups in relation to the potential causes and consequences of trauma. As the focus of our review lies on the concept of trauma-informed work-oriented counselling, we decided against incorporating specific causes and population groups into the search strategy. Instead, the term ‘trauma,’ in its various forms, became the central criterion, and studies were required to explicitly mention it in their abstracts. The only exceptions were Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as these terms frequently appeared in the preliminary search and were deemed essential for inclusion. This approach ensured that the search retrieved studies primarily focused on work-oriented counselling for individuals with trauma histories, regardless of the specific cause

Further, after careful consideration, we decided to **exclude grey literature** from our scoping review. Much of the grey literature is not readily accessible through database searches and instead requires extensive mapping of relevant research institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other entities that may report on primary studies. Conducting a systematic search without geographical limitations posed significant challenges in ensuring a comprehensive search process. The inclusion of grey literature would have introduced inconsistencies in coverage and potential selection bias. Therefore, we opted to focus exclusively on peer-reviewed sources accessible through database search to ensure a systematic and transparent search strategy.

Inclusion and exclusion considerations

We will include all population groups seeking to obtain or retain employment who engaged in counselling, interventions, or other support services to achieve this goal. As for the concept, we will look at the work-oriented counselling within welfare and other services, where the employee qualifications and job responsibilities of the counsellor typically do not extend to certified medical or psychological care. Rather, they function within an interdisciplinary framework, providing employment-related support without offering formal psychological guidance. At the same time, the preliminary search showed that some of the services have psychologists as part of the work-oriented intervention. To account for potential variations in work-oriented interventions, we will distinguish between two groups of counsellors who deliver them: (1) psychologists, who may incorporate clinical insights into their practice, and

(2) interdisciplinary counsellors, who do not provide medical or psychological treatment (Table 2). There will be no restrictions on the research methodology of included studies.

Table 2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Population: Service users who receive services or participate in interventions aimed at improving employability, defined as obtaining or retaining a waged job, and whose inability to secure or maintain employment is linked to trauma.	Other population groups
Concept: Initially non-medical intervention or counselling that consider trauma-related barriers to employment or keeping the waged job of their users in the counselling.	Interventions administered by healthcare professionals in a clinical or medical context, excluding employment or other work-oriented counselling provided by psychologists.
Context: Work-oriented services worldwide, including welfare programs, social services, interventions, and counselling (publicly or privately funded), aimed at assisting individuals in obtaining or maintaining work.	Interventions, services and counselling that do not target employment or work re-integration of their participants/service users
Types of sources: Peer-reviewed articles reporting primary studies, published in English between 2015 and 2025.	

Literature search

The search based on the refined search strategy was conducted 04 March 2025 with the following results (Table 3):

Table 3 Search results

Scopus	365
EBSCO:	
Academic Search Elite	245
CINAHL	142
ERIC	15
MEDLINE	215
OVID:	
EMBASE	102
PsycINFO	104
AMED	12
PubMed	100
PTSDpubs	24
Total:	1324
Duplicates removed:	794

Sample Search strategy for ERIC (EBSCO):

(career OR job OR employment OR vocational OR occupation*) N2 (counseling OR guidance OR agency OR services OR interventions OR construction OR training OR development OR oriented OR coaching OR support*) AND ((trauma* N2 (informed or responsive or aware or sensitive or focused) OR "Posttraumatic stress" OR PTSD OR "Adverse childhood experiences" OR ACE))

Following the search, all identified citations were collected and uploaded into EndNote v21, where duplicate entries were removed.

The remaining records were imported into Rayyan – a web and mobile app for systematic reviews (Ouzzani et al., 2016), where two independent reviewers will screen titles and abstracts to assess their eligibility based on the inclusion criteria for the review. Subsequently, the sources selected for full-text analysis will be thoroughly reviewed to make the final decision on their inclusion in the review. Any disagreements will be resolved through discussion, with the potential of engaging an external interlocutor with knowledge and qualifications similar to the primary authors if there are instances of persistent disagreement.

Search of the reference lists

Once the full-text sources are selected for inclusion, their reference lists will be searched for additional relevant studies to include in the review. These will be treated in the same way for screening and inclusion.

Data extraction, analysis and result presentation

Data extraction will include relevant contextual information about the study and employ the TIDIER-Rehab Checklist (Signal et al., 2024) as a foundational framework.

Descriptive qualitative data analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) will be performed to detect the themes of trauma-informed employment-oriented career counselling. If there is a large volume of data, we may use thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) if appropriate to address research questions.

The PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) will be used to for presentation of the scoping review process, ensuring transparent reporting of the methodology, study selection, data extraction, and synthesis of results (Tricco et al., 2018).

We will report on study characteristics, elements of the interventions and qualitative synthesis relevant to the two research questions.

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