

Trauma and mental health

Current Debates in Mental Health

Key focus: To what extent is trauma a useful framework for understanding mental health difficulties?

In this session, you will build on your existing knowledge of trauma to explore this question. You will consider different perspectives, evaluate research and begin developing your own argument for the essay.

Use this handout to record ideas and questions as we work through the topic. You can also make notes in a separate document. The discussion uses research and a fictional case; you are not expected to share personal experiences.

Your starting point

- What does a trauma perspective help us understand about mental health difficulties?
- What questions remain for you following your trauma training?
- What would make trauma a useful framework: explaining difficulties, helping someone make sense of their experiences, or guiding support?

My starting view:

What do we mean by trauma

- Are we referring to an event, someone's response, or the continuing effects of an experience?
- How might a focus on a single event differ from a focus on repeated or relational adversity?
- How might the definition we choose affect our answer to the essay question?

Making the case for a trauma framework

Identify two reasons why a trauma framework might be useful. Consider understanding coping, recognising adversity, personal meaning and reducing blame. What evidence would support each reason?

Why might trauma perspectives have become increasingly influential? Consider research, survivor advocacy and public discussion. Which explanations would you need to investigate further?

Reading and evaluating evidence

Read the short sections indicated below and note what each source contributes to the debate. These are starting points for your research, rather than a complete reading list for the essay.

Reading 1 Trauma and mental health difficulties

[Hogg and colleagues — abstract and publication details](#)

[Alternative link — short conference summary by the authors](#)

Read the abstract, focusing on the methods, results and conclusion. The alternative link summarises the same work; it is not a separate study.

The authors brought together previous reviews and meta-analyses and found an association between trauma and a range of diagnosed mental disorders.

- What does this finding tell us about the relevance of trauma?
- What does it leave unanswered about why a particular person experiences difficulties?
- What would you need to check in the full paper before deciding how much weight to place on the finding?
Consider definitions, measurement and study design.

Reading 2 Expanding the meaning of harm

[Haslam, Tse and De Deyne — Concept Creep and Psychiatrization](#)

Read the abstract and the opening section on concept creep. This term describes the expansion of harm-related concepts to cover new kinds of experience or less severe instances. The paper offers a conceptual analysis to evaluate.

- When could a broader meaning of trauma help recognise experiences that have been overlooked?
- When could it blur useful distinctions or pathologise distress?
- What evidence would help you assess the benefits and risks of using trauma language?

Your response to the readings

One finding or argument I could use:

One limitation or question I need to explore:

Keep these claims separate: trauma is associated with distress; a trauma framework helps someone make sense of their experience; a particular intervention improves outcomes. Evidence for one does not automatically establish the others.

Exploring different perspectives

A fictional case

Alex, 24, experiences anxiety, low mood and poor sleep. They describe bullying during adolescence and are now working unpredictable shifts, struggling with rent and feeling isolated. Alex says their main concern is that their current circumstances feel unmanageable.

Use the case to compare ways of understanding distress. There is not enough information here to diagnose Alex or determine the cause of their difficulties.

- What might a trauma framework help us understand? What else would we need to know?
- How might current insecurity, relationships, sleep, physical health or patterns of thinking contribute? Could these explanations interact?
- What might we miss if past bullying became the main explanation? What might we miss if it were ignored?
- How should Alex's own understanding influence the language used?
- If support focused only on Alex's coping, what would happen to the housing and employment problems?

What a trauma framework might illuminate:

What other perspectives might add:

Testing an argument

Choose one statement below. Explore the strongest argument both for and against it. Identify the evidence you would need, then rewrite the statement to reflect your considered position.

- "Trauma offers a more meaningful understanding of distress than diagnosis."
- "Broadening the meaning of trauma does more good than harm."
- "Trauma frameworks draw attention away from the social changes people need."

My revised statement:

Developing your essay position

Your essay should evaluate how far trauma is useful as a framework. You may choose a particular mental health difficulty or population to help focus your discussion.

Your provisional argument

My chosen focus:

Trauma is useful as a framework because...

However, its usefulness is limited when...

My overall position is...

Planning your next steps

- Which empirical evidence will support your argument?
- What is the strongest competing perspective or challenge to your position?
- How will you consider personal meaning, culture and social or structural conditions?
- What further reading would help you reach a justified conclusion?

My next reading or search:

Starting references

Hogg, B., Gardoki-Souto, I., Valiente-Gómez, A., Rosa, A. R., Fortea, L., Radua, J., Amann, B. L., & Moreno-Alcázar, A. (2023). Psychological trauma as a transdiagnostic risk factor for mental disorder: An umbrella meta-analysis. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*, 273, 397–410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00406-022-01495-5>

Haslam, N., Tse, J. S. Y., & De Deyne, S. (2021). Concept creep and psychiatrization. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, 806147. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.806147>