Trauma, PTSD, and User Experience in VA.gov

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder caused by very stressful, frightening, or distressing events. Approximately 20% of US veterans (and 7-8% of the general US population) have PTSD.

Common symptoms of PTSD (this is not an exhaustive list):

- **Behavioral**: agitation, irritability, hostility, **hypervigilance**, self-destructive behavior, or **social isolation**
- **Psychological**: flashback, **fear, severe anxiety,** or **mistrust**
- **Mood**: **loss of interest** or pleasure in activities, **guilt**, or loneliness
- **Sleep**: insomnia or nightmares
- **Also common:** emotional detachment or unwanted thoughts

Trauma survivors may:

- Have a **hard time making choices** and/or a **limited attention span**
- Have a **physical impairment**
- Be **emotionally vulnerable**
- **Fear for their safety** or others' safety
- **Lack of trust**, based on past experiences

Naturally, this requires some additional considerations in our design approach. Trauma-informed design principles created by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) seem relevant for our design approach.

Trauma-informed design:

Being trauma-informed means to better serve, and to avoid further harm to people who have experienced trauma. The 6 trauma-informed principles are shown below. Melissa Eggleston (2017) argues that principles 1 and 2, and to a certain degree, 5 and 6, overlaps with good UX design principles.

Trauma-Informed Principles

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

- From Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Safety, trustworthiness, and transparency:

Individuals with trauma and PTSD needs to feel safe. Examples of creating a safe environment, whether online or offline include:

- Ensure that individuals feel welcome, respected, and supported
- Ensure that they can maintain their healthy boundaries
- Maintain consistent schedules and procedures
- Offer sufficient notice and preparation, when changes occur
- Maintain communication that is consistent, open, and respectful
- Maintain awareness of how an individual's culture affects how they perceive trauma, safety, and privacy

- From the Center for Preparedness and Response

Trauma and UX design:

Mellissa Eggleston suggests 10 ideas for trauma-informed principles in UX design.
5 of these are well-known UX principles, and 5 are specific for trauma-survivors.

10 Ideas to Apply to Your Website

UX ideas
1. Make it obvious in five seconds
2. Reduce total cognitive load
3. Increase readability of text
4. Fix broken links, typos, errors
5. Be inclusive

Survivor-Sensitive Features
1. Improve safety alert and exit
2. Ensure "get help" button is prominent
3. Adjust "contact us" for safety
4. Make it more mobile-friendly
5. Upgrade your images

Fig. 1. By Melissa Eggleston

UX principles:

1. The website or service should communicate quickly what it is and what it is for. It should quickly answer "...oh, it's a ......, where I can ...." This should be self-explanatory and not ambiguous.
2. Many trauma and PTSD survivors have cognitive impairments, and the website or service should not overwhelm the user with information, text, images. Simplify. Fewer choices. Consistent navigation, search, etc.
3. Increase the readability of text. Avoid "a wall of words" and excessive capital letters.
4. Fix links, typos, errors to create trust, and predictability.
5. Attempt to include as many users as possible to relate to the content (be inclusive and sensitive to gender, culture, etc.) and be able to read the content (by using sound accessibility principles).

Survivor-sensitive features:

1. Improve safety alert and exit possibilities. Easy to find safety info. Easy to exit.
2. Ensure that "get help" solutions are prominent and easy to use.
3. Improve "contact us" for more safety. Do not ask about email and contact info, unless informing about what this will be used for and not used for.
4. Make mobile-friendly. Many users in low and middle areas use mobile phones predominantly.
5. Upgrade images. Make sure that there are no offensive images and no images that can be triggers for trauma.

- *From Melissa Eggleston*

How are trauma-informed principles used when doing research / interviewing veterans with PTSD?:

Create safety, control, and rapport/connection:

- Start with warm-up questions to build rapport/connection, safety.
- As much as possible, attempt to create a "safe space" when talking with veterans.
- Build trust by being open, transparent, predictable, and professional.
- Give the veteran a sense of control by allowing for breaks and allowing them to stop the interview at any time. Set clear expectations and structure for the interview.
- Respect their boundaries, and allow enough time for each question.

Avoid triggers

- Do not pressure the veteran to talk about their trauma, events, feelings.
- Avoid words, images, descriptions of situations, or expressions that could be a trigger.
- If possible, avoid using the veteran's own situation/trauma, instead create a fictional scenario.
- Use the veteran's own words.
- Use open-ended questions.

Show respect and empathy:

- Do not tell the veteran what they should be doing, feeling, thinking about their trauma.
- Strive towards openness when listening, and being non-judgemental.
- Don't interrupt.
- Be sensitive to gender and cultural differences.
- Don't try to minimize the effect of the trauma, even if it happened a long time ago.
- Understand/empathize with the fact that their trauma might trigger irrational, subconscious feelings (fear generated by the amygdala for survival response) decades after the trauma.

Internal resources:

VA.gov has an excellent app with useful information about, and management advice for individuals with PTSD. It has an overview of symptoms, a way to self-access and monitor symptoms, and a lot of resources on how to better manage PTSD and where to get professional help.

Screen 1:
11:19
PTSD Coach
The difference between the impossible and the possible lies in a person's determination.
--Tommy Lasorda

MANAGE SYMPTOMS   TRACK PROGRESS

LEARN   GET SUPPORT

DEEP BREATHING   MUSCLE RELAXATION   CRISIS RESOURCES

FAVORITE TOOLS

Screen 2:
11:20
Manage Symptoms
SYMPTOMS   TOOLS   FAVORITES

+ YOUR OWN TOOL
AMBIENT SOUNDS
BODY SCAN
CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE
CONNECT WITH OTHERS
DEEP BREATHING
GROUNDING
INSPIRING QUOTES

Manage   Track   Learn   Support

Screen 3:
11:25
PTSD Symptoms
GRAPH   DETAILS

DATE

80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0

10/01 11/01 12/01

SCORE

SCORE
0 TO 30 = LOW
31 TO 60 = MEDIUM
61 TO 80 = HIGH

Manage   Track   Learn   Support

Screen 4:
11:20
Distress meter

What's your current level of distress?
Tap on the up and down arrows to indicate how you are feeling.

7

Next

Skip

5