

Close to the Heart

Trauma-Informed Nursing: A Care Initiative

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Identifying Trauma at the Point of Care

As the largest caregiving sector in the healthcare system, nurses are often the first professionals to recognize when trauma is shaping a patient's condition, behavior, or ability to engage in care. In Israel today, that need has become acute. With one in three Israelis grappling with PTSD, alongside sharp increases in anxiety and depression since the outbreak of war, trauma is increasingly appearing inside hospital wards disguised as something else – recurring pain, agitation, withdrawal, resistance to treatment, or unexplained physical symptoms.

The Program

Close to the Heart was developed to help address this gap. Created by researchers at the Cheryl Spencer Department of Nursing at the University of Haifa, the program equips nurses with practical tools to identify and respond to trauma as part of routine clinical care. It integrates trauma awareness into existing workflows through targeted training, simulation-based learning, and a computerized screening tool.

The initiative was piloted at Rambam Health Care Campus in five departments: Neurology, Trauma, Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, and Surgery. Twenty nurses were selected as departmental “champions,” working alongside social workers and psychologists to help guide implementation within their units.

Nurse champions complete hands-on workshops and guided follow-up sessions, while broader nursing teams participate in a four-part simulation-based program covering the core principles of trauma-informed care. These tools are already used in academic instruction and staff training, making broader rollout feasible.

A central component is a screening tool built around information nurses already collect during intake and routine care. Integrated into existing hospital systems, it flags trauma-related risk factors without adding to staff workload. During the pilot, approximately 20% of hospitalized patients were screened, and 85% of those patients were found to require some level of trauma-informed support.



Leadership



Professor Efrat Shadmi, is Chair of the Cheryl Spencer Department of Nursing and founding Head of the Azrieli Advanced Nursing Center. The new Center marks a significant shift in nursing education in Israel, with a state-of-the-art simulation facility, research unit, and technology innovation hub. Its goal is to train the next generation of nurses with strong clinical and interpersonal skills, equipping them to identify undiagnosed trauma, close care gaps, and deliver equitable care that measurably improves patient outcomes across Israel.



Dr. Yaara Sadeh, is a clinical social worker and lecturer at the School of Social Work. Her research looks at how medical trauma and PTSD affect children and families, with a focus on family-centered care, psychosocial assessment, and trauma-informed healthcare. Her recent work examines pediatric mental health screening and posttraumatic stress and depression in parents of trauma-exposed kids.

What Changes in Practice?

Unrecognized trauma doesn't stay invisible. It shows up as misdiagnosis, as worsening physical and mental health, and sometimes as patient behavior that staff experience as aggression – without a clear understanding of what triggered it.

Close to the Heart changes that. Nurses provide clearer explanations, pay closer attention to potential triggers, and involve patients more actively in decisions about their care, helping restore a sense of control and stability. When appropriate, patients are referred for psychosocial support and follow-up care.

One patient arrived repeatedly with chest pain despite showing no cardiac abnormalities. Through the program's screening process, nurses connected the attacks to severe anxiety that began after his nephew was seriously injured in the war, helping direct him to appropriate care. In another case, a young woman repeatedly refused a minor surgical procedure until staff recognized signs of trauma and adjusted their approach – ensuring continuous accompaniment by a female nurse throughout the process. She ultimately agreed to undergo treatment.

Scaling the Model

The next phase will expand the program across all departments at Rambam Health Care Campus, followed by integration into community healthcare settings through partnerships with Israel's HMOs. Plans are also underway to extend the model to hospitals and clinics across northern Israel, potentially benefiting more than 300,000 patients annually. Training can be delivered at scale through computerized simulation.

The screening tool builds on systems already in use, avoiding additional administrative burden and making adoption across the healthcare system realistic. Over time, the approach is expected to become part of routine nursing practice across both hospital and community care settings, helping healthcare teams identify trauma earlier and respond more effectively.



For Your Consideration

Close to the Heart positions nurses at the forefront of Israel's response to widespread trauma, enabling early identification and more effective care at the point where patients first enter the system. By embedding practical tools into everyday clinical workflows, the program offers a scalable solution that can improve medical outcomes, reduce costs, and helps healthcare teams respond more quickly and appropriately to patients affected by trauma.



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