

# Retail Reimagined: A Blueprint for Trauma-Informed Customer Experiences

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## *Abstract*

*Trauma alters consumer behavior, especially in retail spaces. This research identifies specific triggers within retail environments that may re-traumatize customers, impacting their overall experience. In response, a trauma-informed approach to retailing is proposed, emphasizing three key principles: 1) Safety, 2) Empowerment, Voice & Choice, and 3) Collaboration & Mutuality. The paper provides actionable recommendations for retailers, such as offering sensory-friendly hours, intentional comfort spaces, and investments in de-escalation training. By implementing a trauma-informed approach to retail, companies can foster stronger connections with their customers while contributing to a more accessible and inclusive retail landscape.*

## **The Overlooked Influence of Trauma**

*“I was in a store and it got crowded and noisy and I felt stressed and kind of trapped and just wanted to leave my cart and go.”*

*“I do dread shopping as it stresses me a lot, and on a bad day I get somewhat confused. I just want to get out of the store as soon as I can.”*

*“I tend to feel claustrophobic if a store is crowded. This makes me feel like I am trapped. Also, if I have to wait in line too long, I often start to feel nervous. My heart rate jumps, I will start to sweat, and I will become shaky. If it gets too bad, I have to leave the store.”*

*- Participant Quotes*

Trauma, which arises from distressing and overwhelming experiences, has the potential to reverberate throughout an individual's life damaging their mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.<sup>1</sup> Traumatic experiences can even impact the way people behave as consumers. Acknowledging and understanding how consumer trauma works has gained prominence more recently within consumer behavior. For instance, people who have experienced trauma might be more prone to engage in harmful shopping behaviors, such as compulsive and panic buying.<sup>2, 3</sup>

One particular aspect of consumer trauma that demands more attention is its connection to the retail experience.<sup>4</sup> Retail environments are designed to evoke emotions and desires and often utilize sensory stimuli like visuals, sounds, and scents to trigger emotional responses.<sup>5,6</sup> However, these elements can also inadvertently bring back traumatic memories or feelings, which could be re-traumatizing for survivors. Moreover, those who have experienced trauma may develop avoidance behaviors as a coping mechanism to avoid triggering situations.<sup>7</sup> This may lead customers to withdrawal and quit shopping at certain stores or environments. In light of this, it is important for retailers to consider creating spaces that are welcoming and safe.

*"I have had a panic attack while in the store, my heart was pounding and I couldn't slow it down. All I remember is I felt terrified."*

*- Participant Response*

How can retailers navigate this delicate terrain with empathy and sensitivity? The answer lies in adopting a trauma-informed approach. This approach first acknowledges that trauma is quite common in society and its impact is extensive.<sup>8</sup> In fact, 70% of adults have experienced some form of trauma, which means that many customers are likely dealing with its effects.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging the commonality of trauma is the first step toward building a more compassionate and informed society that prioritizes empathy and understanding in all areas. Next, a trauma-informed approach aims to proactively create environments and interactions that promote safety, trust, and compassion to resist re-traumatization.<sup>10</sup> This care approach has, therefore, been implemented in many settings, including healthcare, education, and social services to enhance the well-being of those they serve.<sup>11</sup> Customer service and retail settings should be next.

Untreated trauma among customers in retail stores can significantly impact retailers, both from a moral and a business perspective. Firstly, from an ethical standpoint, retailers should prioritize the well-being of their customers, recognizing that some may have experienced trauma and that

their shopping experience can either alleviate or exacerbate their distress. Neglecting this responsibility can harm a retailer's reputation and lead to negative customer perceptions. From a business perspective, unaddressed trauma can result in various adverse outcomes. Trauma-triggered behaviors, such as panic attacks, irritability, or avoidance, can deter customers from returning to the store.<sup>12</sup> This can lead to reduced sales, lower customer loyalty, and a decline in overall business performance.

As businesses work to develop ethical, empathetic, and effective strategies, it's crucial to acknowledge the significant impact that consumer trauma can have.<sup>13,14</sup> This research seeks to illuminate the relationship between trauma and consumer behavior, particularly in the context of retailing. A team of marketing researchers with expertise in consumer welfare and retailing presents practical guidelines, following a trauma-informed approach, to improve customer well-being in retail stores. We explore how trauma affects decision-making and call for a compassionate and strategic approach. By following these actionable recommendations, managers can help prevent trauma survivors from being re-traumatized in retail settings, de-escalate critical incidents, and create a more inclusive atmosphere for all stakeholders.

### **Understanding Trauma's Widespread Impact**

Trauma is far more common than often acknowledged, transcending boundaries in terms of its impact. Whether arising from personal tragedies, accidents, natural disasters, or exposure to other distressing events, trauma affects individuals from diverse backgrounds and all walks of life. Recognizing this prevalence highlights the need for awareness and support, as unaddressed trauma can significantly affect an individual's life and well-being. The potential adverse effects of trauma include:<sup>15</sup>

- Emotional reactions: emotional dysregulation and numbing
- Cognitive changes: cognitive errors, trauma-induced hallucinations or delusions, intrusive thoughts and memories, triggers and flashbacks, and dissociation
- Behavioral reactions: self-harm and self-destructive behaviors, substance use, and avoidance
- Physical symptoms: sleep disturbances; gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, neurological, respiratory, dermatological disorders, and more.

However, it's important to note that traumatic events can ultimately impact not only individuals but also the broader community and society at large. Trauma has been likened to a rock hitting the surface of water where

the impact creates the largest wave for the individual but eventually its impact dissipates all around.<sup>16</sup>

### When PTSD Shapes Consumer Choices

*“I have severe anxiety and PTSD. I feel hyper aware around other people. I feel like I have to watch my back. Almost as if I'm anticipating danger. I'm also scared that I'm being judged or watched.”*

*- Participant Response*

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the most commonly diagnosed trauma-related disorder that often arises from individuals enduring traumatic events, leading to challenges in adapting and coping.<sup>17,18</sup> This disorder receives significant attention due to its far-reaching impact.<sup>19</sup> It can increase the risk of neurological, behavioral, and psychological complications, alongside impairments in social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. Furthermore, individuals may adopt health-risk behaviors, such as eating disorders, substance abuse, or violence, as coping mechanisms.<sup>20</sup>

PTSD, classified as a psychiatric condition, can manifest in those who have either directly experienced or witnessed traumatic events, ranging from natural disasters and accidents to terrorism, combat, rape, or other forms of violent assault. These experiences often lead to enduring distressing thoughts and emotions well after the event has concluded, resulting in observable changes in behavior. While diagnosing PTSD requires exposure to a traumatic event, the exposure need not be firsthand.<sup>21</sup> For example, individuals might develop PTSD from learning about the violent death of a loved one. Although even a single traumatic event can trigger PTSD symptoms in individuals, an elevated frequency of traumatic exposures escalates the likelihood of developing PTSD.<sup>22</sup> Research suggests that approximately 1 in 11 adults will receive a PTSD diagnosis during their lifetime.<sup>23</sup>

The impact of PTSD extends broadly and can even influence how consumers behave in the marketplace. Notably, marketing researchers have identified several ways in which trauma and PTSD might contribute to:

- Development of depressive states, leading to depression and compulsive purchasing<sup>24</sup>
- Higher levels of stress, increasing maladaptive consumption, which is amplified for materialistic individuals<sup>25</sup>
- Using consumption as a coping mechanism to alleviate anxiety and to restore or create a new identity following a sense of loss<sup>26</sup>

- Shopping and choosing material objects as a way to feel better and release emotions (i.e., therapeutic catharsis)<sup>27</sup>

### Retailing Through the Lens of PTSD

*“I left my cart full of groceries in an aisle more than once.”*

*-Participant Response*

Given trauma’s ubiquity and associated harmful effects, businesses should consider how best to serve customers who have likely been impacted by trauma. This is especially true in retail environments, which may inadvertently re-traumatize customers. Re-traumatization refers to being exposed to experiences or stimuli, which reminds them of the original traumatic event, triggering a recurrence of traumatic reactions or distress previously experienced. Customers who are re-traumatized may experience:<sup>28</sup>

- Flashbacks/dissociation
- Physiological reactivity
- Aggression
- Self-injurious behaviors
- Withdrawal

From a retail perspective, consumers with PTSD may feel largely uncomfortable shopping in a retail environment due to the number of people that may be in a store. This is not limited to fellow consumers, prior studies have found that consumers may experience an increase in anxiety when employees invade their space through a physical or visual invasion.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, interactions with insensitive or dismissive staff members can mirror past encounters of emotional distress, intensifying feelings of unease. Loud announcements over the intercom or music played at an elevated volume may cause distress and negatively impact a consumer’s shopping experience. And, ultimately, customers may avoid the retail environment altogether.

Few studies have focused specifically on how trauma may impact a consumer’s shopping journey. Recently, marketing researchers explored how trauma may increase consumer anxiety while shopping and negatively influence decision-making abilities.<sup>30</sup> Building upon those results, we utilized open-ended interviews to uncover how consumers who report being victims of traumatic experiences may develop PTSD and the role of the retail environment triggering these survivors either consciously or unconsciously. 110 respondents were recruited from MTurk to answer a series of open-ended questions regarding their comfort level in retail environments and how prior

trauma may impact their shopping experience. Questions were based on sample questions provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Importantly, we have also identified potential ways for retailers to create more accommodating spaces. Additionally, we conducted a thorough investigation and comprehensive review of trauma-informed care in other settings to develop a framework to help managers implement a trauma-informed approach in retail stores.

A core focus of trauma-informed care is avoidance of re-traumatization, therefore, retailers should seek to understand what elements could possibly trigger shoppers.<sup>31</sup> See Table 1 for a list of potential triggers, shared by research participants. Managers should be aware that triggers are highly individual, and it may not represent an exhaustive list.<sup>32</sup> However, considering these triggers and creating a supportive environment will lessen the likelihood of re-traumatizing shoppers and minimize distress for all customers. Consider a fluorescent light that keeps flickering and buzzing as it dies out. For many people, this would be an annoyance, yet for someone who has experienced prior trauma it may be a trigger causing them to become distressed and reactive. Understanding this may prompt management to prioritize maintenance, minimizing any undesirable impact on anyone in the environment. The aim is to create environments that reduce chaos and promote calmness.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 1.** Potential Triggers in Retail Stores



### A Trauma-Informed Approach to Retailing

Since customers may be negatively impacted within retail environments based on past trauma events, retailers need to understand how to use preventative market-based solutions to create a more inclusive retail environment and enhance consumer well-being. How can retailers help shoppers feel more at ease and able to make better purchases? A *trauma-informed approach to retailing* recognizes the widespread impact of trauma, creating environments that prioritize safety, trust, and empowerment to prevent re-traumatization, fostering positive customer experiences. Three key principles fundamental to a trauma-informed approach should lead a retailer's strategy—1) Safety, 2) Empowerment, Voice, & Choice, and 3) Collaboration & Mutuality (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Trauma-Informed Approach to Retailing Defined

A 'Trauma-Informed Approach to Retailing' recognizes the widespread impact of trauma, creating environments that prioritize safety, trust, and empowerment to prevent re-traumatization, fostering positive customer experiences.	
Three Key Principles	Definition*
<b>Safety</b>	Ensuring customers and employees feel both physically and emotionally safe during interactions and within the store environment.
<b>Empowerment, Voice, &amp; Choice</b>	Customers' strengths and experiences are valued, cultivating a belief in customer empowerment. Customers are encouraged to actively participate in decision-making and self-advocacy, while employees act as facilitators of support rather than controllers.
<b>Collaboration &amp; Mutuality</b>	Recognition that healing and positive experiences are fostered through relationships and everyone in the organization, including frontline employees and managers, has a role to play in a trauma-informed approach.

\*Adapted to context from SAMHSA<sup>33</sup>

#### Safety

The first principles within a trauma-informed approach to retailing emphasizes safety. Safety involves the creation of spaces where customers feel physically and emotionally secure.<sup>34</sup> Safety in this context involves providing a retail environment that minimizes potential triggers and promotes a sense of comfort and control.

In a trauma-informed approach to retailing, evidence of security, both visible and tangible measures, should be highlighted so shoppers are ensured that their safety and well-being is being prioritized. In-store signage and communication should be clear, transparent, and easy to understand to prevent confusion and anxiety. Offering a visible and approachable customer service desk also provides shoppers with support to seek help, if required.

Another aspect of creating a sense of safety is organizing store layouts to reduce sensory overload and confusion. Offering clearly marked exits and accessible paths helps customers feel more at ease. Implementing measures to prevent overcrowding also contribute to customer comfort and security. For instance, aisles can be utilized to ease conflict and tensions in retail stores—specifically aisles should be wide enough for two people, plus carts if applicable.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, retailers should consider incorporating intentional spaces and comfort items designed to allow customers an escape from an overcrowded store and to allow them to decompress. Whether called a quiet room, reflection space, calming room, or sensory rooms, we are seeing these intentional spaces becoming more commonplace in schools, airports, and museums. For example, Ryder University has created the Zen Den, a quiet, relaxation lounge to help overwhelmed students de-stress and support students' mental health.<sup>36</sup> It features dimmable lighting, cozy seats, and a forest mural to calm students. These have also been referred to as "safe spaces." Unfortunately, critics of space spaces have narrowly redefined them as relevant to minority groups only and labeled them as an attack on free speech; yet these spaces are invaluable mental health tools.<sup>37</sup> While trauma strips away one's sense of safety, these intentional spaces provide individuals with an opportunity to cope and practice self-care in a secure location. Complimentary comfort items and intentional spaces provide relief for customers but also communicates that the retailer cares, which helps customers feel supported and less alone.

*Take Action:*

- Demonstrate visible security measures to assure customers of their safety.
- Thoughtfully plan store layouts to help customers navigate the store and minimize overwhelming situations.
- Offer complimentary comfort items like water or coffee to provide immediate relief.
- Designate intentional spaces within the store to provide shoppers with a refuge to manage overwhelming moments.

### **Empowerment, Voice, & Choice**

Customers who have experienced trauma have likely felt a sense of powerlessness, which can result in a heightened need for control over their surroundings and experiences.<sup>38,39</sup> In retailing, the Empowerment, Voice, & Choice principle is important because it helps customers who might have experienced trauma feel more in charge and promotes self-advocacy. This means giving them opportunities to make choices and decisions while they



shop. Additionally, instead of focusing on their vulnerabilities, this approach highlights customers' strengths. Importantly, employees should act as facilitators of support, rather than controllers.<sup>40</sup>

Retailers should aim to give customers meaningful choices and involve them in decision-making.<sup>41</sup> This can be done by providing various options, such as different ordering methods like mobile and online ordering, and the convenience of in-store pickup. Further, options could include speedy check-out solutions and self-checkout stations. These choices let customers select their preferences pick what makes them comfortable.

Also, retailers may consider having special hours for quiet shopping. For example, Walmart recently announced it would be trialing sensory-friendly hours for 2 hours on Saturday mornings during back-to-school shopping.<sup>42</sup> This is an effort by the largest retailer to become more accessible to individuals with sensory issues. During these hours, overhead lights will be dimmed, radios will be silenced, and any screens feature stationary images rather than videos. Tesco, the largest retailer in the UK, permanently launched a "Quiet Hour" in 2021, which offers dimmed lights and quietened checkout noises from 9am-10am every Wednesday and Saturday.<sup>43</sup> These unconventional, sensory-friendly hours answer the need for calm spaces, minimizing potential triggers and giving customers a peaceful time to shop.

### *Take Action:*

- Offer fast check-out options and self-service stations to minimize potential stress and discomfort.
- Provide a variety of ordering options (e.g., mobile order, in-store pickup), so customers may choose for themselves the most comfortable and convenient way to shop.
- Introduce unconventional hours for quiet and low-sensory shopping to cater to customers who may want to shop in a peaceful environment, minimizing sensory overload.

### **Collaboration & Mutuality**

The collaboration and mutuality principle, central to a trauma-informed retailing strategy, emphasizes the importance of nurturing meaningful relationships between all employees and customers, especially for those who have experienced trauma.<sup>44</sup>

Supportive staff members play a crucial role in fostering positive experiences by engaging with customers and creating empathetic connections. A respondent in our in-depth interviews shared an experience when she felt overwhelmed and disconnected while shopping. She "wanted to run and hide" and "couldn't get out of there fast enough" upon losing her sense of self. That is, until a compassionate cashier helped to ground her.

## Retail Reimagined

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What did the cashier do? Connected with the customer and told her she understood what she was going through.

*“...thank god for that cashier, she helped me realize that not everyone is a jerk, and there ARE good people out there that understand.”*

*- Participant Response*

Managers should empower employees to recognize the significant role they play in helping customers by connecting with them. Moreover, it is important for managers to ensure that employees who may have experienced trauma, or secondary traumatic stress, are supported with the appropriate support and resources.

Investing in training, including de-escalation techniques and educating them on reading customers' body language to identify when they might need assistance, contributes to calm and helpful interactions. When staff members are equipped with these skills, they can effectively address customers' needs and create a sense of safety. This strategy reinforces the idea that healing and recovery are collaborative efforts, where both customers and employees play essential roles in creating a retail environment that fosters empathy, understanding, and a sense of connection.

Additionally, as a form of collaboration, customers should play a role in evaluating and planning their experience.<sup>45</sup> Managers should encourage customers to share their feedback and concerns. By valuing these customer insights, retailers create a shopping environment that empowers customers to actively participate in shaping their retail interactions. This approach not only builds a stronger rapport between retailers and customers but also ensures that the customer's voice is heard, leading to a more inclusive and satisfying shopping journey.

### *Take Action:*

- Employ caring and understanding staff who understand their role in helping customers feel safe and respected.
- Train staff to recognize when customers are struggling and equip them with techniques to handle tense situations.

### **Checklist**

Actionable steps from these principles have been summarized in an INCLUSIVE checklist (see Figure 2). For managers, this list acts as a practical reference, helping them maintain consistency and track progress while reinforcing the adoption of essential trauma-informed practices. Because trauma affects us all, either directly or indirectly, these strategies to improve and enhance consumer well-being in retail stores can benefit not only the

customers, but also the employees. These tools may be used to create a safer, accessible environment for all stakeholders.

Figure 2. INCLUSIVE Checklist

**I**ntentional Spaces

- Designate quiet and calming areas within the store to allow overwhelmed customers the opportunity to regroup and decompress.

**N**urturing, Supportive Staff

- Incorporate trauma-informed principles within hiring, supervision, and evaluation practices.
- Encourage empathetic engagement with customers to build connections.
- Allow customers to provide feedback on their experience, so they can help shape their retail interactions.

**C**omfort Items

- Provide amenities like free water or coffee to provide immediate relief to shoppers.

**L**ayout Design

- Install wider aisles to avoid overcrowding and respect shoppers' personal space.
- Include easily visible windows and clearly marked exits.

**U**nconventional Hours

- Designate weekly sensory-friendly hours where customers can choose to shop in dimmed lighting without loud noises.

**S**peedy Checkout Solutions

- Implement check-out solutions, such as a queue management system, to minimize wait times.
- Add user-friendly self-check-out options, including self-service kiosks or mobile technologies (e.g., Scan-and-Go) that allow customers to scan and pay for items themselves.

**I**nvestments in Training

- Train employees to recognize when customers are struggling.
- Incorporate training in de-escalation strategies.

**V**ariety of Ordering Options

- Provide customers with meaningful ordering choices.

**E**vidence of Security

- Highlight in-store security measures.
- Utilize clear in-store signage to inform shoppers about policies, safety procedures, and available resources.

### The Future Is Inclusive

As people pay more attention to mental health issues and the wide range of human experiences, it's clear that updating marketing strategies to encompass these factors is essential.<sup>46,47</sup> This research explores why businesses should prioritize understanding the effects of trauma on consumer behavior and how this understanding can lead to more informed, compassionate, and effective strategies.

A trauma-informed approach to retailing recognizes the widespread impact of trauma, creating environments that prioritize safety, trust, and empowerment to prevent re-traumatization, fostering positive customer experiences. This strategy aligns well with the concept of 'neighborliness,' a guiding principle for meaningful corporate social responsibility.<sup>48</sup> Neighborliness emphasizes collaborative and community-driven engagement and recognizing shared consequences rather than independence. Trauma-informed retailing understands that by sharing spaces and experiences, retailers and their stakeholders inevitably share fates. This shared fate fosters an environment of empathy, understanding, and support, which is at the core of neighborliness.

For instance, trauma-informed practices have the potential to provide not only more comfortable shopping experiences for customers who have experienced trauma but also to benefit other customer groups. For instance, stores with loud noises, bright lights, and strong smells can be stressful for neurodiverse customers, who could greatly benefit from a more inclusive and accessible environment.<sup>49</sup> Further, retail environments designed with a trauma-informed approach can also bring comfort to employees who have faced trauma. Unfortunately, there has been a rise in incidents of abuse and hostility directed towards frontline customer service employees since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused chaos and trauma.<sup>50,51,52</sup> Adopting a trauma-informed approach will provide employees with additional tools to de-escalate such hostile situations and, ideally, reduce the frequency of these incidents.

By acknowledging the nuances of consumer trauma and delivering trauma-informed customer experiences, retailers can develop a deeper connection with their customers and build trust. This approach contributes to a business landscape that not only drives sales but also embraces the holistic well-being of consumers.

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