

# A Clinician's Tip Sheet for Working with Trauma

## Supporting you in moving from trauma awareness to trauma responsiveness

Working with people impacted by trauma and chronic or toxic stress can be both challenging and rewarding. This brief guide outlines components of a trauma responsive approach to care that any clinician can use to support people in their journey to healing, recovery and building resilience.

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**What Is Trauma?** When we feel incredibly overwhelmed due to an event, events or circumstances. Something happens that is too fast or too much to deal with - and there is not enough time to process or integrate the experience. We look at the world around us and ourselves differently too.

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### CONVERSATIONS ABOUT TRAUMA: CREATING A HOLDING SPACE

#### How To Talk About Trauma?

Talking about trauma or toxic stress exposure can sometimes be difficult, but talking can benefit the person seeking help and the therapeutic relationship.

Some tips:

- *Set up the environment* by ensuring the space is private and confidential. Notice signs that someone is uncomfortable and ask about their comfort level and safety.
- *Explore trauma and adversity and seek elaboration* by getting permission to ask questions (e.g., You indicated you've

experienced some trauma. Can you tell me about that?). Motivational interviewing skills can be very useful.

- *Explore resilience and coping* with a strengths-based conversation to highlight how they have managed in the past.
- *Explore beliefs about trauma* to prepare to provide psychoeducation.
- *Apply the breaks* when a person becomes overwhelmed or dysregulated as they share their trauma history. You can pause the conversation and lead grounding activities.

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### PSYCHOEDUCATION: KNOWLEDGE EMPOWERS

#### What Are Common Reactions?

People may need assistance in order to make the connection between trauma and their own mental health. Psychoeducation is information provided to those seeking or receiving services and their families.

Some tips:

- *Highlight the impact of the Adverse Childhood Experiences study* which emphasizes that early trauma often carries over into later adulthood.
- *Describe the relationship between stress and the brain.* Common reactions to a

trauma history include anxiety, anger, memory problems, and risky behavior among many others.

- *Connect common reactions to the experience of trauma* by exploring people's awareness of their responses. Empower them to recognize their responses are common reactions to what is happening now or has happened in the past.
- *Highlight that adversity can be overcome* and that the bad experiences don't define a person or control their future.

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## REGULATION: HELPING PEOPLE MANAGE THEIR THOUGHTS, FEELINGS & BEHAVIOR

### Why Help People Self-Regulate?

People exposed to trauma and severe adversity may have a hard time calming themselves down in different situations. Self-regulation is the ability to manage and understand our own thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Some tips:

- *Learn about N.E.A.R. (Neuroscience, Epigenetics, ACEs and Resilience) Science* which describes the relationship between the nervous system and the brain in response to

stressful events. Ask how a person copes as this will guide discussions around the most suitable type of regulation activity.

- *Timing is flexible* when it comes to practicing self-regulation strategies. They can be useful at any point when the person is distressed or overwhelmed. Or they can be used to open or close your meetings. It's important to connect regulation to safety.

Examples include grounding or mindfulness activities (e.g., breathing) and exploring social supports.

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## REFERRALS: CONNECTING PEOPLE TO THE HELP THEY NEED

### When To Provide Referrals?

The decision to seek help can be a difficult one for many people. Making a referral can be a critical component in helping people with a variety of needs.

Some tips:

- *Do some research in advance* about other available services in the community to meet needs such as nutritious food, housing support, etc.

- *Identify what can be most helpful* (i.e. case management, housing, health care support) and consider having informational material readily available in waiting areas. This can help reduce any potential stigma.

- *Have a "What to Share" conversation* in order to help prepare the person for the referral appointment.

- *Check in frequently* to find out if any of these additional services were helpful. Also ask if they need other resources.

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## SELF-CARE: AN ESSENTIAL SKILL IN TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

### Do I Need Self-Care?

Working in the mental health field can be very challenging and even more so when we spend a great deal of time working with people who have been exposed to trauma. Self-care is any act we do *deliberately* to take care of our physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Some tips:

- *Self-assessment and reflection* is a good starting point to find out your levels of

stress and how closely you are living your life according to your values.

- *Create a self-care plan* you can easily reference. A maintenance plan includes minor but meaningful changes to promote overall well-being. An emergency plan is needed when you are overly stressed or burned out.

- *Try to improve your job satisfaction* in order to reduce stress and prevent burnout.

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## *Resources to support trauma responsive practices*

Below are some webinars, guides, and organizational links you can use to help you move to trauma responsiveness.

### CONVERSATIONS ABOUT TRAUMA: CREATING A HOLDING SPACE

- [An Introduction to the ACES Study](#) is a short module that provides quality information you can use to further your knowledge, as well as disseminate and train others in your organization.
- The [Foundations of Trauma Informed Care \(TIC\) Self-Learning Program](#) provides an on-boarding and training tool that contains basic and universal information about TIC that can be used across human service sectors (e.g. health, behavioral health, child welfare, and social services).

### PSYCHOEDUCATION: KNOWLEDGE EMPOWERS

- In [How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime](#) (TEDTalk), pediatrician Nadine Burke Harris explains that the repeated stress of abuse, neglect and parents struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues has real effects on the development of the brain.
- In the video [Dan Siegel's Hand Model of the Brain](#), the relationship between stress and the brain is illustrated which can be used to guide conversations around common reactions to stress.

### REGULATION: HELPING PEOPLE MANAGE THEIR THOUGHTS, FEELINGS & BEHAVIOR

- [Befriending Stress: A Neurological Perspective](#) (webinar) Bala Pillai emphasizes that knowing and understanding the autonomic nervous system can help us identify the process of stress in our bodies and help young people with self-regulation and even healing from trauma.
- [Conversations with Dr. Tony: What Are Polyvagal Practices and Why Are They Important?](#) introduces a framework to better understand and resolve the impact of adversity and trauma and create ways of working that appreciates the role of the autonomic nervous system as people move through states of protection and connection to find a safe and regulated emotional space.

### REFERRALS: CONNECTING PEOPLE TO THE HELP THEY NEED

- The [Social Determinants of Health: Connecting the Dots](#) (learning module) provides a basic understanding of the SDOH and the impact of the environment on our overall well-being.
- In [The Social Determinants of Mental Health: Implications for Clinical Practice](#) (panel discussion), representatives across several sectors analyze the impact SDOH have on participants of services, while also investigating strategies for reducing health disparities that are often rooted in social and economic disadvantages in the context of clinical practice.

### SELF-CARE: AN ESSENTIAL SKILL IN TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

- [Creating a Path for Resiliency](#) (webinar) provides information on resiliency while also offering concrete practices that will build on the resiliency factors of their service recipients.
- [Workforce Resilience](#) (2-part webinar) highlights how high turnover and low job satisfaction are indicators that more can be done to aid in the resiliency of service providers. This series describes best practices for self care and strategies for a more effective supervisory process.