

# Understanding Trauma



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Trauma is defined as experiences that overwhelm a person's capacity to cope. Trauma can include directly or indirectly experiencing abuse, neglect, violence, accidents, natural disasters, war, sudden unexpected loss and other events outside of a person's control. Impacts of trauma can disrupt all aspects of a person including their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing. Trauma can impact a person's sense of safety, sense of self, personal relationships, emotional regulation and physical health.

**Historical trauma** is a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations as a result of massive group trauma. Historical trauma can include the impacts of colonization and colonialism through Indian Residential Schools and other assimilative actions.

**Intergenerational trauma** describes the psychological or emotional effects that can be experienced by people who live with or around trauma survivors. The maladaptive coping patterns that an entire generation of people have developed in order to survive are then passed onto the next generation. Examples of maladaptive coping can look like violence within families and communities, addictions, family dysfunction and neglect, difficulties with interpersonal relationships and mental health disorders.

# Impacts of Trauma



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The experiences of trauma are unique for each person. A group of people experiencing or witnessing the same traumatic event will not all react the same. Some people may experience minor disruptions of their usual functioning while others may experience debilitating responses which impact their ability to function. People can also be traumatized indirectly (vicariously) by hearing accounts of other people's direct experiences or by reading or seeing traumatic experiences online. Vicarious or indirect trauma can be experienced by anyone but can often impact first responders, helpers or frontline staff.

While everyone who has experienced a traumatic event reacts and responds differently, here are common responses to experiencing trauma:

Intrusions	Avoidance	Negative Cognitions	Hypervigilance
Re-living or re-experiencing the traumatic event.	Avoiding people, places or things that may trigger distress.	Strong negative thoughts and mood related to the traumatic event.	Constant state of fear of dangerous or threatening situations.
<b>Examples:</b>  Flashbacks, unwanted memories, thoughts, dreams or images about the traumatic event	<b>Examples:</b>  Substance use, shopping, gambling, isolation, withdrawal, disconnection	<b>Examples:</b>  Terror, horror, rage, guilt, shame, disgust, blaming self or others for the event, loss of interest in activities, irritability, emotional dysregulation	<b>Examples:</b>  Easily startled, reactive, on guard, sleep disturbances, trouble with concentration and focus

# Preparing Yourself as a Helper



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While it is important to learn and practice the skills to support another person who is experiencing emotional distress it is even more important to focus on protecting your own spirit and wellbeing as a helper. Prolonged stress responses without adequate social supports and healthy coping skills can be toxic to a person's health and have long term negative consequences. Practicing trauma-informed care and having a balance between your work and self-care are great protectors against vicarious trauma. If you are unwell, you will not be able to effectively provide support and may risk re-traumatizing the person.



## ✔ Practice Trauma Informed Care

Trauma informed care is an approach that considers a person's emotional response to trauma

Increase your awareness and understanding of trauma impacts, responses and recovery

Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in people, families, communities

Emphasize physical and emotional safety, choice and control

Create an environment of collaboration, trust, engagement and hope

Challenge your own stereotypes, biases, and judgements

## ✔ Develop a Self-Care Routine

Seek out your own support person or team (therapists, Elders, cultural supports) for yourself

Learn about and reflect on your own trauma impacts, triggers and responses

Create a safety and wellness plan for yourself

Understand your helpful coping strategies and practice them

Take good care of your mental, emotional, spiritual and physical wellness

Practice self-care before and after a difficult conversation

# Supporting Someone who is Experiencing Distress



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## ✓ Contribute to a Safe Environment

Use a gentle and affirming tone when speaking

Focus on listening rather than problem solving

Ask permission before making a suggestion

Avoid giving advice or telling someone what they should do

## ✓ Plan for Safety

Work together to come up with an immediate plan to stay safe

Offer to practice a grounding skill together

Encourage person to seek additional supports

Set a future time to update and review safety plan together (See Appendix A)

## ✓ Practice Active and Empathetic Listening

Listen to understand not to respond

Reflect what you are hearing back to the person

Ask questions to clarify if you are unsure

Offer validating statements “I believe you”, “Your feelings make sense”

## ✓ Offer Choices in the Moment

Resist the urge to give advice or tell people what to do

Shift power and control back to the person

Offer opportunities for the person to make decisions about their treatment

Present options to choose from “I can listen to you OR we can talk through strategies”

*Seek out emergency supports or responders if there is an imminent threat of violence, harm or suicide to the person or someone else*

# Appendix A: Example Safety Plan

A safety plan is a guide that you can use when you are feeling distressed or overwhelmed. A safety plan can be updated overtime as you learn about yourself. It identifies the causes of your distress, warning signs of distress as well as helpful coping strategies and resources you can connect with when you need support.

1) What are things that cause me to feel distressed? (i.e. situations, people, places, behaviours, actions)

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2) What are the warning signs that I am becoming distressed? (i.e. situations, emotions, behaviours, actions)

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3) How do I know that I am in distress? (i.e. situations, emotions, behaviours, actions)

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4) What are safe coping strategies I can do to lower my experience of distress?  
(See Appendix B)

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5) Who are the people who I can trust to reach out to for support? (i.e. family, friends, co-workers, Elders)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Number: \_\_\_\_\_

6) Who are my health care providers I can contact if I am in distress?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Number: \_\_\_\_\_

7) What Crisis Lines can I call if I need someone to talk to immediately?  
(See Appendix C)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Number: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Safe Coping Strategies

Coping strategies help people to feel better by reducing or relieving feelings of distress. Here are some examples of safe coping strategies that you might use to help when you are feeling distressed. Try them out and notice if there is any change in your mood, thoughts, or body sensations. If you find them helpful, add them to your bundle!

### Mental

- Look around you and name 5 things you can see, smell, touch and hear
- Take responsibility for your wellness
- Recognize red flags
- Think about the consequences of your actions
- Practice curiosity and compassion
- Learn a new skill or hobby
- Listen to a guided meditation
- Set goals
- Visualize a safe location where you feel at ease and comfortable

### Emotional

- Name and identify your emotions
- Rate the intensity of your emotions
- Express yourself through art, writing, talking or dancing
- Release your emotions
- Connect with a safe person or people
- Set boundaries with harmful relationships
- Prepare for choppy waters
- Use affirmations to support and uplift yourself
- Practice acceptance of yourself today

### Spiritual

- Sing or learn traditional songs
- Speak or learn your traditional language
- Pray or offer gratitude
- Acknowledge your Ancestors
- Spend time with Elders
- Smudge with sacred medicines
- Go to ceremony

### Physical

- Box Breathing – Inhale for count of 4, hold for count of 4, exhale for count of 4
- Watching something funny – Laugh, be silly
- Move your body
- Get a drink of water
- Practice tapping (shoulders, chest, thighs and temples)
- Practice making regalia or bundle items
- Do a body scan – what do you feel as you notice all parts of your body?



## Appendix C: Crisis Lines

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### Hope for Wellness Helpline (24/7)

Immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous peoples across Canada.

**Chat:** [hopeforwellness.ca](https://hopeforwellness.ca)

**Phone:** 1-855-242-3310

### Kids Help Phone (24/7)

Connect with an Indigenous volunteer crisis responder by messaging FIRST NATIONS, INUIT or METIS to 686868 for young people or 741741 for adults or through Facebook Messenger.

**Chat:** [kidshelpphone.ca](https://kidshelpphone.ca)

**Phone:** 1-800-668-6868

**Text:** "CONNECT" to 686868

### NAN Hope (24/7)

Community-driven, culturally appropriate and timely mental health and addictions support to members of the 49 First Nations communities in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Territory.

**Chat:** [nanhope.ca](https://nanhope.ca)

**Phone/text:** 1-844-NAN-HOPE (626-4673)

### Talk for Healing (24/7)

Support and resources for Indigenous women, by Indigenous women across Ontario.

**Chat:** [talk4healing.com](https://talk4healing.com)

**Phone/text:** 1-855-554-HEAL(4325)

### Kamatsiaqtut Nunavut Helpline (24/7)

Anonymous and confidential telephone counselling for Northerners in crisis.

**Phone:** 1-800-265-3333 (Toll free outside of Iqaluit and residents of Nunavumiut) | 867-979-3333 (Local Nunavut phone number)

### Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) Crisis Line (24/7)

Culturally specific mental health and addiction supports for adults, youth and families in Ontario (available in English and French). Once connected services can be delivered in person, over the phone, or by video conference.

**Phone:** 1-877-767-7572

### National Indian Residential Schools Crisis Line (24/7)

Crisis support to former Indian Residential School students and their families. Support provided by trained crisis counsellors.

**Phone:** 1-866-925-4419

### Talk Suicide Canada (24/7)

Provides nationwide, bilingual support to anyone who is facing suicide. Note: Talking for Suicide is not an Indigenous-led service

**Phone:** 1-833-456-4566

**Text:** 45645 [4pm - midnight ET]

## References

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