

# Understanding Trauma and Healing in Adults

## Brief 2. Caring for Ourselves as We Care for Others



Explore this series to learn about trauma and how traumatic events can impact families and staff. Find information that may help guide your conversations with families. Use these resources to promote healing and resilience and to increase family well-being. When families know they are understood, they can be more engaged and responsive to support.

Head Start and Early Head Start leaders and staff can use this series to learn about adult trauma and strategies for self-care and healing. This series can help build knowledge and skills for a program-wide trauma-informed culture.

[Brief 1. Defining Trauma](#)

**[Brief 2. Caring for Ourselves as We Care for Others](#)**

[Brief 3. Coping and Healing](#)

[Brief 4. Building Knowledge and Skills for a Trauma-Informed Culture](#)

[Brief 5. Creating a Program-Wide Trauma-Informed Culture](#)

Head Start and Early Head Start managers and staff can explore this brief to enhance their knowledge about the importance of caring for themselves as they care for others. Learn what triggers trauma and how to respond.

We need to take care of ourselves when we work with people who have experienced trauma. The effects of those experiences on them can affect us too. They can cause us to experience vicarious trauma. They can also bring back—or trigger—the effects of trauma that we may have experienced in our own lives.

### Understanding and Coping with Our Reactions to Others' Trauma: Vicarious Trauma

When we work with families who have experienced trauma, we may be deeply affected by their pain, anxiety, and other strong feelings. The result may be vicarious trauma. It is a natural reaction. Vicarious trauma is our emotional reaction to the helplessness, fear, and hopelessness that people who have experienced trauma often feel. It can leave us with similar feelings. These can weigh us down and make it difficult for us to relax or experience joy.

We can learn to prepare for these natural reactions, and to handle them, by

- honoring our gift of compassion,
- accepting the limits of what we can offer,
- recognizing that our supportive relationship may be more healing than we let ourselves think,
- finding gratitude for the deeply meaningful work we do, and
- seeking connection and comfort in our own relationships.

**Honoring our gift of compassion.** Our ability to feel others' pain allows us to understand others' feelings. These feelings are our guide in the work we do with families. They may also stir up our own feelings. This ability can take a toll, yet it is also a gift. It is an important part of who we are and why we do this work. We may find it helpful to reflect on and value our ability to be compassionate. It is important to attend to our own feelings with equal compassion.

**Accepting the limits of what we can offer.** Because we feel deeply with others, it is natural to want to fix things and to make everything all better, even when we can't. We may hold ourselves responsible for changing things that are not in our control. We may feel guilty about not being able to do so. We can learn to

- notice these thoughts, and how they sap the energy we need for this work;
- protect ourselves from guilty feelings that we do not deserve; and
- save our energy to focus on doing everything we can do.

We can honor these urges as an expression of our gift of compassion. As we remind ourselves to focus on what we can do, we can let go of what we cannot do. We can use words like, "I will do everything in my power to do what I can to be with you through this." We are likely to keep wishing that we could do more. We may need to work on giving ourselves permission to let go of what is not in our power.

**Recognizing that our supportive relationship may be more healing than we let ourselves think.** If we feel that we need to fix everything, and are distressed by the fact that we can't, we may underestimate the importance of what we can do. For children, families, and staff who have had traumatic experiences, our ability to feel with them may be more powerful than we know. We can invite families into safe and trusting relationships that can provide the comfort and hope they need to heal.

We can connect with others' experience with a simple heart-to-heart statement that expresses our commitment to our relationship with them. Before we speak, we can consider cultural differences in the kinds of feelings about traumatic experiences that are expressed and how they are expressed. We can simply say, as an example, "I will do my best to understand and to stay in this with you, no matter what."

It may not be helpful to say, "I know how you feel." Often, we can't really know what another person's experience is really like. Families may not find it helpful to hear, "You must feel so ...". We want to be careful not to make assumptions. We want to welcome whatever the person is actually feeling.

**Finding gratitude for the deeply meaningful work we do.** The work we do is hard. When we struggle with our feelings of not being able to make everything better, it can be helpful for us to focus on what we can do. Working with children, families, and staff who have experienced trauma has purpose. Creating safety, building trust, and offering reliability, predictability, and consistency are things we do every day that help families heal. We can remind ourselves that we do hard work but we also have the reward of work that really matters.

**Seeking connection and comfort in our own relationships.** The children, families, and staff we work with find comfort in connecting with us. We, too, need people in our life who we can turn to with our full range of feelings. All of us need at least one person who cares about us. We all need one person who can listen to and accept all of our feelings, and remind us that we are not alone.

Relationships outside of work may allow us to think, feel, and do things that are not related to the emotions we bear with the families with whom we work. It can help to be with people who bring us something else to focus on, a fresh perspective, humor, or peace.

## **Understanding and Coping with Our Reactions to Others' Trauma: Trauma Triggers**

If we have experienced trauma in our own lives, we may still be trying to understand how it has affected us. We may find that we feel the effects of that experience when we work with families who have experienced trauma. We may notice specific things that children, parents, or other staff do or say that make us think about what happened to us.

We may have thoughts and feelings that are similar to the ones we had when we experienced trauma. For example, we may see more danger than there really is when a child loses control, or when a parent is angry. Others' behaviors may make us think about the person who hurt us, or the moment when we were hurt.

We may not always be aware that some of the feelings we have are connected to our own past experiences. If we are not aware of the connection between what just happened now and what happened to us previously, we may feel frightened and confused without understanding why. These are all referred to as trauma triggers.

Those of us who belong to racial or ethnic groups that have experienced historical trauma such as slavery or genocide often continue to experience trauma caused by racism, prejudice, and discrimination. These may include, for example, overt or subtle policies or practices that exclude or harm those of us who are identified with these groups. Other examples include prejudiced statements by people who may be intentionally hateful, or, instead, well-meaning and unaware of the hurt they cause.

Each new traumatic experience can be a trigger for prior ones in our own lives. Each one may also remind us of the historical trauma (see Brief 1. Defining Trauma) that our people have experienced and that our families have taught us about. Re-traumatizing experiences can bring back a sense of danger, powerlessness, and loss of our own control over defining who we really are.

Common examples of trauma triggers can include:

- People or places
- Times of the year or holidays
- Certain kinds of weather
- Songs
- Separations, losses, or new traumatic experiences that bring back the memories of old trauma
- Parenting a child who is the age we were at the time of our traumatic experience
- Racist statements or acts

Common examples of experiences resulting from trauma triggers can include:

- Flashbacks —powerful memories or visions of the traumatic experience, along with the feelings of fear of that moment
- Panic attacks — heart pounding, skin flushing, breaking out into a sweat, breathing hard and fast, and the feeling that something terrible is about to happen
- Dissociation —zoning out, losing track of time, not being able to stay in and process the present moment

Other common reactions to trauma triggers could include:

- Perceiving more danger than there really is—for example, when a child loses control or when a parent is angry
- Retreating into our thoughts about the trauma, becoming preoccupied with these thoughts, and having trouble staying present or thinking about anything else
- Feeling the urge to blurt out what happened to us
- Feeling like disappearing or rushing away from the immediate situation
- Pulling away from others when there is conflict, real or perceived
- Rejecting help we need because it is difficult for us to trust it

## About Trigger Responses

Trigger responses can seem to sneak up and take control of our thoughts and behavior. Yet there are often patterns to these reactions. We can learn to recognize how trauma triggers affect us. Here are a few things we can do to settle down reactions like these:

- Become familiar with triggers and trigger responses. This can make them less frightening, both for the individual experiencing them and for those who observe them.
- Learn to recognize the triggers and predict the thoughts and feelings they set off. This can help create a greater sense of control over them.
- Focus on sources of safety and protection in the present. This can be helpful when re-experiencing traumatic events brings back past feelings of being in danger.

For those of us who experience trauma related to our race or ethnicity, it helps to talk about what we are feeling with people who will really understand, right away and without explanation. It can also help to consider whether we want to use these feelings in constructive ways to right the wrongs we've experienced.

## How to Cope with Trauma Triggers

There are many ways to handle our reactions to trauma triggers. We can start by learning to recognize the feelings we have that can occur with trauma triggers; for example, these feelings might include sudden, intense fear or anxiety; shutting down and going silent; or wanting to get away from the situation. We may discover that we have had feelings like these at times when we were triggered. In those moments, we may not have been aware of the connection between those feelings and what happened to us in the past.

Next, we can identify the kinds of things that can be triggers for us. This can help us anticipate events and interactions that may be triggers. We can prepare ourselves for them and feel more in control. This can help us feel more confident that we will not be caught off guard. We can learn about the things that trigger us and our reactions to them.

As we do, we may find that these memories, thoughts, and feelings no longer seem to sneak up on us and take control of our behavior. When we can see those thoughts and feelings coming, we can make a decision about what we want to do with them. An important part of healing is this sense of mastery—of reclaiming control over what we think, feel, and do.

One way to be prepared is to be ready to take a break and ask for help when we experience a trauma trigger. We can plan in advance what we will say if we find we need to pause a conversation with another staff member or a family. For example, we might say, “This conversation is really important to me, but I need to attend to another very important matter right now. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

We may find that simply finding a quiet, private spot where we can take some deep breaths and shift our thoughts back to the present is enough to settle ourselves. We may also want to plan in advance with a supervisor to have someone available who can back us up at times like these. If we need more than a quiet moment, we can try other coping strategies that we already know work for us. Examples may include getting in touch with a friend or loved one, taking a short walk outside, taking perspective, and looking for the positives in the situation. Staff and supervisors can support each other to take the time each may need to settle themselves after being triggered by trauma. (See Brief 4 for information about reflective supervision.)

We may find that flashbacks, panic attacks, re-experiencing the trauma, and other effects of what happened to us are making it difficult for us to be with families, or to live our lives the way we want to. If this happens, we can look for a mental health professional who can help us heal. We can remember that the healing road to recovery will have bumps along the way. Setbacks do not mean that we cannot heal, or that we have failed. They are part of the healing process.

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