

Trauma and recovery.

Your journey begins.



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Welcome.

This booklet was informed by people with lived experiences of human trafficking and other types of violence, to promote health, safety, and well-being among other survivors. If any part of this booklet brings up strong emotions for you, please step away and seek professional support as needed. **Your health and well-being are the priority.** You can reach out to the national mental health hotline at 988 or 988lifeline.org.



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A journey toward healing and recovery.

It is well known that many people who have experienced trauma go on to develop difficulties with their mental health. These can include symptoms like depression, anxiety, poor sleep, and eating problems. It can also include diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and physical health problems. The impact is especially profound when trauma occurs in childhood.

Healing from trauma is not a one-size-fits-all path, but it's a journey that no one has to take alone. Whether you're just starting out or well along the road to recovery, this booklet is here to support you along the way. Trauma can cast long shadows over our lives, even leading us to self-destructive behaviors and self-sabotage. But by understanding its impact and discovering the resources available to us, and by accessing those resources, we can begin to heal and build a brighter, healthier future.

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The four Rs.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers the “Four Rs” framework as a trauma-informed approach in public health systems; it is often used by organizations to serve trauma survivors. We believe that individual survivors can also apply the “Four Rs” to their own lives. The key steps are:

1. **Realize** the prevalence and impact of trauma.
2. **Recognize** the signs of traumatic stress.
3. **Respond** by implementing healthier behaviors.
4. **Resist retraumatization** by establishing and promoting personal boundaries and self-care.

We will go through these together in the sections to come. By applying this framework, we can make significant strides in our own paths to recovery. Learn more about SAMHSA here: [samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov).



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1. Realize the prevalence and impact of trauma.

In the following sections, we describe different types of trauma, as well as the impact it can have on individuals, families, and communities. These can be difficult topics.

While definitions of trauma vary across cultures, SAMHSA frames its concept of trauma around the “Three Es”:

- **Event:** The traumatic incident or set of circumstances.
- **Experience:** How the individual perceives and processes the event.
- **Effects:** The lasting impact on the person’s overall well-being.

Individual trauma results from an incident, a series of events, or a set of circumstances that are experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening, and has lasting

adverse effects on a person’s functioning and well-being. This includes our physical, mental, emotional, social, and even spiritual health and well-being.

Trauma and traumatic stress

Many of us experience trauma in our lifetimes. It affects people of all ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds. Trauma can impact not just individuals but entire families, communities, cultures, and generations. Someone may experience trauma directly or indirectly, such as witnessing violence in the media. Indirect trauma, while often underestimated, can be just as devastating.

Trauma is also subjective. The same event can affect two people in vastly different ways. Siblings removed from an abusive household might process that experience differently from each other. A military veteran might respond to deployment differently than another soldier in the same circumstances. This variation is normal, and understanding trauma requires us to acknowledge the uniqueness of each person’s experience.

Stress is a universal human experience, but it becomes traumatic when it overwhelms a person’s ability to cope and recover. The term “traumatic stress” refers to a broad range of reactions that can be both immediate or delayed. For example, some people may experience physical symptoms, such as chronic pain, fatigue, or immune disorders long after the traumatic event itself.



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Natural disasters and human-caused trauma

The classification of traumatic events as being natural or caused by humans can influence how we experience the event. Natural events—often referred to as “acts of God”—are typically seen as unavoidable. Events caused by humans, however, are typically caused either by human failure or human intent. See Table 1 for examples.

The degree of trauma experienced by survivors of natural or human-caused events often corresponds with the extent of devastation, scope of losses, and time it takes to restore a sense of normalcy. Losses include loss of life, physical injuries, damages to property, loss of income, and more. The availability, accessibility, and duration of support and relief services in the wake of a disaster play a crucial role in whether—and how quickly—individuals, families, and communities recover from trauma.

Table 1: Examples of natural and human-caused trauma.

Caused Naturally	Caused by People	
	Accidents	Intentional Acts
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tornado• Lightning strike• Wildfire• Epidemic• Pandemic• Medical condition• Volcanic eruption• Blizzard• Hurricane• Tsunami	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Train derailment• Roofing fall• Structural collapse• Aircraft crash• Car accident due to malfunction• Radiation leak• Crane collapse• Gas explosion• Electrocution• Mine collapse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arson• Terrorism• Racism and hate crimes• Homicides or suicides• Rioting• Physical abuse and neglect• Warfare• Domestic violence• Human trafficking

In cases of human-caused trauma, especially intentional acts, the sense of betrayal or injustice can add another layer of emotional complexity and even hinder healing.

The role of shame and community in trauma

The number of people affected by a tragic event can also shape the experience of trauma. Survivors may experience different levels of shame based on how widely the event impacts their community. When a disaster or traumatic event affects many people, there is often a collective sense of suffering, and survivors may find solace in knowing they are not alone. In these cases, communities may come together, normalizing traumatic stress reactions and providing a shared sense of support.

On the other hand, if an individual feels isolated in their experience—because they are one of the few affected or their trauma is minimized by others—they may struggle with feelings of shame or self-blame. According to Dr. Bessel van der Kolk's work in *The Body Keeps the Score*, shame is one of the most toxic emotional responses following trauma. It can prevent survivors from seeking help, sharing their experiences, or engaging in healing support and activities, as they internalize the idea that they somehow deserved what happened to them.

For many, the aftermath of trauma is not just about the event itself but about how others respond to their pain. This includes family members and community members. If their experience is acknowledged and validated, they are more likely to begin healing. If, however, their trauma is dismissed, minimized, or ignored by others, including by institutions, the healing process may be more difficult.



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Individual traumas

Individual trauma refers to an event, a series of events, or set of circumstances that directly affect a single person. While others may know about it or be indirectly impacted, the experience is primarily personal. The effects of individual trauma are often deeply internalized, and survivors may not receive the same level of community support as those who experience collective trauma.

Survivors of individual traumas may not benefit from the shared solidarity that emerges after group traumas. Many feel isolated, burdened by shame, and unsure how to move forward. They may struggle with self-blame, especially when the trauma remains hidden. For example, a survivor of sexual assault may feel an undue sense of responsibility, believing they could have done something differently to prevent the attack. This distortion of responsibility isolates the survivor further, leaving them without the comfort or acceptance needed to heal.

Single vs. repeated trauma

While some may recover quickly from a single traumatic event, others may face more long-term effects, especially if they have a history of trauma or mental health struggles. A single traumatic experience can have a profound impact on the body and mind, especially when it is overwhelming or particularly horrific.

Some individuals face repeated trauma, which can involve similar events, such as multiple physical assaults, or unrelated occurrences. These repeated traumas can have a cumulative effect over time. For some, repeated trauma becomes sustained. SAMHSA provides examples such as children enduring ongoing abuse or neglect, individuals in long-term relationships with violent partners, and people living in chronic poverty. Such experiences can wear down a person's resilience and ability to cope, leaving survivors vulnerable to future traumas and often leading to a cycle of victimization.

Developmental trauma

This type of trauma can occur during formative periods such as childhood or young adulthood. For those of us who were trafficked as children or teenagers, this represents an event far outside what any young person should experience at such a critical stage of development. Unlike older adults, whose sense of self and understanding of the world may already be formed, young people are still in the process of building their identity and emotional regulation. Trauma during this time doesn't just disrupt life—it becomes deeply ingrained in the

foundational aspects of who we are, often shaping the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us.

It can impact one's social, physical, and emotional development, such as the ability to learn, regulate our emotions, and connect with peers. For survivors of familial trafficking, the abuse and exploitation often occurs early in life, leaving a devastating imprint on our lives. It can impact our ability to function in the world. Many survivors live with on-going health challenges. When exploitation occurs during these formative years, the process of rebuilding is often more complex, requiring survivors to address not only the trauma itself but also the developmental gaps left in its wake.

Physical trauma and its psychological effects

Trauma can also result from physical harm. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Dr. Judith Herman explains that the shock of sudden health crises or physical injuries can leave individuals with psychological trauma. Even when the physical wounds heal, emotional scars may remain. For survivors of human trafficking and other forms of violence, physical and psychological traumas are often intertwined, complicating the healing process.



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Group traumas

Group trauma refers to traumatic experiences that impact a specific group of people who often share a common identity, history, or activity, and who are routinely placed in harm's way due to their professions or other circumstances. Like other types of trauma, group traumas can indirectly affect those who are connected to the group, such as family members, friends, and the broader community. Examples:

- A crew of fishermen who lose members in a fishing accident.
- A gang whose members experience multiple deaths and injuries.
- A team of firefighters who lost members in a roof collapse.

Certain occupational groups are at a high risk of experiencing trauma, especially repeated trauma. This includes military service members, first responders (such as law enforcement officers, EMTs, and disaster management personnel), medical and behavioral health professionals, and even journalists and clergy. They often face physical, emotional, and mental stressors, all while feeling a profound responsibility for saving lives.

The unique challenges of group trauma

Survivors of group trauma can experience different reactions compared to those affected by individual or mass traumas. Within a group, traumatic experiences are often kept internal—group members may even view outsiders as “intruders” and encourage each other to suppress emotions and maintain the group’s solidarity. This can be particularly true in occupational settings where repressing emotions is often seen as necessary. This often prevents long-term healing. Group members may refrain from supporting and acknowledging the pain of their colleagues, out of fear that it might trigger festering and unresolved emotions in themselves.

The importance of supportive group resources

Groups with robust resources can create a more supportive environment for its members, especially in handling traumas. If you belong to a certain group, consider what resources may be available to you.



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Cultural and community traumas

Cultural and community-based traumas encompass a wide range of atrocities that affect not just individuals but entire communities. These traumas often erode any sense of safety within a given community, whether that be a neighborhood, school, town, or cultural group. These traumatic events might involve acts of violence, such as mass shootings, or insidious efforts to dismantle cultural practices, resources, and identities, such as the forced attendance of Native American children in boarding schools or their placement in non-Native foster homes.

Cultural and community-based traumas can also occur when there is indifference or limited responsiveness to specific communities or cultures facing a potential threat. SAMHSA describes cultural trauma as events that erode the heritage of a culture - whether intentional or not. These traumas can include prejudice, systemic disenfranchisement, and health

inequities—whether it’s limited access to healthcare and necessary medications, or inadequate culturally appropriate educational resources or materials. Unfortunately, these forms of trauma are often perpetuated over generations.

Historical trauma and its generational impact

Historical trauma, also known as generational trauma, occurs when the profound harm inflicted onto a minoritized group is so widespread and intense that it affects an entire culture, with repercussions that echo across multiple generations. SAMHSA explains that stories of trauma, coping behaviors, and stress reactions can be passed down through families and communities, shaping the lives of descendants in various ways.

Examples include the enslavement and torture of African Americans, the violent relocation of American Indians onto reservations, the extermination of millions of Jewish and non-Jewish people during the Holocaust, and the forced relocation of Japanese Americans into inhumane concentration camps during World War II. The trauma experienced by these communities did not end with the generations that lived through it—it continues to shape the health and well-being of their descendants.

Native Americans, for example, have endured centuries of trauma, beginning with the arrival of European colonizers. The loss of population and systematic erasure of cultural identity have led to widespread suffering, which persists in Native communities today. This has resulted in a significant loss of cultural knowledge, language, and identity, while

also contributing to higher rates of depression, grief, and substance use disorders across generations. Research shows that historical trauma can increase a community's vulnerability to contemporary traumas, exacerbating the challenges they face today.

For survivors of violence, the effects of historical or cultural trauma may feel familiar. Even if they haven't experienced these collective traumas firsthand, the legacy of such trauma can manifest in feelings of distress, disconnection, isolation, and even shame. As survivors, we have seen how the weight of past traumas—both personal and collective—can shape how we navigate our own healing. The struggle to reclaim identity, build resilience, and find a sense of safety is not unique to individuals; it is a battle that entire communities face.

The importance of acknowledging trauma

We understand that these topics can be incredibly difficult, especially for those who have been affected by trauma. But acknowledging trauma—whether personal, cultural, or historical—is essential for healing. As trauma expert Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart explains in her work on Native American communities, recognizing the impact of historical trauma allows survivors to break the cycle of suffering and start their journey toward healing.

Mass traumas—whether natural or caused by humans—affect entire communities and cultures, often resulting in emotional, psychological, and social upheaval. They involve significant loss of life and property, while disrupting daily routines and services for entire communities. These events can impact



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large numbers of people directly and indirectly. A notable example is the September 11th terrorist attacks, which triggered immediate and delayed traumatic stress reactions in countless individuals—whether they were at the site of the attacks or watched the events unfold on television.

In the aftermath of such events, people often seek ways to make sense of the tragedy. As seen after the September 11th attacks, people responded in different ways, including renewed patriotism, community vigils, charitable donations, and, unfortunately, acts of violence against Arab and Muslim communities. These responses illustrate how survivors and witnesses often try to right perceived wrongs. However, some responses, such as acts of violence, create new layers of injustices and harm.

Mass trauma from anticipated events

Although traumatic events are often unexpected, mass traumas can result from natural disasters that are anticipated, yet have unexpected consequences. Hurricane Katrina, for example, was expected, but the aftermath brought unforeseen and catastrophic results. Survivors struggled to access basic necessities, and many were forced to relocate far from their homes.

Additionally, inadequate or delayed governmental responses to disasters can compound the challenges. After an initial mass trauma, the resulting consequences often create additional traumas and adversities, known as “cascading trauma”—where trauma occurs before individuals have the chance to recover from the previous trauma, amplifying the emotional and psychological toll.

The long-term impact of mass trauma

SAMHSA points out that mass traumas often generate an initial rally of support, bringing survivors together in shared grief and recovery. This collective experience can provide a sense of hope, belonging, and connection. Yet, it’s vital to acknowledge that sustained support is necessary for long-term recovery, and unfortunately, such support often wanes over time.



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Interpersonal trauma and other traumas

Interpersonal traumas are traumatic events that occur (and typically reoccur) between individuals who often know each other. It includes relationships involving abuse, neglect, and violence, such as abuse of children or vulnerable adults, intimate partner violence (IPV), human trafficking, and abuse within high-control groups or cults. People who are chronically stressed and traumatized are particularly vulnerable to traumatic stress reactions, substance use disorders, and mental health struggles. This includes survivors of interpersonal traumas.

Children and interpersonal trauma

Children often suffer secondary trauma from interpersonal trauma. Even when they are not the direct target, children

frequently witness or overhear violence, experiencing trauma vicariously. Whether they see bruises on a parent or hear cries for help, the impact on their developing minds can be profound. According to trauma expert Dr. Bruce Perry, children exposed to violence often experience heightened stress responses that can affect their emotional regulation, behavioral development, and overall well-being for years.

For many survivors of interpersonal trauma, there may be little time or space to process these experiences. Even when the traumatic event has passed, the absence of supportive relationships or environments can hinder healing. Without models for healthy processing, survivors may feel stuck, unable to move forward in their recovery.

Political terror, warfare, and refugee trauma

In addition to interpersonal trauma, other forms of trauma—such as political terror and forced displacement—can have unique and far-reaching effects. Such acts can create a pervasive sense of unpredictability and fear in everyday life. Increased security measures, heightened suspicion of certain populations, and a constant state of hyperawareness can leave entire communities on edge. These traumas often extend beyond the immediate victims, affecting entire nations or regions.

Refugees and immigrants without legal status face heightened risks of trauma. Refugees and asylum seekers are forced to flee their homes due to persecution and violence. Others may choose to leave their homes due to dire situations of poverty or systemic oppressions, to flee armed conflict, or to escape

effects of climate change. They often experience intense trauma, before and during the migration process, which can lead to significant psychological challenges once they relocate and attempt to rebuild their lives in a new country.

Research by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) indicates that refugees are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than other immigrant groups, and their long-term mental health outcomes can be severely affected. The displacement, loss of cultural identity, and adjustment to new environments only compound the difficulties many individuals face, making it crucial for communities to provide culturally sensitive, trauma-informed resources.

The cumulative impact of trauma

One of the most significant factors in understanding trauma is recognizing its cumulative impact. People who experience multiple traumas, especially over long periods, are at the highest risk for developing traumatic stress reactions. Whether the trauma is interpersonal, cultural, or rooted in political violence, the effects can add up over time. SAMHSA explains that this accumulation of trauma often goes unnoticed, and many individuals may not even realize they are living with traumatic stress reactions until the effects on their health and well-being become overwhelming.



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2. Recognize the signs of traumatic stress.

As discussed earlier, stress is a normal part of the human experience. However, stress can become traumatic when it overwhelms an individual's ability to cope and recover. Traumatic stress refers to a broad range of reactions that a person may experience after a traumatic event, with responses that can manifest immediately or later on. See Table 2 for examples provided by SAMHSA.

Unfortunately, if left unaddressed, these reactions can potentially lead to long-term negative health consequences, including mental health challenges, substance use disorders, toxic or violent relationships, and physical disorders or other chronic health conditions. These consequences can be compounding.

Please practice self-compassion and self-care as you consider the impact that traumatic stress may have had on your own life and the lives of loved ones.

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Table 2: Examples of reactions to trauma.

Emotional Reactions	
Immediate	Delayed
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Numbness and detachment• Anxiety or severe fear• Guilt (e.g., survivor guilt)• Exhilaration because of surviving• Anger• Sadness• Helplessness• Disorientation• Feeling out of control• Denial• Constriction of feelings• Feeling overwhelmed• Shock• Horror	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Irritability and/or hostility• Depression• Mood swings, instability• Anxiety (e.g., phobia, generalized anxiety)• Fear of trauma recurrence• Grief reactions• Shame• Feelings of fragility and/or vulnerability• Emotional detachment from anything that requires emotional reactions (e.g., significant and/or family relationships, conversations about self, discussion of trauma)

Physical Reactions	
Immediate	Delayed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nausea and/or upset stomach • Sweating or shivering • Faintness • Muscle tremors or uncontrollable shaking • Elevated heartbeat, respiration, and blood pressure • Extreme fatigue or exhaustion • Greater startle responses • Depersonalization (feeling as if you are watching yourself) • Other fight, flight, freeze, or fawn reactions (fawn reactions include submitting or people pleasing reactions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep disturbances, nightmares • Somatization (e.g., body aches and pains, or other physical complaints, due to chronic stress) • Appetite and digestive changes • Lowered resistance to colds and infection • Persistent fatigue • Elevated cortisol levels • Hyperarousal (e.g., jumpiness, constantly scanning for threats) • Long-term health effects including, but not limited to, heart, liver, autoimmune, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

Cognitive Reactions	
Immediate	Delayed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty concentrating • Rumination or racing thoughts (e.g., replaying the traumatic event over and over again) • Distortion of time and space (e.g., traumatic event may be perceived as if it was happening in slow motion, or a few seconds can be perceived as minutes) • Memory problems (e.g., not being able to recall important aspects of the trauma) • Strong identification with victims • Negative thoughts (e.g., “I have terrible judgement”) • Justifying the behavior of those who caused harm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrusive memories or flashbacks • Reactivation of previous traumatic events • Self-blame • Preoccupation with event • Difficulty making decisions • Magical thinking: belief that certain behaviors, including avoidant behavior, will protect against future trauma • Belief that feelings or memories are dangerous • Generalization of triggers (e.g., a survivor of a home invasion may avoid being alone at home) • Suicidal thinking

Behavioral Reactions	
Immediate	Delayed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Startled reaction • Restlessness • Sleep and appetite disturbances • Difficulty expressing oneself • Argumentative behavior • Increased use of substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs, and tobacco) • Social withdrawal and apathy (lack of interest in activities) • Avoidant behaviors (e.g., avoiding any reminders of traumatic event, trying not to think about or talk about the event) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance of event reminders (e.g., avoiding people, places, and things that can be reminders) • Social relationship disturbances • Decreased activity level • Engagement in risky or high-risk behaviors • Increased use of substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs, and tobacco) • Social withdrawal and apathy (lack of interest in activities) • Trauma bonding (attachments that occur in the presence of danger or as a result of shared experiences of abuse)

Existential Reactions	
Immediate	Delayed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intense use of prayer • Restoration of faith in the goodness of others (e.g., receiving help from others) • Loss of self-efficacy (a person's belief in their ability to achieve a goal or complete a task) • Despair about humanity, particularly if the event was intentional • Immediate disruption of life assumptions (e.g., fairness, safety, goodness, and predictability of life) • Feeling fundamentally changed or altered after the event, questioning one's identity and personal values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questioning ("Why me?") • Increased cynicism, disillusionment • Increased self-confidence ("I can survive anything!") • Loss of purpose • Hopelessness • Renewed faith • Reestablishing priorities or redefining meaning of life • Reworking life's assumptions to accommodate the trauma (e.g., taking a self-defense class to reestablish safety) • Heightened awareness of one's own mortality

Recognizing the profound and lasting effects of trauma can be a deeply emotional experience. It may stir feelings of grief over lost time or lost opportunities, anger at the circumstances or individuals involved, and shame from the self-blame or societal judgment. These emotions are natural and valid responses to understanding the complex ways that trauma can impact our sense of personal safety, relationships, and self-worth.

It’s important to acknowledge that processing these emotions can take time and may feel overwhelming. Be gentle with yourself as you navigate these feelings, and remember that healing is not about erasing the past but about finding ways to move forward with greater awareness, personal strength, and resilience.

As you reflect on your journey of healing, it’s also helpful to recognize that trauma can take different direct and indirect forms, each with its own unique impact. While direct trauma is often seen as more immediate or harmful, indirect trauma can also lead to significant distress. Factors such as proximity to the event, the relationship to the person involved, and the sense of helplessness experienced can influence the impact of indirect trauma. For instance, parents may internalize the pain of their children, which can lead to intense vicarious trauma.

Survivors of violence, including survivors of human trafficking, may also face indirect trauma that can compound emotional injuries from other experiences. Watching or hearing about the suffering of others, for example, can be just as impactful as the direct events of violent experiences. This highlights the importance of acknowledging the range of trauma experiences and how indirect events can be just as debilitating.

The role of socio-ecological factors in trauma

An individual’s experience of trauma is also shaped by socio-ecological factors; this means a person’s environment, identity, and relationships can influence trauma and recovery. For instance, a child may process trauma differently from an adult, and a person who identifies as LGBTQ2IA+ may experience trauma in ways that are distinct from those who do not. Gender, age, cultural background, and identity all play a role in shaping how trauma is experienced and understood. See further examples of socio-ecological influences in Table 3.

Table 3: Socio-ecological factors that influence trauma.

Individual factors	Age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and other demographics; history of trauma, resilience, and behavioral health challenges; temperament and other personality traits; etc.
Interpersonal factors	Relationships with family members, friends, significant others, coworkers, and others; physical and behavioral health of parents/ family; parents’ history of trauma; social networks; etc.
Community and organizational factors	Neighborhood quality, school system and/or work environment, medical and behavioral health system quality and accessibility, faith-based settings, transportation availability, community socioeconomic status, community employment rates, etc.
Societal factors	Laws, state and federal economic and social policies, media, societal norms, judicial system, etc.
Interpersonal factors	Collective or individualistic cultural norms, ethnicity, cultural subsystem norms (e.g., toxic masculine norms which emphasize toughness and discourage vulnerability in men and boys), cognitive and maturational development, etc.
Period in history	Societal attitudes at the time of the trauma, etc.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) offers resources to help parents and caregivers recognize how children and youth experience and respond to traumatic events. Learn more: nctsn.org.

Reflecting on trauma and its influences

As we continue to explore trauma and healing in this booklet, it's essential to consider how these socio-ecological factors and individual circumstances can shape a person's experience of trauma and the aftermath. You might find it helpful to reflect on how these factors may have influenced your own journey. Remember to step away and take breaks as needed.

SAMHSA provides a series of questions that can help individuals better understand the nature and characteristics of trauma and its impact:

- Was it a single, repeated, or ongoing event?
- Was there enough time to process it?
- How many losses occurred as part of the trauma?
- Was the trauma unexpected or anticipated?
- How often does the individual encounter reminders of the trauma?
- Who was responsible for the event?
- Was the trauma intentional?
- What has happened in the time since the trauma?

These questions help to provide a deeper understanding of the complexity of trauma. In her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Dr. Judith Herman provides a framework for healing that includes three stages: establishing safety, processing traumatic

memories, and reconnecting with daily life. This process can be a guide for those seeking to make sense of their trauma and find a way forward.

The personal impact of unresolved trauma

For many survivors, trauma responses can persist for years and can lead to cycles of distress, violence, and increased substance use. This highlights a common pattern: Trauma often begets further trauma.

Survivor Quote: Holly

“As a teen, I struggled with depression. In the years following my experience as a sex trafficking victim, I often lived in a state of constant shame and anxiety. Without proper coping skills, these trauma reactions led to further negative health outcomes, including substance use, adolescent pregnancy, and toxic relationships. Due to the feelings of shame and self-blame, I found it difficult to walk away from abusive relationships, fearing that no one else would ever care for me. This created a sense of entrapment; I felt stuck in a cycle of harm and hopelessness.”

These feelings are not uncommon for trauma survivors, including survivors of violence. Many individuals feel trapped in destructive patterns, unsure of how to escape. If this resonates, support is available.

- **The National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text **988** for immediate support if you're feeling hopeless or overwhelmed. To chat with someone online, learn more: 988lifeline.org.
- **SAMHSA's National Helpline:** For free, confidential mental health and substance use disorder treatment, call **1-800-662-HELP (4357)** or visit samhsa.gov/find-help/helplines/national-helpline.
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline:** Call **1-800-799-SAFE (7233)** or text "START" to **88788** if you are in an abusive relationship and need support. Learn more: thehotline.org.
- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:** For immediate assistance, call **1-888-373-7888** or text "HELP" or "INFO" to BeFree (**233733**). Learn more: humantraffickinghotline.org.
- **National Sexual Assault Hotline:** To be connected with trained staff at a sexual assault service provider in your area, call **1-800-656-HOPE (4673)**. Learn more: rainn.org.
- **National Teen Dating Hotline:** For confidential support, call **1-866-331-9474** or text "LOVEIS" to **22522**. Learn more: loveisrespect.org.

- **National Runaway Safeline:** For safety and support, call or text **1-800-RUNAWAY (786-2929)**. Learn more: 1800runaway.org.
- **StrongHearts Native Helpline** is a 24/7 domestic and sexual violence helpline for Native Americans and Alaska Natives. Call **1-844-7NATIVE (762-8483)**. Learn more: strongheartshelpline.org.

Even if a survivor of violence does not endure a large-scale disaster, their experiences with emotional upheaval and toxic relationships can mirror the emotional chaos often felt in the wake of human-caused events. The sense of helplessness one may face—feeling trapped in a situation caused by another person's choices—can echo the trauma many survivors of disasters experience.

The development of PTSD

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) explains that nearly everyone will experience some form of adverse reaction following a traumatic event. However, most people naturally recover from these initial symptoms. For others, especially those who have experienced repeated or cumulative trauma, particularly in childhood, these symptoms may persist and develop into acute, chronic, or complex PTSD.

PTSD is characterized by ongoing distress and intrusive symptoms long after the traumatic event has passed. These symptoms can include flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness. Over time, trauma that is not fully processed can wear down a person's

resilience, making it harder to recover from future stressors. As discussed in previous sections, multiple or repeated traumas can accumulate over a lifetime, further weakening an individual's ability to bounce back. To learn more, visit NIMH at nimh.nih.gov.

Feeling stuck: The cycle of trauma

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk sheds light on how trauma can leave people feeling trapped and unable to move forward. He explains that, even when an opportunity for escape or change presents itself, many survivors remain stuck in the fear they know. He writes, “The mere opportunity to escape does not necessarily make traumatized [people] take the road to freedom... Many traumatized people simply give up.”



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For trauma survivors who find themselves stuck in cycles of toxic behaviors or harmful relationships, unresolved PTSD may be an underlying factor. Understanding the connection between past trauma and present behaviors is an essential step toward healing.

Moving forward with healing

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of traumatic stress is vital for both survivors and those supporting them. Knowing that these responses are protective reactions to traumatic events can empower survivors to seek help and break the cycle of trauma. By identifying the underlying trauma that fuels toxic behaviors or relationships, individuals can begin the journey toward healing.

The next step in this process is learning to cope with trauma in healthier ways. In the following sections, we will explore the three pillars of healing and discuss how to integrate this knowledge into everyday life.



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3. Respond by applying healthier behaviors.

Trauma doesn't always result in long-term adverse effects. Individuals, families, and communities often respond with resilience. The term resilience refers to a person's natural ability to persevere, bounce back, and rise above adversity. Although resilience is innate, trauma can make it harder to access or strengthen this ability without the right tools, supports, or safe environments. Let's explore three pillars of healing, which can help us to build resilience and resist re-traumatization.

- **Social awareness and activism**
- **Health and well-being**
- **Community and culture**

These pillars were inspired by the writings of Shawn Ginwright, Ph.D. Learn more: shawnginwright.com.

Social awareness and activism

For those who have gained a greater awareness of trauma—whether it has affected you personally, your family, or your community—there are numerous ways to get involved in social activism. Raising awareness and advocating for change can be done through various channels, such as protesting, volunteering, or donating to local organizations that work on issues related to trauma.

Finding balance between activism and self-care

While social activism can be an empowering and healing experience, it's essential to balance activism with self-care. For some trauma survivors, high-functioning PTSD can manifest as a constant need to stay busy. Whether through work, advocacy, or other activities, they may feel compelled to fill their time to avoid confronting negative thoughts or emotions.



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However, without acknowledging the signs of traumatic stress, this constant state of activity can lead to other health issues.

Overworking and advocating without adequate self-care can lead to physical and emotional strain. One may begin to experience issues such as increased substance use or other unhealthy coping behaviors, which is particularly unsafe if engaging in advocacy efforts that may lead a person to travel alone. These are signs that a person may not have fully addressed past trauma or managed traumatic stress, which can happen to any one of us.

Striking a balance between healing and activism

Activism is powerful, but it should not come at the expense of personal well-being. Activism needs to be done in harmony with one's mental, emotional, and physical health. Finding balance is critical; that goes for all of us. It's important to know when to step away and invest more time in our health, well-being, community, and cultural connections; this will enable us to heal more deeply while continuing to advocate.

For those feeling called to engage in social activism, it's important to remember that, although raising awareness and advocating for others is valuable, it should not replace the personal work of our own healing. Social activism complements the healing process; it does not substitute it. Prioritizing self-care and addressing trauma is essential for our minds, our bodies, and our spirits.



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Health and well-being

For individuals looking to stop toxic behaviors, it can be helpful to understand the “stages of change”. One model breaks down the process of change into six stages, which can help individuals better understand where they are in their recovery journey. Below are the stages:

- **Precontemplation:** There is no intention to change the problem behavior within the next six months, possibly due to being uninformed or underinformed about the behavior and its effects
- **Contemplation:** There may be an intention to change the problem behavior within the next six months, as the person begins to weigh the pros and cons of the behavior change

- **Preparation:** There is an intention to act and change the behavior within the next month
- **Action:** Action has been taken and the behavior has been changed, although relapses may occur
- **Maintenance:** The behavior has been changed for at least six months
- **Termination:** The behavior change has been maintained for at least five years

These stages unfold at different paces for everyone—some may spend months or years in one stage, while others move through the stages more quickly. The time frames provided are approximate, intended to give a general sense of the process, but it's important to respect and honor your unique journey.

Unhealthy habits may look different for each individual. For one, it may be binge drinking; for another, it may be a sedentary lifestyle. Over time, healthier behaviors can become the new normal. Our healing journeys are not instantaneous. It may involve gradual changes—like slowly letting go of one unhealthy habit at a time.

Self-care and its importance

It's important to note that self-care is not always glamorous or easy. While the idea of self-care often brings to mind images of relaxation and indulgence, it also involves taking tedious and practical steps to move forward and maintain one's physical and mental health.

This includes scheduling appointments with healthcare providers—general practitioners, dentists, and other specialists—and actually following through with those appointments. For many trauma survivors, these seemingly

simple tasks can be stressful and even triggering. In the final section, Resist retraumatization, we will explore strategies for advocating for oneself and others in these healthcare settings and beyond.



Holly A. Gibbs



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Community and culture

Exploring your own communities and cultures is an essential part of the healing process. Whether it's finding a peer network, participating in local events, or reconnecting with a chosen family, building connections can create crucial support. Survivors are encouraged to seek out spaces and activities that align with their values and interests as they rediscover who they are. You can find community in a local gym, faith-based group, or artist collective. Find what helps you heal from the past and take small steps to create a life that feels whole again.

The importance of supportive group resources

There are many organizations and programs that provide critical support to trauma survivors within specific groups.

For example, Survivor Alliance, Elevate Academy, Survivor Leadership Institute (SLI), Treasures, You are More Than (YAMT), and the National Survivor Network (NSN) are a few key resources for survivors of human trafficking.

Survivor Alliance is a survivor-led international organization founded by Minh Dang, MSW, PhD, providing members with opportunities, support services, and advocacy. Elevate Academy is a survivor-led international online school founded by Rebecca Bender, MACT, providing survivors with education and group classroom support, coaching, and in-person chapters. SLI is a US-based program by GEMS, a survivor-led organization founded by Rachel Lloyd. SLI offers community, professional development, and leadership opportunities for survivors of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking.

Treasures is a survivor-led, faith-based outreach and online support group founded by Harmony Dust, MSW, for survivors of sexual exploitation. YAMT is a survivor-led organization founded by Ashante Taylorcox, MA-MHC, LPC; YAMT offers online peer support groups for survivors of sexual exploitation who are from marginalized communities. NSN is a program of the Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking (Cast), offering a supportive community for survivors of human trafficking to connect, find resources, and advocate for systemic change.

These organizations offer examples of how groups with adequate resources foster a stronger, more supportive environment for its members. With the right tools and connections, groups can navigate trauma and healing more effectively, preventing harm and ensuring members feel heard,

validated, and cared for. As trauma expert Dr. Judith Herman explains in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, the path to healing often begins when survivors can share their experiences in a safe and supportive community.

For groups affected by trauma, this sense of safety can be found in organizations that understand the group's unique challenges. When group members feel empowered to seek help, they can break down the barriers of silence and shame, allowing for collective healing. If you belong to a group at high risk for trauma, please consider seeking out resources—whether through peer networks, organizations, or counseling services. These resources can make a significant difference.

A note of caution

It's important to remain cautious when seeking out new groups or communities. Some spaces may be unhealthy and may perpetuate toxic behaviors, while others may exploit vulnerable individuals in search of human connection. Unfortunately, cults and other high-control groups often target those who are seeking community. It's essential to protect yourself and your loved ones, and approach new environments with care. By taking these steps and staying mindful of personal safety, survivors can cultivate a sense of community and culture that nurtures healing and supports long-term recovery.



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4. Resist retraumatization.

As we move forward, it's essential to understand the importance of resisting retraumatization—both for ourselves and others. Retraumatization occurs when individuals are exposed to reminders or situations that evoke past traumas, often leading to the resurfacing of painful memories or emotions. For many, this can happen without realizing it, particularly in environments that lack a trauma-informed approach. Implementing the guiding principles of a trauma-informed approach into our relationships—with ourselves and others—can play a critical role in resisting re-traumatization.

Recognizing signs and preventing retraumatization

Trauma survivors may find themselves in situations where the effects of past trauma are triggered by present-day experiences. These triggers might come from unexpected

places—like a conversation, a familiar scent, or a stressful environment. Unresolved trauma can resurface in subtle, yet impactful ways. In the midst of stress or conflict, feelings of shame or fear can rise again, threatening to undo the progress one has made.

Recognizing these patterns is a key first step toward resisting retraumatization. Understanding how trauma can influence our behaviors and emotions can allow us to take proactive steps in preventing future harm. One of the most important aspects of this process may be learning how to cultivate safe, supportive relationships—both with ourselves and with others.

Applying the principles of trauma-informed care

A trauma-informed approach is rooted in six key principles; these can guide individuals in how to interact with themselves and others, to resist retraumatization. These principles, developed by SAMHSA, are as follows:

- **Safety:** Creating environments, both physical and emotional, where individuals feel safe from harm.
- **Trustworthiness and transparency:** Building trust through open, honest communication.
- **Peer support:** Encouraging shared experiences and support from others who have gone through similar challenges.
- **Collaboration and mutuality:** Acknowledging that healing is a collaborative effort between individuals, professionals, and communities.

- **Empowerment, voice, and choice:** Encouraging survivors to have agency over their own healing processes.
- **Cultural, historical, and gender issues:** Understanding the influence of culture, identity, and history on trauma and its effects.

For survivors, applying these principles starts with us—the relationship we have with ourselves. We recommend practicing self-compassion, especially when you make mistakes. This is a cornerstone to personal healing. We also recommend creating safe spaces in your daily life, whether through mindfulness practices, structured self-care routines, or boundaries with family members and others to protect your own emotional well-being.

Resisting retraumatization in relationships with others

Equally important to self-care is the responsibility of resisting retraumatization in relationships with others. Trauma survivors often find that relationships can be a source of both healing and harm, depending on how they are navigated. It's essential to surround yourself with people who respect your boundaries. Building relationships rooted in trust, transparency, and mutual respect can help to prevent re-traumatization.

At the same time, it's important for survivors to recognize their own impact on others. As individuals who have experienced trauma, there is a risk of unintentionally projecting unresolved emotions or engaging in behaviors that could harm others. Learning to approach relationships with empathy, clear communication, and a trauma-informed perspective helps to ensure that interactions are healing rather than harmful.

Advocating for yourself in stressful environments

One area where retraumatization can often occur is in interactions with institutions such as healthcare, social service, education, or legal systems. For trauma survivors, these environments can be triggering, especially when professionals fail to approach situations with sensitivity or understanding. Advocating for oneself in these settings is crucial for maintaining a sense of safety.

For instance, one may find it difficult to navigate medical appointments, perhaps because clinical environments bring up feelings of vulnerability and loss of control. Learning to advocate for oneself—by clearly communicating needs, setting boundaries, and seeking out trauma-informed professionals—can become a vital part of resisting retraumatization in these contexts.

Fostering a healing-centered approach

Resisting retraumatization isn't just about avoiding triggers—it's about creating environments that actively promote healing. This means cultivating relationships, spaces, and daily routines that align with the principles of a trauma-informed approach. By integrating these principles into daily life, survivors can not only protect themselves from further harm but also build foundations for long-term positive health and well-being.

At the heart of this process is the recognition that healing is not linear, and setbacks may occur. However, by adopting a trauma-informed approach, survivors can create and model the conditions necessary for sustained recovery, for themselves and the people around them.

While it's important to focus on creating healing environments and fostering resilience, it's also essential to acknowledge that some new traumatic experiences are unavoidable and beyond our control.

While it may not always be possible to avoid new traumatic experiences or completely resist retraumatization, developing tools and strategies for self-awareness, resilience, and healing can help minimize its impact. For example, a trauma survivor might face unavoidable events like the sudden loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a serious health diagnosis—situations outside their control that could be deeply traumatic. The practices we've shared in this booklet can help support recovery and provide a foundation for navigating such challenges with greater stability and strength.

Moving forward

No two journeys look the same, and that's okay. Some things that didn't work for us early on became essential tools later. Be open to exploring new ways of healing, and give yourself grace when things don't go as planned. Habits formed during violence and exploitation can take years to unlearn, but with self-awareness and support, you can move toward the future you dream of.

Also, trauma leaves marks that can take time to understand and heal. You might experience anxiety, depression, or difficulty trusting others. You might struggle with memory, self-esteem, or forming healthy relationships. All of these feelings are valid, and they don't mean you're broken; they mean you've survived.

Remember, healing doesn't mean forgetting what happened—it means learning how to live fully in the present while acknowledging the past. It's a gradual process, but every step forward is progress. Whether it's reaching out for support, journaling your feelings, or simply reminding yourself to breathe, know that you're doing the best you can—and that's enough.

Next steps

Take your time. Breathe. Heal.

Trauma can feel like it's woven into every part of your life—physically, emotionally, and mentally. But healing is possible. Start small:

- Explore books and videos that resonate with you (we've got recommendations below!).
- Connect with support groups or organizations that understand what you're going through.
- Be patient with yourself—it's okay to not have all the answers right away.

And remember: This is YOUR journey. We're here cheering you on every step of the way.

It might take years to reassemble a life you love, and that's okay. Healing is messy, beautiful, and uniquely yours. You've got this.



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Resources and tips

Books and memoirs by survivors of human trafficking

See this link to learn more about books written by survivors: findyournorthglobal.com/resourcelibrary.

Additional Tips

Here are some topics to read a book on, google local or virtual resources, or listen to a podcast:

- Healing from trauma
- Healthy coping mechanisms
- Setting healthy boundaries
- Attachment styles
- Finding community in a new city
- Survivor support groups

Here are some recommendations for activities to try:

- Gardening
- Baking a cake or cookies
- Volunteering at an animal shelter
- Building a gingerbread house
- Going on a bike ride
- Planning a future vacation
- Attending a yoga class in-person or online
- Working on a home improvement project
- Playing a board game
- Scrapbooking
- Reading a book
- Going for a jog or walking your dog
- Attending a sporting event
- Visiting a museum
- Drawing or painting a picture
- Carving pumpkins

Here are some tips for staying safe and grounded:

- **Ensure your safety:** When going into stressful situations, have an exit strategy in place. Create safe spaces in your home and daily activities.
- **Ground yourself:** When you get angry, take a few deep breaths; count backwards from 5 to 1.
- **Practice self-compassion:** Reactions to trauma are not only normal, but it's your mind and body's way of trying to keep you safe. It's okay to make mistakes; talk to yourself in a soothing manner.
- **Practice mindful behaviors and activities:** Practice diaphragmatic breathing (breathe in slowly and deeply through the nose and out through the mouth), mindful walking, tapping exercises, etc.
- **Model positive behaviors for others:** When in stressful situations, validate people's feelings, normalize reactions to trauma, and encourage the group to take a break or talk about it.
- **Know it's okay to say no:** Your time, energy, and well-being are valuable, and setting boundaries is an act of self-respect. Give yourself permission to say no without guilt. "No" is a complete sentence.
- **Limit overstimulation:** Too much noise, information, or stress can be overwhelming. Take breaks, unplug, and spend time in calm environments.



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