

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Merriam-Webster defines trauma as an emotional upset. Trauma can be physically, emotionally, and mentally stressful experience that takes place in the life of an individual. Trauma can change how the brain processes experience.

We all have different sensitivities, and we all experience things differently, so what is traumatic for one person might not be as traumatic for someone else. For example, for one child, a move away from friends and family may be experienced as traumatic, while for another child, it may not.

Some examples of possible traumatic events are physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing a loved one being harmed in some way, loss of a loved one, divorce, a move, natural disasters, substance use by a caretaker, diagnosis of an illness in self or loved ones, and living in violent communities.

Complex trauma occurs when trauma has been ongoing, as with long term family abuse or violent communities.

TRAUMA SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Signs and symptoms of trauma can include:

- Trouble relating to self and others
- Problems regulating emotions
- Anxiety
- Behavioral changes (a child who's always been quiet may begin to act out or a bubbly child may become quiet and clingy to caretakers)
- Problems forming attachments to others
- Trouble sleeping
- Recurring nightmares
- Changes in appetite
- Body aches
- Trouble focusing
- School-related problems
- Hyperactivity
- Tiredness
- Difficulty focusing

Signs or symptoms you may see more commonly in teens:

- Use of alcohol or drugs
- Engage in inappropriate sexual activity
- Become depressed
- Suicide attempts
- Self-injury

These can occur immediately after or during an ongoing event, or have delayed onset of sometimes years. While some of these symptoms can appear similar to other disorders, it is important to address them as t

trauma and seek out treatment. Without treatment, symptoms of childhood trauma can persist for a long time, affecting daily living, and even changing the brain and the nervous system into adulthood.

ACES?

Back in the mid-90s, the CDC and Kaiser-Permanente carried out a study examining the long-term effects of what they called Adverse Childhood Experiences (also known as ACES). ACES have been linked to a host of health problems and emotional struggles later in life, including substance abuse, heart disease, cancers, depression, and suicide. The ACES study underscores the need for early and effective treatment of trauma.

ACES are, unfortunately, common, and include experiences of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, such as living with an adult who abuses alcohol or drugs, witnessing domestic violence, divorce, and other traumatic experiences. If a child has experienced one ACE, it's likely they've experienced several. For instance, domestic violence and alcohol abuse are often tied together, and often lead to divorce.

There is hope, however. Resilience can help to overcome the effect of ACES.

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Resilience is the ability to bounce back after hard times. It is important to remember that despite bad things happening, there is hope. Children can regain a sense of well-being despite trauma, and sometimes emerge even stronger. The interaction between children and their environment can promote resilience. The most important way to help children be resilient is to ensure that they have strong, stable relationships with caretakers, family members, family friends, and community members that they can trust and rely on to help them maintain a sense of safety and view the world as a safe place.

Another way to promote resilience is to help children feel capable. When a child is given tools and skills and helped to cope with traumatic experiences, they begin to believe in their ability to heal and calm themselves. Physical exercise, arts and crafts activities, and play, among other things, can instill a sense of capability and improve regulation. Further along in this tool kit we provide examples of specific activities that can help in healing.

Reigniting hope and a belief in self and others, and a vision of a better future, can all promote resilience.

VALIDATING EMOTIONS

Validating the experience of others is critical in the treatment of trauma and promoting resiliency. As indicated earlier, trauma is an emotional upset, and is experienced differently from person to person. What one person sees as trauma may not be traumatic for someone else. Trauma is all about experience and how experience is perceived.

When validating emotions, here are some important points to remember:

- Take time to listen
- Make an effort to understand the person's point of view

- Empathize
- Give verbal responses to show your listening
- Stay present
- Ask clarifying questions

Validating emotions can allow the individual to feel understood and that what they are feeling is okay. By validating emotions you can build/strengthen a relationship and help the individual to become more resilient.

HOW TO SPEND TIME WITH KIDS

Spending time with kids can help them develop resiliency. Caring relationships, whether they are parents, teachers, or others can aid in coping. When children feel unconditional support they feel empowered and confident that they can work through difficult situations. When spending time with kids it is important to reduce distractions. There is a difference between truly spending time together and just being in the same room and around each other. It is also important to be present in the moment and to take time to truly be present in the interaction.

There are many ways that you can spend time with kids, some examples include:

- have a family dinner
- read a book together
- go for a walk
- play a game
- do a craft
- play with toys
- cook/bake together
- play a sport
- go for a bike ride
- share your ups and downs about the day
- have a special bedtime routine
- help with homework
- ask about their day
- go to a park

In the following pages we provide some specific activities adults can do with children to help encourage resiliency by giving the children some tools to help keep themselves calm when healing from trauma. These activities work best if they are used when the child is in a calm state. It's hard for the brain to learn new skills when the child is already upset. If the skills are taught when the child is feeling calm and peaceful, eventually, with practice, the child can learn the signs that they're getting upset and can use a tool to calm themselves before getting too upset.

MINDFULNESS GROUNDING TECHNIQUE

The purpose of this activity is to assist children calming down or staying calm when they have become upset. This activity uses the idea of mindfulness or being present in the moment. This activity can also be done at bedtime to assist children in falling asleep and reducing anxiety.

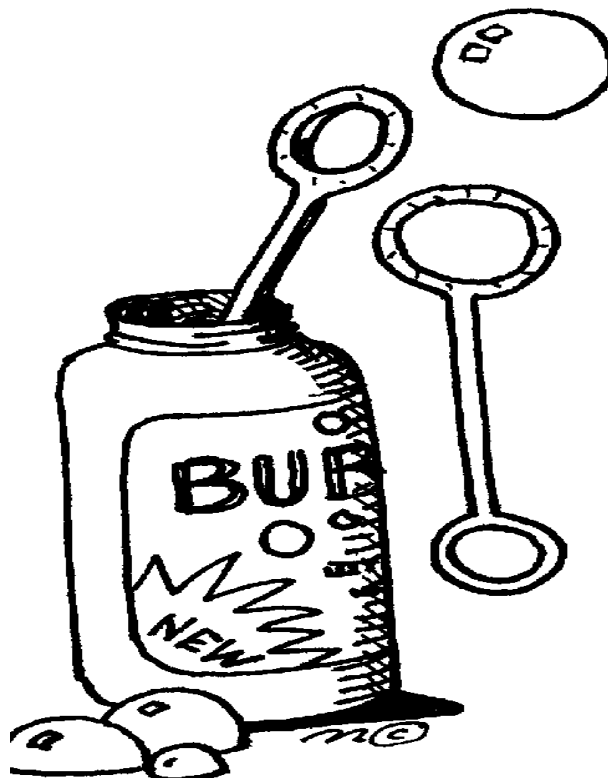
Directions: Ask the child to name 5 things they can see right now, wait as the child lists them. You can also help the child if they appear to be stuck. Next you ask the child to name 4 things they can feel right now. Allow the child to get up and feel things around them. Next ask the child to list three things they can hear right now, then 2 things they can smell and 1 thing they can taste. Taste can be difficult for children so you can also ask them to list one thing they tasted that day.



MINDFULNESS GROUNDING TECHNIQUE

The purpose of this activity is to teach deep breathing techniques to children. Deep breathing helps children to take a moment to relax and work on returning to a calm state. This activity can be done anytime the child is feeling upset. This technique is best practiced daily so that it becomes second nature for the child. You will need a bubble solution and bubble wand for this activity.

Directions: Take the bubble solutions and wand and tell the child “We are going to learn something fun today using bubbles”. Next ask the child if they know how to make great big bubbles. If the child says yes, have them demonstrate. Tell the child in order to create great big bubbles you need to have a lot of breath. Take the bubble solution and demonstrate quick puff breathing making small or no bubbles. Respond with “See when I use my little breath, my bubbles are small and hard to get out”. Next demonstrate fast breathing. Respond with “See when I breathe fast the bubbles pop faster”. Finally, use deep slow breaths and blow a bubble. Respond with “See how I took a big deep breath and my bubble got bigger and didn't pop”. Tell the child that slow, deep breaths are useful when blowing big bubbles and when feeling upset. Work with the child to practice all three bubble breaths. Afterwards, practice the deep breathing bubble breath several times. When the child becomes upset you can remind them to use their “bubble breath” and pretend they are blowing a big bubble. Additionally, you can have some bubble solution on hand and actually have the child blow bubbles when upset to practice deep breathing.



MINDFULNESS GROUNDING TECHNIQUE

The purpose of this activity is to create a box where children can put various items in the box that help them when they become upset. The box is then stored in an accessible location to both client and adult. Child can grab the box when needed, or the adult can suggest the coping box and/or participate with the child in partaking in the coping box. This is a cooperative activity between the adult and child. Note: accessibility of the box is determined by adult's knowledge of the child and the child's ability to use the box when needed for coping. These boxes can also be used in a school setting as well.

Directions: A simple box is all that is needed for the container. This box can be big or small as determined by the child and adult. The box can be decorated or plain. Let the child feel free to use their creativity on the box. It is recommended that the box can be sealed in order to protect contents. Once the box is complete adult and child determine which items child would like in the box. Below are suggestions of some of the materials that can be included in a coping box.

- Pipe cleaners
- Slime or putty
- A small, soft stuffed animals
- Fidget toys
- Crayons and paper
- Bubbles
- Journal (older children)
- Small puzzle
- Book(s)
- Playdoh
- Glitter jar
- Soft fabric or blanket
- Pictures of things child enjoys and/or family or cherished memories
- Bubble wrap
- Pom poms
- Calming scent item (these can be candles, sprays and/or lotions)

HEART CHECK-IN

The purpose of this activity is to check in on the child's emotions. This will help both you and the child to understand what they are feeling and explore those feelings.

Directions: Using the Heart Handout, ask the child to color areas of the heart using different colors to represent different emotions. Label these emotions on the side of the paper. Let the child know the parts they color in should be as big or as little as they felt that emotion during the time period you are referencing. For example: Johnny colored half of the heart red for anger because he felt very angry today during school.

