

Understanding Trauma and Healing in Adults

Brief 3. Coping and Healing



Explore this series to learn about trauma and how traumatic events can impact families and staff. Find information to guide your conversations with families. Use these resources to promote healing, resilience, and 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. Strengthening Trauma-Informed Program Practices

Brief 5. Strengthening Trauma-Informed Staff Practices

Head Start and Early Head Start managers and staff can explore this brief to review strategies for coping with and healing from trauma. Learn how families' strengths help the healing process.

Strategies for Coping and Healing

Healing is a process. We have to have hope in order to heal. Hope begins in respectful and trust-building relationships. It grows in the context of a safe environment. Staff can use the following strategies to promote healing in themselves, their peers, and the children and families they work with.

Establish safety

Assurance of survival and protection from more trauma is critical to healing. Although some traumatic events may persist over time, establishing safety is always the first and most important priority.

Protect ourselves

Initial ways of coping with trauma—such as avoidance, distrust, anger, and guilt—can cause distress and disrupt relationships. While these feelings and reactions are difficult, they can also be seen in a positive light. They are often attempts to regain control and to master or overcome the traumatic events. We may actually be doing the very best we can in those moments. When we seek to understand the meaning behind behaviors like these, we can engage more effectively with those we work with who have experienced trauma.

Self-reflection: Listening to our own story

Taking stock of the hurt and of the ways it has affected our thoughts, feelings, relationships, and sense of our place in the world can help in the healing process. Taking stock helps us make new meanings of what happened and who we are. As our story shifts from “something is wrong with me” to “something happened to me,” we can begin to

reclaim our sense of who we have always been. We can remind ourselves, “I am not the traumatic event that I experienced. I get to decide who I am.”

The “something that happened” does not define who we really are. It does not determine who we can become.

Connect with others and tell our story

Mutually respectful relationships can help us feel safe enough to trust that we can sort through what happened and tell our story. We need to take our time and think carefully about whom we first tell our story to. When we choose a trusted person to tell our own story to, we make our own meaning. We take back the control that we may have lost during the traumatic experience. This is especially important if we were hurt in ways that changed our understanding of who we are.

When we know our story has been understood and accepted without judgment, we can begin to feel that we are in control of determining who we are. As we tell our story, we can step inside it to see other people, our relationships, our world, and ourselves in less frightening, more hopeful ways.

For many of us, the experience of discrimination is part of our story. For those of us who experience trauma related to our race or ethnicity, it helps to tell the story of those experiences to people who know what we’re talking about and will truly understand.

Self-regulation: Cope with thoughts and feelings

Self-regulation is how we manage our thoughts and feelings in order to take action that helps us reach our goals. This may include actions we take in relationships, at work, at home, and in other settings (Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos, & Hamoudi, 2015; Tsethlikai, Murray, Meyer, & Sparrow, 2018). How we manage our thoughts and feelings is influenced by our relationships and cultures.

Self-regulation can help ensure that strong feelings do not interfere with clear thinking, judgment, decision-making, or actions. When we settle ourselves—that is, when we self-regulate—we are able to understand these strong feelings. We can understand where these feelings are coming from and what they might be telling us. As we come to understand these feelings, we can make the decisions and take the actions that best serve us.

Traumatic experiences can disrupt our self-regulation. We may be more irritable and more on edge. We may be quicker to think we are in danger. We may react before we have an accurate picture of what is going on. It is important to know what sets off reactions like these. These reactions also can disrupt self-regulation. (See Trauma Triggers below for more information.)

Nurture and soothe ourselves

Most of us know what kinds of things help us settle ourselves when we are upset. We might

- talk to a friend or loved one;
- take a walk, exercise, or do yoga;
- breathe deeply or meditate;
- listen to music or dance;
- try to explore our feelings from several different angles; or
- look for the positive elements in situations.

Celebrate Strengths

Families are resilient. They can heal from trauma. Families draw on a number of strengths to heal. Think about how to build on families’ strengths to help the healing process.

When families are resilient, they can “bounce back” from challenging events or experiences and “keep rolling.”

See Brief 1. **Defining Trauma** for a definition of resilience.

You can make a list of the things that help you. Remind yourself to turn to these things whenever you need to. You can also work on adding new things to your list. These might include ways of settling yourself that are more effective or easier to use in all kinds of situations.

As you focus on your coping and soothing strategies, think about what healing looks like for other staff, parents, and children. What strategies are they using? What can you learn from each other? Do they use coping strategies from their cultures or experiences that you may not be familiar with?

How Families' Strengths Help the Healing Process

Families are resilient. They can heal from trauma. Families draw on a number of strengths to heal. Here are some examples of family strengths.

Family cultures, beliefs, and attitudes

A family's cultures can create a positive identity for all of its members. When family members affirm the beliefs and values of their cultures, they can experience a sense of unity as a family. They can use their shared beliefs and values to come together to make meaning of difficult situations.

A family's cultures can also provide a reassuring sense of connection between the past and the present. Together, family members can remember the past struggles that they have overcome as a family. They can reinforce each other's hopes for the future.

Family communication

Family members may find that they can build trust by listening carefully to each other. They can try to understand different perspectives and opinions. They can check in to be sure that they have been understood. They can also use these communication skills to cooperate when solving problems and resolving conflicts.

Families' sense of belonging to a community

A family's experience of belonging in their community can create a sense of safety and trust. With this sense of belonging, safety, and trust, families can build healing relationships with other family members, neighbors, and members of their faith-based and cultural communities. They can identify resources and opportunities in the community that can be essential to the healing process.

Families who have a long history of adversity associated with poverty or racism may at times feel worn down. Families may experience a pileup of multiple traumatic events at the same time. Often, however, they have also developed strengths over many generations to deal with these challenges. Spirituality or family or community gatherings to share food, comfort, and material resources are common sources of strength.

Learning to Deal with Conflict and Repair Relationships

Conflicts can occur in a safe, trusting, and nurturing relationships. Traumatic experiences can influence how we respond to conflicts. Traumatic experiences can make it hard to trust. They may contribute to conflicts even in the healthy relationships that sustain us and help us grow. It is helpful to remember that conflicts in positive relationships can be overcome. Often the process of repairing relationships makes them stronger.

Most positive relationships—such as those between staff and families—require effort, care, and attention. Most will not always be smooth and easy. Misunderstanding, disagreement, conflict, and hurt feelings are likely—and to be expected. The ways we express and respond to these feelings can vary from one person to another. They can also vary from one culture to another.

These feelings can be especially frightening for those of us who have experienced trauma. That is because those past experiences can affect the way we interact with others in the present—and how we understand their reactions. The old feelings of the past can make it more difficult for us to be clear about

- the feelings we are having in the present moment,
- why we are feeling them, and
- what they mean.

Feelings about a present conflict in a safe and nurturing relationship can become blurred with feelings from past traumatic experiences. The feeling of powerlessness is part of most traumatic experiences. This feeling can make it hard to believe that we do have the power to handle conflicts in constructive ways. We may feel tempted to withdraw to what might seem like a safe distance.

Instead, we can work on noticing our old patterns of avoidance and distrust, and habits of numbing our feelings. It may help to give ourselves enough alone time to sort through what is going on. Reflection can help us identify the feelings that come from our traumatic experience. We can distinguish them from those that come from the disappointment and hurt of the moment we may be in right now.

We can strive to re-engage in the relationship in which we are experiencing conflict. We can take the first step and openly own our role in the misunderstanding. We can model our hope of being able to listen and work things out. We can take ownership of our role in the challenging moments of our relationships. We need to see these genuine efforts in the other person as well in order to know that this is a safe relationship in which we can heal and grow.

Traumatic experiences can make it harder for us to believe in our ability to resolve the conflicts that occur in our relationships. Yet we can continue to heal when we commit to and act on our own willingness to repair the relationship. The repair may take time and may not feel complete.

The commitment that each person involved makes to heal the relationship helps us heal from trauma. All staff in a program can work together to create a trauma-informed culture that is defined by safety and trust.

Related Resources

Learn more about the topics in this brief. Explore the following resources available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

Bringing Families Together: Building Community (video)

Watch this video for tips that programs can use to bring families together to build a strong sense of community. Discover ways for parents to share experiences and build connections that strengthen family well-being and outcomes for children.

Building Partnerships with Families Series

Explore this series to learn about ways to strengthen goal-oriented relationships and partnerships with families.

- Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families
- Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices
- Family Engagement and Cultural Perspectives: Applying Strengths-based Attitudes
- Partnering with Families of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners
- Preparing for Challenging Conversations with Families
- Engaging with Families in Conversations About Sensitive Topics

Related Resources, *continued*

Family Connections: A Mental Health Consultation Model—Short Papers for Staff and Parents

Explore these short papers for information about depression, resilience, and best practices in engaging parents facing adversities. Use these resources as handouts for parents and staff, in training workshops, and in parent groups.

- Parenting, Depression, and Hope: Reaching Out to Families Facing Adversity
- Fostering Resilience in Families Coping with Depression
- Parenting Through Tough Times: Coping with Depression
- The Ability to Cope: Building Resilience in You and Your Child

Funds of Knowledge (Learning Activity)

Use this handout to discover how to create a relationship-based culture that supports family engagement. Reflect on your own Funds of Knowledge. Think about how you might gather this information from families and use it to inform your work.

References

- Murray, D. W., Rosanbalm, K., Christopoulos, C., & Hamoudi, A. (2015). *Self-regulation and toxic stress: Foundations for understanding self-regulation from an applied developmental perspective* (OPRE Report # 2015-21). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Tsethlikai, M., Murray, D. W., Meyer, A. M., & Sparrow, J. (2018). *Reflections on the relevance of “Self-Regulation” for Native communities*. (OPRE Brief #2018-64). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481

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