

# Healing Youth Alliance Toolkit



## HELPING YOUTH RISE ABOVE TRAUMA

**THIS TOOLKIT** will teach pastors, educators, families and young adults to recognize signs of trauma in youth and empower them to respond in ways that will begin to create a pathway for healing. Included in the toolkit are theological considerations that invite all of us, including houses of worship, to move the dialogue and understanding of the importance of creating trauma-informed environments.

Equipped with this type of knowledge and care, our communities are transformed into

- circles of support when faith falters;
- safe harbors when survivors are reminded of the trauma; and
- an abiding assurance that joy still comes in the morning.



# INTRODUCTION

## WHY IT MATTERS

Many individuals face long-standing barriers to seeking mental health services, in particular African American youth. Research shows that many African Americans rely on faith, family and social communities for emotional support rather than turning to health care professionals, even though medical or therapeutic treatment may be necessary.

We believe that faith-based and youth development organizations must address this gap by offering culturally-sensitive mental health resources and trauma-informed practices to pastors, educators, families and young adults.

**4.3 million** Texans live with a mental health disorder.

**1.2 million** of them are children.<sup>1</sup>

Among children living below 100% of the federal poverty level



More than 1 in 5 (22%) had a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder.<sup>2</sup>



Two out of three students in the US are likely to have experienced one or more traumatic events before the

**age of 17.**<sup>3</sup>

**78%** of Latino kids suffer at least **one** adverse childhood experience (ACE).

ACEs may include poverty, neglect, abuse, or more.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Beyond the ABC's: Assessing Children's Health in Dallas County: Assessing the Well-Being of Children in North Texas 2017. Children's Health, 25.  
<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health](#)  
<sup>3</sup> Saunders, B. E., & Adams, Z. W. (2014). [Epidemiology of Traumatic Experiences in Childhood](#). Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 23(2), 167-184.  
<sup>4</sup> [The State of Latino Early Childhood Development: A Research Review](#).

# SECTION



## **“ Social Support is a Powerful Determinant”** by Sherrye Willis

Even on a good day, life can be overwhelming filled with circumstances, decisions and thoughts beyond our control. Constant glances at our cell phones, work commitments, emails galore, family responsibilities, to-do lists, expectations, doctors' appointments and the list goes on and on. Added to that are food and medicine cost, clothing choices, money worries, as well as mental, emotional, physical and spiritual issues that can all trigger some form of trauma. These are the types of traumas that may manifest itself as anxiety, depression, post traumatic stress syndrome and even thoughts of suicide.

Now couple our every day stressors with poverty, health inequities, abuse, neglect, complex trauma, a family disaster, a community catastrophe, a death, a loss of a job, divorce, structural and/or environmental racism or even a pandemic and you have a perfect storm waiting to happen.

So what do we do? How do we move forward? How do we simply keep one foot in front of the other? As adults these are haunting questions. For our youth, these questions sometimes seem insurmountable. Without ways to cope and a greater understanding of trauma and types of trauma, our children flounder.

For many of our youth, when mistakes are made, or challenges come, negative beliefs about one's self come into play:

“I'm stupid.”

“I'm worthless.”

“I'm ugly.”

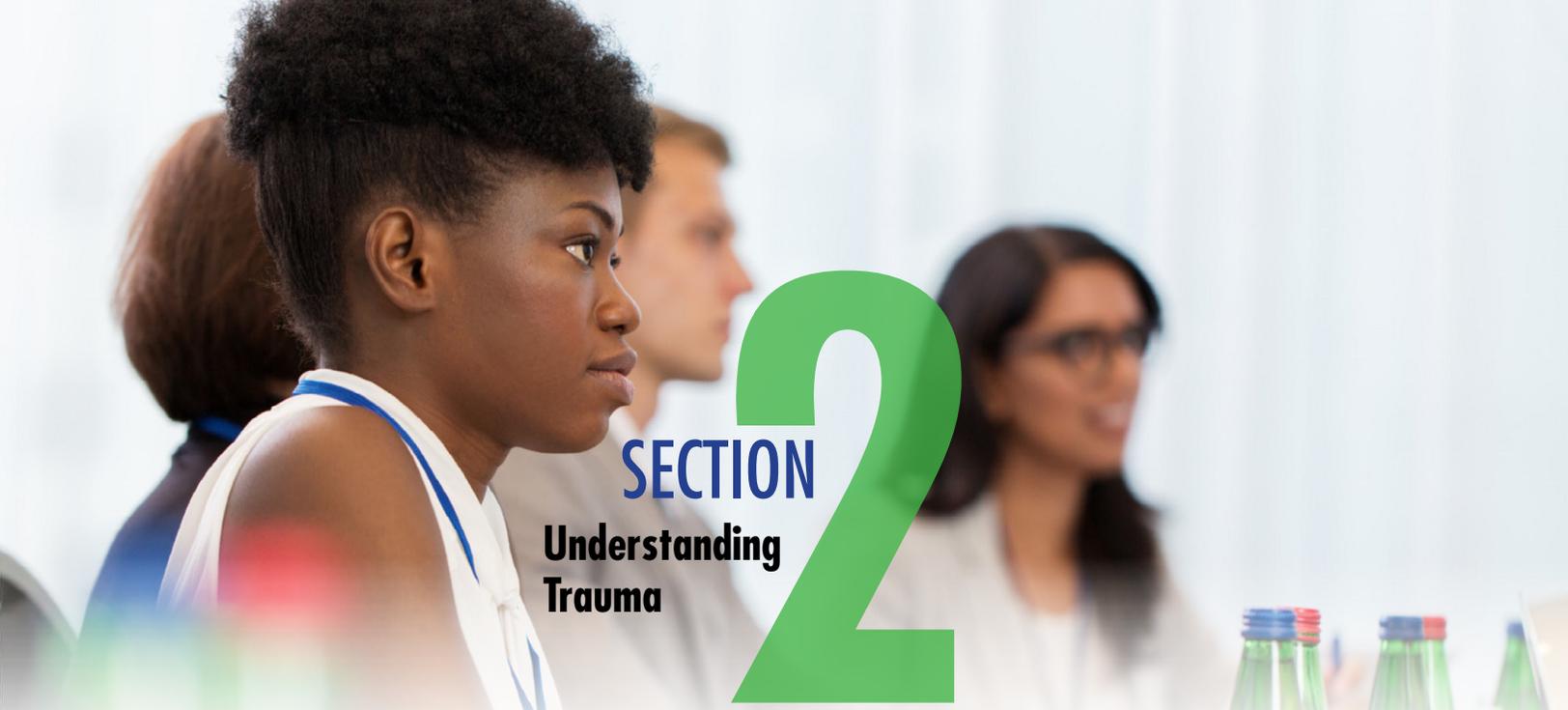
“I will never amount to anything.”

“I'm broken. I need fixing.”

Social support changes those self-defacing thoughts and gives our youth an opportunity to recover and thrive. There is no question that as a society, it is up to all of us to provide the collective care and social support that our youth need. What you do today matters. Your knowledge and your care may very well change the trajectory of a young child's life.

Social support is one of the most powerful determinants of facilitating or impairing recovery from trauma (Feeny, Rytwinski, & Zoellner, 2014).





## SECTION

## Understanding Trauma

### Defining Trauma:

- The person has experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others. (Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - DSM)  
OR
- An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration - SAMHSA)

### Why is it important to learn about trauma?

- Many people have experienced trauma. *Most people have experienced some type of trauma but they don't recognize it as trauma (or don't know to call it trauma).*
- Trauma is stored in people's minds and bodies. Trauma affects brain development and health.
- Trauma affects a person's behavior, feelings, relationships, and worldview.
- When we understand trauma and some of the ways it impacts people, we are better able to communicate with and support those who have been affected by trauma.

### Prevalence of Trauma

Many people experience trauma during their lifetimes. Although many individuals exposed to trauma demonstrate few or no lingering symptoms, those individuals who have experienced repeated, chronic, or multiple traumas are more likely to exhibit pronounced symptoms and consequences, including substance abuse, mental illness, and health problems. Subsequently, trauma can significantly affect how one engages in major life areas as well as treatment.

*The World Health Organization conducted a study throughout 30 different countries around the world (including the US), and they found that...*

- 70% of people have been exposed to some type of traumatic event in their lifetime
- On average, 4.5 traumatic events per person
- 14.7% of traumatic experiences involved sexual violence
- 8.4% of traumatic experiences involved physical violence

Even in a country such as Australia (a country with crime rates consistently lower than the US), one study found that 65% of men and 50% of women have experienced trauma at some point in their life. Men tended to experience or witness physical violence while women tended to experience trauma in the form of sexual violence (Creamer, Burgess, & McFarlane, 2001). The point we are trying to make is that trauma is a lot more common than we think, even in contexts that one might deem as 'safe.'

Nearly 90% of people living in low-income, urban areas have experienced trauma in their lifetime (Gilkin et al, 2016).

### Types of Trauma

- Acute trauma: A single event that lasts for a limited amount of time
- Chronic trauma: Multiple traumatic events that happen over an extended period of time
- Complex trauma: Chronic trauma that was caused by those whom the survivor depended on for survival and safety

### Impact of Trauma

In Shelly Rambo's book *Spirit and Trauma*, she says "Trauma is what does not go away. It persists in symptoms that live on in the body, in the intrusive fragments of memories that return. It persists in symptoms that live on in communities."

# SECTION 3 Triggers



**What is a Trigger?** A trigger is a stimulus that sets off a memory of a trauma or a specific portion of a traumatic experience. Some triggers can be identified and anticipated easily, but many are subtle and inconspicuous, often surprising the survivor or catching him or her off guard.

A trigger is any sensory reminder of the traumatic event: a noise, smell, temperature, other physical sensation, or visual scene. Triggers can generalize to any characteristic, no matter how remote, that resembles or represents a previous trauma, such as revisiting the location where the trauma occurred, being alone, seeing the same breed of dog that bit you, or hearing loud voices.

Triggers are often associated with the time of day, season, holiday, or anniversary of the event.

## How Can You Help Our Youth When Triggers Occur?

**One of the easiest techniques you can do with a youth survivor is a grounding exercise. Grounding exercises** are things you can do to help bring the survivor into contact with the present moment – the here and now. The grounding exercises can be quick strategies (like taking three deep “belly breaths”) or longer, more formal exercises (like meditation).

Here are a few grounding exercises that require little time and effort:

### As a caregiver I can have the survivor:

- Imagine a favorite place - it’s like taking a mini vacation wherever you are
- Think of your favorite things

- Name animals alphabetically (alligator, bear, cow, dog, etc...)
- Squeeze Something (play dough, clay, silly putty, your fists, a stress ball)
- Get a cold drink of water
- 54321 Grounding-go through each of the 5 senses.

Acknowledge FIVE things you see around you...

Acknowledge FOUR things you can touch around you...

Acknowledge THREE things you hear...

Acknowledge TWO things you can smell...

Acknowledge ONE thing you can taste.

- Think of words to a song he/she loves
- Deep breathe (For example say “Breathe in like you are smelling a flower, breathe out like you are blowing out birthday candles.” OR “Arms up and breathe in, arms down and breathe out.” OR “Pretend your belly is a balloon. Breathe in and make the balloon bigger, then breathe out and make the balloon shrink.”)

## Use Understanding and Supportive Language

**Use the following phrases as a way to support the survivor. Let them know that you are here to support and help in anyway.**

“I’m here for you”

“How can I help?”

“Together, we can work on this.”



## SECTION

# 4

## Recommendations

### Key ingredients to Increasing Social Support for Our Youth

*Since we know that healing takes place in the context of relationships, let's look at some key aspects to beneficial relationships. The RICH model identifies key ingredients that the service provider or social support must bring to the relationship.*

- **Respect**—active listening, acceptance, validation  
Respecting survivors means we break patterns of responding to difficult behaviors with anger and frustration in order to allow for a new dynamic to unfold. We listen, we accept them as they are, and we validate their emotions.
- **Information**— being knowledgeable about trauma and being able to communicate that info compassionately and clearly  
Survivors of trauma have lost a sense of safety that service providers can help rebuild through providing appropriate information. By providing information about what is happening and what the plan is, survivors will feel safer in their environment, knowing better what they can expect.
- **Connection**— fostering connection by being empathetic and aware of the survivor's experience in the moment.  
Connection refers to the development of an emotional bond with the survivor. Many traumatized people are disconnected from the people around them, while connection with others is vital to their recovery.
- **Hope**— conveying belief that healing is possible  
Service providers can help instill hope by helping survivors to engage in healthy relationships and achieve goals that make recovery seem possible.

*The big take away from all of this is that our role as the community is accompaniment. Our role is not to heal, not to control circumstances, emotions, or behaviors, and not to take away the pain. We need to be present, provide safe spaces, and journey alongside survivors. That is the best thing we can do for them.*

# CAREGIVERS: PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO ENSURE SELF-CARE

To care for others well, during this season of [Coronavirus](#) and beyond, will require us to learn how to care for ourselves at the same time.

Here are some practical steps you can take to ensure that you are properly attending to your own needs so that you can in turn sustainably attend to the needs of others.

1. **Take the necessary steps to protect yourself and your loved ones.** The World Health Organization suggests staying informed but avoiding overexposure to news that might cause you to feel [anxious](#) or distressed. And once you are able to take reasonable and well-informed measures to ensure the safety of you and your loved ones.
2. **Acknowledge that you need to cope.** You can't cope with an emotion or a problem that you are unwilling to accept that you have. "I shouldn't feel anxious or tired or overwhelmed because my circumstances aren't as dire as others" is the language of denial. Others can have legitimate needs and you can have legitimate needs both at the same time. Don't let your denial become the burden of those around you.
3. **Be mindful of how you compensate for your lack of control.** It is entirely human to seek out certainty and any semblance of control in the midst of a disorienting and rapidly-changing environment. Some of us compensate through vigilant and meticulous micromanagement (which will often lead to angry outbursts at the slightest derailment), while others compensate through disengagement or helpless surrender. Even our drive to find a source of blame for our problems is tied to control. What is needed for such a time as this has been nicely captured by Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer, "*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and [wisdom](#) to know the difference.*"
4. **Stay in the present moment.** Broadly speaking, anxiety is reflected in a mind that is perpetually oriented to the future, while [depression](#) is reflected in a mind that is perpetually oriented to the past. Staying in the present moment (or even in the present day) ensures that the burdens we carry today are just today's burdens (rather than the burdens of yesterday and tomorrow as well).
5. **Take care of your body.** Eat healthy, regular meals—to the extent that you are able. Exercise regularly. Spend time outside. Breathe deeply. Get plenty of sleep and avoid strenuous mental or physical activities as you approach bedtime. Avoid/limit [alcohol](#) and drugs.
6. **In moments of acute distress, distract yourself.** While holding your breath, splash your face with cold water or press the area between your eyebrows with a cold pack (this triggers what scientists call the "dive response"). Engage in intense exercise for a short time, like running, jumping, doing sit-ups. And then afterward, watch your favorite comedy on Netflix or YouTube. And while you're doing that, enjoy your favorite snack (I love BBQ Lays Chips).
7. **Stay connected with others and reach out for support.** Research suggests that one of the most consistent and powerful predictors of [resilience](#) and recovery in the face of emotionally distressful situations is social support—being reminded that others care and that we are not alone. Social support can be emotional (aimed at meeting emotional needs), instrumental (aimed at meeting practical needs), formal (with professionals such as psychologists or counselors), and informal (with family and friends). All of it is helpful and at any given point, we may find ourselves needing one form more than another.

To read the article **Coping and Caring for Yourself During the Covid-19 Outbreak** in its entirety please log onto: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/202003/coping-and-caring-yourself-during-the-covid-19-outbreak>

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# KEYS TO NAVIGATING TRAUMA, GRIEF, AND LOSS FROM COVID-19 IN YOUR CHURCH

## Three points of consideration:

### 1. **As Christians, we need—now more than ever—a nuanced redemption narrative.**

We need to learn how to celebrate Christ's triumph over sin while at the same time affirming that this work hasn't yet been fully consummated. And because of this, Christ proclaims in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matthew 5:4).

Pastors—now and even when we're free to meet together again—give permission, make space for yourself and for your congregation to mourn, so the comfort of God can be received (2 Corinthians 1:3-4) and so we may yearn with even greater anticipation our true hope, which is grounded in Christ's return.

### 2. **As Christians, we cannot bypass all the other stages of grief and skip straight to meaning-making.**

I wish there was a way to quickly and definitively reach the determination of King David that "even the darkness is not dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you" (Psalm 139:11-12).

But in the lived experience of grief (not the ideal theoretical or philosophical forms of grief), there's no other way to meaning and acceptance apart from some non-linear (and often messy and circular) combination of the earlier stages.

I think of the journey of Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. There was no shortcut to the Celestial City.

The only way for Christians to reach that final destination was through the Slough of Despond, past the Iron Cage of Despair, into the Valley of the Shadow of Death (Psalm 23:4).

### 3. **As Christians, let's reach out and accompany each other in our journey of grief.**

Psychological research on trauma has found that one of the most consistent and powerful predictors of resilience and recovery in the face of emotionally distressful situations is social support—being reminded that others care, and we're not alone.

There are many types of social support—it can be emotional (aimed at meeting emotional needs), instrumental (aimed at meeting practical needs), formal (with professionals such as psychologists or counselors), and informal (with family and friends).

Every type is helpful, and at any given point, we may find ourselves needing one form more than another.

Above all, let's not forget to seek out and receive Christ's accompaniment in our journey of grief. Let's not forget the foundation of our Christian faith is built upon a trauma—the trauma of the cross of Christ.

And so, we can approach God's throne of grace with confidence, for we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted (and has suffered) in every way, just as we are (Hebrews 4:15-16).

To read the article in its entirety please log onto:

<https://factsandtrends.net/2020/05/19/3-keys-to-navigating-trauma-grief-and-loss-from-covid-19-in-your-church/>

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308647467\\_Secondary\\_and\\_Vicarious\\_Trauma\\_Implications\\_for\\_Faith\\_and\\_Clinical\\_Practice](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308647467_Secondary_and_Vicarious_Trauma_Implications_for_Faith_and_Clinical_Practice)

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## SECTION

## Resources

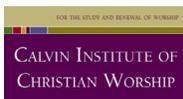
Log onto <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/all-nctsn-resources> to find a wide range of topics such as:

- "Age Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event"
- "Coping in Hard Times Fact Sheet for Parents"
- "Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for Military Families and Caregivers"
- "Creating Effective Child and Family Focused Disaster Behavioral Health Messages on Social Media"
- "Talking to Children About Islamophobia and Hate-Based Violence"
- "Understanding Refugee Trauma: For Child Welfare"
- "Caring for Kids: What Parents Need to Know About Sexual Abuse"
- "Children and Domestic Violence: Before You Talk to Your Children: How Your Feelings Matter"

**The National Child Traumatic Stress Network Recommended Film for Youth by Youth:**

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/never-give-complex-trauma-film-youth-youth>

Toolkit sponsored by:



[www.alliancetxt.org](http://www.alliancetxt.org)

Alliance for Greater Works is committed to dismantling the root causes of injustices affecting marginalized communities.