

# Course Guidebook

## Trauma-Informed Disaster Response

Guidance, activities, and  
resources for you to grow your  
trauma-informed care approach



**US** BY THE PEOPLE  
FOR THE PEOPLE  
WITH THE PEOPLE

01



02



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## **A NOTE TO PARTICIPANTS**

This course is for disaster recovery staff or anyone interested in growing their trauma-informed care approach.

Being trauma-informed and responsive is an evolving practice. While you will learn topics and techniques to build into your approach, we encourage you to continue and sustain your learning journey in deeper ways beyond this course.

If you or anyone you know is experiencing stress or a mental health crisis, this content is not a substitute for seeking assistance from a trusted licensed professional or someone in your care network.

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# Course Overview



The course was created by a team of federal trauma-informed care practitioners, human-centered designers, and federal recovery staff.

Their experiences, perspectives, and feedback of staff have directly informed the topics and techniques in the video lessons and guidebook.

## About this Course

The goal of this course is to leverage your existing capabilities, build on your emotional intelligence and inspire you with new techniques that you can practice and adapt to make your own.



## Why We are Here:

After a disaster occurs, survivors face numerous challenges—like finding stable housing, meeting basic needs, taking care of their families, and managing the complex emotions that can come with experiencing a disaster.

On top of this, many survivors are navigating complex systems and other aid to get crucial recovery assistance. Unfortunately, the processes in place Unfortunately, these systems often don't consider the role that public services can have in helping either resolve or exacerbate trauma-related issues an individual may be experiencing.

Federal disaster recovery staff deliver services at a vulnerable time in survivors' recovery journeys. Connected and compassionate interactions and communications have positive impacts on survivors, while negative

interactions or communications can be re-traumatizing for them.

When we spoke with disaster survivors to learn about their experiences, many voiced that their primary goal was to receive the federal assistance they needed, but they also expressed that the way they were treated deeply influenced their mental health, well-being, and long-term recovery.

By engaging with this guidebook and the video lessons, you are taking a positive step in growing your trauma-informed skills to support disaster survivors with care.



# Course Materials

The three video lessons and guidebook will teach you about trauma, trauma-informed care techniques, and ways to take care of yourself in disaster recovery work. These are essential components and practices of becoming trauma-informed and responsive.



# About This Guidebook

This guidebook supplements the video lessons. Please note, it is not a replacement for engaging with the three videos lessons. This guidebook is a tool to add to your toolbox.



## USE THE GUIDEBOOK AS:

- A reference to revisit the topics and techniques shared in the three video lessons;
- A way to engage with additional activities to explore and reflect on your trauma-informed care approach (this can be done independently or with your team); and
- A hub of external resources to learn more about the topics covered in this course.

# Suggested Use

This course is self-guided to allow flexibility with learning. You can engage with the materials either with a team or on your own.

## TEAM-LED

Taking this course with your team? We recommend learning in a group setting for the topics in this course. Coordinate on a group schedule to watch the videos and find time to convene after each video to discuss the topics covered in more depth. Use the guidebook activities to support your conversations.

## INDIVIDUAL-LED

Taking this course on your own? We recommend watching all three videos within 3 weeks so the topics are top of mind. Participate in the video-facilitated activities and use this guidebook to continue learning and growing. We encourage you to engage with your trusted network to discuss the topics, your reflections, and questions you might have.

## DISCUSS AND REFLECT



How do you hope this course will impact your work with survivors?

## Taking Care During the Course

The topics in the video lessons and guidebook address trauma by using examples from disaster survivors and federal recovery staff. All names have been changed and some story details combined, but their emotions remain true to their experiences.

These are not light topics. Listening to, reading about, or discussing traumatic experiences may activate your nervous system in ways that you might not anticipate. You may have moments where you feel uncomfortable. Pay attention to how your body reacts to the content.

Feel free to take breaks and come back to the guidebook when you are ready.



**LESSON 1**

# Understanding Trauma and its Impact



The topics, activities, and resources in Lesson 1 are not a replacement for professional mental health or crisis counseling. If you feel that you are struggling or experiencing a crisis, reach out to a trusted licensed professional, someone in your care network, or call/text 988 or go to [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).

# Lesson 1 Overview



## TOPICS COVERED

- The definition of trauma used in this course
- Different types of trauma
- A trauma-informed care approach
- The six foundational principles

## ACTIVITIES

- Activities to help you reflect and apply the concepts

## RESOURCES

- Additional resources so that you further explore the Lesson 1 topics



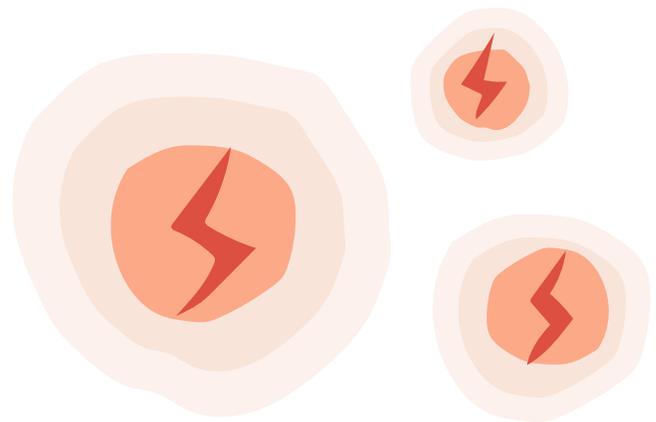
Make sure to watch Video Lesson 1 to engage more deeply with the topics.

# Defining Trauma

There are several definitions for the words *stress*, *trauma*, and *traumatic stress*. Trauma is not the same thing as feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

For this course, we are using the following definition of trauma:

**An event—or series of events—an individual experiences as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening. And the event or events can have long-lasting adverse effects on an individual’s emotional, psychological, and physical well-being.<sup>1</sup>**



1. SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach

<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>

“

**What you have really lost is your feeling of safety. Being able to go into your home, close the door, sit in your favorite chair, and feel like you are really safe. It is like people going off to war, it stamps them.**

”

Wildfire Disaster Survivor

## Reactions to Trauma

Each of us has unique reactions to a traumatic event which can be immediate or show up over time. The reaction often depends on the type of trauma someone has experienced and/or the support they get after the trauma is experienced.

### TYPES OF REACTIONS

- **Emotional**
- **Psychological**
- **Physical**

“ People go through a period of shock and disbelief. It can be brief or last for days... There are a lot of emotional reactions. It could be anger, sadness, guilt, or grief. It’s hard to know which one it will be, and it can go on for a very long time. When we are responding, it is important to listen to them and meet their needs...at whatever stage they are in.

Disaster Recovery  
Responder

”

# Types of Trauma

On top of changes to the brain, many disaster survivors have experienced other traumatic events before a disaster. This can make coping with the disaster and recovery even more challenging for them.

## SOME TYPES OF TRAUMA INCLUDE:<sup>2</sup>

### Acute Trauma

Single event

(e.g., car accident, assault, or natural disaster)

### Chronic Trauma

Multiple, repeated, long-term, and prolonged events

(e.g., intimate partner violence or experiencing homelessness)

### Complex Trauma

Varied and multiple, often interpersonal events

(e.g., child abuse)

When we interact or create communications for individuals impacted by disasters, we must acknowledge they have been through an event or series of events that have been physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening. Because of this, we recommend building trauma-informed care into your approach.

2. [https://www.medicinenet.com/what\\_are\\_the\\_3\\_types\\_of\\_trauma/article.htm](https://www.medicinenet.com/what_are_the_3_types_of_trauma/article.htm)

# Trauma-Informed Care Approach

At its core, a trauma-informed care approach is about changing the way we work in order to be aware of the trauma that people have experienced. This includes doing everything we can to make sure we're not making circumstances worse for the people we are helping, or what's known as re-traumatizing them. It's about being able to recognize and respond to disaster survivors in ways that are sensitive to their emotional, physical, and psychological state—whether that's stress, trauma or a range of emotions they could be experiencing.

**Think of it this way, a trauma-informed approach changes the question from:**

**“What’s wrong with you!”**



**to:**

**“What happened to you?”**



Notice the difference, not only in tone but also in scope. A trauma-informed approach is deeply interested in the whole situation surrounding a person and not just a single problem that they may be encountering.

You don't need to be a trained mental health worker to be trauma-informed. In fact, anyone engaging with the public, such as in disaster recovery efforts can become trauma-informed. That's why your job—whether it's helping disaster survivors understand benefits, talking on the phone with them or creating communications—can all be trauma-informed, even though you don't provide clinical trauma-informed care Interventions like a licensed care professional might.

## Four “R’s” to Keep in Mind

The contexts we work within matter. In this course, we offer several frameworks to help consider how to meet people where they are. A trauma-informed approach is grounded in four assumptions and six principles. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) describes the four assumptions that are foundational to a trauma-informed approach as the four “R’s”<sup>3</sup>:

- **Realize** that trauma affects people and groups, such as those who have experienced a disaster.
- **Recognize** how trauma may show up in interpersonal interactions and relationships.
- **Respond** with supportive, caring, and trauma-informed care and communication.
- **Avoid retraumatization** by responding to survivors and team members in compassionate and supportive ways.

3. SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach

<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>



# Foundational Principles

There are six main principles<sup>4</sup> that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) uses for a trauma-informed care approach.

## Examples for Disaster Recovery



### Safety

Making sure everyone feels physically and psychologically safe

In disaster recovery centers, care organizations and staff and volunteers are trained to greet individuals in a welcoming and sensitive manner. Waiting areas have space for people to sit further away from strangers.



### Trustworthiness and transparency

Building trust with people by being clear and straightforward about the decisions being made

Agency staff are trained to acknowledge trauma the individuals have expressed and provide information in a timely manner and in formats or languages chosen or spoken by the survivors.



### Peer support

Fostering environments where people can support one another

A safe and supportive peer-to-peer program within agencies allows staff to share their experiences with each other while learning from one another and mitigating stress.



### Collaboration and mutuality

Building people's power to participate fully in the systems they are part of

There are forums for agency staff such as one-on-one meetings, team training days and "debrief days," where staff can speak openly and honestly with peers and leadership about their hopes and concerns in disaster recovery work.



### Empowerment, voice, and choice

Recognizing people's strengths, experiences, and resilience

Agency staff utilize evidence-based tools and feedback mechanisms for disaster survivors to make informed choices about what comes next in their recovery.



### Cultural, historical, and gender issues

Incorporating individuals' cultures and identities and thoughtfully addressing the effects of historical and intergenerational trauma

Agencies partner and collaborate with essential community organizations and networks to better understand local contexts and cultural nuances before deploying or delivering any assistance or services.

## LESSON 1 Understanding Trauma and its Impact

# Activities

## Activity: What is Your “Why”?

Taking time to reflect on what drives your commitment to disaster recovery work can anchor you to your mission as you learn and practice trauma-informed techniques. Reflect on the prompts below.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

What originally drew you to disaster recovery work?

What is your primary motivation for the work you do?

### DISCUSS AND REFLECT



How did your other team members come to this work?

What motivates them to show up everyday?

## Activity: Defining Your Approach

Take 10 minutes to reflect on the topics provided in Lesson 1 about defining trauma and a trauma-informed care approach.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

In your own words, explain trauma in 3-5 sentences to a friend. What might you say?

In your experience, how does trauma show up in your disaster recovery work?

In your own words, explain your understanding of trauma-informed care to a friend. What might you say?

### DISCUSS AND REFLECT



How are your colleague's definitions similar?

How are the definitions different?

# Activity: Applying the Six Foundational Principles

Take 10 minutes to reflect on the six principles of trauma-informed care.

LESSON 1 Introduction to Trauma-Informed Care

### Foundational Principles

There are six main principles<sup>1</sup> that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) uses for a trauma-informed care approach.

	Examples for Disaster Recovery
<b>● Safety</b> Helping care recipients feel physically and psychologically safe	In Disaster Recovery Centers, care organizations, staff and volunteers are trained to greet individuals in a welcoming and sensitive manner. Helping people have control for people to further increase their strength.
<b>● Transparency</b> Seeking to work openly by being clear and straightforward about the decisions being made	Agency staff are trained to acknowledge how the agency can have a role and provide information in a timely manner with respect to language chosen or spoken by the workers.
<b>● Peer support</b> Fostering environments where people can support one another	A safe and supportive peer-to-peer program within agencies allows staff to share their experiences with each other while learning from one another and mitigating stress.
<b>● Mutuality</b> Building person's power to participate fully in the systems they are part of	There are forums for agency staff such as one-on-one meetings, team meetings and individual staff, where staff can speak openly and honestly with peers and leadership about their hopes and concerns in disaster recovery work.
<b>● Empowerment, voice and choice</b> Recognizing people's strengths, experiences, and choices	Agency staff utilize evidence-based tools and feedback mechanisms that empower workers to make informed choices about what services need in their recovery.
<b>● Identity and context</b> Recognizing individual's culture and identities, and thoughtfully addressing the effects of historical and organizational trauma	Agencies partner and collaborate with essential community organizations and networks to better understand and address culture differences. Working to address any assistance or services.

13 <sup>1</sup> SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach  
<https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma/concept-and-guidance-for-trauma-informed-approach>

Refer to the Six Principles on **page 19**.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

Which principle(s) do you feel shows up in your work most often? Can you provide an example?

Which principle(s) can you envision yourself integrating into your approach? Why?

## DISCUSS AND REFLECT



What are some ways in which the six principles show up in your work as a team?

Which principle does your team use the most?

Which principle might your team try to use more often?

# Lesson 1 Resources

## Articles

[“SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach”](#)

[“What is Trauma-Informed Care?”, Buffalo Center for Social Research](#)

[Anticipatory stress influences decision making under explicit risk conditions](#)

## Guidelines and Courses

[HHS Disaster Behavioral Health Resources](#)

[National Voluntary organizations Active in Disaster: Disaster Emotional Care Guidelines](#)

[American Psychological Association - Disaster Mental Health Training Courses](#)

## Podcasts

[“Focus on Equity—Engaging Persons with Disabilities in Emergency Response and Recovery” by FEMA](#)

[“An Equity Lens for Emergency Management” by FEMA](#)

## Books

[“What Happened To You?” By Oprah Winfrey and Bruce Perry](#)

[“My Grandmother’s Hands” by Resmaa Menakem](#)

## Videos

[Insights from Educators: Supporting Mental Wellness with Bruce D. Perry, MD, PhD](#)

[“Trauma and the Nervous System- A polyvagal perspective”](#)

[“How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime” by Nadine Harris](#)



## LESSON 2

# Applying Trauma- Informed Care Techniques



The topics, activities, and resources in lesson 2 are not a replacement for professional mental health or crisis counseling. If you feel that you are struggling or experiencing a crisis, reach out to a trusted licensed professional, someone in your care network, or call/text 988 or go to [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).

# Lesson 2 Overview



## TOPICS COVERED

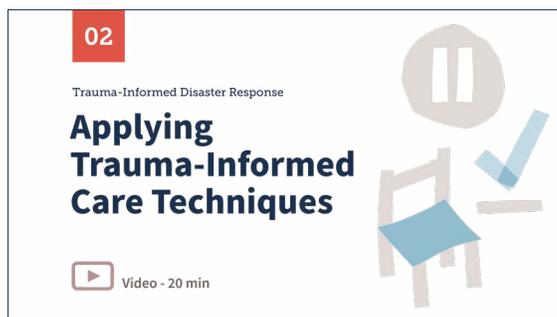
- The importance of a trauma-informed care approach in disaster recovery
- Trauma-informed techniques to apply in disaster recovery work

## ACTIVITIES

- Activities to help you reflect and apply the techniques to your approach

## RESOURCES

- Additional resources to help you continue explore the topics in Lesson 2



Make sure to watch Video Lesson 2 to engage more deeply with the topics.

# Application in Disaster Recovery

Becoming trauma-informed and responsive requires training. We spoke with federal disaster response staff to gather their most promising practices.

We learned that many staff already use a trauma-informed care approach, even if they aren't calling it that. We took what we heard and created four customized trauma-informed care techniques that are covered in this section.

The techniques won't make any of us experts overnight because becoming trauma-informed is an ongoing and evolving process. However, the techniques will help you turn the trauma-informed care principles from Lesson 1 into action—and that can have a significant impact on survivors.

Think of these techniques as adding to all the skills you already have that are uniquely your own.

## 4 TRAUMA-INFORMED DISASTER RECOVERY TECHNIQUES

**Slow things down.** pg 28

**Actively listen.** pg 29

**Get practical.** pg 30

**Be comfortable in your role.** pg 31

## Slow things down.

Slowing down is an opportunity for you to build rapport and trust, consider the survivor's emotions, and set clear goals for the interaction.



**Present a welcoming environment:** Make sure there is a comfortable seat ready, little clutter around, and the space is as quiet as possible. The fewer sensory distractions, the easier it is for both you and the person you are helping to focus on the task at hand.



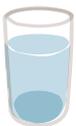
**Body language:** Be aware of body language on your end and their end. Try to present yourself with an open and welcoming posture.



**Establish rapport:** You might ask the survivor what their name is and how they are doing. Introduce yourself, include your role. The title of your role might be confusing to them. It's important to let them know how you can help them.



**Acknowledge and validate:** If the survivor displays vulnerable emotions with you, it's okay to acknowledge and validate their feelings. You might have the survivor create a sense of calm by saying something like, "Before we continue, why don't we both take a few deep breaths together?"



**Offer nourishment:** If there is water or snacks around, consider offering them some. Better yet, suggest that the survivor walks with you to get the water or snacks. Moving together can create a feeling of connection and calm.



**Be clear and set intentions:** Slowly and clearly explain the purpose of the interaction. For example, share how long you will spend with them, what you can help them accomplish, and what they can achieve by the end of the interaction.



**Be mindful of pace:** Check to see if they have any questions before moving forward in the conversation. Ask them if they need a moment to process your words. Let them set the pace and try to mirror it.

## Actively listen.

This technique is the key to a productive and supportive interaction despite the chaos and noise that may be going on around you and the survivor. Here are some methods we suggest incorporating into your practice:



**Keep it open:** Ask open-ended questions to assess the whole situation, not just one issue. Avoid making assumptions. Simple phrases such as, “Are you comfortable telling me more about that?” or “Is there anything else I should understand to fully grasp your situation?” work well.



**Center the survivor:** Avoid redirecting back to your own or others’ experiences.



**Be prepared to pause:** Allow for uninterrupted emotional responses, like crying. Crying is one of the most healthy and natural ways to release stress.



**And finally, be prepared to respond with compassion:** Instead of saying, “I can’t believe that happened!” try “I am so sorry you [and your family] are going through this.” Instead of saying, “You are so strong, brave, or resilient,” try, “Tell me how I can support you the most right now?” And finally, rather than saying “Try to relax,” say “How are you feeling about the process at this point?”

## Get practical.

Being clear, honest, and action-oriented are the key to open communication and practical next steps. Here are some methods we suggest incorporating into your approach:



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**Share a next step:** Provide a simple next step or a few next steps for the survivor to take. It is better to share one achievable next step, rather than explain the long and complicated process ahead of them.



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**Speak plainly and directly:** Try not to use words that can be confusing when you explain how the survivor can proceed. Lose the acronyms and industry speak—the words that are familiar to you only because of your job will probably be unfamiliar and unhelpful to survivors.



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**Check for clarity:** Have the survivor repeat their next step to you before wrapping up the conversation to make sure they understood you and that they feel confident to proceed. Invite any further questions they may have.



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**Have tools or templates ready:** People process information in all different ways, especially when they may be impacted by overwhelming stress and trauma. If you need to help the survivor focus, try having a prepared template with you to fill out alongside them to document their next steps. If you sense that explaining information verbally to the survivor is ineffective, use a prepared template or try to have blank paper around so you can visualize or write out concepts or their next best steps.



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**And lastly, check in with yourself:** You are most helpful when you are taking care of yourself. Be aware of what tends to overwhelm you or push your buttons and know when to pull in the support of others if an interaction may feel too much for you.

## Be comfortable in your role.

There are systemic challenges that may be difficult for you to influence in your role, but it's important to focus on what you can influence in your interactions with survivors.

Compassion really does change the recovery experience for survivors. Here are some methods we suggest incorporating into your practice:



**Be prepared to explain your role plainly and kindly:** Oftentimes survivors might assume since you work for the federal government you have authority to help them with all their needs. Be prepared and practiced on how you explain your role and the extent of what you can provide for the survivor.



**Connect survivors to referrals and resources:** Make sure that you are aware of relevant and culturally appropriate local resources that may be helpful to give survivors. Always be aware of resources that can address immediate needs that you can point the survivor to.



**Continue growing your trauma-informed care approach:** It's important to always continue to grow your trauma-informed care approach in disaster recovery work so you can respond in sensitive ways and avoid retraumatizing disaster survivors. Being trauma-informed and responsive is an ongoing practice. Even the most experienced disaster recovery workers and trauma-informed care practitioners often find themselves reviewing many of the basics that are included in this course.

## **LESSON 2 Applying Trauma-Informed Care Techniques**

# **Activities**

# Activity: Approaching a Conversation

Develop your own personalized approach to slowing down conversations with disaster survivors.

How might you respond to the following scenarios:

LESSON 2 Applying Trauma-Informed Care Techniques

**Slow things down.**

Slowing down is an opportunity for you to build rapport and trust, consider the survivor's emotions, and set clear goals for the interaction.

 **Present a welcoming environment:** Make sure there is a comfortable seat ready, little clutter around, and the space is as quiet as possible. The fewer sensory distractions, the easier it is for both you and the person you are helping to focus on the task at hand.

 **Body language:** Be aware of body language on your end and their end. Try to present yourself with an open and welcoming posture.

 **Establish rapport:** You might ask the survivor what their name is and how they are doing. Introduce yourself, include your role. The idea of your role might be confusing to them. It's important to let them know how you can help them.

 **Acknowledge and validate:** If the survivor displays vulnerable emotions with you, it's okay to acknowledge and validate their feelings. You might have the survivor create a sense of calm by saying something like, "Before we continue, why don't we both take a few deep breaths together?"

 **Offer nourishment:** If there is water or snacks around, consider offering them some. Before you suggest that the survivor walk with you to get the water or snacks, moving together can create a feeling of connection and calm.

 **Be clear and set intentions:** Slowly and clearly explain the purpose of the interaction. For example, share how long you will spend with them, what you can help them accomplish, and what they can achieve by the end of the interaction.

 **Be mindful of pace:** Check to see if they have any questions before moving forward in the conversation. Ask them if they need a moment to process your words. Let them set the pace and try to mirror it.

28

Refer to the “Slow down.” techniques on **page 28**.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

## SCENARIO A

**A survivor approaches with tears in their eyes, looking frustrated and distressed.**

- How will you begin the conversation?
- How will you slow things down?

## SCENARIO B

**You answer the call of a survivor whose emotions are heightened because of what happened with their claim process.**

- How will you respond to them?
- How will you slow things down?

# Activity: Compassionate Language

Reframing is an important part of being trauma-informed. Try reframing the phrases below.



Refer to the “Actively listen.” techniques on **page 29**.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

**Instead of saying...**

**Reframe by saying...**

**“That’s crazy that happened to you!”**



**“You are so lucky you survived!”**



**“Please, calm down.”**



## DISCUSS AND REFLECT



Share your reframes with your team. Sharing and hearing what others might say can inspire multiple ways of compassionate response.

# Activity: Checklist

Use or adapt this checklist to ensure your interactions with disaster survivors are compassionate and actionable.



Refer to the “Get practical.” techniques on **page 30**.

## INTRODUCTION

- Introduce yourself.
- Explain your role clearly and plainly.
- Do one thing to slow things down and build rapport with the disaster survivor.

## LISTEN ACTIVELY

- Ask open-ended questions to assess the whole situation, not just one issue.
- Ask follow-up questions.

## GET PRACTICAL

- Determine and explain next steps clearly and in plain language.
- Connect the disaster survivor to necessary resources or referrals to address immediate or long-term needs.
- Highlight a point of contact.
- Send them off with written next steps; including who, what where, when, and how.

## REMINDER

Print this page, take a picture of it, or save it to your electronic device and refer to it when deployed.

# Activity: Role Definition

Clearly communicating your role and influence to disaster survivors can help avoid false expectations or confusion. How can you explain your role using plain language?

LESSON 2 Applying Trauma-Informed Care Techniques

**Be comfortable in your role.**

There are systemic challenges that may be difficult for you to influence in your role, but it's important to focus on what you can influence in your interactions with survivors. Compassion really does change the recovery experience for survivors. Here are some methods we suggest incorporating into your practice:

- Be prepared to explain your role plainly and kindly.** Oftentimes survivors might assume that if you work for the federal government you have authority to help them with all their needs. Be prepared and practiced on how you explain your role and the extent of what you can provide for the survivor.
- Connect survivors to referrals and resources.** Make sure that you are aware of relevant and culturally appropriate local resources that may be helpful to your survivors. Always be aware of resources that can address immediate needs that you can point the survivor to.
- Continue growing your trauma-informed care approach.** It's important to always continue to grow your trauma-informed care approach in disaster recovery work so you can respond in sensitive ways and avoid retraumatizing disaster survivors. Being trauma-informed and responsive is an ongoing practice. Even the most experienced disaster recovery workers and trauma-informed care practitioners often find themselves reviewing many of the basics that are included in this course.

31

Refer to the “Be comfortable in your role” techniques on **page 31**.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

What's **in my circle** of influence when working with disaster survivors?

What's **out of my circle** of influence when working with disaster survivors?



Combine your responses to prompt 1 and 2.



## DISCUSS AND REFLECT



Share your responses with your team and give each other feedback.

Hearing what other colleagues wrote might inspire your own role explanation.

Practice explaining your role with your team.

# Activity: Conversation Guide

Wrap up everything you learned by using the Conversation Guide below to help you create your own style of trauma-informed conversations with survivors. Consider various scenarios such as at a Disaster Recovery Center or over the phone.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.



**Building rapport:**

How will I build trust?



**Your role:**

What can I influence? What can I not?



**Survivor needs:**

What is the whole situation?  
What is the most pressing need?

**ROLE PLAY**



Role play interactions with your team.

Use your conversation guide when practicing.



**Actions to take:**

What are the immediate and long-term next steps?

# Activity: Commit to a Trauma-Informed Care Approach.

Revisit the four trauma-informed care techniques and their methods. Consider what you already do and what you would like to build into your personal approach.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

Which techniques will you incorporate into your approach?

Which methods within each technique do you plan to use?

## DISCUSS AND REFLECT



How can your team support you in your commitment?

How can you support your team in their commitments?

What commitments might you make as a team?

What other effective techniques or methods do already use?

# Communication Materials Checklist

Communication materials such as flyers, forms, letters, or digital experiences can and should be trauma-informed. Processing information and making complex decisions is challenging in times of intense stress and trauma. This trauma-informed communications checklist can reduce further confusion or stress as disaster survivors navigate federal communication materials.

## Keep it simple and actionable.

### Language

- Does the material use basic words and phrases?
- Does the material have action-oriented headings?
- Does the material use short sentences and phrases?

### Organizing Information

- Does the material organize information in chronological order?
- Does the material visually highlight important content?
- Does the material have lists, tables, or visual elements to make reading the information more digestible?

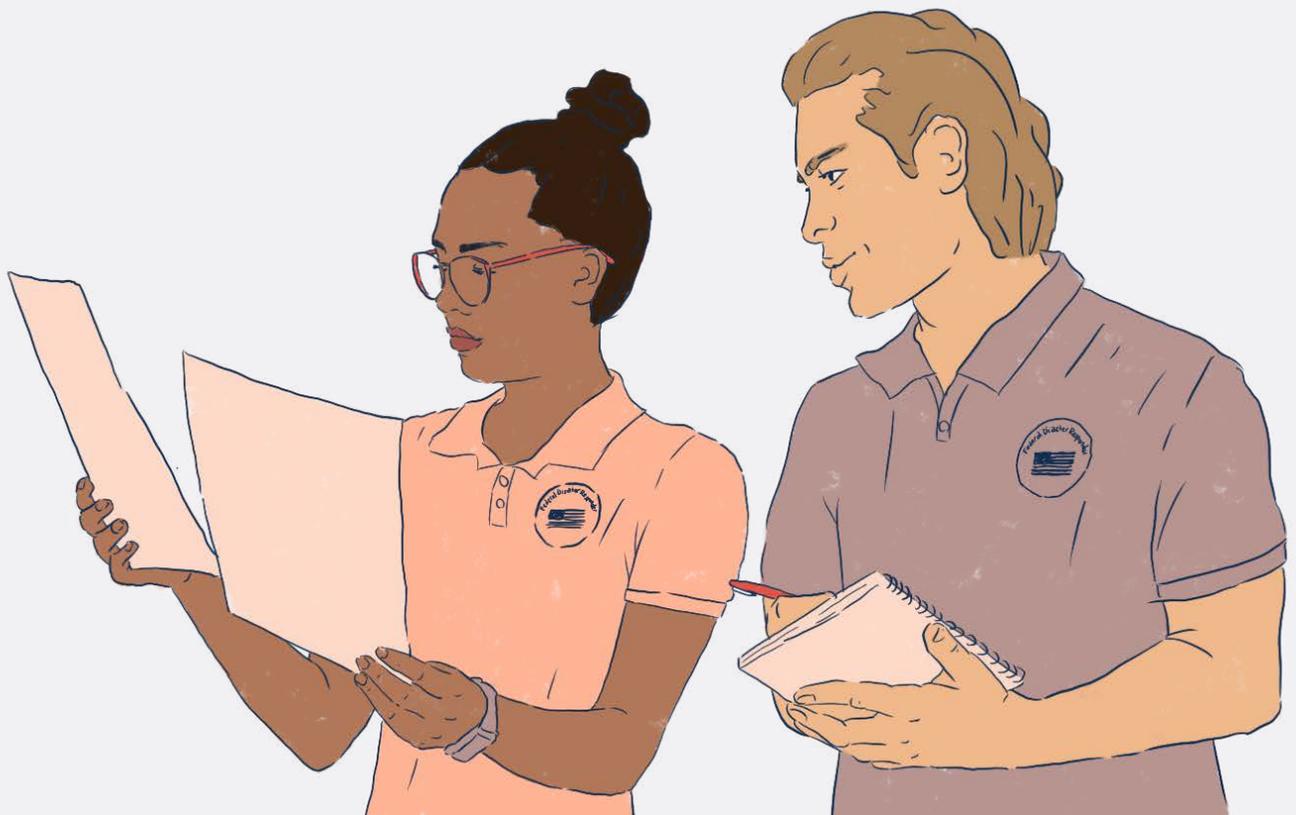
## Provide clarity and transparency.

- Does the material have a clearly stated goal and purpose?
- Does the material have a clear call to action?
- Does the material provide an estimated timeline for the process or service?
- Does the material set expectations about updates and decisions?
- Is the content up to date?
- Is the material written in present tense?
- Is the material written in active-voice?

# Communication Materials Checklist (Continued)

## Promote safety and connection.

- Does the material acknowledge the circumstances in a sensitive and compassionate way?
- Does the material use pronouns that speak directly to the reader?
- Does the material use culturally appropriate language and visuals for its audience?
- Does the material provide a connection to translation services?
- Does the material offer a connection to obtaining the document in other languages?
- Does the material offer alternative formats?
- Has your team ensured 508 compliance?
- Does the material connect the reader to relevant resources and referrals?



## Lesson 2 Resources

### Resources for Interacting with Disaster Survivors

[Working with Disaster-Affected Communities to Envision Healthier Futures: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Post-Disaster Recovery Planning](#)

[Compassionate and Trauma-Informed Responses](#)

[Figuring out FEMA](#)

[Trauma-Informed Disaster Response and Recovery](#)

[HHS Disaster Behavioral Health Resources](#)

[National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster: Disaster Emotional Care Guidelines](#)

[American Psychological Association - Disaster Mental Health Training Courses](#)

### Resources for Creating Trauma-Informed Communications

[Reducing Sludge in Letters](#)

[Plain Language](#)

[508 Compliance](#)

#### **Accessible video resources:**

<https://www.section508.gov/create/synchronized-media/>

<https://digital.gov/2014/06/30/508-accessible-videos-how-to-make-audio-descriptions/>

<https://digital.gov/2014/06/30/508-accessible-videos-how-to-caption-videos/>

## LESSON 3

# Taking Care in Disaster Recovery Work



The topics, activities, and resources in lesson 3 are not a replacement for professional mental health or crisis counseling. If you feel that you are struggling or experiencing a crisis, reach out to a trusted licensed professional, someone in your care network, or call/text 988 or go to [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).

# Lesson 3 Overview



## TOPICS COVERED

- The prevalence of secondary traumatic stress in disaster recovery
- Well-being techniques to manage stress before, during, and after disaster recovery work

## ACTIVITIES

- Activities to help you reflect and apply the techniques shared

## RESOURCES

- Additional resources so that you can continue to explore the topics in Lesson 3



Make sure to watch Video Lesson 3 to engage more deeply with the topics

## Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress is emotional hardship that results when a person hears someone's firsthand traumatic experiences. Its symptoms can mimic those of the person who experienced the trauma directly.

Witnessing a post-disaster environment and hearing the first-hand experiences of survivors can have a significant impact on your emotional, mental, and physical well-being. This environment is even more challenging if you have personally survived a disaster. Even with this said, symptoms that are experienced are unique to each person.



**“ Being mentally resilient in a disaster is always a big challenge...you have to find ways to replenish yourself. It takes a toll on you as an individual. ”**

**Federal Disaster  
Recovery Responder**

# Signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress

Feeling stressed is natural in intense working environments such as a post-disaster site. But signs of stress can often be overlooked when you are so committed to helping others. Below are **cognitive**, **emotional**, and **behavioral** signs you can be aware of to recognize when your stress is rising and getting in the way of everyday tasks or your usual capabilities.

## COGNITIVE SIGNS

- Lower concentration
- Feeling indifferent
- Having very rigid thoughts
- Irritability
- Perfectionism
- Being preoccupied with a sense of stress

## BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

- Withdrawal from activities
- Appetite changes
- Feeling overly controlling or demanding
- Physical pain
- Difficulty sleeping
- Trouble listening
- Exhaustion or fatigue
- Minimizing experiences
- Finding it hard to accept the complexity of a situation

## EMOTIONAL SIGNS

- Guilt
- Lack of feelings
- Anger
- Feeling overly critical
- Fear
- Sadness
- Helplessness or hopelessness

# Techniques to Manage Stress

**Grounding** is a practice to help you refocus on the present moment. Staying in the present moment allows people to feel safe and more in control by focusing on the physical world and how they experience it.

There are many ways to manage and cope with stress. For this course, we focus on grounding techniques that staff can build into their care routine. Each technique has several methods.

The 3 grounding techniques are:



## MENTAL GROUNDING

bringing your **mind** to the present moment



## PHYSICAL GROUNDING

bringing your **body** to the present moment of a situation



## SOOTHING GROUNDING

regulating your **emotions** to help you calm down



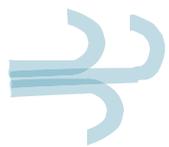
# Mental Grounding

Mental grounding engages your five senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—to help anchor you in the present moment. Here are some examples of techniques that you might consider using in your own practice:



## Counting

Identify and describe five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.



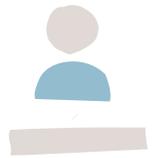
## Breathing exercises

Take slow, deep breaths and pay attention to the sensation of the air moving in and out of your body.



## Progressive muscle relaxation

Tense and relax different muscle groups in your body to release tension and notice sensations.



# Physical Grounding

Physical grounding is a set of techniques that focus on tracking sensations in your body and environment. Here are some examples of techniques that you might consider using in your own practice:



## Body Scan

Take a few minutes to focus on each part of your body, starting from your toes and moving upward. Pay attention to any tension, discomfort, or sensations you feel in each body part, and relax them one by one.



## Grounding Stance

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and feel the connection between your feet and the ground. Imagine roots growing slowly from your feet and into the earth to provide a sense of stability.



## Mindful Movement

Go for a walk and pay close attention to the sensations of each step and the movement of your body.



## Grounding Objects

Carry a small object with you, like a smooth stone or a textured keychain, that you can touch to ground yourself.



## Deep Pressure

Apply deep pressure to your body by hugging yourself tightly, wrapping yourself in a blanket, or using a weighted blanket.



# Soothing Grounding

Soothing techniques can be used as an emotional regulation strategy to regain balance after an upsetting event. Here are some examples of techniques that you might consider using in your own practice:



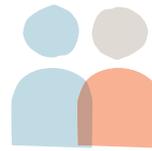
## Visualization

Visualize positive places or comforting memories in your life. You can close your eyes and imagine a safe and peaceful place, or maybe a joyful or comforting memory. Focus on the details of this place or memory...Who's there? How does it sound? Smell? Create a mental image of this positive place or memory and refer to it in moments of stress.

**I am  
safe.**

## Affirmations

Repeat positive affirmations. It might take time to find the right affirmation, but once you do this can be a powerful tool. For example, you might say, "I am safe," "I can handle this," or "This feeling will pass."



## Social Supports

Connect with people you trust who can provide emotional support and understanding. Staff mentioned the importance of having a network of trusted people.

These people can be:

- colleagues in the field with you where you can discuss work
- loved ones with whom you can decompress
- a licensed, professional mental health provider

## LESSON 3 Taking Care in Disaster Recovery

# Activities

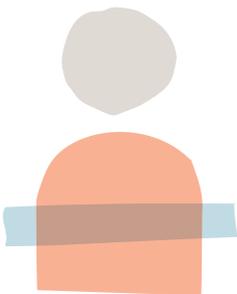
## Activity: Body Mapping

It can be helpful to identify where your body feels stress. Maybe your head gets numb or aches, maybe your chest feels like it tightens, or maybe you get back pain. Knowing where you typically experience feeling stress throughout your body can help you recognize the signs of stress so that you can use techniques to cope.



Sketch below, in a notebook, or somewhere you might look at it often.

- Draw an outline of your body.
- Close your eyes for a moment and try to think about where you typically “feel” stress in your body.
- Now, open your eyes. On the outline of your body, mark the areas where you typically feel stress.



## Activity: Your Care Network

Connecting with people you trust for emotional support and understanding when you need to process or express intense emotions is a way to manage and cope with stress. Secondary traumatic stress often occurs when you don't have the space to process what has happened to you so consider building your social support.

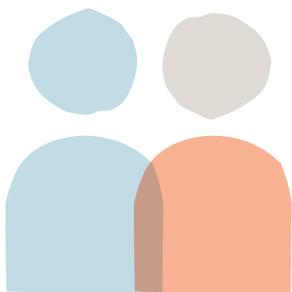


Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

- Think about who is in your trusted circle.
- Write down the people who come to mind that you can reach out to.

**Work Colleagues:**

**Licensed Care Professionals:**



**Friends or Family:**

**Other trusted individuals:**

# Activity: Give it a Try

Read through the grounding techniques provided in video lesson 3 and the guidebook for each technique.

Choose 1 grounding techniques that you will try.



Refer to **pages 47-49**.

- Commit to practicing the technique for at least a week. We suggest sticking with the same time each day. For example, in the morning right after you wake up or after you've had lunch.
- Take 5 minutes to write down in a journal or in an electronic document how you feel before practicing the technique. Are you tired? Hungry? Grumpy? Annoyed? Energetic? Excited?
- Move slowly through the exercise. Take as much time as you want or need.
- After completing the exercise, take 5 more minutes to write down how it felt to practice the technique. Did you get distracted? Did it feel good? Was there a moment that felt awkward?

# Activity: Commit to Yourself

Take time to reflect on what you usually do when you feel stressed or upset. Consider what you'd like to integrate into your routine or personal practice to continue to support you in your ongoing practice of well-being.



Write your response in the text boxes below or use a notebook.

- Think back to some of the things you feel when you're preparing for deployment or when you are deployed to a new place, or when you're preparing to answer calls from survivors or create communication materials for them.
- Fill out the following for some of those feelings:

If I start to feel \_\_\_\_\_ I will try \_\_\_\_\_ .  
emotion technique

When I feel \_\_\_\_\_ in the moment, I will  
emotion  
try \_\_\_\_\_ . If my body is feeling \_\_\_\_\_  
technique bodily sensation

I will try \_\_\_\_\_ .  
technique

## DISCUSS AND REFLECT



How can your team members support you in your commitment?

What commitments or exercises might you try as a team?

## Lesson 3 Resources

[Secondary Traumatic Stress](#)

[Before, During, and After—A Podcast for  
Emergency Managers by FEMA](#)

[The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit](#)

[Resilience, Balance, and Meaning Guide](#)

[Vicarious Traumatization: Potential  
Hazards and Interventions for Disaster  
and Trauma Workers](#)

[Insights from Educators: Supporting  
Mental Wellness with Bruce D. Perry, MD,](#)



## THANK YOU

Being trauma-informed and responsive is an evolving practice. Refer back to this guidebook and the video lessons as often as you need. We encourage you to continue and sustain your learning journey in deeper ways beyond this course. By engaging with this guidebook and the video lessons, you are taking a positive step in growing your trauma-informed skills to support disaster survivors with care.

