

Talking about Trauma

Tips + strategies
for positive, effective
engagement and
planning



Allegheny County
Department of Human Services

A trauma is a scary, dangerous, or violent event or series of events that overwhelm the individual's ability to cope. The event may have happened to that individual directly, or the individual perceives a real possibility that it could. It is experienced as something life-changing and potentially life-threatening to the individual or someone close to the individual.



Trauma Reactions



Often times as a result of adverse experiences, the nervous system keeps us prepared for when danger may reoccur, and stands guard ready to respond quickly to triggers (even when others do not perceive these triggers as dangerous).

Common reactions:

- **Feeling unsafe**
- **Anxiety**
- **Feeling fearful**
- **Emotional symptoms**
- **Physical symptoms**
- **Relationship problems**
- **Substance abuse**
- **Behavioral adaptations**

Reactions to trauma are diverse and unique to the individual. The link from trauma to later life functioning is often not apparent.



Why It Helps to Talk About Trauma



Talking about trauma helps to:

- **Shift focus from “what’s wrong with you?” to “what happened to you?”**
- **Help understand behaviors**
- **Opens the door to share experiences**



Setting the Tone



Tips to establish a positive tone:

- **Identify a safe, comfortable and private environment**
- **Explain your role**
- **Explain why you're asking about trauma**
- **Take your time**
- **Acknowledge sharing personal information can be difficult**
- **Focus on strength and resilience**
- **Keep the client in the loop**
(what will happen to the information they give you?)



Conversation Tips



- **Don't pressure anyone to talk about trauma**
- **Be honest and use everyday terms**
- **Start with general questions**
- **Let them lead the conversation**
- **Talk about how they got through certain situations**
- **Highlight strengths**
- **Normalize the client's reactions**
- **Don't get overwhelmed or feel pressure to "fix" someone's trauma**
- **Offer to connect with a specialist to explore further if necessary**



After the Conversation



- **Thank them for sharing**
- **Communicate relevant information to team members**
- **Make a referral if appropriate**

Note: Just because someone has experienced trauma, it doesn't mean they need therapy. If the individual still seems upset by the trauma or has a hard time talking about it and dealing with it, he/she would benefit from a referral to a mental health professional who specializes in trauma.

- **Take care of yourself. Seek supervision if you are feeling overwhelmed**



“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.”



- Fred Rogers

Notes



Notes



Sources

Sources: Allegheny County DHS Trauma Think Tank; “Application of the CANS in Trauma Informed Service Planning” Training: Kisiel 2011; Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit, 2nd Edition, 2014; Hendricks, Allison, 2015; “Strategies and Innovations in using CANS – Trauma & FANS – Trauma in Practice”. Kisiel, St. Jean, Kiser, Connors, 2014; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, www.samhsa.gov; NCTSN.org, 2014; “Trauma-Informed Treatment Planning with the CANS: What is it, How to do it and Why it’s worth the Effort.” Fehrenbach, Kisiel, Maj, Ocampo. 2011.