

Psychological First Aid for Youth Experiencing Homelessness



NCTSN

The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network

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Collaborating Agencies



Angel's Flight



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Covenant
House
Opening Doors for Homeless Youth



The Way In

Understanding Youth Homelessness in the Context of Trauma

Psychological First Aid for Youth Experiencing Homelessness is designed to provide a framework and a model for intervention by direct care staff working in drop-in centers, emergency and transitional shelters, and group homes so they can better understand and address the needs of homeless youth who are often impacted by trauma.

Research suggests that most homeless youth have experienced multiple traumatic events. While a large number of youth had traumatic events before they left home, many are re-traumatized once they arrive on the street.

Common traumatic events include:

- Child physical and sexual abuse and neglect
- Witnessing violence at home between parents or caregivers
- Removal from home by child protective services
- Incapacitation of parents due to mental illness, substance abuse, or incarceration
- Witnessing community violence
- Experiencing violence in their own relationships
- Harassment or violence due to homelessness, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity
- Physical and sexual assault on the street
- Incarceration
- Engaging in survival sex or prostitution

For children and adolescents, trauma can interfere with normal development and the ability to form healthy relationships and, if untreated, may lead to lifelong problems including school and learning problems, depression, anxiety, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and chronic health problems.

Responses to trauma can include:

- Difficulties sleeping and/or eating
- Inability to concentrate or complete everyday tasks
- Feelings of inadequacy and guilt
- Preoccupation with their bodies
- Stomach aches, headaches, and other multiple health complaints
- Acting out or impulsive behaviors, including unsafe sex, multiple sexual partners, substance abuse, or illegal activities
- Bullying or intimidation of peers or staff
- Behaving as if they were younger than they actually are
- Impulsive and aggressive behaviors
- Heightened moodiness and irritability
- Pushing away caregivers

Some of these common responses to trauma can look like laziness, apathy, arrogance, or excessive anger. Line staff need to be mindful that attitudes and behaviors that look like non-compliance may be responses to trauma.

The Role of Direct Care Staff

Direct care staff are the heart of any homeless youth serving agency. Regardless of the title—youth worker, childcare worker, resident assistant, resident advocate, or case manager—direct care staff have the most day-to-day contact with youth in drop-in centers, emergency shelters, group homes, or transitional living programs.

These staff are the ones who:

- Wake youth up in the morning and put them to sleep at night;
- Maintain rules, provide structure, prepare meals, play sports, and/or lead groups;
- Help youth navigate the services that are available to them;
- Are often the first to know if a youth is in crisis, feeling depressed or suicidal, engaging in dangerous sexual behavior, taking unnecessary risks, or abusing drugs or alcohol;
- Are the first to hear about a new partner, celebrate a good grade in school, or congratulate a youth for on-going risk reduction or sobriety; and
- Are often viewed as safe targets for displaced anger and fear.

As staff work hard to connect these youth to scarce resources like housing, mental health, and substance abuse treatment, their developmental stage, life experience, and traumatic responses may interfere with their ability to engage in available services.

Direct Care Staff Play a Vital Role In Providing Trauma-Informed Services

Direct care staff are often the “first-to-know” and the main “go-to” persons for homeless youth. Because many homeless youth have experienced violence or other traumas, direct care staff need guidance to understand the affects of trauma and how to best provide helpful intervention.



1. Contact & Engagement

The first contact with a young person is critically important. Many homeless youth have been the target of hate, anger, or violence; many have been ignored and feel invisible. Many homeless youth will focus all of their attention on figuring out if your agency feels safe to them and they may not be able to listen to you fully. Many of the youth are in crisis when we first meet them and they often feel overwhelmed by the new environment.

To help youth feel safe, welcome, important, and worthy:

- Make the first contact warm, respectful, and non-threatening.
- Introduce yourself and describe your role at the agency.
- Allow time to learn about the young person, his/her name, and his/her needs and wants.
- Explain program rules clearly and in a matter-of-fact way (e.g., that weapons must be checked in or that pets cannot come inside) and that these rules apply to everyone.
- Explain why these rules are in place (e.g., to create a safe environment for everyone or because some people have pet allergies).
- Explain the limits of confidentiality so youth are clear about what information is private and what information will be shared and why.
- Explain the resources that are available to them (e.g., food, showers, groups, shelter) and be available for questions.
- Be prepared to repeat this introductory information to youth many times. As they feel safer, they may be able to hear more of what you have to offer.
- Be prepared for them to challenge you or the rules.
- Assess whether they have any immediate basic needs (e.g., water, bathroom, medical assistance).

Wrong Way:

Hi. What's your name? How old are you? Why are you homeless? Do you have a social worker or are you on probation? Please fill out these forms and return them to me.

Right Way:

Hi, it's nice to meet you. I'm Crystal. I'm a residential assistant here. What is your name? I help get people set up and answer their questions. Have you been to a shelter before? I'm glad you've come in. We provide breakfast, showers, and a safe place to stay.

2. Safety & Comfort

Many homeless youth come to our agencies to find respite from the street. The more successful we are in helping them feel safe and comfortable, the more likely they are to stay in the program and fully access available services.

- Safety can mean different things to different people. Since many homeless youth come from racial or sexual (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender) minorities, a safe environment is one where people are treated with respect and derogatory language is not accepted.
- Recognize that some youth are hyper-alert and vigilant. These skills have allowed them to survive on the street. It may be difficult for these young people to relax, even in the most comfortable environment. However, providing a consistent and supportive environment, where youth know what to expect, can help them become more at ease.
- Youth may be reminded of traumatic events while they are in your agency. Sounds, smells, or interactions with peers and staff can serve as reminders and can often result in acting-out behavior or withdrawing from relationships and/or the environment. When you notice a significant and rapid change in a young person's behavior, help the young person identify and explore what is going on.
- Give youth the opportunity to make choices, whenever reasonable, about how they participate in your program and how much they need to disclose to you about themselves and past experiences. Providing choices can help them feel in control.
- Monitor your own feelings of safety and security. If you are feeling unsafe, it is likely that the youth may feel out of control or unsafe as well. Talk to your supervisor if you feel that there are steps the service site can take to make everyone feel safer.

If you sense that a youth is uncomfortable, try to understand why he/she is feeling this way. Youth may not want to disclose information that they feel vulnerable about. Take your cues from him/her; express interest without pushing him/her to talk. Most youth feel better if we show that we care about what is going on with them by asking them directly in a respectful manner.

What might prevent youth from feeling safe/comfortable at your agency?

How might you and your agency provide emotional and physical safety for youth?

If you feel unsafe, what steps can you take? What are you supposed to do?

3. Calm & Orient

Youth experiencing homelessness can appear anxious, agitated, or upset. These behaviors and feelings can be common reactions to changes in their environment and may be an indication of substance use, mental health issues, or traumatic experiences. Regardless of why a youth behaves in such a manner, you will want to calm and orient him/her as part of creating a safe environment.

If a young person appears agitated, or stressed, you can help calm and orient him/her by:

- **Enlisting help from friends.** Friends can provide a sense of familiarity and social support. Be aware that some youth are socially isolated and do not have any friends or peers that they trust.
- **Inviting the youth to go to a quiet place to sit or talk.** Make sure that the space is not isolated but respect a young person's privacy and give him/her a few moments to become oriented and calm before asking any questions. Some youth may prefer to go outside or take a walk. Keep in mind that intense emotions may come and go in waves.
- **Sharing your concerns and offering help.** Calmly tell the youth your concerns and say that you are here to help. If he/she doesn't want help in that moment, say that you will check back later. Always remember to follow up if you make a commitment to do so. It is often hard to figure out if a young person wants to be alone or if he/she wants to talk.
- **Remaining calm, quiet, and present.** Naturally, staff can get angry, upset, nervous, or frustrated when dealing with someone who is agitated, but it is important that you stay calm. When a young person is agitated or excited, don't try to engage him/her. Let the person know that you are close by if he/she needs you.

Some youth may arrive at your agency disoriented or uncommunicative for any number of reasons. If so, enlist the assistance of a supervisor and/or a clinician as soon as possible. It is best to move the young person to a quiet and supervised space and to speak in a calm and reassuring tone of voice while you are waiting for further consultation.

Wrong way:

Listen, Jake. If you don't start calming down I'm going to call security. You don't have to stay here, you know. You'll either watch your language or you can leave.

Right Way:

[Pause. Be aware of your words and respond as calmly as possible. Make sure that you are not in a confrontational pose (i.e., with your arms crossed, fingers pointed, or facing directly at the person.)] Jake, you seem really upset right now. How can I help?

4. Information Gathering

Part of engaging youth is gathering information about their immediate needs and helping them to address these concerns.

- Let each young person know that you are asking questions so that you can figure out how to help, but that he/she is free not to answer a question for any reason.
- Some young people just want a safe place to be for the moment and are not interested in sharing any information with you. This can frustrate staff wanting to help. Over time, as a young person feels safer at the agency or more connected to staff, he/she may disclose information and accept services or referrals.
- Other youth may tell you his/her life story in the first contact, making it hard to prioritize his/her needs and concerns. Direct care staff can play an important role in helping youth figure out what he/she wants right now.
- Some youth regret telling staff too much about his/her history. He/she may end up feeling ashamed and embarrassed about what was shared and will not return to the agency. If you are concerned that a young person is sharing too much, gently help him/her slow down. Check in with the young person and ask him/her how he/she is doing. Mention that sharing a lot of information may feel overwhelming. You can also slow the pace by listening to the youth's story without asking questions or by stating that you want to make sure there is time to get to his/her current concerns.
- The responsibility of the staff person is to listen actively (every so often, sum up what was said and ask if you have it right), carefully, receptively, and non-judgmentally.
- Youth may disclose to a direct care staff member that he/she is thinking about hurting him/herself or somebody else. Even if the staff member can't tell if this was said seriously or as a joke, he/she must take it seriously. In most agencies, direct care staff have access to clinical staff to help figure out the next steps. All staff should know the agency policies on how to handle these situations.

What questions might you ask to help youth identify his/her most immediate needs?

How are staff trained to respond to youth who threaten to harm themselves or others?

If a young person refuses to share any details about him/herself, can you still help him/her? Is there any information that you have to collect (age, etc.) before initiating services?

5. Practical Assistance

Based on the information that has been gathered, reflect on the needs the young person has identified and prioritized, and the available services. Homeless youth may have difficulty asking for help or being clear about what help they want from you or your agency. They may be unaware of the resources available to them or may feel powerless to take steps toward meeting their needs.

The direct staff can do the following to help youth with this process.

- **Identifying Needs:** Work with the young person to create a list of the needs he/she has already identified through the initial information gathering. Make sure to ask about basic needs, such as food, clothing, safety, and shelter. Check with him/her often to make sure that the list is accurate and complete.
- **Prioritizing Needs:** You may want to help connect him/her to a case manager to prioritize these needs. Often youth express needs that they are not yet ready or willing to address. For example, a young woman may acknowledge that she is feeling sad or depressed, but not have any desire to receive counseling. The case manager can help her identify which needs are immediate and which may be part of a longer term case plan.
- **Creating an Action Plan for Today:** Work with the youth to create an action plan for those items that he/she can complete today. List the steps to take to resolve today's issue. Share responsibilities listed in the action plan—allocate some tasks to you and some to the young person. How much a youth can do independently will depend on the individual. Make sure that you follow through on your tasks, so that you build trust. Begin with a simple short list of tasks that the youth can accomplish easily, rather than a long list that may feel overwhelming.

Wrong way:

One of our requirements is that we make a case management plan; so let's sit down and get started. I know you need a place to live, a job, and your GED.

Right way:

You have mentioned lots of things you want to change about your life, like getting housing, finding a job, getting a GED. Where would you like to start?

6. Connect with Social Supports

Youth who have a positive social support system are better able to tolerate the stresses of living on the street. While many youth experiencing homelessness have limited access to family members who can help them, others have extensive networks of friends and acquaintances that help meet their needs for emotional and practical support. Part of the role of agencies working with homeless youth is to expand youths' ability to develop or enhance their positive social support system.

Direct care staff can help disconnected youth engage in pro-social, positive activities at the agency or in the community and increase their social support:

- **Peer Support.** Identifying appropriate group activities in your agency or in your community, such as educational, recreational, and support groups. Try to find groups or activities that match the interests of the young person.
- **Staff Support.** Be a source of support yourself. When youth develop a positive and appropriate relationship with a staff member, they learn skills to form more positive and appropriate relationships with their peers and others. Since you may be the primary source of support, it is critical to understand agency rules about boundaries and to communicate these boundaries clearly to the youth. Maintaining appropriate boundaries at all times not only protects you, but protects youth by modeling appropriate relationships.
- **Family/Community Support.** Even though homeless youth may not be living with their families, many continue to have contact with parents, aunts or uncles, cousins, or even with old friends and teachers. Explore with youth whether they have family members or friends on whom they can rely for positive support. Look for ways to reconnect youth with these positive influences.

Social support can help youth tolerate the stress of the streets.

Direct care staff can engage homeless youth in pro-social, positive activities at the agency or in the community and increase their social supports.



7. Information on Coping

Many homeless youth have been exposed to multiple traumas, including physical assaults, sexual assaults, hate crimes, and witnessing violence. It can be beneficial to assure youth that their stress reactions to such victimization are understandable and to help them find positive ways of coping.

Be aware that it is common for youth to react to stress and trauma in these ways:

- Having trouble paying attention, being more forgetful, or feeling spacey
- Feeling jumpy, nervous, or concerned about the changes in their bodies and/or thoughts
- Not being able to forget about a traumatic experience (***intrusive reactions***), such as dreaming about a traumatic or stressful event, or being reminded about the event by sights, smells, or other triggers
- Trying not to think about, talk about, or remember the traumatic event (***avoidance reactions***), including not wanting to go anywhere or do anything that reminds the youth of the traumatic event, even to the point of beginning to feel detached and withdrawn from their friends
- Feeling that the danger is still present, including feeling that you always have to be on the lookout for danger, being startled easily, having strong emotions, sleep problems, and difficulty concentrating (***physical reactions***)

Depending on the life experiences of the young person, he/she may be aware of or concerned about such changes. If he/she asks you about them, tell the youth that these responses are understandable and expected in youth who have had stressful lives.

Many homeless youth have lived with trauma for so long, that these reactions are a common part of their every day existence and not something that they are worried or concerned about. For those who are struggling with their past, you can refer them to a mental health professional for more help in healing from the trauma. It can be useful for staff to educate youth about the range of responses to traumatic stress, while also encouraging the youth to seek support to recover from these experiences.

Help youth find ways to positively cope with these common reactions, such as:

- Talking to friends or trusted adults
- Engaging in activities they like (sports, reading, drawing, listening to music)
- Participating in support groups or counseling
- Writing in a journal or participating in creative art activities

Help youth explore how they have been coping so far. They may have been using drugs or alcohol, engaging in risky behavior, or withdrawing from their friends. These are coping strategies that help youth feel better in the moment but often cause more problems. Youth may also have positive ways of coping. If so, highlight these skills to help them understand their full capacity to manage emotions.

If you or the young person is concerned about the degree to which past trauma is disrupting the young person's life, it is important to refer the young person to a mental health professional that can conduct further assessment and create a support plan.

8. Link with Collaborative Services

Often youth will express a need that we cannot meet at our agency. In those instances, we need to link them with local agencies that can address these needs.

When making referrals:

- Check that the agency is a youth-friendly place that will welcome youth and will understand how young people use services.
- Prepare youth for the experience of using services at the agency, especially when it is not youth-friendly. For example, if they know that they will be turned away if they are more than 10 minutes late or if they are prepared for a rude receptionist, they are more likely to be successful.
- Accompany young people to an appointment (assuming that they approve) when possible. Find out if your agency has a staff release policy to enable you to do so.
- Write down the referral information, including time and date of appointment, and the phone number and address of the agency. Ask if the youth needs help on how to get to the appointment (e.g., needs directions, transportation).

Wrong Way:

OK, Maria, you're all set. Here is a piece of paper with the address and phone number of the agency that offers the GED preparation course. You'll need to call and find out when the class is and what time it is offered.

Right Way:

Maria, this agency provides the GED preparation course that we have been talking about. However, there are a couple of things you need to know before going. Classes are every Wednesday at 3 PM; I know you didn't want a morning class. Attendance at every class is really important there. If you can't make a class for any reason, you have to call in advance to let them know. If you ever need help, let me know. I've told the group leader about you and she is really excited to meet you. She sounds great.

9. Patience

Working with youth experiencing homelessness can be incredibly rewarding and supremely challenging. Be patient with yourself and with the youth you serve.

The skills youth develop to survive on the streets often are not appropriate in a drop-in center, shelter, or transitional living program environment. In order to survive on the streets and get what they need, youth may exaggerate or minimize their history or situation; tell a service provider what they think the service provider wants to hear; lie; act aggressively; or take things that don't belong to them. Many youth find it difficult to let go of these survival skills, even when they are beginning to feel more safe and secure. Due to all of our hard work trying to help youth, staff

can feel offended when a young person treats them with disrespect; feel personally responsible when a young person is unable to engage in the services we worked so hard to get for him/her; and feel like a failure when we are unable to see the results of our hard work.

- **Recognize and try to accept that change happens very slowly for these young people. We may never see the outcomes of our efforts.**
- **Trust that our efforts to engage with youth, connect them with services, and provide a safe environment make a difference in the lives of these young people. Being safe for one day or one evening may be more than what they have experienced in years.**

10. Manage Personal & Professional Stress

Staff who work directly with highly traumatized youth are vulnerable to high levels of work stress and burnout. **Secondary traumatic stress**, also called compassion fatigue or indirect trauma, is a type of occupational stress that can come from working with large numbers of traumatized individuals and hearing their stories of abuse, loss, abandonment, and victimization.

All staff need to take care of themselves to prevent work stress and burnout. While everyone has their own way of taking care of themselves, effective ways include:

- Exercising
- Engaging in a hobby
- Creating a healthy consistent structure and pattern in your own life

- Knowing your limits
- Improving your understanding of trauma and how it affects youth
- Taking a time-out in a difficult situation
- Seeking support from co-workers, friends, and family
- Seeking professional counseling when appropriate
- Taking vacations when you can

Your agency may also offer services to help staff cope with stress at work. This can include vacation days, short-term counseling through employee assistance programs (EAPs), and clinical supervision. Taking advantage of these services when they are available can minimize stress and increase longevity in the field.



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