Trauma-Informed Sensory Positive Toolkit for Disaster Settings

Families, Caregivers, and Direct Support Professionals

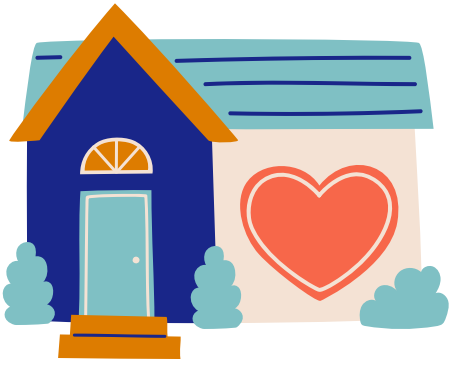
This trauma-informed sensory positive toolkit was developed in partnership with the PA Department of Human Services for the purpose of informing self-advocates, shelter staff/volunteers, families, caregivers, and Direct Support Professionals (DSP) on how to best support persons with sensory needs, including individuals with Intellectual Disabilities and/or Autism in a disaster shelter setting.

This document is part of a collection of resource guides focused on the needs specific to a disaster shelter. To access additional autism-related resources, visit the AID in PA website: aidinpa.org. There are also additional toolkits for Self-Advocates and Shelter Staff, and Volunteers.

Safety Plan

Safety Plans are ways to help individuals stay safe and know where to get help in the event of an emergency. Below is an example of information that can be included in a safety plan. A safety plan should be individualized to the needs of the person, contain images and other visuals, be kept somewhere easy to find, and be reviewed frequently.

A safety plan for someone with an intellectual disability and/or autism may look different in some ways. It may include information about things like communication preferences, sensory needs, and other supports to help someone feel comfortable.



It is recommended that the completed safety plan be posted somewhere the individual can see and access easily. This plan should be constructed with the person and updated as needed. It may be helpful to upload a version of the safety plan to a cell phone or tablet.

Remember to discuss the plan periodically and what it contains so that if it is needed, the person feels comfortable and safe using it.

The ASERT Collaborative is funded by the Office of Developmental Programs, PA Department of Human Services

Safety Plan (Adult/Child)

INDIVIDUAL INFORMATION

My/Their Nickname: _____

Things that help me/them to feel calm (pets, colors, objects, interests):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Things that make me/them uncomfortable, afraid, and/or upset (loud noises, crowded spaces, animals, routine disruptions):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Signs that I/they might be uncomfortable or in a bad mood (pacing, crying, disengaging, angry):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Places I/they can go in this setting where they can feel safe and calm:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

People I/they like to talk to:

1. _____ Phone number: _____
2. _____ Phone number: _____
3. _____ Phone number: _____

NEEDS

****Miscommunication can lead to unnecessary stress and frustration. It is important to understand a person's individual communication needs.****

How do I/they communicate with others? How do I/they receive information from others? (ASL, verbal language, PECS, tactile objects/cues, interpreter):

Things I/they commonly say or do and what they mean (I hold out a cup when I want a drink, I sign "I like you" when I feel safe):

Any other communication needs?:

TOP THINGS TO KNOW

My/their favorite things (people, foods, types of clothing, TV/movies, music, hobbies, high-interest topics, etc):

How to introduce me/them to new people/items/locations/transitions/changes in schedule, etc.?

IMPORTANT CONTACTS

Important Family/Friends Contact Information:

Supports Contact Information (Coordinator, Case Manager, Direct Support provider, educator, unpaid supports):

MEDICAL INFORMATION

Primary Care Doctor Contact Information:

Psychiatrist/Specialist Contact Information:

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ASSIST Device Manual

While in the shelter, autistic people will experience a wide variety of different sensory inputs. It's helpful to consider some of these areas of potential sensory input and determine helpful strategies to assist the person with addressing difficulties that may arise. Environments can easily become overwhelming and can lead to aggressive behavior. Below are possible sensory experiences that may be presented while in a shelter. Also included are suggestions that may help address these sensory experiences based on the seven senses.

Sight

- An autistic person may see different patterns on walls, clothing, and furniture that they aren't used to. That can be distracting and disorienting.
- An autistic person may need extra time to acclimate to changes in light intensity (turning lights on/off, natural light, artificial light).
- You may want to ask to adjust the room lighting to be darker or dim the lighting.
- If available, you may want to ask to use shades to dim overhead fluorescent lighting.
- Light glare from flooring, TVs, digital screens, and other reflective surfaces could be a challenge.
- They may be asked to fill out paperwork. This can be a stressful task due to the small font and dense text. Suggest a movement break or check for an option with larger and more concise text.

Suggestions:

- Use a phone to show pictures and create a sequence of steps for what the individual should expect to happen.
- Use sunglasses to alleviate brightness.
- Lava lamps and slow-moving videos or projections can reduce stress.

Smell

- Advise others to wear odor-neutral deodorant and avoid strong-smelling lotions and perfumes.
- Develop a social story about potential experiences prior to entering a shelter or crowded space.
- Is it possible to move into a room or area further away from eating spaces like cafeterias?
- Ask about a shelter room/space with a window that can be opened/closed as needed.
- The scent of alcohol wipes, disinfecting sprays, bleach, or hand sanitizer could be overwhelming. Give a warning before cleaning a room/space, or post a sign on the door outside of the room to indicate when it was cleaned.
- Be mindful of trash areas with some scented garbage bags that are overly scented/ fragranced.

Suggestions:

- Suggest the individual have access to essential oils or other pleasant-smelling items (Also have an item to put the scent on, including cotton balls, perfume strips, or other items).
- Record the individual's preferred calming smells and any overwhelming scents/smells.
- Determine if unscented soap and unscented garbage/trash bags are available.
- Offer a variety of scented hand sanitizers.

Sound/Auditory

- Competing sounds can be an issue (i.e., multiple radios/songs on, people talking, etc.)
- There may be low-intensity or common sounds that can be frustrating (i.e., people crunching food, sniffling, whistling, computer sounds, fluorescent light buzzing).
- You may want to give the individual time to acclimate to sounds by separating with distance or a door/another space first.
- Suggest fidget toys (stress ball, putty, etc.) or having a preferred object for comfort.
- Tell those helping in the shelter what is comforting and would help the person relax.
- Tell staff what words or visuals can help explain that sounds are "safe" or "okay."

Suggestions:

- Noise-cancelling headphones (short-term strategy, long-term use can increase sound sensitivity).
- Fidget toys (stress ball, putty, etc.) or have a preferred object for comfort.
- Have visual supports or index cards with simple images available to explain directions.
- You may need to provide verbal support. Remember to speak slowly and give time for a response to questions. You may have to repeat yourself.
- No more than one person should be talking at a time.
- Suggest calming music.

Taste

- Areas with a variety of foods and scents could be overwhelming. Consider offering a spot away from strong smells.
- Identify a person's typical mealtimes. Changes to that routine can be challenging or upsetting.
- Have snacks in their room in case public eating areas are overwhelming.
- If in a shelter, consider the available foods and what an individual will be able to eat and drink on a daily basis due to sensitivities.
- Consider having toothpaste options, as some of the mint-based flavors can be too strong (i.e., sweet-based flavors).
- Remind staff to allow for more time during meals or breaks as the individual adjusts to the new environment.

Suggestions:

- Have a variety of snacks available (i.e., bread-based, starchy, or salty food).
- Be aware of the individual's preferred/non-preferred foods and scents.
- Be aware of the individual's normal meal/snack time and routine.
- Have cup and straw options available.

Touch

- There may be situations in which the person is inadvertently touched in crowded spaces (bumping into or brushing up against people). This can cause physical pain and distress.
- Individuals may have different preferences for the texture of foods and may express dissatisfaction with food that is unrelated to taste and due to texture.
- Individuals may react strongly to being touched on or near cuts, bruises, or injuries, or they may seem not to notice such injuries.
- Various textures (clothing and bedding fabric, medical gloves, furniture) may cause discomfort/pain and lead to avoiding/pulling away from textures.

Suggestions:

- Provide options for fidget toys with different textures, such as rubbery, stretchy, smooth, plastic, beaded, etc.
- Visual cues during dressing, such as a mirror, can help visualize touch sensation.

Proprioception: Informs movement and determines the amount of force needed.

- Remind others in the shelter to provide an arm's length distance of personal space.
- Ask about heavy work options between activities or tasks (options can include helping to set up chairs or carrying a heavy item).
- Provide a weighted blanket or another weighted item to place on the lap.
- Make sure to keep the space clear of any fall/trip hazards.
- Encourage movement breaks (examples: wall push-ups, jumping activities, or yoga) if doing a task that requires sitting for an extended period.

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Suggestions:

- Have a weighted blanket, lap pad, or wrist/ankle weights.
- Stretch bands (i.e., can be used as fidgets to pull with hands in opposition or can be placed around chair legs to push against, can wrap around door handle for pulling/stretches, etc.)
- Box with sand for increasing weight against hand muscles.
- Fidget toys or stress balls.
- Soft lead 2B pencils (if the individual is writing too hard and creating holes in the paper).
- HB pencil (if the individual is writing too lightly and the handwriting is illegible).

Vestibular: Sense of movement and where the body is in space. Used for balance.

- Inform staff the person may need space for movements such as jumping and spinning because they require movement to stay calm or to be alert.
- Steps or uneven ground may be challenging to navigate and cause imbalance.
- Request seating options that provide support/stability or opportunities for movement, like a rocking chair or cushion.
- If a shelter has bunk beds, consider the option of the bottom bunk to allow the person to be closer to the ground if they have a fear of gravity.
- Make sure to have railings or have someone walk with them when going up or downstairs to assist with balance.
- Inform shelter staff about their preference for using stairs, elevators, or escalators.

Suggestions:

- Chairs or large exercise balls that rock can be relaxing and calming for hyporeactivity to movement. Make sure an individual can maintain his or her balance (some individuals also prefer chairs that spin).
- Provide stable four-legged seating with back support and limited movement for hypersensitivity.
- Provide a heavy blanket or bean bag chair to provide touch and pressure input to an individual's body to help calm an overreaction to movement.
- Provide opportunities to walk around or do light exercises to help support attention and focus.
- Play preferred music to help soothe and calm.

Meltdowns

Meltdowns of family members may occur as a result of individuals being outside of their typical routines and feeling confined inside the same space. Use this resource as a guide to identify what a meltdown looks like, how it can be avoided, and how you should and should not respond if a meltdown occurs.

What is a Meltdown?

- A temporary loss of control of his or her actions and behaviors. This can happen when a person is completely overwhelmed.
- Sometimes this can look like screaming, crying, kicking, lashing out, biting, engaging in self-injury, or running away.
- This is not the same thing as misbehaving or having a temper tantrum.

How to Avoid Meltdowns:

- Try and identify triggers or the target reason as to why the person is becoming overwhelmed. It would be helpful to make a note of particular times, places, or activities that are likely to bring on stress. While in a calm state, ask the person who has a history of meltdowns the following questions:
  - Do you know ahead of time when you are close to experiencing a meltdown?
  - When a meltdown is beginning, do you have any ideas as to how I can best support you?
  - Are there signs of having a meltdown that I can look out for?
  - Can we come up with a signal so that you can let me know when you are feeling overwhelmed?
- Then, do your best to minimize those known triggers, such as overwhelming environments and changes in routine. However, totally avoiding triggers is not suggested, as that will prevent the person from learning how to problem-solve in these situations.
- Prepare for the meltdown with the individual ahead of time. You can try reminding them of one or two simple strategies to try, that have typically worked for them in the past.

How to Respond When Meltdowns Occur:

- Try to redirect attention ahead of time if you notice any warning signs or triggers. Are you able to distract them with a calming activity such as a preferred hobby or game, a fidget toy, listening to calming music, or taking deep breaths?
- Reduce environmental noises by turning off music/TV, turning off overhead lights, and clearing out other people.
- Give them space and time.
- Allow space for the individual to pace, jump, rock, or be alone.

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How NOT to Respond when Meltdowns Occur:

- Do not ask a lot of questions.
- Do not ask how they are feeling or why they are feeling this way. But you can help them understand by acknowledging their stress by saying, "I can see that you are upset."
- Do not tell the person they need to "calm down," "relax," or "just breathe." Even typically developing individuals can rarely calm down on command. Such statements can frustrate the individual, resulting in escalating the situation even further. Instead, try to model calming strategies, such as "Let's breathe together."
- Do not demand eye contact during a meltdown. Do not try to talk them out of a repetitive behavior/routine. Sometimes, familiar rituals can serve a calming purpose or restore a sense of self-control.
- Avoid getting into a debate.
- Avoid placing additional demands or insisting on completing difficult tasks during clear signs of increased stress.
- Be careful about allowing meltdowns to lead to getting out of activities that they do not prefer. The behavior can become a learned response. Instead, try to reintroduce the task at a later time, when supports are in place

Crisis Intervention and De-Escalation

In your direct support to adults with Autism, it is possible that you will encounter moments of crisis. A crisis can be triggered by environmental, social, and communication stressors, changes in schedules or routines, task anxiety, and other factors.

A crisis looks different for every individual, but in each situation, there will be a period of escalation before the crisis and then a de-escalation. Below you'll find a helpful strategy for navigating how you can recognize and respond to an individual you're supporting when he or she is escalating, in crisis, or de-escalating.

Be Able to Self-Identify: It is important to know yourself and how you tend to react when you see an individual escalating or in crisis. Identify some of the feelings you may have when you see an individual escalating:

- You may feel anxious.
- You may feel frustrated.
- You may feel responsible for the behavior.
- You may feel helpless.

Now that you've identified your potential feelings, try to put any reactions or judgments aside. You can process these feelings with a supervisor or colleague at a later time.

Intervention: First, it is important to ensure an individual's safety as well as your own when an individual is escalating, in crisis, and de-escalating. If it is appropriate, and if you can, identify and remove the triggers causing the crisis.

- Be familiar with an individual's Crisis Intervention Plan and utilize your own crisis intervention training when you recognize that a person is escalating or in crisis. Talk to the person you support and learn about his or her triggers. You may not know what they consider a crisis, and you need to know what a "crisis" looks like to that person.
- Be clear and concise with your language if you are speaking to the individual during the escalation, crisis, or de-escalation.
- Be aware of your voice tone and volume if and when you are speaking to the individual.
- Be aware of your body language around the person.
- If appropriate, ask questions to determine what the person needs you to do to help them through the crisis. It is good to determine where the person would like you to be, whether or not you should speak, and if there is anything you can do to assist them.
- Be able to recognize when it is appropriate to introduce coping strategies during the escalation, crisis, and de-escalation. Ask for help when needed through the use of supervisors, the individual's natural supports, and crisis intervention services.

What You Can Do Now!

- A good first step in crisis prevention is to identify someone's potential triggers.
- You can do this by asking the person, their family members, colleagues, or others who know them well. Then plan accordingly.
- Seek assistance from your supervisor and colleagues whenever you observe increasing behavior challenges in someone you're supporting.

Trauma Information

If someone you are supporting is staying in a shelter, it's likely because they've gone through a traumatic experience. Also, having to stay in a shelter can be traumatic. Understanding what trauma is and how to cope is important to help you support someone to get through the experience in the best way possible. Remember, you can connect with the disaster mental health staff members on site for assistance in supporting someone through traumatic events.

Basics of Trauma

- Trauma is an event that occurs and may affect people in different, often negative ways. These experiences can make someone feel entirely helpless. Trauma may happen from serious injuries, death, violence, or witnessing a disturbing event.
- Trauma can have an impact on someone's life in different areas. This can include physical and mental health, emotions, relationships with others, and/or behavior. They may have trouble eating, sleeping, or doing their usual daily activities.

Effects of Trauma

- Symptoms may begin during the event. This means they may have immediate impacts from going through a traumatic event.
- Sometimes it takes longer for people to be impacted by trauma. They may experience symptoms days, weeks, or months after the event happens.
- Other times, it is a combination of these two. People are immediately affected as the event happens, and also can continue to affect people for days, weeks, or months after.
- Trauma can affect people after the event because specific people, places, and situations can be reminders of it. Reliving the trauma through memories is also common.

Resilience

Resilience means staying calm and in control when faced with a challenge. It can help us understand trauma and get through tough times in healthy ways. Helping those you are supporting to increase their resilience can help them cope with stressful situations like being in a shelter. Below is information about resilience skills that can be used to help the individual cope with the stress of being in a shelter and build their resilience.

Tracking: What is happening in the mind and body? Focus on thoughts and sensations – things they can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Use tracking when they feel stressed (increased heart rate, negative thoughts, clenching fists, etc). When using tracking to notice these sensations, also use coping skills to help with the stress. Use tracking to notice pleasant thoughts and feelings, too. Focus on those good things to help cope and increase resilience.

Resourcing: Use different resources to help them feel better. Utilize things that are pleasant or make them happy like music, pictures, people, objects, and thoughts, like happy memories. If they're feeling stressed, focus on a favorite thing (in real life or imagination) and pay attention to the details. If their favorite thing is the beach, have them close their eyes and imagine the sound of the waves, the sun on their face, the feeling of the sand, the breeze across their skin, and the smell of salty air. How do those things make them feel? Focus on what makes them happy.

Grounding: Focus on where their body is touching different surfaces. They can use grounding if they're standing, sitting, or lying down. Do they feel the pull of gravity on their body? Use tracking, and focus on the things that feel good or pleasant.

Gesturing: Certain gestures can make people feel happy or calm. When people are excited, they sometimes jump up and down or throw their hands in the air. If they have movements they do when they're calm or happy, do those same movements when they're feeling stressed. This can help the brain shift from being stressed to calm and happy. When gesturing, pay attention to different thoughts and feelings in the body and focus on what feels good.

Shift and Stay: If they're having negative thoughts, try and shift their mind away from them. Start to focus on positive or neutral thoughts. You can use the other skills above to help shift to more positive things (like memories of a favorite place, favorite music, etc). Keep their mind focused on these new thoughts by thinking about as many details as possible and staying focused on these positive thoughts.

To learn more about these skills and for help practicing them, you can download and use the iChill App for free.

- This app explains resiliency and resilience skills in depth. Users can record where they are in their Resilience or "OK" Zone as well as create a list of their resources with pictures to help them feel better.
- This is a free app to download on your phone or available to access online at www.ichillapp.com.