# Trauma-Informed Sensory Positive Toolkit for Disaster Settings

*Self-Advocates*

*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.

## What to Expect in a Shelter

Most people have never had to stay in a shelter before, so it can be a new and scary experience. The information below provides a basic explanation of what a shelter is, why people need to go to shelters, and what to expect when you're there.

### What is a shelter?

- A shelter is a place that you can go to during natural disasters or conflicts, like when something happens to your home. The purpose is to provide personal safety, protection from the weather, and disease prevention. A typical stay is for 12-72 hours (about 3 days), but can be longer when needed.
- Shelters provide basic needs such as a safe space to get away from the emergency, restroom facilities, water, food, diapers, hygiene products like toothbrushes and soap, and medical assistance when necessary.

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## Why would a person need to go to a shelter?

A person would go to a shelter to seek safety from multiple different events, such as natural disasters (hurricanes, wildfires, floods, tornadoes, etc.), house fires, homelessness, and abuse.

## What is it like in a shelter?

- Shelters are there to provide the basic safety of a warm place to eat and sleep. They cannot offer the same types of luxuries or conveniences as an actual house or hotel.
- Shelters can be used in emergency situations and are placed in whatever large buildings are available in the affected area. They are typically in warehouses, office buildings, schools, church halls, tents, etc.
- They can often be crowded, noisy, boring, short-staffed, and with very little privacy. Rooms may be filled with people, cots to sleep on, personal items, and sometimes separate rooms for pets. This all depends on the area you're in, the conflict/crisis affecting you, and the number of other people affected by it.
- It's important to remember that you are safe and that being in a shelter is only temporary!

## What are the roles of the shelter staff?

- The staff in shelters is usually made up of county employees or volunteers trained by the Office of Emergency Management.
- Staff help maintain a safe and clean environment while providing food and any medical and emotional support when necessary. They maintain shelter security by keeping the peace, alerting shelter residents of any rules/policies/procedures, and providing conflict resolution.

## What happens when I leave the shelter?

- Once it is safe to leave a shelter, you may be able to return home, depending on the type of crisis that occurred.
- If your house is unlivable, you may be told to seek another shelter or to stay with friends and family.


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## Identifying and Communicating Needs

If you are in an Emergency Shelter, it's important that you are able to identify and communicate what your needs are to the staff. The following sections are areas to consider when identifying your own needs. Not all these areas may apply to you.

- Nickname, preferred name, preferred pronouns.
- How do you prefer to communicate? Are there challenges you have with communication? This may include phrases or words you may use that staff may not know or understand.
- Favorite things like people, foods, clothing, TV/movies, music, hobbies, etc.
- Things you don't like (certain people, being touched, weather, sounds, words/phrases, babies, colors, clothing, etc.)
- Things you are afraid of or that make you anxious.
- Things that help you calm down (songs, books, movies, items, places to go to calm down, etc.).
- How you handle changes, new people/places/things.
- Contact information for any family, friends, or support staff.
- Do you have any sensory sensitivities or issues?

The next sections will take you through specific topics such as sensory needs, mental health, physical health, and communication that may be impacted by being in a shelter. Review these sections for information that may help you identify specific needs you may have so you can get the right support from shelter staff.


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## Sensory Needs

Below are the different senses with some examples of things to consider and possible accommodations to help.

**Sight:** *Perception of objects and people in the environment.*

- If you need extra time to acclimate to changes in light intensity (turning lights on/off, natural light to artificial light):
  - Request to have the room lighting adjusted to be darker or to dim the lighting.
- If you need to fill out paperwork, there may be a lot of text with small fonts:
  - You can request breaks when completing paperwork or the option to fill out the paperwork with larger and simpler text.

**Sound:** *Perception of noises in the environment.*

- If competing sounds are an issue (i.e., multiple radios/songs on, people talking, etc.):
  - Ask for a quiet place to go when talking about important things, and make sure no more than one person is talking at a time.
  - You could also ask to use visual supports or index cards with simple images to explain directions, if that is better than directions being told to you.
- If low-intensity or common sounds are frustrating (i.e., people crunching food, sniffling, whistling, computer sounds, fluorescent light buzzing):
  - Ask for noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs.
  - Give time to acclimate to sounds first by separating with distance or a door/another space first.
  - Ask if there is a quiet place to go if the shelter gets too loud.

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

- If the space feels crowded or there are many people around:
  - Ask people to provide an arm's length distance of personal space.
  - Ask for a weighted blanket.
  - Take movement breaks (examples: wall push-ups, jumping activities, or yoga) if you are doing a task that requires sitting for a long time.


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**Touch:** *Detection of something touching the skin.*

- If the space is crowded and others are bumping into you or brushing up against you, and that causes distress:
  - Ask for a separate space away from others.
  - Ask for fidget toys or weighted blankets (if they are helpful for you).
- If you have specific preferences for the texture of foods, bedding, or clothing:
  - Alert staff to your preferences and request different options, if available.
- If you are sensitive to being touched when getting first aid for cuts, bruises, or injuries, or do not like the sensation of certain things (latex gloves):
  - Alert staff to your sensitivities and what works best for you.
  - Ask for fidget toys (if helpful for you).
  - Request visual or verbal explanations of what aid is being provided before the staff touches to provide care.

**Taste:** *Ability to taste, including sweet, sour, salty, and bitter.*

- If you are overwhelmed by a variety of foods and scents:
  - Ask to eat in a spot further away from strongly scented foods and drinks.
  - Ask to keep snacks in your room (if you have a private room) to be able to eat away from others.
- If you prefer to stick with a set routine for mealtimes/snacks or have preferred cups/utensils:
  - Let the staff know your typical routine and preferences, including cups, straws, plates, or utensils that you prefer.
- If you have sensitive tastes:
  - Ask for different flavors of toothpaste.
  - Let the staff know your food/drink preferences.

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

- If you engage in stimming behaviors to self-regulate or calm yourself:
  - Ask for space to allow movements such as jumping and spinning.
- If you have trouble with steps or uneven ground:
  - Ask to use an elevator, ramp, or escalator if available.
  - Ask for help walking on uneven ground.
- If the shelter has bunk beds:
  - Request a lower bunk.


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**Smell:** *Detection of scents or odors, closely tied to taste.*

- If you have sensitivities to certain smells or odors:
  - Ask for neutral personal care items (deodorant, lotion, etc.).

- If you have smells/scents that are calming to you, let staff know so they can try to provide those.
- Ask to have a room away from eating spaces.
- Ask staff to let you know before they use alcohol wipes, disinfecting sprays, bleach, or other cleaning supplies so you can leave the area if overwhelmed by the smells.

## Mental/Behavioral Health Needs

If you have mental or behavioral health needs, it is important to communicate that to the shelter staff so they can help provide any additional support you need or connect you with services while you are in the shelter. Additionally, having to go to an emergency shelter can be a stressful time for anyone. Even if you did not have mental or behavioral health concerns before, living in a shelter, even for a short period of time, may be stressful for you, and you may benefit from some of these supports. Below are some common mental health diagnoses that you may want to tell shelter staff about, along with coping strategies you may find helpful.

**Signs of Mental Health Concerns:** It is natural to experience emotional ups and downs. Life events affect everyone, and some people are more vulnerable to experiencing mental health challenges than others. If you have not experienced mental health concerns in the past, you may want to be aware of some common signs in case you experience any of these in the emergency shelter.

**Some common signs of mental health concerns may include:**

- Sudden changes in behavior.
- Withdrawal.
- Lethargy.
- Shutdown.
- Increased repetitive behavior.
- Agitation.
- Poor self-care.
- Feelings of hopelessness.
- Change in communication.
- Increased sensory challenges.

**Anxiety:** Anxiety is a commonly occurring mental health diagnosis. New or stressful situations may make anxiety even worse. If you are in an emergency shelter, you likely have gone through stressful and/or traumatic events. It is normal to experience anxiety in these situations. Below are some signs of anxiety as well as suggestions for managing anxiety.

## How to Manage Anxiety:

### Change How You Think

- You can't control everything, and that is okay. Taking control of small things can help you feel like you have some control when so many other things may be out of control.
- Try to stay positive. While you may have just gone through a very stressful and traumatic situation, you are safe, and there are people to help. Focus on the good things.

### Avoid Stress

- This is not always possible, especially if you're in an emergency shelter, but if you notice yourself getting stressed, find a quiet place to take a break. If you're not sure where to go, ask the shelter staff for help.
  - It's okay to say "no" to people, especially if you need a break.
  - Know when and how to ask for help. Shelter staff are there to help you.
  - Learn your limits and what situations are stressful for you. Communicate this to shelter staff so they can help you avoid stressful situations.

### Take Deep Breaths

- Taking long, slow breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth can help you relax if you're feeling anxious.

### Get Some Sleep

- Getting plenty of sleep helps your body rest and handle stress better. If you have sensory sensitivities that impact your sleep, communicate them to shelter staff so they can help.


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## Take a Break

- Do something relaxing that you enjoy that is available to you:
  - Practice meditation.
  - Listen to calming music.
  - Watch funny movies, TV, or videos.
  - Read.
  - Paint, draw, or doodle.
  - Play games.

## Eat Well

- Eating healthy foods like fruits and vegetables helps your body work better and handle stress and anxiety more easily.
- If you have sensory sensitivities or special dietary needs, be sure to communicate that to the shelter staff.
- Reduce how much caffeine and sugar you eat.
- Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs.

## Be Active

- Exercise can help you relax. Take a walk outside
- Spend time outdoors. Just because you're staying in an emergency shelter doesn't mean you can't go outside.

**Depression:** Everyone feels sad or down sometimes, usually when something bad or sad happens. When you have gone through a stressful or traumatic situation, such as being in a shelter, you may start to feel depressed. Below are some of the signs of depression and how to recognize them, and how to manage depression.

**Signs of Depression may include:**

- Mind:
  - Feeling tired, having no energy.
  - Changes in how much you sleep, either a lot less or more.
  - Changes in how much you eat, either a lot less or more.
- Thoughts/Emotions:
  - Not interested in favorite subjects or activities.
  - Thoughts about death or not wanting to be alive.
  - Don't want to spend time with friends or loved ones.
  - Easily frustrated, irritable, and easily upset about things that don't normally bother you.
- Body:
  - Not caring about taking care of your body, like brushing your teeth or showering.
  - Feeling achy or having pain you can't explain.
  - Having an upset stomach.

## Managing Depression:

### Take Care of Your Mind:

- Try to keep doing your regular daily activities like going to school/work, doing chores, and maintaining your hygiene. This may be hard to do in a shelter setting, but the more you can keep to your usual routines, the more it will help.
- Get outside to get some fresh air and sunshine. This can help improve your mental state.
- Stay connected to friends and family to support you. Keep up with social activities, even if you don't want to. It can help provide a break from the emergency shelter.

### Take Care of Your Feelings:

- Listen to music, watch TV, read, draw, or play games.
- Try to find positives in the situation. Being in a shelter can be stressful, but there may be good things happening as well.
- Talking to a therapist, physician, or another mental health professional can help. If you need help finding someone to connect with, talk to the shelter staff.

## Take Care of Your Body

- Don't skip meals.
- Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs.
- Minimize sugar.
- Sleeping too little or too much can make depression worse, so aim to get 7-9 hours of sleep a night.
- Find exercises that are continuous and rhythmic, like swimming, walking, or dancing.

**Crisis and Coping:** Staying in an emergency shelter can be a very stressful time. Even if you usually handle stressful situations well, you may end up having a hard time managing being in a shelter. It can be helpful to have a safety plan in place for shelter staff to know the best way to support you if you end up in a crisis.

**In a crisis, it is important to make sure that you are safe and feel safe.**

- Use strategies that you have learned to keep yourself calm. These can include fidget spinners, deep breathing, and other things that you find relaxing.
- Be sure to ask any questions. Shelter staff are there to support you.
- If you are having a hard time responding, try to find out why that is. If you are having a hard time talking, it may be helpful to write things down to communicate with shelter staff. Reflect and practice relaxation techniques. Shelter staff can assist you if needed.
- If you feel you need to speak to a mental health professional, let the shelter staff know. They can connect you with resources to help.
- If you have a safety plan or ways that are helpful to support you if you are in crisis, consider sharing that information with shelter staff when you arrive. If you don't have a plan in place, you can connect with the disaster mental health staff members on site for assistance and support.
- Identify a coping zone somewhere in the shelter with help from the staff. This coping zone should be a quiet place where you can relax, practice coping skills, and practice self-care during stressful situations.
- Create a list of coping strategies that can be used. Some strategies could include: counting back from 10, listening to music, reading, playing a game, journaling, drawing your feelings, yoga, or positive self-talk.

# Medical/Physical Health Needs

**Sleep Issues:** Getting the right amount of sleep is always important, but even more so when in stressful situations. Individuals with autism are more likely to have sleep issues.

**Some things that may help your sleep include:**

- Sleep environment: The place you are sleeping should be as dark, quiet, and cool as possible. You may be more sensitive to noise or have sensory issues. The environment should be adapted or have adaptations available to make it as comfortable as possible. If you are having a hard time sleeping due to sensory issues, talk to shelter staff to see if they can help you.
- Bedtime routine: The routine should be as predictable as possible, somewhere between 20-30 minutes, and include relaxing activities such as reading or listening to quiet music. Avoid the use of electronics close to bedtime, such as TV, computer, and video games, which can be stimulating, making it difficult to fall asleep.
- Sleep\wake schedule: The schedule, including your bedtime routine, should be regular with not much of a difference between the weekday and weekend schedules.
- Exercise: Daytime exercise can make it easier to fall asleep, and exercise tends to lead to deeper sleep. Avoid exercising too close to bedtime, as it can make it difficult to fall asleep.
- Avoid caffeine: This is important throughout the day but particularly at bedtime, which can make it difficult to fall asleep. Caffeine is found not only in coffee, but also in tea, chocolate, and some sodas.

**Gastrointestinal Issues:** Individuals with autism are more prone to gastrointestinal (GI) issues. If you have GI issues, it is important to share those with shelter staff if you have specific needs and supports around those issues.

**Gastrointestinal issues may include:**

- Constipation.
- Diarrhea.
- Gas.
- Abdominal pain.
- Painful stool.
- Nausea or vomiting.

Stressful situations, such as being in a shelter, can make gastrointestinal symptoms worse. Some ways to address gastrointestinal issues include:

- Make sure you have enough fruits and vegetables that you like to eat.
- Take any vitamins or minerals that are prescribed.
- Other helpful tools that you have learned help regulate your gastrointestinal issues.

In a shelter, there may not be foods that you like to eat or textures of food that you do not like. If you have specific dietary needs, you need to let shelter staff know so they can help support you to get the foods that you need.

**Allergies:** Individuals with autism may have health issues, including allergies that shelter staff will need to know about. If you were not asked about your medical history, including allergies, please let shelter staff know if you have specific allergies.

- If you are sensitive to fabrics, let staff know so they can get you the right clothes and bedding.
- If you have food allergies or sensitivities, make sure to alert shelter staff so they can help get you appropriate, healthy foods.

## Social/Communication Needs

Being in a shelter is a highly stressful situation. Even though it may be hard, you will have to communicate with shelter staff. It may also be helpful to be social with others in the shelter. Shelter staff should find ways to accommodate your preferred communication style. Ways to communicate include texting, tablets or smartphones, letter boards, or choice boards.

**Some things to communicate to shelter staff may include:**

- If you are finding it difficult to communicate in the environment, ask shelter staff if there is a quieter place you can go to continue the conversation.
- If you are having a hard time answering the questions from the shelter staff, be clear about why you are having a hard time answering them.

**Below are some examples of what you could say to shelter staff:**

- "Can you please give me a few moments to think and respond to your questions?"
- "I am having a hard time answering all these questions. Can we take a break from these questions for now and get back to them?"
- "I am getting confused with some of these questions. Can you simplify the question for me?"
- "I am not sure how to answer that question. Can you provide a few options for the question for me?"
- "Can you please be more specific when you ask me questions? For example, "What did you order for lunch?" instead of "How was your lunch?"
- "I don't understand what you are trying to tell me. Can you explain it to me in another way? I may understand it better written out, drawn, or in bullet points."


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# Trauma Information

If you are staying in a shelter, it's likely because you'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 get through the experience in the best way possible.

## Basics of Trauma

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

## Effects of Trauma

- Directly as an event happens. This means that you may have immediate impacts from going through a traumatic event.
- Sometimes it takes longer for people to be impacted by trauma. You 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 can also 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 for some.

## Resilience

Resilience means staying calm and in control when faced with a challenge, such as being in a shelter. It can help us understand trauma and get through tough times in healthy ways. Being able to build your resilience can help you cope with stressful situations like being in a shelter. Below is information about resilience skills that can be used to help you cope with the stress of being in a shelter and build your resilience.

- **Tracking:** Pay attention to what is happening in your mind and body. Focus on thoughts and sensations – things you can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. You can use tracking to notice when you may be feeling stressed (increased heart rate, negative thoughts, clenching fists, etc). When you use tracking to notice these sensations, you can then use coping skills to help with the stress. You can use tracking to notice pleasant thoughts and feelings, too, and focus on those good things to help you cope and increase your resilience.


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- **Resourcing:** Use different resources to help you feel better. You can use things that are pleasant or make you happy, like music, pictures, people, things, and ideas, like happy memories. If you're feeling stressed, you can focus on a favorite thing (in real life or imagination) and pay attention to the details. If your favorite thing is the beach, you can close your eyes and imagine the sound of the waves, the sun on your face, the feeling of the sand, the breeze across your skin, and the smell of the salty air. Pay attention to how those things make you feel, and focus on the ones that make you feel happy.

- **Grounding:** Focus on where your body is touching different surfaces. You can use grounding if you're standing, sitting, or lying down. Feel the pull of gravity on your body. Use tracking to pay attention to how your body feels, 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. These are gestures. If you have movements that you do when you're calm or happy, you can use those when you are feeling stressed. This can help your brain shift from being stressed to calm and happy. When you're using gestures, pay attention to different thoughts and feelings in your body and focus on what feels good.

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


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