

Tips for Serving Trauma Survivors

- All survivors must be treated with respect and in a trauma-sensitive manner.
- Trauma impacts children and adults from diverse communities.
- Rates of trauma are known to be high among people with psychiatric diagnosis, people who have been homeless, people of color, children and adults who are physically or cognitively challenged, and teens and adults who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).
- Do not assume you know the culture, background or sexual orientation of anyone you are in contact with or providing services to.
- There is no so-called 'normal' way to adapt to trauma, which by its very nature is outside the realm of 'normal' experience.
- Behavior that follows trauma is often symptomatic and can be misunderstood when in fact such behaviors are often remarkable adaptations to a traumatic event.
- Some survivors may appear extremely calm and lack emotional expression; they may minimize or discount their experience. These are examples of coping mechanisms and do not indicate a lack of impact from the traumatic event.
- Survivors invariably blame themselves for the trauma that they experienced as a way to cope with the feelings of loss of control.
- Providers do well to offer empathy and compassion and to convey respect to the survivor under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Some people use drugs and alcohol as a pre-existing method of coping with emotional pain which may be related to trauma.
- Intrusive questioning can be retraumatizing to the survivor and result in additional trauma.
- Someone's sexual history is not relevant to the experience of a recent sexual assault.
- Providers need to be empathic, empower the survivor, and emphasize strength and resilience. This can begin to help survivors regain a sense of control over their well-being.
- Providers need to be sensitive to their own self-protective needs as a witness to the outcome of trauma and not force their beliefs onto any survivor.

Building Connections: The Sexual Assault and Mental Health Project

New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 518-482-4222 www.nyscasa.org

Mental Health Association in New York State, 518-434-0439 www.mhanys.org