

The 12 Core Concepts for Understanding Traumatic Stress Responses in Children and Families Adapted for Youth Who Are Trafficked

The 12 Core Concepts for Understanding Traumatic Stress Responses in Children and Families provide a rationale for trauma-informed assessment and intervention. The Concepts cover a broad range of points that practitioners and agencies should consider as they strive to assess, understand, and assist trauma-exposed children, families, and communities in trauma-informed ways.

1. Traumatic experiences are inherently complex.



Every traumatic event is made up of different traumatic moments. These moments may include varying degrees of objective life threat, physical violation, and witnessing of injury or death. The moment-to-moment reactions youth have to these individual events are even more complex due to limitations in appraising and responding to danger, safety, and protection. When youth are sold for sex or labor, they constantly receive information that they must weigh and react to quickly. Thoughts come quickly and continuously: “What do I need to do to survive this? What’s worse, if he rapes me or kills me? If I don’t do what they say, what will they do to me? If I don’t do this, will my ‘boyfriend’ will be angry?”

2. Trauma occurs within a broad context that includes youth's personal characteristics, life experiences, and current circumstances.



Early interpersonal trauma may make youth more vulnerable to trafficking, teaching them not to trust others and to survive by any means necessary even if that involves further maltreatment. How they deal with, respond to, and cope with these situations stems from their current experience (e.g., a strong bond with the trafficker), the accumulation of their past experiences (e.g., childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence), and temperament as well as their physical, familial, community, and cultural environments.

3. Traumatic events often generate secondary adversities, life changes, and distressing reminders in youth's daily lives.



Some trafficked youth cannot escape a constant flood of painful and demoralizing reminders of past traumatic events or moments. Reminders can be anything that a youth associates with a traumatic experience (i.e., smell of alcohol, cologne, or sweat, certain locations) whether large or small, obvious or unknown. Reminders occur when least expected and youth may react with avoidance, numbing, hypervigilance, re-experiencing, or other responses. Traumatic events often generate secondary adversities such as social stigma, ongoing treatment for injuries, and legal proceedings. These adversities coupled with trauma reminders and loss reminders may produce significant fluctuations in a youth’s emotional and behavioral functioning.

4. Youth can exhibit a wide range of reactions to trauma and loss.



Due to past or on-going trauma, youth may respond to everyday challenges with rage, aggression, defiance, recklessness, or by bonding with aggressors. Others may withdraw, emotionally shut down, dissociate, self-harm, or self-medicate.

5. Danger and safety are primary concerns in the lives of youth who have had traumatic experiences.



Trafficked youth may believe that no person, relationship, or place can ever be safe or trustworthy. Continual exposure to traumatic experiences can make it more difficult for youth to distinguish between safe and unsafe situations, and may lead to significant changes in their own protective and risk-taking behavior.

6. Traumatic experiences affect the family and broader caregiving system.



Parents, caregivers, family members, and friends may want to help a youth who has been trafficked, but they may not know how to regain the youth's trust or how to help the youth envision a life that doesn't involve being trafficked.

7. Protective and promotive factors can reduce the adverse impact of trauma.



Supportive adults and communities, strong social connections, positive mentors, high self-esteem, and good coping skills can buffer the effects of trauma experienced by trafficked youth. When given the opportunity, many trafficked youth demonstrate remarkable resilience and enormous capacity to heal.

8. Trauma and post-trauma adversities can strongly influence development.



Trafficked youth may have had many interruptions and interference in their childhood (e.g., innocence, playfulness, creativity) and adolescence (e.g., autonomy, intimacy, self-definition) causing a disruption in healthy development.

9. Developmental neurobiology underlies youth's reactions to traumatic experiences.



Trafficked youth may develop "survival brain"—an automatic focus on anticipating or counteracting danger rather than letting down their guard—especially when life seems safe (the times when they have most often been blindsided by victimizers).

10. Culture is closely interwoven with traumatic experiences, responses, and recovery.



Every trafficked youth has a unique set of past and current cultural experiences, values, beliefs, and expectations. Youth may feel conflicted with by divided loyalties when cultures clash.

11. Challenges to the social contract, including legal and ethical issues, affect trauma response and recovery.



Trafficked youth may have lost hope that society, especially people with power (such as law enforcement or judicial professionals) will fulfill their societal mandate to protect and help them. Vulnerable to criminalization, stigmatization, and victimization, youth often resist and are distrustful of the authority of those they perceive as unwilling and unable to help. Some of the distrust is due to the instances in the past when these systems have failed them.

12. Working with trauma-exposed youth and their families can be extremely rewarding.



Adults who come to know trafficked youth in the course of providing them with services may be deeply affected by hearing about the tragedy and horror of these youths' experiences. It is imperative for these adults to take care of their own emotional and physical health in order to be able to thoughtfully and consistently helpful to trafficked youth.

For more information on *The 12 Core Concepts for Understanding Traumatic Stress Responses in Children and Families*, please visit www.NCTSN.org