

A Guide for Youth  
**Understanding  
Trauma**



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## INTRODUCING HAYDEN & JESSIE

Hello! I'm Hayden, an advocate for youth. Today we are going to talk about trauma



Hey! I'm Jessie, a youth advocate



### MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

When youth witness or experience a horrible event, they often do not have words to help make sense of what is happening and do not realize the potential for long lasting effects. It can be challenging to ask for help. As a result, youth often work to make sense of it alone. Managing these challenging emotions and stressful events by themselves can often lead to additional struggles such as unhealthy habits like smoking or drinking, hanging out with the wrong group of friends, acting out or internalizing their feelings and isolating themselves as a way to be safe.

This guide is designed to help youth make a connection between stressful events and the potential lasting impacts. Understanding trauma and having a framework to talk about past experiences can help in processing and asking for help. This understanding supports healing.

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I was 25 before I understood how my childhood experiences were impacting my adult life. The adults in my life seemed to understand, and they often tossed out words I didn't understand or labels to 'help' me understand why I was behaving and feeling the way I did. But those labels never really helped me understand my circumstances. I lived in survival mode all the time, struggling both physically and emotionally to stay afloat.

Making sense of my labels and childhood experiences didn't come until I understood trauma and could explain my childhood experiences.



I'm trying to figure out what all this trauma stuff has to do with my life. I'm not sure I even know what trauma is and I definitely haven't experienced it.

Yeah, I feel like adults are trying to fix me, and telling me what's wrong. They use words I don't understand, or words that don't describe what I'm actually going through.



So I may not recognize events in my life as trauma because I can dismiss them? It can feel as if it's just how things go, bad things happen?

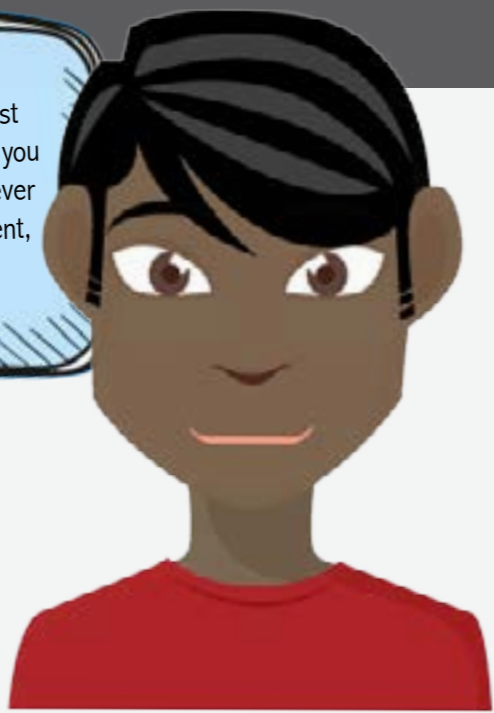
Trauma is experienced differently by everyone. It takes work to get to a place of healing from these experiences; trauma isn't something you can just get over. Did you know that just witnessing domestic violence, being separated from your family or feeling as if no one cares about you can all be considered trauma? It took me a long time to learn it wasn't just about some major event you had to witness. It can be things we see and experience everyday, just too much of that stress can very well be trauma.

These events may become your normal and you adapt and deal with them in the best way you can. I'll share my story to provide you with an example. Remember everyone has different experiences and they impact us individually.

## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is any bad event or emotional strain that has or is happening to you. Trauma can also be one or more events witnessed by you. These events leave a lasting impact on you and may continue to bother you throughout your life. It is important to remember that these events impact your sense of safety, often impact your relationships with others and shape who you are.

I'm not sure I get it. I understand that bad things happen, but I've been told you're just supposed to suck it up and move on. Can you give me an example of trauma? I've only ever heard of trauma as a really bad car accident, bombing or something MAJOR like that.



## HAYDEN'S STORY

I grew up in a home where my parents fought about everything. Some days the fights felt like loud conversations, other days my dad would hit my mom, make her cry and they would throw things at each other. As a child I thought this was how parents acted, that it was normal. I learned to follow the "rules" so I would not be punished. This was my reality. I learned to be a rule follower because then there was less fighting. I followed rules at home, school and church to make sure no one would get me in trouble with my dad. But I didn't WANT to follow the rules. I was only safe to be me with my friends, because they didn't tell on me, no matter what bad things I was doing - drinking, smoking, hanging with the wrong crowd, and all that.

I didn't learn what healthy relationships looked like, and I always felt unsafe, living in fear of getting hurt or yelled at. This caused me to avoid people. I felt very alone. Even now, when I see people fighting it makes me sad and it brings me right back to a place where I want to run, hide or avoid people. Because of those experiences I frequently find myself in unhealthy relationships. I didn't learn how to manage conflict or how to stand up for myself. I would avoid new situations and relationships because I felt so anxious. To manage anxiety I was told to 'snap out of it' and used several types of meds. When I would talk to a therapist they focused on how to make me less depressed or less anxious. These conversations were focused on how I was feeling in the moment, not how I grew up and how traumatic experiences taught me my way of dealing with stress and fear.

**What Happened:** Grew up in a violent family

**How did it make me feel:** Became a rule follower, felt alone, afraid and anxious

**How does it still bother me?** I avoid situations in order to feel safe. I don't speak up for myself in relationships and I struggle to understand what a healthy relationship really is. When I become stressed I run away to avoid it, either by ending the relationship or quitting my job.

I had to name what I had experienced, and acknowledge it was trauma. I needed help to understand what had happened in my childhood and the lasting effects, how it made me feel and why it still bothers me. Helping professionals are now calling these events from childhood "adversities" and researchers are studying the impact these Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs can have on us as we get older.



## WHAT ARE THE ACEs?

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) is a research study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente to look at how childhood events impact us in the long run. ACEs are a list of events that have been demonstrated to have lasting effects, both physically and emotionally. Some of these events may seem small, while others more severe, but all may impact us. The response to traumatic events and experiences vary among people, as trauma is individualized. Only you truly understand the full impact of an experience and how it affects your daily life.

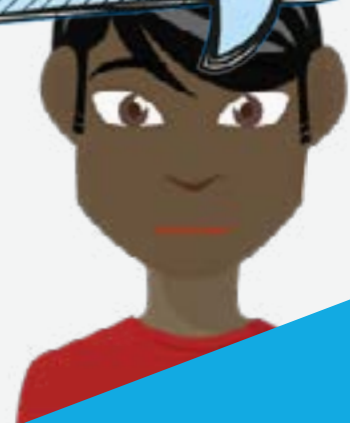
It is important to know that we all experience things differently. A friend or sibling who experienced the same event may not have the same response you have. And that is OK! Many youth have experienced abuse, neglect and household dysfunction but it doesn't mean that they are traumatized. We all have different ways to manage and cope with that stress.

Hayden – I still don't know about trauma and all that, but this relates to my life. There are some parts of your story that are like mine. I thought "Wait, I felt that way" or "I went through that too!"

Recognizing that one or more of these events is something you have experienced or currently are experiencing is important to your health. Reaching out to others and talking about your experiences and how it impacts you, can be healing. Let's keep talking to see how particular events have impacted you and help you to understand how they continue to make you feel.

Yeah, some of this stuff comes up in my daily life. I'm not sure I'm comfortable talking to other people about them. I don't want to seem weird or something. I'm willing to try to talk to someone, but no promises.

That's okay, there are people who can help and who really care. It's important to realize you aren't weird or anything. Trauma can happen to anyone at any time. You are not alone.



## ACES CATEGORIES

**HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION**

MENTAL ILLNESS  
MOTHER TREATED VIOLENTLY  
DIVORCE  
INCARCERATED RELATIVE  
SUBSTANCE ABUSE

**NEGLECT**

PHYSICAL  
EMOTIONAL

**ABUSE**

PHYSICAL  
EMOTIONAL  
SEXUAL

# IMPACT

You know what... I am always having issues sleeping, and if I do sleep I have nightmares. It really sucks, so I avoid sleeping and then I jump from being happy to mad. I don't understand what is wrong with me, but now I think it could be how my experiences are affecting my life.

One thing you can do is to look at the ACE's and ask yourself,  
 Has this happened to me?  
 Do I think about it a lot?  
 Does it get in the way of my daily life?

If you answered yes to these questions then it may have a bigger impact than you realize. Making sense of what has happened can be helpful in learning new ways to cope and build skills to manage stress and heal from the pain.

Exactly! That's great that you are seeing how trauma may be impacting your life.

Research has shown that many people have an ACE or multiple ACE's (link). What is most important is how you are able to manage those experiences physically and emotionally. These experiences may lead to:

- Low self- esteem
- Anxiety
- Nightmares
- Mood swings
- Headaches
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- High risk behaviors

Other times these experiences may not have a lasting impact with emotional or physical symptoms. What is important is making the connection that a particular event is still bothering you in some way.

You may have experienced some of these and they may have caused you to feel upset, sad or withdrawn. You may also have other reactions. It's important to understand what reactions are common for you. Remember these reactions are normal responses for those who have experienced trauma. Jessie, have you been thinking about what may cause a reaction for you?

For me when I see someone yelling at a child, I feel saddened because I know what that is like. When I hear yelling I feel anxious and sometimes I have a physical reaction and jump. I get really upset when people poke me because my dad used to do that to me when he was mad. How about you try this for yourself?

- A. When I see \_\_\_\_\_ I feel \_\_\_\_\_
- B. When I hear \_\_\_\_\_ I feel \_\_\_\_\_
- C. I tend to get upset more when \_\_\_\_\_ happens.
- D. Or create your own \_\_\_\_\_

No, not really. I just now am realizing that I'm reacting to it. What causes it for you?

# SYMPTOMS & TRIGGERS

Your reactions to adverse experiences can help you understand yourself and what you need to work on to begin healing. Youth who have experienced trauma often have moments where things happen completely out of their control; external events that may cause a sudden reaction or make them feel a certain way. The sudden onset of these emotions could be caused by external events that are often referred to as triggers. Triggers mean that you experienced something and it caused a negative impact or reaction on how you were feeling in that moment.

These types of reactions can come in many forms such as:

- Smells, sounds, colors or places
- Anniversary dates of the event or loss
- Loud voices, yelling or fighting
- Being around alcohol or drugs
- Certain gestures like pointing, poking or grabbing
- Media or news about particular events
- Bullying and name calling
- Feeling as if you don't have control in that moment
- Public safety authority figures like police officers, fire fighters or emergency medical technicians (EMTs).

I am starting to think about events that give me a strong reaction to find my triggers. I can see how my past experiences can be called trauma and how these experiences and my reactions are connected. I'll give this a try.

When I see someone being picked on/bullied, I feel hopeless and sad.

When I hear someone cussing at a person, I feel my anger boiling out like a volcano.

I get really bothered when a fight or argument happens.

# WHAT'S NEXT?

The good news is that youth are resilient and despite adversity are resourceful in finding ways to meet needs! Many youth find it helpful to talk with someone. Youth will share when they form a trusting relationship with an adult. When youth understand these experiences as trauma it takes away the blame youth may feel around the events. When we name our adversities as trauma it shifts the feeling that something is wrong with us to something has happened to us.

First would be to name it for what it is: If it was a particular adversity or multiple adversities then name it as trauma.

If you are unsure, that's ok. Knowing that something has happened to you is the start. Once you can name it, talk about it: Think about who you share this private information with. Youth can consider how best to share their story by considering the following; what I want to share, why I want to share and what I hope is done with the information I share.

Yes!! Starting a conversation about your experiences and trauma can be hard; here are some things to keep in mind.

What can I do to reach out and start rewriting my negative story into something positive?

What if I'm not sure about what's bothering me?

So conversations may look different depending on who I decide to share this information with?



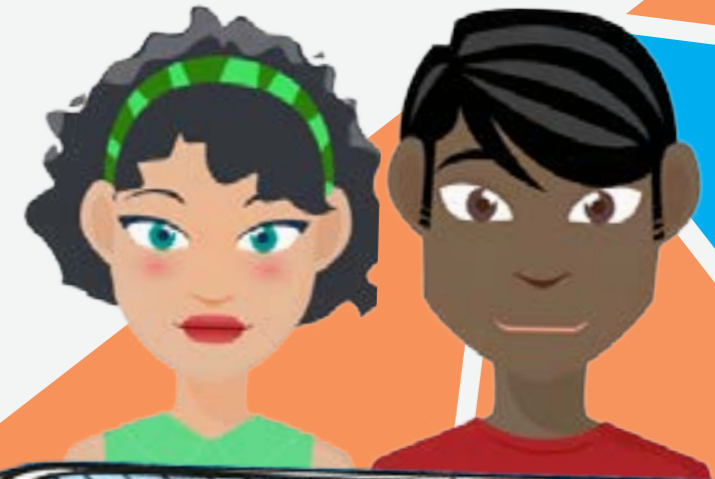
- Share with a caring adult, (one you are comfortable with and whom you trust)
- Set up a safe place in which to share.
- Tell your story as your story. Be open & honest, but you don't have to share anything you don't want to.
- Discuss how it has impacted you, what your feelings are and how you are coping.
- Create a space for support and share what could be helpful to your healing process.
- Discuss what you would like to do in the future and what are your next steps for healing and growth.

# RESILIENCY

Resiliency is just a fancy word which means the ability to bounce back and ability to cope with stress and adversity in a healthy manner. Many youth are extremely resilient and are able to use their life experiences to help them grow. We can learn to be resilient as well!

There are some things to keep in mind while building your resilience.

- Understand that your experiences are unique: It's okay to take time to make sense of it all.
- Build and identify coping skills such as calling a friend, exercising, drawing, creating music or other activity that makes you feel better: choose what works best for you.
- Make connections to others: It is important to find supportive people to build resilience.
- Make connections to services: You may need professional help in processing trauma. There is nothing wrong with asking for help, and there are many who specialize in working with trauma.
- Take care of yourself: This may seem simple, but it is essential to take good care of yourself. This includes getting enough sleep, healthy meals, and making time for things you enjoy.
- Build resilience: You have the power to rewrite your story, choose how you relate to and manage your experiences.



No one gets to choose the hand that they were dealt and bad things happen. But I can change how I let it affect me and my life. I am in control of how I feel and what I do about it.

Jessie, I am so glad I have gained your trust and you shared your experiences with me. Because of my experiences I have learned how important it is to help young adults learn what trauma is and how it may be affecting them. I found a framework to explain my experiences, I had words to advocate for myself and I became aware of services that specifically dealt with the trauma I had experienced. This understanding allowed me to reconnect with service providers, to actually work through my childhood trauma and better understand how it was connecting to my adult behaviors.

I had experienced trauma and just didn't know what to name it. This shifted my thinking, which allowed me to name my pain and most importantly, to re-write my story of survival to one of healing and hope.

Thank you for chatting with me. I understand what has happened to me, and it's called Trauma. I get how to share my experiences and know how to ask for support. I feel better knowing that I'm not in this alone. I am excited to move on from this by getting support and building resiliency.



I'm so glad we were able to talk today, and that you are empowered to create your journey of healing. Here are some more resources for you to check out!!



Supportive adults and providers looking for additional resources can check out Georgetown University's National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health's Trauma Informed Care website:

Georgetown University  
Resources



Youth and young adults looking for additional resources can check out Youth M.O.V.E. National's Resource website:

Youth M.O.V.E. National  
Resources



For additional resources use your smart phone to scan these QR codes