



Deconstructing Trauma

Integrating Harm

Reduction and Prevention

for Lasting Recovery

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Deconstructing Trauma –Integrating Harm Reduction and Prevention for Lasting Recovery

Understanding, Regulating, and Healing Trauma

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Welcome! This session is a safe space for learning and reflection.

Session Description

Grounded in trauma-informed public health research, trauma significantly impacts population health in rural communities, shaping behavior, substance use patterns, engagement in care, and long-term recovery outcomes. This session reframes trauma not as a fixed condition, but as an experience that can be understood and addressed through trauma-responsive care.

Participants will explore how trauma affects the nervous system, behavior, and recovery, and how harm reduction and prevention strategies can be integrated to support lasting recovery. Drawing from the Deconstructing Trauma Program, this session blends evidence-based practices with holistic and culturally responsive approaches to address root causes of trauma, strengthen emotional regulation, and reduce relapse risk.

Designed for rural and low-resource settings, the session offers practical, transferable strategies that providers and community programs can implement to build resilience, improve engagement, and advance population and community health outcomes.

(SAMHSA, 2014; HRSA, Rural Behavioral Health Toolkit)

Session Objectives

Our trauma-responsive, grounded approaches blend clinical strategies with holistic practices to restore wellness across mind, body, spirit, and energy.

Objectives:

- Identify how trauma impacts the nervous system, behavior, and recovery outcomes in rural populations, and how trauma-responsive care improves engagement and population health.
- Apply practical harm reduction and prevention strategies from the Deconstructing Trauma Program model to support emotional regulation, resilience, and relapse prevention in rural and low-resource settings.
- Describe actionable, trauma-responsive tools and practices that community programs and providers can implement to strengthen recovery, improve service engagement, and advance community health outcomes.

What is Trauma?

As defined within trauma-informed behavioral health frameworks, trauma is not only an event—it is how the mind, body, and nervous system respond to overwhelming or chronic stress. In rural and underserved communities, repeated exposure to adversity can shape beliefs, behaviors, and long-term health outcomes.

- Trauma can stem from adverse childhood experiences, accidents, violence, neglect, loss, and ongoing environmental or systemic stressors.
- Unaddressed trauma affects emotional regulation, decision-making, relationships, and physical health. Trauma-responsive care helps individuals and communities understand trauma as something experienced—not something that defines who they are.

(SAMHSA, 2014)

Trauma is Stored in the Body

Trauma & the Body: Neurobiological research demonstrates that trauma activates the nervous system and survival responses (fight, flight, freeze, and fawn). When stress responses remain activated over time, they can disrupt emotional regulation, behavior, and physical health.

- Common signs of unresolved trauma may include chronic stress, anxiety, depression, aggression, emotional numbness, hypervigilance, sleep disruption, and chronic pain.
- In rural and low-resource settings, these symptoms often go untreated and can contribute to substance use, disengagement from care, and poorer health outcomes. Trauma-responsive approaches support regulation, safety, and recovery by addressing the body-based impacts of trauma.

(Porges, 2011; SAMHSA, 2014)

Understanding Triggers

Triggers are people, places, dates, words, sensations, or environmental cues that activate trauma-related stress responses.

Common Examples:

- **Loud voices** → may activate past conflict or threat responses
- **Feeling ignored** → may trigger abandonment or relational stress
- **Certain dates/places/scents** → may recall past traumatic experiences

Recognizing triggers helps individuals and providers anticipate stress responses and apply regulation strategies before escalation occurs.

Reflection Activity: Identify one or two common triggers observed in your work or community setting.

Harm Reduction Deconstructing Trauma

Consistent with national harm reduction frameworks, harm reduction focuses on reducing immediate risk, strengthening engagement, and building readiness for change—especially in rural and low-resource settings.

Harm Reduction Strategies:

- **Person-centered:** Emphasizes dignity, safety, choice, and autonomy
- **Meet people where they are:** Supports small, self-defined steps toward stability
- **Trauma-responsive:** Reduces shame and builds trust and consistent engagement
- **Protective, not permissive:** Prioritizes safety and long-term recovery
- **Culturally responsive:** Care is guided by community values and lived experience

(SAMHSA Harm Reduction Framework, 2023)

Harm Reduction in Practice

Motivational and engagement research supports harm reduction as an approach that strengthens trust, improves engagement, and increases readiness for change.

Practical Harm Reduction Tools Focus On:

- **Stabilization supports:** Co-create safety plans; integrate brief regulation pauses (breathwork, grounding, gentle movement)
- **Lower barriers to care:** Flexible engagement, plain language, non-stigmatizing approaches; include peers, family, and cultural supports when appropriate
- **Practical tools:** Trigger mapping, coping cards, daily rhythm planning, supportive check-ins, and safer-use education when applicable

Activity: Brief body scan, grounding exercise, or progressive muscle release to model regulation strategies.

Prevention for Lasting Recovery

Relapse prevention and ACE prevention research indicate that prevention extends beyond education—it is embedded in daily stability, relationships, and early support.

Prevention Strategies Strengthen:

- **Stabilize essentials:** Housing, benefits, transportation, identification, and access to care
- **Daily regulation routines:** Sleep, nutrition, hydration, movement, breathwork, time in nature
- **Relational wellness:** Maintain connection with peers, mentors, elders, and providers; use clear communication and healthy boundaries
- **Early intervention:** Identify triggers and warning signs; use brief stabilization supports, warm handoffs, and simple, choice-led safety plans
- **Relapse prevention:** Reduce high-risk cues, schedule supportive contacts, and maintain a one-page recovery or crisis plan

(Marlatt & Donovan, 2005; CDC, 2023)

Emotional Regulation — Why It Matters

Neuroscience and trauma research indicate that trauma disrupts emotional regulation by keeping the nervous system in a heightened or shut-down state. This can affect perception, decision-making, communication, and engagement in care.

Effective Emotional Regulation Supports:

- **Improved** stress tolerance and safety
- **Clearer** thinking and decision-making
- **Stronger** relationships and communication
- **Greater** engagement in recovery and prevention efforts

Developing regulation skills allows individuals and providers to respond thoughtfully rather than react automatically, supporting stability and long-term recovery.

(Porges, 2011; SAMHSA, 2014)

What Regulation Means

Regulation refers to the body and mind's ability to return to a state of safety and stability after stress, allowing individuals to think clearly, respond rather than react, and remain engaged in recovery and care.

Regulation Brings Stability to Both Body and Mind:

Physical Regulation

- Heart rate stabilizes
- Breathing slows
- Muscle tension decreases
- Stress hormone activation lowers
- Nervous system shifts from survival response to safety state

Mental & Emotional Regulation

- Clearer thinking
- Reduced reactivity
- Improved decision-making
- Greater treatment engagement
- Increased sense of safety and stability

(Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2012)

Emotional Regulation Tools

Research on nervous system regulation shows that brief, evidence-informed practices can calm the central nervous system and improve emotional stability. These techniques can be used in clinical, community, and outreach settings to support stabilization, engagement, and prevention.

How to — Key Techniques for Emotional Regulation:

- **Breathwork Tool:** 4-7-8 breathing (inhale 4, hold 7, exhale 8) to calm the central nervous system
- **Grounding Tool:** 5-4-3-2-1 sensory method to return attention to the present moment.
5 things you see • 4 things you feel • 3 things you hear • 2 things you smell • 1 thing you taste
- **Safety Tool:** Feel the ground beneath you, orient to safety, and breathe slowly to reset the nervous system

How to – Key Techniques for Emotional Regulation Continued:

- **Self-Soothing Statements:** Simple supportive phrases such as “I am safe in this moment” or “I can slow this down”
- **Movement & Nature:** Gentle movement and time in nature support nervous system regulation and stress reduction
- **Guided Visualization:** Visualization techniques promote safety, grounding, and emotional stabilization
- **Reflective Practices:** Journaling and self-reflection support insight, emotional processing, and behavior change
- **Relational Connection:** Healing and recovery are strengthened through safe, supportive relationships and community connection

Activity: Brief guided visualization and grounding exercise. (Close eyes if comfortable and imagine a peaceful place while practicing slow breathing).

(Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2012)

Integration & Reflection

Consider These Questions for Reflection:

- What is one key takeaway you can apply in your role or program?
- Where could harm reduction or prevention strategies strengthen engagement or outcomes in your setting?
- What is one small, practical change you could implement within the next month?

Thank you for your time and for the essential work you do to support healing, recovery, and community wellness in rural settings.

As a closing resource, attendees are invited to access a free guided stress-reduction meditation by scanning the QR code provided. This brief practice is intended to support nervous system regulation, grounding, and ongoing wellness for professionals and community members.



Implementation & Resource Alignment

Trauma-responsive strategies shared in this session align with tools used in the Deconstructing Trauma™ model to support harm reduction, prevention, and recovery.

Key Resources to Support Implementation:

- Client and facilitator tools supporting emotional regulation and resilience
- Adaptable resources for group and individual settings
- Training and implementation support for rural and community-based programs

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Evidence Base & References

The Following Sources Support the Practices Presented:

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