

UBC Anxiety Stress and Autism Program

A Trauma Resource Guide for Autistic Youth and their Caregivers



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Using This Resource Guide

This guide is meant to help autistic youth and their caregivers learn more about trauma and coping with traumatic stress. Although the focus of this guide is primarily trauma, there are also providers and resources recommended that may also be helpful for other behavioural, emotional, social, and environmental concerns that can co-occur with trauma. The first portion of this guide (page 1) provides some background information about trauma, how to spot signs of trauma in your child, and approaches to treating trauma. The second portion (pages 2-5) contains resources to help your child deal with trauma or related difficulties.

What is Trauma?

Trauma or traumatic events describe an event(s) that are experienced as threatening and have adverse effects. Trauma can lead to traumatic stress, a lasting and negative change in mood, thoughts, and behaviour. This might include startling more easily, negative thoughts about the world, repetitive play, or nightmares.

How Common is Trauma?

Autistic children are at a heightened risk of traumatic events. Research has found that autistic children are more likely to experience neglect and abuse than neurotypical children. Furthermore, autistic adults report increased incidences of bullying, exclusion, and loss of autonomy in their childhood.

The latest research suggests that autistic children can experience traumatic stress in response to a broader range of experiences—experiences that might be overlooked as traumas based on neurotypical experiences. For example, children with extreme sensory sensitivities may find some sensory experiences traumatic. Others may have experienced traumatic medical procedures or stigmatisation associated with their autism.

Spotting Signs of Trauma

It might be difficult to identify when an autistic child is struggling with trauma. For example, some symptoms of traumatic stress, such as difficulty with emotions and repetitive play, are also associated with autism. If you're worried about your child and how they are coping with an experience, it can be useful to think of whether their behaviour has changed from their usual functioning following the event.

Addressing Trauma

Supporting your child following a traumatic experience might start by removing them from certain situations or limiting their interactions with certain people. Facing trauma is easier when the trauma is in the past. If you and/or your child are witnessing or experiencing any kind of violence, and it is safe for you to do so, call 9-1-1 in an emergency or, if there is no imminent danger, call 3-1-1. Resources for anonymous support outside of first responders can be found at the end of this resource package.

Low- or No-Cost Mental Health Support Services

There is little research to date looking at how best to treat trauma in autistic children. Still, clinicians and researchers recommend seeking **Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TF-CBT)** and working with a trained provider who can tailor the program to your child's needs. TF-CBT is a type of psychotherapy that focuses on how thoughts, emotions, and behaviours surrounding the trauma continue to impact the child in the present moment. Clinicians use TF-CBT to help children replace unhelpful thoughts (e.g., self-blame for the trauma), build coping skills to handle uncomfortable emotions about the trauma, face situations / things that the child might be avoiding because they remind the child of the trauma, and a safety plan to prevent further victimisation and build autonomy. Research has found that TF-CBT is effective at treating traumatic stress in neurotypical children. Autism experts have proposed that TF-CBT can be [adapted](#) to meet autistic children's cognitive and developmental needs.

Low- or no-cost therapy	Quick reference
<p><u>Foundry BC Centres</u> Foundry BC Centres are drop-in mental health and social services centres. These services are appropriate for youth who do not require intensive, ongoing care.</p> <p>Foundry BC App: An interactive mobile app and web portal designed to help youth aged 12-24 connect directly with FREE virtual counselling, peer support groups, and personalised recommendations for health services. You can access drop-in virtual counselling from Monday to Thursday, 2pm-6pm; or, pre-book an appointment at a time that works for you.</p>	<p>Location: use the Find a Centre tool to locate your local Foundry Centre.</p> <p>Online: www.foundrybc.ca</p> <p>Get Connected: Download the Foundry App from the Itunes App Store, access it through the Web Portal, or call 1-833-308-6379.</p>
<p><u>BC Child and Youth Mental Health Services (CYMH)</u> CYMH clinics across the lower mainland serve children with complex mental health needs and their families. CYMH teams can provide DBT and CBT skills groups, psychiatric assessment, psychotherapy, parenting skills sessions, case management, medication management, and referrals.</p> <p>Intake: Call your closest clinic to book an appointment with a CYMH clinician. They will assess your child to determine appropriate services.</p>	<p>Get Connected: check to see which CYMH clinic is closest to you.</p> <p>Learn more: The CYMH Toolkit explains its service model. Here To Help BC's info sheet on CYMH lets you know what to expect from BC Child and Youth Mental Health Services.</p>
<p><u>Mood Disorders Association of BC (MDABC)</u> While MDABC psychiatry services are only available to adults, children can be seen at the MDABC Counselling and Wellness Centre by a registered clinical counsellor. A 50-minute individual session is \$95. Many forms of therapy are offered, and you can see the counselling team here.</p>	<p>Online: www.mdabc.net</p> <p>Intake: you can self-refer or refer your child using this intake form. Wait times are very minimal.</p>
<p><u>Moving Forward Family Services</u> MFFS connects low-income individuals who don't have extended healthcare benefits with registered or practicum counsellors.</p> <p>Services: <i>For medium-income clients without extended health insurance:</i> Registered Clinical Counsellor (> 12 sessions, \$50) <i>For low-income clients:</i> Practicum student (< 12 sessions, \$20) <i>For unemployed clients:</i> Practicum student (<4 sessions, FREE)</p>	<p>Online: www.mffs.ca</p> <p>Intake: Send an email to counsellor@movingforwardfamilyservices.com OR complete this self-referral form OR call (877) 485-5025.</p>

Self-Help Mental Health Support Resources

For people who prefer to receive anonymous treatment, or for those who are waiting to access virtual or in-person support services, you may be interested in some of the following self-help resources.

Self-help	Quick Reference
<p><u>Walkalong</u></p> <p>Walkalong was developed by UBC researchers as a free tool for young adults to self-monitor and manage their mental health. It includes a Life Chart for wellness tracking, Self-Help exercises, an Encyclopedia of reliable treatment options, and stories of others' lived experiences.</p>	<p>Online: www.walkalong.ca/about-us/general</p>
<p><u>KidTrauma</u></p> <p>KidTrama was developed as a resource for parents of neurotypical children struggling with trauma. Developed by psychologists at the University of Zurich, this resource provides information and tips for supporting children with trauma. The resource is organised by developmental age, with pages aimed towards both caregivers and adolescents.</p>	<p>Online: https://kidtrauma.org/?page_id=25&lang=en</p> <p>KidTrauma App: Apple or Google Play</p>
<p><u>Kelty's Keys</u></p> <p>Kelty's Keys is a free online therapy program for adolescents and adults offered by Vancouver Coastal Health. There are "self-help" online modules and a "guided" option where online tools are supplemented with email counselling from a virtual therapist. Note that both options require independence and self-initiation and are not suitable for children.</p>	<p>Online: www.keltyskey.com/</p> <p>Currently only the "self-help" option is available until further notice; all therapist spots are filled.</p>
<p><u>HereToHelp BC</u></p> <p>HereToHelp BC provides health literacy resources on provincial mental health services as well as common mental health concerns. Check out their Resource Library for information, workbooks, and wellness modules.</p>	<p>Online: www.heretohelp.bc.ca</p>
<p><u>Anxiety Canada</u></p> <p>Anxiety Canada provides educational information on anxiety disorders. In addition to learning about the conditions themselves, you can also access a variety of self-help tools or download the Mindshift Mobile App.</p> <p>My Anxiety Plan (MAP): A 10-hour CBT self-help course that helps people map out the causes, triggers, coping skills, and treatment strategies for their anxiety. There is an adult curriculum and a child & teen curriculum.</p>	<p>Location: www.anxietycanada.com or www.youth.anxietycanada.com</p> <p>Mindshift App: MindShift CBT MAP courses: My Anxiety Plan</p>
<p><u>Dealing with Depression</u></p> <p>A downloadable resource intended for: teens with depressed moods, concerned adults who want to help a depressed teen or other teens who want to help a friend or family member. This resource has very accessible worksheets and some great information about depression.</p>	<p>Access it: Dealing with Depression Workbook</p>

Webinars, Podcasts, and Websites on Trauma and Autism

Webinars and **websites** that autistic young adults and caregivers may find helpful for facing and managing trauma.

Websites

[Becoming More Trauma Informed in the Autism Community.](#)

By Aide Canada

- A resource page for trauma-informed autism care. The page includes webinars and articles meant to educate, guide, and support autistic individuals and their caregivers in understanding how trauma presents in folks on the spectrum.

[Autism, Grief, & Bereavement.](#)

By Autism Speaks

- A list of resources for caregivers trying to support their autistic child with grief and loss. It includes informational articles that offer tips for how best to support.

[At the Intersection of Autism and Trauma](#)

By *Spectrum*

- This *Spectrum* article explains the complicated interplay between autism and traumatic stress through an in-depth interview with ASAP lab director Dr. Connor Kerns.

Webinars

[ACT Mental Health and Autism Project.](#)

By Autism Training Community and the UBC Faculty of Medicine.

- A webinar series discussing mental health challenges in autistic children. The intended audience is clinicians, but parents may find the discussions of lived expertise, coping strategies, and treatment options helpful.

[Social Thinking Methodology Webinars.](#)

By *Social Thinking*.

- Free evidence-based webinars on the basics of social-emotional learning. Learn how your child can build social awareness and self-regulation skills. Also, see [Social Thinking Methodology Articles.](#)

Resource Guides and Templates on Trauma and Autism - For Caregivers

[Supporting Individuals with Autism through Uncertain Times.](#) By the UNC FPG Child Development Institute.

- This comprehensive PDF specifically addresses the uncertainty and anxiety brought by COVID-19. It discusses strategies to navigate challenges that may be uniquely faced by autistic individuals during the pandemic.

[Safety Planning Template.](#) By MHAutism.

- For youth who experience mental health challenges or suicide ideation, safety planning is critical to mitigating and managing acute emotional crises. This template is tailored specifically to autistic individuals and can be filled out and shared with your child's support team and family members.

Resources for Clinicians

Below are some resources you may wish to share with your children's care team, describing evidence-based practices to address trauma in autistic children.

Best practices for assessing trauma in autistic children.

- Michna, G. A., Trudel, S. M., Bray, M. A., Reinhardt, J., Dirsmith, J., Theodore, L., ... & Gilbert, M. L. (2022). Best practices and emerging trends in assessment of trauma in students with autism spectrum disorder. *Psychology in the Schools*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22769>

A web-based measure of trauma in autistic children.

- Schelinski, S., & von Kriegstein, K. (2020). Brief report: speech-in-noise recognition and the relation to vocal pitch perception in adults with autism spectrum disorder and typical development. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 50(1), 356-363. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-03864-3>

Recommendations for adapting TF-CBT for autistic children.

- Stack, A., & Lucyshyn, J. (2019). Autism spectrum disorder and the experience of traumatic events: review of the current literature to inform modifications to a treatment model for children with autism. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 49(4), 1613-1625. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3854-9>

Recommendations for telehealth-based TF-CBT adaptations for autistic children.

- Romney, J. S., & Garcia, M. (2021). TF-CBT Informed Teletherapy for Children with Autism and their Families. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 14(3), 415-424. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-021-00354-0>

Recommendations for adapting TF-CBT for children with intellectual and developmental delays.

- D'Amico, P. J., Vogel, J. M., Mannarino, A. P., Hoffman, D. L., Briggs, E. C., Tunno, A. M., ... & Schwartz, R. M. (2022). Tailoring trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities: A survey of nationally certified TF-CBT therapists. *Evidence-Based Practice in Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 7(1), 112-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23794925.2021.1955639>