



## Tool 2: A Space of Safety

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*Part of the “Come on In: Reimagining Shelter as a Healing Space for Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse” toolkit*

One of the most important parts of providing shelter is creating that warm, safe, welcoming environment where guests can gather. Most often when folks think about shelter safety, they think about the exterior – where it’s located, the security systems in place, who has access to it. But in this tool, we want to shift our focus to discussing safety within the shelter – which can play an even bigger factor in a survivor’s sense of wellbeing.

Let’s explore what we mean when we use the word “safety.” It is important for shelters to embrace the understanding that safety is not the absence of harm. And that the absence of harm does not necessarily create a sense of safety. Everyone has their own definition of safety, and have had different experiences that contribute to where, when, and how they feel emotionally and physically safe.

**Broadly speaking, safety is about actively protecting yourself and being able to control the environment around you.** Safety can mean knowing how to calm yourself when you have triggering feelings or thoughts, or having the confidence in

your abilities to regulate yourself in the moment. There is no one list we can create of all the things that will make shelter guests feel safe. Instead, it's important to see safety planning as an ongoing collaboration and conversation between shelter guests and shelter advocates.

As shelter advocates, your most important role is supporting survivors in finding their way back to safety and healing. For adult survivors of child sexual abuse, the environment of the shelter can be deeply triggering: the lack of control over this new space, the lack of access to culturally affirming resources, the shared living areas, the lack of privacy. These can challenge an adult survivor of child sexual abuse's physical and emotional safety, and resurface memories and feelings from their past abuse. Shelter advocates play one of the most active and ongoing roles in helping shelter guests feel safe during their stay at the shelter.

Every survivor will have different needs and triggers while staying in shelter making it important to spend time creating individual safety plans. We should note, these individualized safety plans might break your shelter's universal rules. If so, it's time to rethink your shelter's approach to rules and regulations, and ask yourself:

- ▶ **Who are these rules and regulations benefiting?**
- ▶ **Who are they harming?**
- ▶ **Who are they biased against?**
- ▶ **Do we need them? If so, why?**

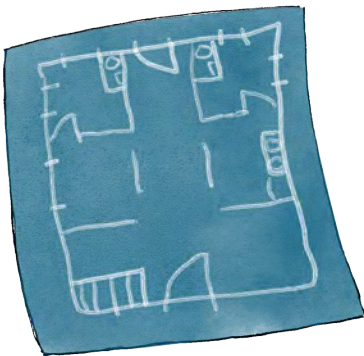
We'll talk more about evaluating and rethinking your shelter's rules and regulations in Tool 3 of this toolkit. Below, we're diving into suggestions and ideas on how to make your shelter environment feel safer and more supportive for each and every one of your shelter guests. As you begin – or continue! – this work of rethinking your shelter space, think about:

- ▶ **Assign one adult/family unit per bedroom.** Sharing a room with a stranger can be extremely triggering for an adult survivor of child sexual abuse. Assigning one adult/family unit per bedroom allows guests a sense of control and ownership over their own space. It also provides a place of respite if communal shelter areas feel too chaotic or overwhelming. While this type of assignment strategy may be a big change to shelter operations – and other shelter advocates may be concerned with serving less people – the trauma-informed service you provide will be much less stressful for both guests and shelter advocates. It will also provide survivors a greater sense of safety and, through personalized and supportive care, more space for healing.
- ▶ **Install bedroom door locks that guests have sole control over.** This will help guests feel safer because they can control which people are allowed in their personal space and when. For adult survivors of child sexual abuse, this is important as the bedroom can be a particularly triggering space.
- ▶ **Do not conduct room checks.** By stopping this practice, shelter advocates give more control to survivors what they bring in and how they keep their personal shelter spaces. This sense of control can increase the survivor's safety and comfort.

- ▶ **Make sure bathrooms can be locked. Ideally, each adult/family unit in the shelter would have access to their own locking bathroom.** If this is not possible, installing locks on the bathroom will help survivors feel a greater sense of safety in the space. Like the bedroom environment, bathrooms can often feel extremely vulnerable for adult survivors of child sexual abuse.
- ▶ **Allow shelter guests to manage their own personal belongings including food, prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, and substances.** When guests have to ask shelter advocates for access to their own belongings, it creates an unbalanced dynamic of power and control. Guests might even avoid asking for the things they need for fear of being judged or denied access by shelter advocates. The more control guests have over their environment, their decisions, and their belongings, the more physical and emotional safety they'll feel while staying in your shelter. If a guest desires, allow them to lock up their medications, food, or other belongings in individually assigned cabinets or compartments.



- ▶ **Allow shelter guests independent access over all basic hygiene needs including toilet paper, menstrual products, soap, shampoo, and more. Do not limit the amount of products an adult/family unit can have.** By giving shelter guests independent access over their own hygiene needs, this provides each survivor with a sense of personal agency, control over their own body, and ability to provide for themselves. It's also important to be aware that talking about personal hygiene and bodily functions may be triggering for adult survivors of child sexual abuse.



- ▶ **When a guest enters the space, give them a tour of the shelter.** This will give them a sense of safety knowing where things are and more about the routines/rhythms of the space.
- ▶ **During intake, get to know the guest in front of you.** The intake process is your chance as a shelter advocate to get to know your guest and for them to learn about you and the shelter. This is your time to ask about their comfort around bedroom and bathroom arrangements, curfews, food accommodations, and more to see what makes them feel safe and what might be retriggering in this space. Based on a guest's answers, you can help them create an plan to navigate this space in the safest way possible. But don't let it stop at the intake! It is important for advocates to also understand that a guest's safety concerns may not immediately make sense or may not immediately emerge. Continue checking in with your guests throughout their stay to see how their needs are changing, what's coming up for them, and ways that together you can continue building physical and emotional safety in the shelter space.

## Trauma-Informed Interior Design

The interior layout, decoration, and cleanliness of the shelter plays a huge part in how shelter guests feel safe and calm in the space. [The concept of trauma-informed design](#) focuses on transforming shelter environments from being places where people live into tools that can help in their healing process. This includes making spaces that:

- ▶ **Provide both privacy and a sense of community**
- ▶ **Give survivors agency and control over their surroundings**
- ▶ **Uphold survivors' dignity and self-worth**



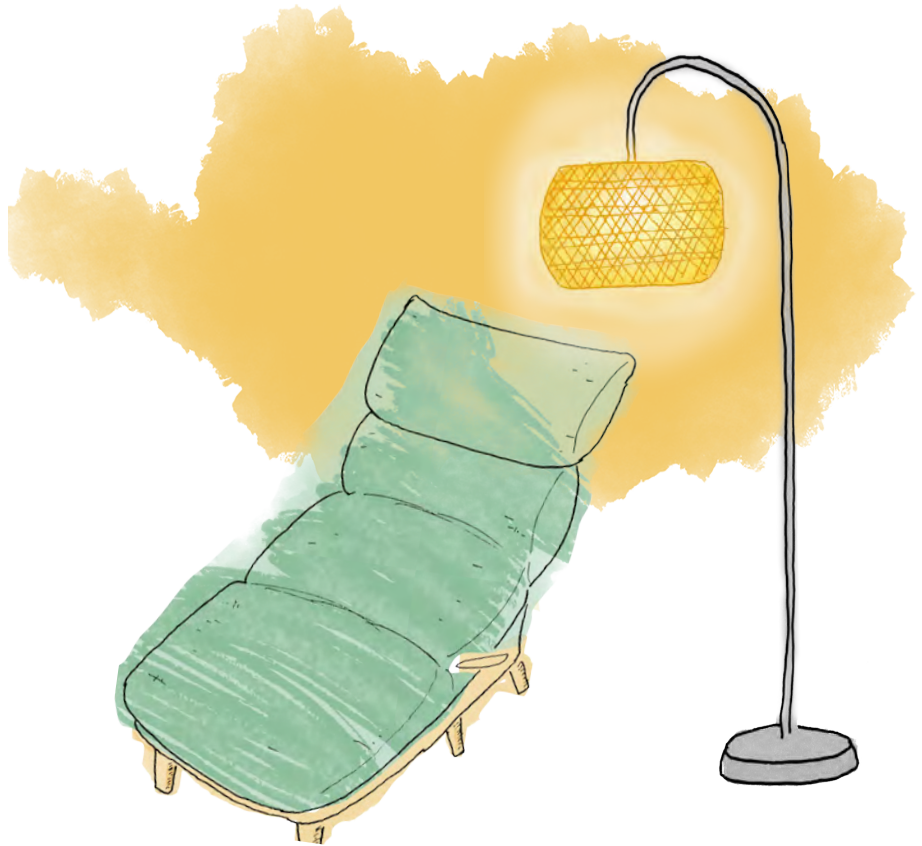
When the shelter space feels either chaotic or sterile, it can [trigger](#) survivors. While triggers are personal to each survivor, some elements that may feel generally retraumatizing include excessive clutter, disorganized or dark spaces, broken or very used furniture, clinical and sterile feeling rooms, and black bed frames reminiscent of institutionalized living. Investing in the interior design of your shelter space will go a long way towards building safety and providing more space for healing. To begin this transformation of your shelter space, we suggest:

- ▶ **Repaint walls with warm and light colors to make the rooms feel welcoming and airy.**
- ▶ **Talk with shelter guests about what they want/need in the shelter space.** Ask – “How can we make this space as flexible and easy to navigate as possible?” – to guide your design process. Running focus groups with current guests can help you plan a redesign for future guests. This also gives shelter guests a chance to participate in shelter decisions, which can make them feel valued.
- ▶ **Invest in new – or only slightly used – furniture that feels inviting to use.** This could include things like comfortable couches and armchairs with lots of pillows and blankets, matching tables and chairs, and bookcases to hold the shelter’s growing library of books, games, and media.
- ▶ **Declutter the space.** Get rid of furniture, toys, appliances, posters, or any tableware (plates, bowls, mugs, etc.) that are outdated or broken. Following your clean out, make a list of things of shelter needs and share this with the local community in a call for donations or partner with local organizations.
- ▶ **Install adequate storage to keep clutter and items out of sight.** This storage should be for both communal living objects as well as individual cubbies for guests’ personal belongings. These cubbies should include locks to increase guests’ sense of privacy and control over their belongings.

- ▶ **Incorporate design elements that represent the multiple communities you service.** Some examples include signage in multiple languages or making private spaces for guests to practice their religions.
- ▶ **Decorate with personal touches.** This includes things like wall art, curtains, throw blankets and pillows, plants, rugs, twinkle lights or soft lighting. Some of these can be acquired through collaborations with local artists or by hosting arts & craft nights with shelter guests. Be sure to include items that represent the cultural identities of your community.
- ▶ **Connect with nature.** As one of the major principles of trauma-informed design, bring in nature or a connection with nature into the shelter space. This can be achieved through natural materials for décor and furniture, plants both inside and outside the shelter space, and even the maintaining of an outdoor community vegetable garden.
- ▶ **Take out harsh, sterile lighting and replace it with a variety of warm, soft overhead lights and lamps around the space.**







## *Creating Safety Plans*

As a shelter advocate, you have a lot of experience safety planning with survivors of domestic violence. Safety planning with survivors of sexual violence – particularly adult survivors of child sexual abuse – might feel new and confusing. We’re here to reassure you that you already have all the tools you need to hold these valuable and important conversations.

Safety planning is developing a plan that helps a survivor accept, contend with, and make decisions about their response to trauma. The best way to begin these conversations is to ask the survivor what their needs are. It’s important to be aware that describing feelings and emotions may not be something some survivors are able to do or were allowed to do in the past. Try presenting different ways the survivor can communicate with you, like drawing, writing things down, recording their feelings in private and sharing with the advocate to listen to later.

When a shelter guest describes a concern, it is your job to help them identify

what might help them feel safer. If a survivor can't yet envision exactly what these improvements may be, it's your role to present options for their consideration, always putting them in charge of the ultimate decision of how (or even, if) they want to move forward. To help facilitate safety planning, here are some trauma-informed questions that you can work into conversations. Please do not go through these questions like an interview or checklist. It's better to have them in mind and use them in conversation as appropriate.

- ▶ What is your worst fear being here at our shelter? What can we do to alleviate this fear?
- ▶ Describe what your body feels like when you feel this way?
- ▶ What are your thoughts and feelings when you feel this way?
- ▶ What do you notice is happening around you when you start to feel unsafe?
- ▶ Is there something you can carry with you or is in your home that may help to ground you? (Something they can touch, see, hear or smell)
- ▶ Is there a message you can use to help with the anxiety? (Self-talk, note card, mantra, saying or message on electronic device)
- ▶ Who is best to support you when you experience unsafe feelings? (Friend, family, helpline, counselor)
- ▶ Do you have a readily available list of support contacts you can access? (On their phone, in a wallet, etc.)
- ▶ Is there a hobby or creative outlet that would help you work through unsafe feelings?
- ▶ What has helped in the past when you felt this way?
- ▶ When you envision yourself in a room that feels very safe, what do you see and how do you feel?
- ▶ Are there habits or routines that make you feel safe? What objects or support do you need to complete these routines?

As we talked about in Tool 1: Groundwork for Healing, making shelters safer for adult survivors of child sexual abuse is just as much about creating emotional safety as it is physical safety. Our goal as a healing-centered movement is to give survivors as much autonomy and control over their own decisions, bodies, and spaces as possible to affirm and empower their healing.

*For more resources on building safety through trauma-informed design and assessing the physical safety of your shelter space, we recommend:*

- ▶ [Picturing Your Program](#) (pg. 46 - 53) - How to assess the physical safety of your space
- ▶ [Building Cultures of Care](#) (pg. 26 - 27) - Creating welcoming spaces
- ▶ [Trauma-Informed Design Framework](#)
- ▶ [The Importance of Trauma-Informed Design](#)
- ▶ [Building Dignity: Design Strategies for Domestic Violence Shelters](#)
- ▶ [Trauma-Informed Practices \(Portland Homeless Family Solutions\)](#)

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