

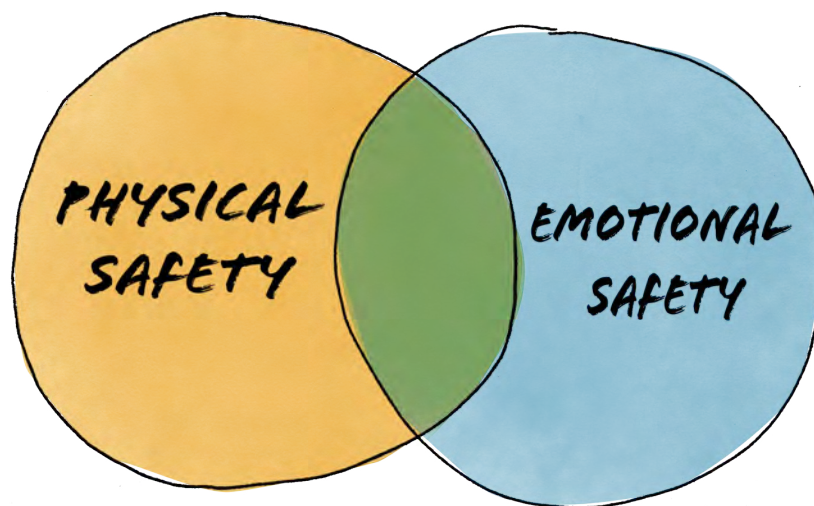
Tool 1: Groundwork for Healing

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

The goal of shelters is to provide survivors of domestic and sexual violence a place to land, catch their breath, and regroup in a safe supportive place. This is what drives us in this work. As those of us working in shelters know, this work can be just as rewarding and fulfilling as it can be challenging and draining.

As the anti-sexual violence field learned in the [Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative \(SADI\)](#), the current way in which dual and multi-service shelter programs function isn't actually meeting the needs of survivors of sexual violence. This includes adult survivors of child sexual abuse, whose experiences, safety, and care is the focus of this toolkit. By learning how to better support adult survivors of child sexual abuse, you will also learn how to better support all survivors of sexual violence coming into shelter.

Creating safe spaces for healing is the center of the work of shelters. This includes both physical and emotional safety. But as often happens while creating the rules and systems of our shelters, staff are so focused on providing physical safety that emotional safety is overlooked. For survivors of sexual violence, especially adult survivors of child sexual abuse, emotional safety is crucial for a survivor's wellbeing. Without this trauma-informed attention, survivors can be triggered and retraumatized by the very services meant to support healing.



This toolkit will use the term “shelter advocates” to refer to all personnel working within the shelter. This decision is based on the beliefs that:

- ▶ every employee can advocate for and support all survivors staying in shelter, and
- ▶ every employee deserves comprehensive benefits and resources that protect their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

If you work at a shelter in a rural community, you're probably juggling a lot of different responsibilities. This can make it hard to engage in further training or reflect on what's working and not working within your shelter system. This toolkit provides guidance on how to make your shelter more inclusive and trauma-informed for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. The toolkit offers a variety of suggestions. Some of these suggestions are easy and won't cost your shelter any money to implement. Others will take financial involvement, community support, and radical imagination.

For those of you already doing the work of revising your rules and practices to better support the survivors of domestic violence accessing your shelter, these tools can empower and inspire you to go farther on the trauma-informed path you're already on.

It's important to regularly make the time for reflection because it's often a shelter's own practices, rules, and structures that get in the way of being a safe place for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Many common structures and practices are rooted in racism, oppression, and ableism. These practices put particular emphasis on what safety looks like for white and able-bodied survivors, and not what safety means for survivors of color, queer and trans survivors, survivors with disabilities, Deaf survivors, and survivors with other marginalized identities. It's part of your ongoing work to dismantle these systems of oppression within the shelter to create real – rather than perceived – safe spaces of healing.

The Effects of Child Sexual Abuse

Understanding the long-term effects that child abuse can have on an individual is the foundation to serving adult survivors of child sexual abuse. When a person experiences sexual abuse as a child, their nervous system is overwhelmed and brain development is disrupted. This change to the nervous system can last well into adulthood and deeply impact a person's physical, mental, sexual, and spiritual health. Not only might a survivor have long-term physical effects from their past trauma (ex. pain, chronic illness, injuries), but emotional effects as well.

Depending on the circumstances of the abuse, a survivor may:

- ▶ **feel nervous around authority figures,**
- ▶ **distrust new people, places, or experiences, or**
- ▶ **be overly compliant to rules or the expectations of others.**

If a survivor told someone about their abuse when they were a child and they weren't believed, were shamed, or nothing was done, they may have decided never to mention the abuse to anyone again. Adult survivors of child sexual abuse may also never have learned what safety felt or looked like as a child, and find themselves in a constant state of hyper-vigilance, stress, and distrust. When combined with experiences of racism and oppression, the effects of trauma can be further heightened and multiplied for survivors of color, queer survivors, survivors with disabilities, and survivors with other marginalized identities.

Adult survivors of child sexual abuse may also experience:

- ▶ **Night terrors or trouble sleeping in a bed (where the abuse may have happened).**
- ▶ **Dissociation or disconnecting from their body. This may feel like floating outside of their body, memory loss, or experiencing flashbacks that feel more like a dream than reality.**
- ▶ **Anxiety, depression, or other mental health conditions caused by the mind's attempt to cope with and protect the survivor from memories of their trauma.**
- ▶ **Substance use that was adopted by the survivor as a coping mechanism to deal with the abuse and its effects.**

It's important for shelter advocates to understand that while many adult survivors of child sexual abuse may be feeling the stress and emotions of their past trauma, they may not be displaying any signs of these externally. An adult survivor of child sexual abuse might not disclose their past experiences of trauma during intake, or ever, while staying in shelter. This makes it even more important for shelter advocates to be aware and proactive in providing trauma-informed, individualized care for all survivors in the shelter.

Common Shelter Practices Can Be Triggering

There are some common shelter practices that can be retraumatizing for adult survivors of child sexual abuse:

- ▶ **Sharing rooms.** Adult survivors of child sexual abuse may feel uncomfortable or unsafe sleeping in a room with a stranger.
- ▶ **Rules regulating where guests are allowed or not allowed to sleep.** Adult survivors of child sexual abuse may feel uncomfortable or unsafe sleeping in a bed at all.
- ▶ **Rules regulating what time guests need to go to bed, get up in the morning, or be in their room for “curfew.”** It’s common for adult survivors of child sexual abuse to have trouble sleeping in general. They may prefer to be up during the night and sleep during the day, a less triggering time.
- ▶ **Shelter advocates having access to bedrooms 24/7.** This can trigger an adult survivor of child sexual abuse who feels like they don’t have control over their space.
- ▶ **Shelter advocates conducting room checks** and the survivor not having control over what they can and can’t keep in their room.
- ▶ **Sharing bathrooms.** Adult survivors of child sexual abuse may have strong privacy needs about bathing and personal hygiene.
- ▶ **Not being allowed independent access to prescription and/or over-the-counter meds.** Shelters often require these to be locked up and that guests must ask shelter advocates for access. This takes away a survivor’s agency to care for themselves and creates a power dynamic between shelter advocates and shelter guests.
- ▶ **Having to ask for personal hygiene items** such as toilet paper, menstrual products, soap etc. This takes away a survivor’s agency to care for themselves and creates a power dynamic between shelter advocates and shelter guests.

- ▶ **Monitoring guests comings and goings** by requiring them to check in and check out. This takes away a survivor's agency to care for themselves and creates a power dynamic between shelter advocates and shelter guests.
- ▶ **The lack of community** and rules about having guests at the shelter can be incredibly isolating and difficult for survivors.
- ▶ **Rules regarding substance use** can take away a coping tool that some survivors use to manage the effects of trauma.
- ▶ **The chaos of communal living**, and a disorganized interior design of a shelter, can exacerbate a survivor's internal feelings of stress and lack of control.
- ▶ **The use of law enforcement as the only means of transportation to the shelter.** Being confined in a police car, being near officers, or seeing the presence of officers at the shelter can be frightening or triggering.
- ▶ **Having strangers around one's kids** can trigger anxiety about their safety, which often then brings up memories of the abuse.
- ▶ **Seeing dynamics of other families** – especially parental interaction with kids - can be triggering for adult survivors of child sexual abuse.
- ▶ **The mere presence of children** – especially in small spaces – might retrigger memories of the survivor's own child or family dynamics.

How Shelter Advocates Can Better Serve Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

The hope of this work is to build a world that's safer for survivors. But sometimes while trying to make places that are safe for everyone, shelters lose sight of individual's needs. As a shelter advocate, you have one of the most important roles in making these changes happen. You already have the advocacy tools you need to make the shelter more healing focused. These skills include:

- ▶ Helping a survivor recognize and use their existing strengths and resources.
- ▶ Using intake, one-on-one conversations, and check-ins to learn about a survivor's experience of shelter and unique safety needs.
- ▶ Helping to expand a survivor's toolbox of coping strategies, including practices that are grounded in their cultural identity.
- ▶ Remembering that it's not your role to fix or remove pain or obstacles that stand in a survivor's way. Your role is presenting options and empowering a survivor to decide what is right for them.
- ▶ Being present over time. A survivor's needs and sense of safety will evolve over time, making an ongoing and trusting relationship important between you and your shelter guests.
- ▶ Using every opportunity to give agency and the power of choice back to a survivor to validate and empower them.



Adult survivors of child sexual abuse are already in shelters – even if the primary reason they sought shelter is for another reason. It’s up to all advocates to change shelters from the inside out. This starts by relearning advocacy skills and unlearning biases. In this toolkit, you will find tools on:

- ▶ Tool 2: A Space for Safety
- ▶ Tool 3: Polishing our Practices and Procedures
- ▶ Tool 4: Our Culture as an Investment
- ▶ Tool 5: Connection and Community
- ▶ Tool 6: An Open Invitation



These tools will help you start the conversation. Or for those of you already talking about trauma-informed shelter care, it’s our hope these tools further empower and validate your work, and bring new ideas to the table. Because when shelters care for adult survivors of child sexual abuse, they care for all survivors looking for safety and respite.

Conclusion

We're grateful and inspired by the work you're doing to rethink and rebuild your shelter rules, practices, and spaces to be more healing and supportive of adult survivors of child sexual abuse. For those of you already doing the work to provide trauma-informed care and actively dismantle the systems of oppression within our field, we see you and we thank you.

As you begin – or continue – this work of better serving adult survivors of child sexual abuse in shelters, we want to continue supporting you. [Please reach out to our rural technical assistance team](#) for further information, training, advice, and more on how we can continue these important conversations together.

This toolkit is part of a larger series of work RSP has produced called “Building Resilience,” focused on providing better understanding and care for all adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Other resources that we think would be helpful to your work include:

- ▶ [Building Resilience: Conversations with and about Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ▶ Building Resilience Toolkit: Serving Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse Navigating Mental Health and Substance Use

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