



# **Come on In: Reimagining Shelter as a Healing Space for Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**

by Valerie Davis and  
Leah Green

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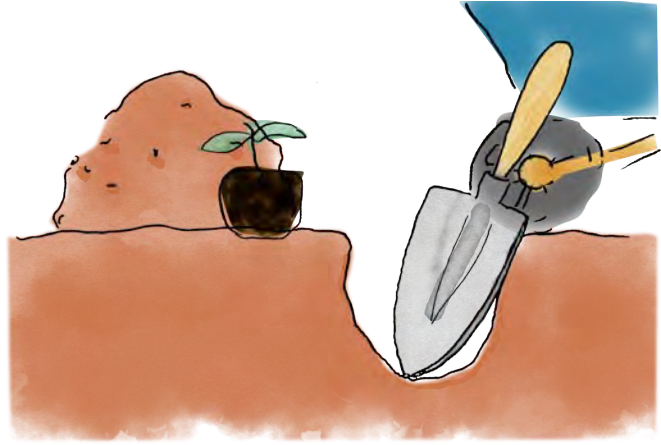
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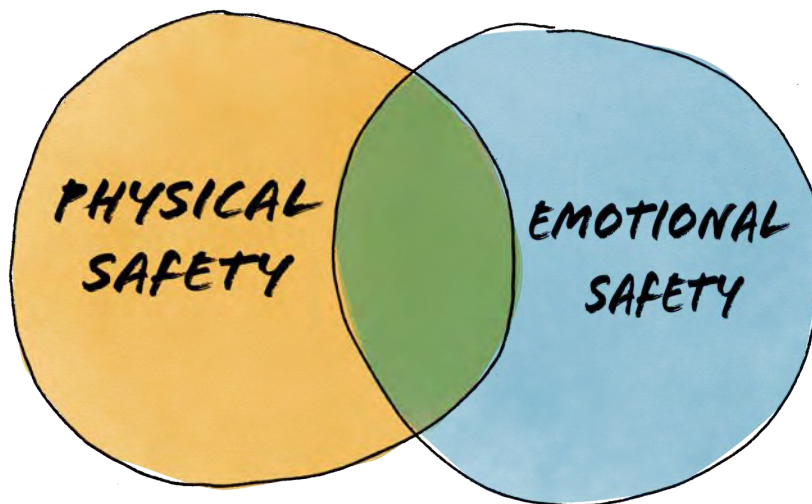
# Tool 1: Groundwork for Healing

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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



## Tool 2: A Space of Safety

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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:

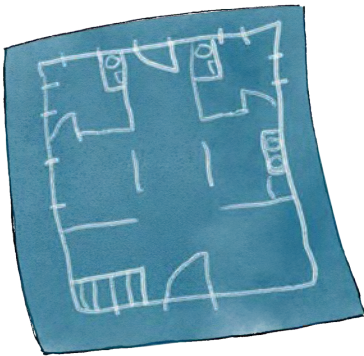
- **Assign one adult/family unit per bedroom.** Sharing a room with a stranger can be extremely triggering for an adult survivor of child sexual abuse. Assigning one adult/family unit per bedroom allows guests a sense of control and ownership over their own space. It also provides a place of respite 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:

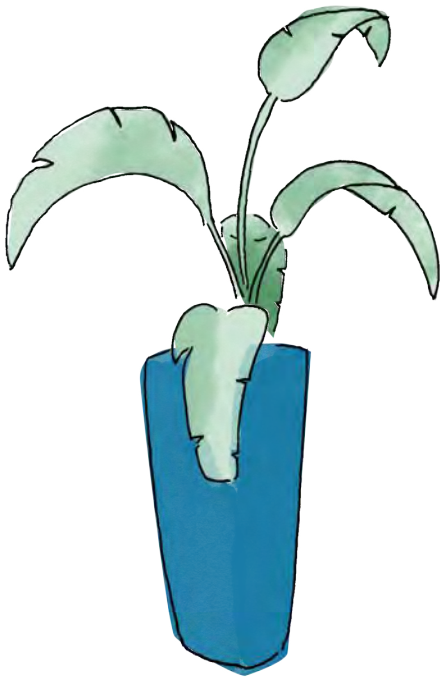
- ▶ **Provide both privacy and a sense of community**
- ▶ **Give survivors agency and control over their surroundings**
- ▶ **Uphold survivors' dignity and self-worth**

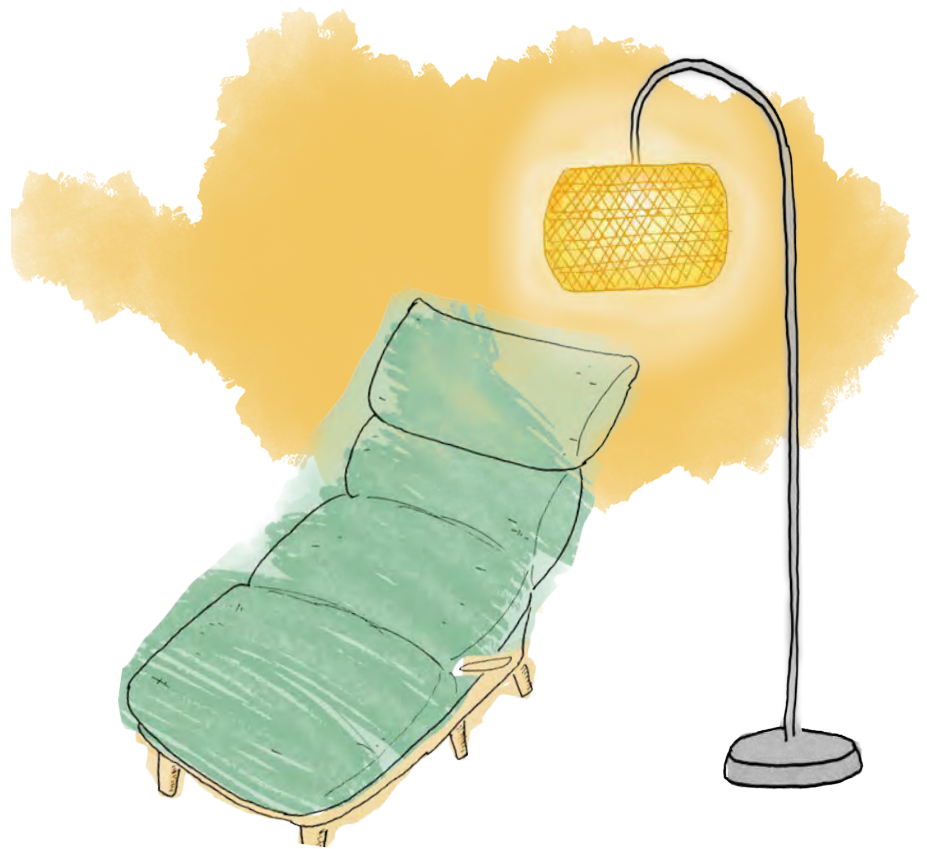


When the shelter space feels either chaotic or sterile, it can [trigger](#) survivors. While triggers are personal to each survivor, some elements that may feel generally retraumatizing include excessive clutter, disorganized or dark spaces, broken or very used furniture, clinical and sterile feeling 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 \(Portland Homeless Family Solutions\)](#)





## Tool 3: Polishing Our Practices and Procedures

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A shelter's policies and procedures (including shelter rules) can either support or hinder your ability to serve survivors in a trauma-informed, healing-centered way. As you work to make your shelter services more supportive for adult survivors of child sexual abuse, the most important step to start with is reviewing and updating the current shelter rules to better align with trauma-informed values.

Within shelters, rules have often been created to prevent harm. However, many of these rules – which were made with a “one size fits all” mindset – can be retraumatizing for survivors of sexual violence. These rules tend to put a focus 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.

Rules by their very nature are meant to control and modify a person's behaviors. In their experiences with abuse, survivors of sexual violence and domestic violence have had their basic bodily autonomy and choices taken away. When shelter rules do the same, they're no longer keeping shelter guests safe. Nor are they creating an environment where healing can happen.

For adult survivors of child sexual abuse, privacy and a sense of control (over their environment, their routine, their decisions, etc.) are two of the most important factors in feeling safe. Knowing this, shelter rules and practices need to be restructured in a way that promotes survivor empowerment and helps shelter guests regain a sense of control over their own lives.

The best approach to doing this is through individualized, one-on-one advocacy with each shelter guest. This advocacy begins with intake and continues throughout the entire guest's stay. This allows shelter advocates and shelter guests to build a trusting and present relationship where guests feel safe sharing their needs, triggers, and thoughts as they come up over time.

Tool 2: A Space of Safety offered up organizational changes on how to help guests feel a greater sense of safety within your shelter space as well as how to safety plan with survivors of sexual violence. Tool 3: Polishing our Practices and Procedures focuses on examining and revising your current shelter rules and practices to be more trauma-informed and supportive of survivors of sexual violence, specifically adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

**It's important to understand that how a shelter assesses and develops their policies is equally as important as what the policies say.** It's vital that everyone working at the shelter have a shared understanding of the context for all policies



and the core organizational values they support. This will help shelter advocates better understand how and why these rules (or lack thereof) have been created and how they can implement them in a trauma-informed, supportive way.

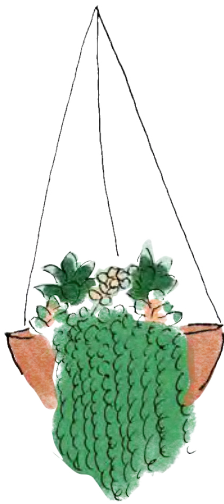
**Remember, the goal of trauma-informed care in shelter is to provide the best quality and most personalized care to every guest.** Keeping this in mind, here are some guiding questions\* to help you update your current rules and practices. For those of you already doing the work of revising, consider these questions an opportunity to inspire new ideas and reignite personal and team conversations around your current practices and structures.

- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the values of privacy, respect, and empowerment?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the value of personalized and/or individualized advocacy?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the value of creating culturally relevant services? For example, is smudging allowed in your shelter? If not, what needs to change so that your shelter can allow this cultural practice?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the value of equalizing power and privilege?



- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the value of open and honest communication? Does it encourage survivors to hide, deny, or adjust their experiences with us?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with our knowledge and understanding of the impact of trauma? How might it contribute to triggers or retraumatization?
- ▶ How does the language used in this practice, rule, or procedure include or exclude survivors of sexual violence as participants in services? Consider these examples of excluding: Referring to abusive partners, referring specifically to domestic violence services, or stating that all guests have experienced violence in their home.

*\* These questions were adapted from [How the Earth Didn't Fly into the Sun: Missouri's Project to Reduce Rules in Domestic Violence Shelters](#).*



### *Additional questions to consider:*

- ▶ What was the context when this practice, rule, or procedure was set?
- ▶ Is today's context the same as when the practice, rule, or procedure was set? What's different?
- ▶ Whose needs are prioritized by this practice, rule, or procedure?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure impact survivors?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure impact shelter advocates?
- ▶ Does this practice, rule, or procedure recognize shelter advocates and/or survivors in all aspects of their identities?

- ▶ How is this practice, rule, or procedure implemented?
  - » If there is a disconnection between policy or rule and practice, why is that?
  - » Should the practice be instituted into policy or rule, or do you need to change practices?
  
- ▶ What would it feel like to have a survivor seeking services learn about these practices, rules, and procedures? To gain a larger understanding of how practices, rules, and procedures are meeting or not meeting the needs of guests, shelters may want to consider including the following questions on exit evaluations/satisfaction surveys:
  - » How did you feel when you read or learned about the rules for the first time?
  - » What do you see the rules accomplishing?
  - » Have you ever wanted to do something that the rules prevented you from doing? How did this feel?

For additional information about updating your shelter rules and to read about the experiences of real shelter programs, check-out:

- ▶ [How the Earth Didn't Fly into the Sun: Missouri's Project to Reduce Rules in Domestic Violence Shelters](#)
- ▶ [Building Dignity: Design Strategies for Domestic Violence Shelters](#)







## Tool 4: Our Culture as an Investment

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Shelter advocates work incredibly hard and care deeply about the survivors they serve. And, shelter advocates are constantly asked to do the most with the least. Shelter advocates tend to receive the least pay, be the least supported with training, and receive the least supervisory support and space to debrief about their work.

And despite having the hardest job in programs, shelter advocates are still asked to take on almost all the roles within the shelter at once – especially during evenings, overnights, and weekends. This includes being the sole shelter personnel on duty, supporting and advocating for all guests (adults and children) in the shelter, and answering the helpline. These tasks, when combined, make it impossible for shelter advocates to be properly present, actively listen, and support shelter guests.

In response to this tremendous amount of responsibility, shelter advocates are burning out, becoming detached, and feeling like they're just going through the motions in their interactions with survivors. They might also be coping with triggers or resurfacing traumatic memories of their own. In trying to manage all that's being asked of them, shelter advocates might, understandably, lean towards creating rigid rules and expectations to make their jobs manageable. But it's these types of rules that can be retraumatizing for survivors accessing shelter services and discourage them from developing a trusting relationship with shelter advocates.

**To properly continue trauma-informed shelter work, everyone in this field has to prioritize the wellness of shelter advocates in a more holistic way.**

By giving shelter advocates the resources, training, and support they deserve, they will have more flexibility, more curiosity, and more creativity in their interactions with survivors. We recommend you spend time talking with your shelter advocates about their individual needs, concerns, etc. and coupled with these trauma-informed strategies, create a plan to better prioritize their well-being moving forward.

## *Tenets of Trauma-Informed Work*



# *Strategies for Prioritizing the Well-Being of Shelter Advocates*

## *1. Practice Empowering Leadership*

- ▶ Remind shelter advocates of their value to your organization – both as human beings and as important resources to the community.
- ▶ Use trauma-informed supervision practices. In the same way that adult survivors of child sexual abuse deserve to receive trauma-informed services from our shelters, shelter advocates also deserve trauma-informed workplaces. Trauma-informed supervision considers the cumulative exposure to stressful and traumatic situations – including personal experiences with racism and oppression – that shelter advocates experience. This type of supervision then works to actively reduce the effects of these experiences by providing consistent opportunities for reflection, debriefing, and support. For more information on trauma-informed supervision, [visit our website](#) for the following resources: [Change Starts Within: Strengthening Services](#) and [Building Cultures of Care: A Guide for Sexual Assault Services Programs](#).

## *2. Create a work culture that supports and practices wellness.*

- ▶ Ensure shelter advocates have manageable workloads.
- ▶ Do not have shelter advocates be the sole person on duty. If you're a small team, utilize the assistance of volunteers – especially during busier times like evenings, overnights, and weekends.
- ▶ Do not have shelter advocates answer [the helpline](#) while on duty, but instead delegate this responsibility to volunteers or other staff. This will help free up your shelter advocate's ability to be more present with shelter guests and manage their other responsibilities.

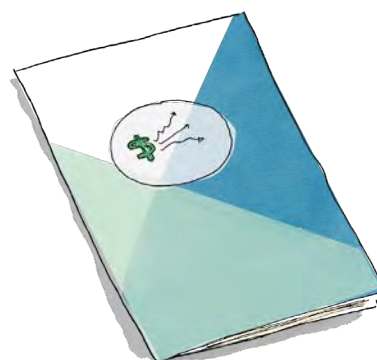
- ▶ Explore what behaviors are being rewarded in your organization. Are you telling shelter advocates to set boundaries but then actually rewarding self-sacrificing behaviors, such as rarely using sick or vacation time? If so, it's important to realign your organization's practices with its messages.

### *3. Provide Initial and On-going Training*

- ▶ Provide all shelter advocates training specific to serving adult survivors of child sexual abuse as well as opportunities for continued training.
- ▶ Provide ongoing anti-racism and anti-oppression training and discussions that support conversations between shelter advocates, within the larger community, and between others doing this work.

### *4. Put time, thought, and money into comprehensive and holistic benefits.*

- ▶ Pay all shelter advocates a competitive, living wage. This includes providing simple IRA retirement funds with an organizational match.
- ▶ Provide health, dental, and vision insurance with the organization contributing a large portion of the premium.
- ▶ Provide shelter advocates with adequate vacation and sick time. This necessitates organizational commitment and structures that allow shelter advocates to take time off.





## 5. *Stand Together*

- ▶ Hold regular team meetings that are accessible to all shelter advocates. Create opportunities for shelter advocates to meaningfully contribute to the planning and agenda setting of these meetings.
  
- ▶ Provide structural relief via “relief workers” who would be hourly, on contract, etc.
  - » “Relief workers” would allow shelter advocates to periodically and regularly get away from the busy work environment to have focused meetings and retreats together.
  - » “Relief workers” would make it more possible for shelter advocates to take mental health days, sick days, vacation days, and/or be relieved of some crisis-related duties – especially when they themselves are in crisis or emotional hardship in their personal life.
  
- ▶ Create a work culture that promotes joy and connection as an antidote to vicarious trauma.
  - » Encourage connections, morale, and relationships through working in teams, social activities, and peer support networks.
  - » Celebrate successes together

The strategies in this tool are taken from a workshop, “Supporting and Sustaining Our Staff,” presented by Mira Yusef and Valerie Davis at the 2017 National Sexual Assault Conference.

# Tool 5: Connection and Community

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When survivors of sexual violence and domestic violence enter shelters, they can become isolated from their friends, family, and support systems. Healing is as much about helping a survivor address the effects of their trauma as it is about encouraging their connections to joy and fun. Connection and community are foundational for healing. They're not only important to a survivor's healing in the moment, but for their future healing as well. In current shelter systems, there are many common practices causing continued isolation for shelter guests, including:

- requiring guests to keep the shelter's location confidential.
- barring guests from bringing friends, family, and other service providers into the shelter.
- discouraging communication and/or relationships between shelter guests to try and maintain guest confidentiality.
- believing that advocates should focus solely on the trauma that brought someone to shelter and therefore discouraging joy and fun.

Sexual violence is an inherently isolating experience. Because of this, community and the act of building community offers an incredible opportunity for healing, especially for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. **Building and being part of a community allows survivors to feel connected and in sync with others, helps with emotional regulation, and creates a communal rhythm that benefits a survivor's nervous systems.** It's important to take the time to rethink what fostering community could look like between guests – and between guests and their outside-of-shelter relationships – to better support the survivors accessing your services.

Here are a few trauma-informed tips on how shelter guests can stay connected with family, friends, and other care providers, and how guests can build community with one another. These tips are just a starting point. We recommend taking time to brainstorm more ideas inspired by your community's unique needs – specifically keeping in mind the needs of adult survivors of child sexual abuse accessing your services.

## *Ways to Keep Shelter Guests Connected to Family, Friends, and Necessary Supports*

- ▶ Allow family, friends, and other service providers to pick up and drop off survivors at the shelter instead of blocks away.
- ▶ Allow multi-generational households to stay at the shelter.
- ▶ Provide a place for shelter guests to meet in-person with their loved ones and other service providers. Preferably this would be at the shelter. However, if this isn't possible, create a comfortable living room type space at your outreach office for shelter guests to regularly use.



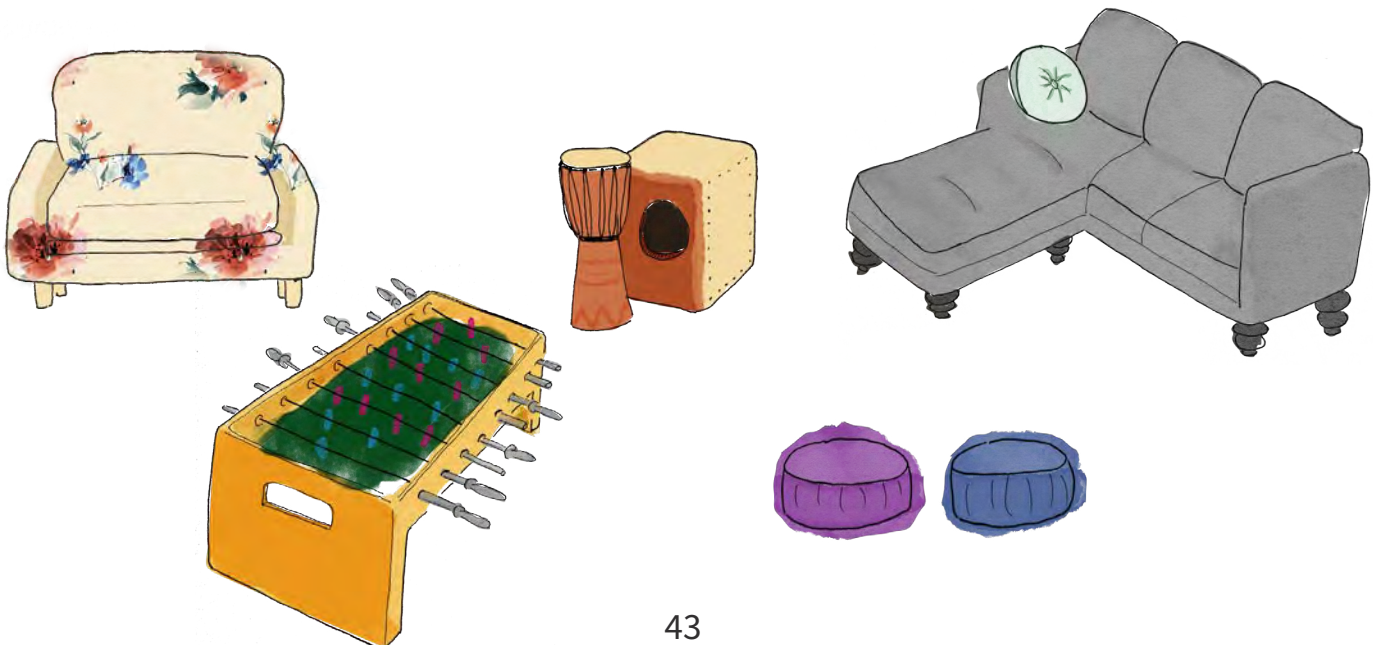
- ▶ Provide access to private phone calls, text messages, and/or social media apps.
- ▶ Create an environment where shelter guests are supported in spending time with friends and family – including having overnight visits away from the shelter.
- ▶ Provide the space and ingredients that encourages guests to prepare and cook the food that makes them feel connected to their family, friends, and cultural identities.



## *Ways Shelter Guests Can Care and Support One Another*

- ▶ Offer guests opportunities for support groups, including those that are centered around joy and fun. To make this as trauma-informed and holistic as possible, check in with shelter guests about what they'd like to see brought into the space and try and facilitate these needs.
- ▶ Teach grounding skills and emotional regulation skills to all guests. This allows guests to know how to comfort each other when they see each other in distress.
- ▶ Provide fun opportunities where guests are encouraged to interact with one another should they desire. This could happen through regular potlucks, movie nights, book clubs, board games, musical performances, art classes, yoga classes, beauty sessions at local salons, dance classes, etc.

Fostering a sense of community will look and feel different for every guest so make the time to regularly check in and ask shelter guests how they would like to build community within the shelter.







## Tool 6: An Open Invitation

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Currently, shelters are set up to primarily serve survivors of domestic violence, many of whom may also be adult survivors of child sexual abuse. While some shelters are available to folks who have recently experienced sexual violence, they often still require survivors to be in imminent danger to qualify for services. The reality of sexual violence is that many survivors of recent sexual assault might not qualify for shelter services in the days or weeks following the violence. But despite not qualifying, survivors still need a safe space that will help them cope and embark on their healing journeys.

Adult survivors of child sexual abuse, are also unlikely to meet current shelter requirements of being in imminent danger, unless they are experiencing other forms of violence such as domestic abuse. While their abuse might be in the past, they may continue to have long-term effects of the sexual violence like flashbacks or lack of emotional safety. But shelters can be a place of respite for these adult survivors of child sexual abuse as they regain their balance and form connections with support systems.

The 'imminent danger' requirement to access shelters mean they serve only a small percentage of the survivor population. Instead, what if shelters were a place of respite for all survivors of sexual violence by removing this requirement? This would allow you to provide resources and build ongoing relationships with even more survivors in your community, including adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

By making your shelters a recognized support for any survivor of any form of sexual violence, you could serve many more survivors currently without your support, including:

- ▶ Adult survivors of child sexual abuse who are not currently experiencing domestic violence
- ▶ Survivors of sexual violence who are currently experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing. Oftentimes, in dealing with the ongoing effects of their trauma, survivors may experience homelessness or inadequate housing. A shelter can provide both respite and emotional support.
- ▶ Adult survivors of child sexual abuse who have stable housing and employment, but who are currently experiencing a temporary emotional crisis. This may look like an acute lack of emotional safety, flashbacks, disconnection, or other long-term impacts of sexual violence.
- ▶ Survivors of sexual violence who were recently released from prison or jail.
- ▶ Survivors who need community or more regular emotional support. For example, a survivor who is starting a new therapy practice and does not want to be alone.
- ▶ Survivors with previous experiences of abuse that need a few days to rest and reset.

**To make shelters more inclusive and accessible to survivors within our communities, the current shelter models of communal living must be reconsidered and instead, move towards apartment style living.** “Apartment style living” is a shelter model in which each individual survivor/family unit stays in living spaces that include bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, etc. separate from other guests. These apartments will often be grouped together in the same building or complex in which communal space will also be available for survivors to gather and connect with one another. These types of programs will also have shelter advocates onsite to provide support and advocacy to survivors. The benefits of shifting to this practice include:

- ▶ Survivors can live independently and with agency over their space, but with built in support.
- ▶ More flexibility for survivors of all physical and cognitive abilities, gender identities, and differing health, safety, and healing needs.
- ▶ Shelter advocates can more easily employ the recommendations outlined in Tools 2-5 of this toolkit.
- ▶ As the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, separate living spaces keep viruses from spreading.



As you begin to rethink the rules and systems of your shelter, this is the time to rethink who you're currently serving and how you could be supporting even more survivors in your community who need emotional support and resources. The healing journey for survivors of sexual violence – especially adult survivors of child sexual abuse – is ongoing, making it deeply important that shelter services are open and supportive to this continuous process.

