



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**

**FACTOR-INWENTASH**  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK

# **Working with Vulnerable Youth Online: A Trauma-Informed Approach**

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# Context: Teen Dating Violence

**20%**

of Canadian teens  
report being  
victimized by  
physical dating  
violence.

**35%**

of Canadian teens  
report emotional  
and psychological  
violence.

**10-30%**

of Canadian teens  
report being  
victimized  
by cyber dating  
violence.

(PREVNet, 2020)

# Context: Teen Sexual Violence

**55%**

of Canadian victims of sexual assault are under the age of 18

(Cotter & Beaupré, 2014)

**>80%**

of these complainants are female

(Cotter & Beaupré, 2014)

**33%**

of Canadian teenagers & young women 15-24 had experienced online sexual harassment in the past 12 months

(Cotter & Savage, 2019)

# Context: COVID-19

**9**

women & girls  
across Canada  
have been killed  
in domestic homicides  
in 1 month of pandemic

(Hayes, 2020)

**12%**

of teenagers & young  
women 15-24 are very  
or extremely anxious  
about the possibility of  
violence in the home

(Government of Canada, 2020b).

**24%**

of the 112% increase of  
calls to Kids Help Phone  
are related to physical  
violence in the home

(Miller, 2020).

# Context: COVID-19

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## ***Increased violence at home***

- Must maintain awareness that the home environment may not be a safe space (Campbell, 2020; Dimond et al., 2011).
- COVID-19 has led to increased confinement with perpetrators, economic precarity & reduced access to protection services (Tran et al., 2020).
- Gender-based violence & sexual exploitation & abuse are expected to further increase (Tran et al., 2020).

# Context: COVID-19

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## *Unsafe environments*

- Youth who live in “socially toxic” environments characterized by systemic barriers, such as community violence, discrimination & poverty may experience symptoms of trauma
  - Such as emotional distress & feelings of helplessness
  - Likely further exacerbated by the current health pandemic

(Bulanda & Byro Johnson, 2016, p. 304).

# Context: COVID-19

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## ***Potential increase in online teen dating violence***

- The sudden switch to digital technologies for all connectivity increases teenagers' vulnerability to cyber-based violence (Ragavan et al., 2020).
- Increased reliance on technology creates opportunities for cyber abuse whereby:
  - Abusive partners control, stalk, or discredit their partners through texts, social media, or mobile Apps (Ragavan et al., 2020).

# Context: COVID-19

## ***Potential increase in online sexual pressure***

- Female adolescents who experience offline sexual coercion (Choi et al., 2016; Kernsmith et al., 2018) & dating violence (Bianchi et al., 2018) are more likely to report online sexual coercion & sexting under pressure.
- *Offline sexual coercion:*
  - “Pressuring a dating partner to have sex without a condom, insisting on sex when partner did not want to, &/or using threats to pressure a partner into having sex” (Kernsmith et al., 2018)
  - “Ever giving in to sex play (fondling, kissing, or petting, but not intercourse)” or “giving in to sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because you were overwhelmed by a man’s continual argument or pressure” (Choi et al., 2016).

# Context: COVID-19

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## *Potential increase in online sexual pressure*

- Female adolescents are **often repeatedly asked, pressured, or coerced** to send self-made sexually explicit pictures (Ringrose et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2013).
- Given **likely decline of in-person sexual coercion & harassment**, due to social distancing measures, can presume that **online sexual pressure** (repeated solicitations, bribery, & threats to receive sexual images) **will take its place**.
- Unfortunately, once these images are sent they **can be used to blackmail & further harass teenagers** (Gamez-Guadix & Mateos-Perez, 2019; Walker et al., 2013).

# Context: COVID-19

## *Potential increase in online sexual harassment*

- Offline sexual objectification & physical harassment is tied to technologically mediated harassment (Ringrose et al., 2012).
- Female adolescents who experience offline forms of sexual coercion more likely to have received a naked image without permission compared to counterparts (Choi et al., 2016).
- Online sexual harassment can involve unsolicited sexual images (i.e., '**dick pics**')
  - Young men send unsolicited sexual comments & threats of physical abuse alongside sending unsolicited photos (Kaylor et al., 2016).
- COVID-19 outbreak has already sparked an increase in online sexual predators (Blanchfield, 2020), & could lead to increased sexual harassment of young people online.

# Context: COVID-19

## ***Increased mental health concerns***

- 50% of the 1,900 Canadians surveyed by the Angus Reid Institute reported that their mental health has worsened since COVID-19 (Angus Reid Institute, 2020).
- Adolescents' mental health & wellbeing are particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 due to their developmental stage
  - Adolescence is a sensitive period for social interaction, as they have an enhanced need for peer acceptance & peer influence
  - Widespread changes in social environment (e.g., enforced social distancing, increased social deprivation), might significantly impact brain & behavioural development during adolescence
  - Feeling insufficiently connected to others linked to profound & lasting negative consequences on physical & mental health, even leading to increased mortality

(Orben et al., 2020).

# Context: COVID-19

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## *Increased mental health concerns & trauma*

- Adolescents may experience increased exposure to traumatic events, linked to dating violence or domestic violence, due to conditions of COVID-19.
- Response to traumatic events are wide-ranging (Benoit et al., 2014).
  - Responses include: Isolation, hypervigilance, drinking or using other drugs to cope, self-injury, eating disorders, depression, anxiety (CAMH, 2020).

# Context: COVID-19

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## *Decreased access to social supports & services*

- Physical distancing enhances the challenges faced by adolescents exposed to or experiencing violence by disrupting the social supports & services that help reduce violence (Ragavan et al., 2020).
- **As few as 8% of youth** who experience dating violence reach out to parents, teachers, health care practitioners, or other adults who can help (PREVNet, 2020).
- During COVID-19, lack of access to social supports, beyond one's parents, **will likely further decrease** reporting frequency.



# Learning Objectives

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- Given the context of COVID-19, it is important to understand how **trauma-informed** services can be made **accessible, online, to vulnerable youth.**
- Using a **trauma-informed approach**, the aim of this webinar is to inform service providers about ways to assess for **barriers to access** & ensure that online services for youth are **safe & confidential.**

# Trauma-Informed Care (TIC)

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- Trauma-informed care (TIC) is informed by, & responsive to, the impact of any distressing experience & its presenting issues among highly vulnerable individuals (Jennings, 2004).
- Trauma-informed services incorporate an awareness of the prevalence of trauma & its impacts on the lives of clients into all aspects of service provision (Levenson, 2017).

# Trauma Defined

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- Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically &/or emotionally harmful, overwhelming, or life threatening.
- Trauma is defined by what is referred to as the “Three E’s:”
  - **Event** & circumstances
  - **Experience** (individual’s unique response)
  - **Effect** on individual behavior & wellbeing

(IWGYP & SAMHSA, 2013; SAMHSA, 2015).

# Trauma Defined

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- Psychological trauma refers to any critical incident (including repeated verbal & emotional abuse & neglect) that:
  - Causes people to experience unusually strong emotional reactions
  - Produces physiological changes
  - Has the potential to affect their ability to function at work, at home, & in other areas of their lives (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth 1996).

# Trauma-Informed Approach

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- Not solely for persons with a history of trauma (SAMHSA, 2014).
- An accessible, humane, holistic approach to care with an ardent belief in each person's capacity to make the necessary changes in their lives.
- Organizational cultures & service providers
  - Highly sensitive to the physical, emotional, social, & environmental “triggers” related to an individual's distress
  - **Partner** with individuals to explore, express, & diffuse issues in a manner that prevents re-traumatization (SAMHSA, 2013).

# Trauma-Informed Approach

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- Must be aware of the relational context in which trauma occurs & how the person is responded to.
- The **relational context is key**, regardless of the model/framework utilized
- Critical that adults listen to & validate a child/youth's experience of victimization / trauma
- Failure to do so can lead to youth feeling further traumatized, to doubting their feelings/views & to stop telling adults about traumatic experiences

(Stolorow & Atwood, 1992)

# Trauma-Informed Approach

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- Must recognize that youth are reluctant to volunteer information about their traumatic experiences
  - Service provider's responsibility to empathically encourage youth to talk
- An emphasis on “telling one's story,” at one's own pace, & in an environment promoting respect & physical & psychological safety.
- Adult/ service provider's inquiry, interest, & empathic understanding can help strengthen a sense of self, increase self-esteem, & foster ability to identify feelings (Goldstein et al., 2009).

# Trauma-Informed Approach

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- *Implementing a trauma-informed approach requires fidelity to a set of core principles rather than a rigidly prescribed set of practices or procedures*

(Klain & White, 2013; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2008; SAMHSA, 2014; Wall, Higgins, & Hunter, 2016).

## Trauma-informed child & family service system is . . .

**“one where all parties recognize & respond to the impact of traumatic stress on those who have contact with the system. Programs & agencies infuse & sustain trauma awareness, knowledge, & skills into their organizational cultures, practices, & policies. They act in collaboration with all those involved with the child drawing on the best available science to support recovery & resiliency in children & families”  
(p. 15).**

The Chadwick Trauma-Informed Systems Project (2013)

# Trauma-Informed Principles

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*Online services should integrate the following core principles*

- Trauma Awareness
- Safety & Trustworthiness
- Connection

# Trauma-Informed Principles

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## Trauma Awareness in Practice

- Identifying trauma-related needs of children & family, such as *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*, *triggers*, & *stress responses* (Lang et al., 2015; SAMHSA, 2014).
- *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*
  - Conventionally identified as: psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; physical or emotional neglect or abandonment; death of a parent; violence against mother; parental separation or divorce; or living with caregivers who misuse substances, experience mental illness or suicidal behaviour, or were ever imprisoned (Felitti et al., 1998).

# Trauma-Informed Principles

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## Trauma Awareness in Practice

- There has been a recent call to expand this conventional definition of ACEs (Cronholm et al., 2015; Finkelhor, Shattuck, et al., 2015).
- Recognition that adversity also occurs at school, in the community & can be related to systemic inequality such as poverty or racism (Cronholm et al., 2015; Finkelhor, Shattuck, et al., 2015).

# Trauma-Informed Principles

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## Trauma Awareness in Practice

- Responding to youth online during this time of COVID-19
  - Service providers must be mindful of youth's possible increased vulnerability.
  - Service providers must assess for young people's experiences of expanded ACEs (directly & indirectly) related to the pandemic.

# Trauma-Informed Principles

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## Trauma Awareness in Practice

- Recognizing youth may have previously experienced trauma
  - Situating symptoms in this context
- Understanding various ways of coping with trauma (Levenson, 2017; Miller, 2019).
  - e.g., coping strategies that may look “maladaptive” - best effort to cope
- Focusing on developing safe & supportive relationship & environment (Knight, 2015).
- Applying a cultural lens: understanding trauma & approaches to healing are informed by cultural contexts (Bulanda & Byro Johnson, 2016).

# Trauma-Informed Principles

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## Safety & Trustworthiness in Practice

- Maximizing the physical & psychological safety of youth is necessary for social & emotional wellbeing & in promoting long-term positive outcomes (Conradi & Wilson, 2010; SAMHSA, 2014).
- COVID-19: Due to challenges to youth's sense of physical (e.g., unsafe homes) &/or psychological safety (e.g., online abuse or confidentiality risks), there is a need to explore new strategies to enhance their safety through online services.



# Trauma-Informed Principles

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## Connection

- People grow through connection (Jordan, 2010).
- Connection is the active ingredient in healing relationships (Giller et al., 2006; Saakvitne et al., 2000).
- In response to the abrupt change in service delivery, due to COVID-19, service providers must find new ways to re-establish a connection & sense of equilibrium & engagement.

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# 1. Assessing & resolving barriers to youth accessing online services

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- There are many barriers that prevent youth from accessing online services.
- In order to promote **trauma awareness**, it is important to assess these new barriers within the context of the new trauma-related needs of clients.

# Barrier: Privacy Concerns



- Due to the sudden switch to online communication overall, individuals from all communities may be experiencing new barriers to accessing online services.
- Youth experiencing dating / sexual violence & its possible new online formats, as well as youth coping with past traumatic events face specific challenges when accessing online services.

# Barrier: Privacy Concerns

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- During COVID-19, youth may have difficulty identifying places where they can participate in online intervention *privately*.
  - i.e., without family members hearing or observing them
- Increased lack of privacy may prevent youth from seeking support.
  - As fear of family members learning about their issues was a common barrier for youth experiencing dating violence, prior to COVID-19 context (Alleyne-Green et al., 2015).
- Furthermore, if living in unsafe homes, this lack of privacy may put clients in greater danger during remote sessions.

# Barrier: Privacy Concerns (Cont'd)



- Abusive partner (or parent/ family member) may monitor youth's online activity (e.g., emails, instant messaging, etc.) & find out that youth is participating in online support/intervention (Dimond et al., 2011).
- Abusive partners (or parent/family member) may have access to youth's online accounts, & impersonate youth in communicating with service provider.
- Could **worsen** youth's experiences of dating / sexual violence (or other abuse), or **prevent youth** from accessing remote services in the first place.

# Recommendations: Privacy

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- Before initiating online service, **ask about privacy of youth's space.**
  - e.g., Does the room have a door? Can they be alone in the room?
- **Support youth in identifying safe places** for online intervention, where family members cannot hear / observe them participate (Ford-Gilboe et al., 2017).
- If a completely private space is not available for video-conferencing or phone calls, **consider alternative media formats**, e.g. email, messaging, etc.
  - e.g., Zoom sessions, but if/when the youth wants to discuss something more private or is worried others can hear, can use the messaging component of Zoom - combining video & messaging.

# Recommendations: Privacy (Cont'd)



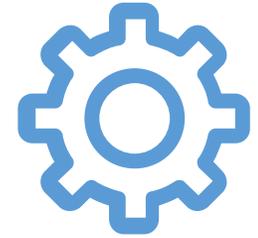
- Before initiating online service, **ask youth whether others have access to their mobile phone, computer or other devices, & to online accounts** (Betteridge, 2012).
- **Encourage youth to have access to a safe & secure e-mail account** for which only the youth has access to the password (Koziol-McLain et al., 2015).
- Consider whether there needs to be a **process to verify youth's identity** (Van Sickle, 2017).

# Recommendations: Privacy (Cont'd)



- To mitigate the risk of their online activity being monitored by an abusive partner or family member, **ask youth to use a trusted device** (Glass et al., 2015).
- **Provide youth with resources about safe internet use**
  - e.g., opening website in 'incognito mode' & deleting browser history afterwards (Ford-Gilboe et al., 2017).

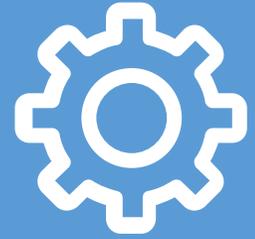
# Barrier: Connectivity Issues



- Youth require computer, tablet or smartphone, headphones & reliable Internet connection to access service.
- As economic precarity has increased during COVID-19 (Goldman, 2020), **youth may have limited access to these resources.**
- **Technological malfunctions & loss of Internet connection** may interrupt or terminate a session (Hassija & Gray, 2011).

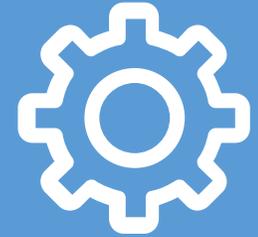
# Recommendations: Connectivity

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- Allow youth to identify their **preferred form of contact** (e.g., text, video, telephone), & a **contact person** who they trust to pass on a message if service provider cannot reach them (Koziol-McLain et al., 2015).
- Strength-based, provides youth with personal control in the process
- **Essential component of a trauma-informed approach.**

# Recommendations: Connectivity (Cont'd)



- For youth who lack necessary resources, if feasible, **consider providing them equipment**, e.g., providing iPads (Stewart, 2020).
  - Should have equipment tracking document, equipment check In-Out procedures, equipment loaner agreement, equipment letters, equipment cleaning protocol (Stewart, 2020).
  - Some organizations with funding provide iPad or other device for duration (Medical University of South Carolina, 2020)
    - *Telehealth webinar on equipment loaning procedures:*  
[https://telehealthfortrauma.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/telehealth-delivery-of-tf-cbt-part-1-60-minutes\\_updated.mp4](https://telehealthfortrauma.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/telehealth-delivery-of-tf-cbt-part-1-60-minutes_updated.mp4)

# Recommendations: Connectivity (Cont'd)

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- Service providers should make a **proactive plan with the youth** to address how service would be **provided in the event of technological failure** (Van Sickle, 2017).
- Should incorporate **verification process of youth's identity** when switching from video chat to other forms of contact (e.g., emailing, text messaging) (Van Sickle, 2017).



## 2. Ensuring that online services for youth are safe & confidential

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- As mentioned, safety, trustworthiness & connection are important principles in a trauma-informed approach.
- Important to account for these needs when switching to online service delivery.

# Emphasis on Physical Safety

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- Trauma survivors often **feel unsafe** & may currently be in **unsafe relationships or living situations** (BC Provincial Mental Health & Substance Use Planning Council, 2013).
- Physical, emotional, & cultural safety for youth is consequently key to a trauma-informed approach (BC Provincial Mental Health & Substance Use Planning Council, 2013).
- Youth may endorse **thoughts of harm** or another **crisis situation** may emerge, & additional help is consequently required (Van Sickle, 2017).

# Emphasis on Psychological Safety

- Youth with trauma histories tend to **overestimate risk** to their psychological safety (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016).
- Youth with trauma histories are at **risk of being triggered** (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016), & may consequently go offline or cut off access to service provider in the middle of a session.

# Recommendations: Enhancing Safety Online

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## *Creating a Crisis Plan*

- This can serve as another opportunity to discuss with the youth the limits of confidentiality, including a potential duty to warn or protect (Van Sickle, 2017).
- For vulnerable youth, important to develop a crisis plan with the youth in case of emergency (Van Sickle, 2017).

# Recommendations: Enhancing Safety Online (Cont'd)

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## *Creating a Crisis Plan*

- Define 'emergency', explain that online sessions are not intended to treat or manage emergency situations, & review the specific protocol that will be followed if an emergency arise (Stewart, 2020).
- Gather contact information for the person the youth consented to have contacted in the event of an emergency (Van Sickle, 2017).
- Make sure emergency information is readily accessible (Stewart, 2020).

# Recommendations: Enhancing Safety Online (Cont'd)

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## *Sharing Safety Resources*

- A trauma-informed approach encourages the enhancement of personal safety & future growth
- Through training & education with respect to personal safety skills, healthy sexuality, interpersonal relationships, & the utilization of skills learned in managing future stressors & trauma reminders (CEBC, 2014).

# Recommendations: Enhancing Safety Online (Cont'd)

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## *Sharing Safety Resources*

- Use screen sharing option to share PowerPoints & Word Documents with activities built in to cover various safety topics (e.g., healthy relationships, body safety, assertive communication, navigating unsafe situations, sexting) (Stewart, 2020).
- Use screen sharing option to watch videos on safety topics (e.g., [amaze.org](https://www.amaze.org) or [JoinOneLove](https://www.joinone.org) YouTube Channel) (Stewart, 2020).

# List of Safety Resources

## PowerPoint Documents:

- [Enhancing Safety – Friendships and Relationships](#)
- [Thoughts Feelings & Behaviors](#)
- [Feelings Charades](#)
- [Relaxation Breathing and Soccer](#)

## Word /PDF Documents:

- [Emotions](#)
- [Circle of Support](#)
- [Progressive Muscle Relaxation Carnival Script](#)

For more resources go to: <https://telehealthfortrauma.com/resources/>

# List of Safety Resources

## YouTube Videos:

- [Does #SocialDistancing have you feeling isolated?](#)
- [Sexual Assault, Consent and Sexual Harassment: What's The Difference?](#)
- [10 Signs of a Healthy Relationship](#)
- [10 Signs of an Unhealthy Relationship](#)

*For more resources go to:*

- [JoineOneLove YouTube Channel](#)
- [AMAZE Org YouTube Channel](#)

# Recommendations: Enhancing Safety Online (Cont'd)

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## *Getting Creative*

- Traumatic memories can be associated with non-verbal memories (sights, sounds & smells) (Patrick & Pinna-Perez, 2019).
- Art can be a useful tool to express these memories for adolescents, & help with overall healing (McCook, 2015; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010).
- Clients report beneficial effects of trauma-focused art therapy
  - More relaxation, externalization of memories & emotions into artwork, less intrusive thoughts of traumatic experiences & more confidence in the future (Schouten et al., 2019).

# Recommendations: Enhancing Safety Online (Cont'd)

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## ***Getting Creative Online*** (Consider new ways in which youth can express themselves artistically online)

- Sending artwork via electronic means (i.e., taking photos & texting them or screen sharing art during video conferences)
- Encouraging youth to keep pencils, crayons & other tools on hand
- Use free digital art making programs to stimulate creativity
  - Drawing programs: Krita, Artweaver Free, Microsoft Paint 3D
  - Video Editing: iMovie, TikTok,
  - Music Editing: Garage Band

# Emphasis on Trustworthiness

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- People who have experienced trauma often report having **difficulties trusting others & their intentions** (BC Provincial Mental Health & Substance Use Planning Council, 2013).
- Discussing past trauma, in trauma narrative interventions, is particularly challenging online due to the **sensitive nature** of these sessions (Jones et al., 2014).
- The use of communication technology (e.g., text messaging, email) may compromise **youth's confidentiality & privacy** (Van Sickle, 2017).

# Recommendations: Establishing Trustworthiness

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## *Be transparent about confidentiality*

- At the outset, inform youth about limits to confidentiality (Van Sickle, 2017).
- Develop written Consent Form that outlines limits & risks of online services, & professional obligations (as regulated professionals) (Van Sickle, 2017; Stewart, 2020).
- Youth may need to be reassured that their sessions will not be recorded, posted online, or shared with their caregivers (Seager van Dyk et al., 2020).

# Emphasis on Connections

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- Trauma undermines youth's ability to form positive relationships, which is a necessary component of adolescent development (Bath, 2008).
- Female adolescents may be vulnerable to “choosing” relationships that foster & maintain one's self-concept as a victim (Klem et al., 2009).
- Safety depends on development of comfortable & positive connections between traumatized youth & the adults in their lives (Bath, 2008).

# Recommendations: Enhancing Connections

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## ***Be as consistent & predictable as possible***

- Provide clear information about the programming & offer predictable meetings (Ford-Gilboe et al., 2017).
- Prepare youth for online meetings beforehand
  - e.g., sending out a tip sheet for using online devices, or setting up a test call to check connectivity, etc. (Stewart, 2020).
- Schedule appointments consistently (BC Provincial Mental Health & Substance Use Planning Council, 2013).



## Recommendations: Enhancing Connections (Cont'd)

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### *Be supportive & empathic*

- Reach out & engage should youth miss appointments
- Check in when session content might cause distress for youth, & incorporate a debrief at the end of each session (Ford-Gilboe et al., 2017; *Trauma-Informed Practice Guide*, 2013).
- Developing trauma-informed therapeutic relationships involves being **non-judgemental, reliable, supportive & tailoring interventions** to the needs of the youth (Tompkins & Neale, 2018).



# Recommendations: Enhancing Connections (Cont'd)

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## *Be supportive & empathic*

- Recognize that the youth may not know what they are feeling
- Youth may feel shame, may blame themselves, may feel they deserve the abusive treatment
- Understand that youth find it very difficult to talk about such issues with adults



# Recommendations: Enhancing Connections (Cont'd)

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## *Be supportive & empathic*

- **Connection is the correction** (Middelton-Moz, 2010)
- Critical to listen empathically, follow youth's pace & help them open up, without being invasive
  - Can help youth become more accepting of themselves
- Mirrors research findings on resilience, which points to the primacy of positive connections with caring adults (Benard, 2004).

# Thank You

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