

Healing

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet about how the brain heals from complex trauma

- 1** The good news is that people can and do heal from trauma, including complex childhood trauma.
- 2** Research shows that the brain can change right through life. We call this neuroplasticity.
- 3** Experiences change the brain. This applies to both good and bad experiences and includes experiences of support. Just as negative experiences can have damaging impacts so positive experiences can help recovery.
- 4** Bad experiences can cause harm while good experiences can help build new brain pathways, help the brain to repair (neural reintegration) and people to heal.
- 5** Research shows that with the right support, people can heal even from severe early trauma and that when parents heal from their own trauma their children do better too.
- 6** In order to heal, people need good support which includes empathy, understanding and respect.
- 7** Our everyday interactions (conversations and care) can help people heal from trauma. Healthy relationships of trust and safety can aid recovery, including with friends, family members, counsellors and other services.
- 8** Recognising that current risky behaviour may be an attempt to solve past unresolved trauma and escape unbearable sensations can be the beginning of recovery.



- 9** Replacing old coping mechanisms with more constructive ones is challenging and needs support. Recovery is not about 'will-power' alone. It is a process which can take time, and which should be led as much as possible by the survivor at their own pace.
- 10** Best practice therapy for complex trauma follows what is called a phased approach where phase 1 safety and stabilisation is very important.
- 11** As complex trauma affects the way the body, mind and feelings work together, approaches which work with the body, brain and emotions are all useful.
- 12** Basic knowledge of the brain can assist the recovery process. From 'top down', the brain is made up of the cortex (thinking, reflective capacity), limbic system (emotions) and brain stem (arousal states; includes 'survival' responses).
- 13** Under stress, the lower' (brain stem) responses take over (flow 'bottom up') and limit the person's ability to be calm, to reflect, and to respond flexibly (i.e. 'higher brain' – cortex functioning).
- 14** Survivors are easily triggered from lower brain stem responses. This is not a sign of 'personal weakness' but how the brain functions. Soothing strategies help calm these responses.
- 15** Everyone is unique and what works for one person to support their recovery may not help someone else.
- 16** Psychotherapy, body-based approaches, EMDR which is attuned to dissociation, mindfulness, breathing and grounding strategies, yoga, art and music therapy are some of many strategies and approaches which can be useful.
- 17** A big part of healing is beginning to recognise your own strengths. Survivors are often very good at caring for others but can struggle in caring for themselves. Learning to care for oneself can be an important step along the way to healing too.

