

Coping Strategies

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet for people who have experienced complex trauma.

- 1** Trauma which is ongoing can overwhelm a person's capacity to cope.
- 2** A person experiencing ongoing trauma needs to adapt to survive. These adaptations are called coping strategies.
- 3** Coping strategies form pathways in the brain which become familiar. They become the person's 'go to' (default) responses during times of more stress and trauma.
- 4** People in 'survival' mode cope the best way they can. They adopt coping strategies to help manage their strong feelings and changes in arousal.
- 5** Some strategies do not stay helpful. While they were protective at first, they become risks for health impacts.
- 6** Even when coping strategies are no longer protective, we need to understand and respect them. That's because they initially helped the person to survive.

- 7** People use different coping strategies to reduce the pain and distress of trauma. Coping strategies include addictions and compulsive behaviours e.g. alcohol, drugs, self-harm, suicidality, anger and aggression. Others are withdrawal, avoidance and dissociation.
- 8** Coping strategies can cause challenges both for the person and for the people with whom they interact. The person is not trying to be difficult; they are trying to manage as best they can.
- 9** Coping strategies are often automatic and effective in the short term but can also be harmful and become risky over time.
- 10** Children develop coping mechanisms to deal with the effects of childhood trauma. It is normal to want to feel better and 'escape' strong and challenging feelings.
- 11** It is critical not to try to remove a person's coping strategies until they have developed different resources to help them cope.
- 12** When people are in a trauma response they are outside of their 'window of tolerance'. People can learn to widen their 'window'. This can help them cope and manage their strong emotions and behaviours. It can also help them better manage their triggers over time.
- 13** People can develop new coping strategies over time – coping strategies which are less challenging and risky.

