

# Trauma in Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities





# Trauma in Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

- ▶ Both adults and children with disabilities experience higher rates of trauma.
- ▶ People with intellectual disabilities may not be able to express how they are feeling.
- ▶ By paying attention and noticing signs of distress, we can better help these individuals.

## ***Individuals with intellectual disabilities experience trauma too!***

Everyone can experience trauma, including physical trauma such as violence or emotional trauma such as bereavement. This includes people with intellectual disabilities.

Though they may not be able to express it, they can be deeply affected by their own experiences and by those around them.

In addition, these individuals may be vulnerable to trauma as a result of bullying, neglect, and abuse.



## ***How do people with verbal difficulty handle trauma?***

People with intellectual disabilities may not be able to say what is wrong but may have a noticeable change in behavior.

These may include:

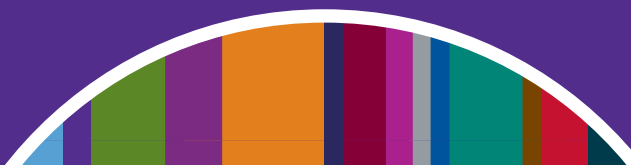
- ▶ Crying and sadness without a clear cause
- ▶ Increased anger and aggression
- ▶ Self-injurious behavior
- ▶ Running away
- ▶ Agitation in particular circumstances

Though there may be other causes for this, including physical pain or frustration, it is important to keep their mental health in mind.

## ***What to do if you are concerned about a sudden behavior change?***

Ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ Does there appear to be a direct cause? Does there seem to be something they want or some recent change in their environment?
- ▶ Might they be in pain? This may be a result of an injury, dental pain, constipation or stomach upset, or other physical causes.
- ▶ Has there been a major life event recently? Tragedies like the death of a loved one may affect a person with intellectual disabilities deeply, even if they do not express it directly.
- ▶ Is the behavior change only in specific locations or around specific people? This may be an indication of bullying or abuse.





## ***What to do if you suspect pain?***

- ▶ Pay attention to if the individual is focusing on a particular part of their body.
- ▶ Other behaviors may give clues. If the individual is refusing solid foods and only taking liquids, they may have tooth pain. If they are eating and stooling less, they may have constipation.
- ▶ If you suspect pain but are unable to find a cause, make an appointment with the doctor.
- ▶ Seek medical attention immediately if you notice breathing difficulty, extremely low energy (lethargy), or dangerous behaviors.

## ***What to do if you suspect a major life event has affected someone with intellectual disabilities?***

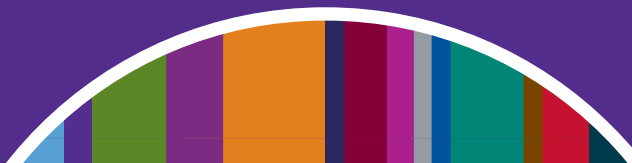
- ▶ Try to soothe as much as possible and talk to them about it with simple language.
- ▶ Create a calming environment as best as possible and show that you are there for them.
- ▶ Seek medical attention if the behaviors risk harm to themselves or others.





## ***What to do if you suspect abuse?***

- ▶ It is important to discuss your concerns as soon as possible with someone you trust, including a doctor, teacher, or case manager.
- ▶ If the behaviors only appear in certain locations or with certain people, ask someone you trust if anything may have happened.
- ▶ Keep an eye out for bruising or injuries that are unusual or don't seem to have an explanation.
- ▶ Pay attention if they are exhibiting inappropriate sexual behaviors such as touching other people's private parts or making sexual gestures with objects.
- ▶ Try to keep the person away from a suspected abuser as you and others work to assess the situation.
- ▶ Doctors, teachers, and counselors are mandated reporters and must report suspected abuse of both adults and children with disabilities who are dependent on others for their daily needs.
- ▶ Reach out to the Disabled Persons Protection Commission ([mass.gov/info-details/what-is-reportable](https://mass.gov/info-details/what-is-reportable)).





# Additional Resources

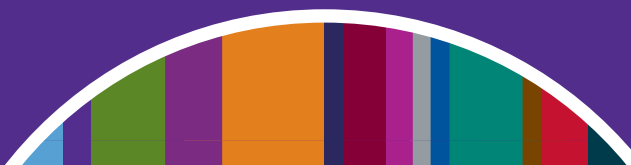
- ▶ [mass.gov/orgs/departments-of-developmentalservices](https://mass.gov/orgs/departments/departments-of-developmentalservices)
- ▶ [parentcenterhub.org/intellectual](https://parentcenterhub.org/intellectual)
- ▶ [familyvoices.org](https://familyvoices.org)
- ▶ [olmsteadrights.org/self-helptools/advocacy-resources/item.6692-Massachusetts\\_Disability\\_Resources\\_and\\_Advocacy\\_Organizations](https://olmsteadrights.org/self-helptools/advocacy-resources/item.6692-Massachusetts_Disability_Resources_and_Advocacy_Organizations)



# References

Jones L, Bellis MA, Wood S, Hughes K, McCoy E, Eckley L, Bates G, Mikton C, Shakespeare T, Officer A. Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *Lancet*. 2012 Sep 8;380(9845):899-907. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60692-8. Epub 2012 Jul 12. PMID: 22795511.

Hughes K, Bellis MA, Jones L, Wood S, Bates G, Eckley L, McCoy E, Mikton C, Shakespeare T, Officer A. Prevalence and risk of violence against adults with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *Lancet*. 2012 Apr 28;379(9826):1621-9. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(11)61851-5. Epub 2012 Feb 28. PMID: 22377290.



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