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ADAPTATIONS TO TOUGH SITUATIONS YOU MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING

You may have experienced a lot of different kinds of difficult experiences in your life. Later on, you might want to talk (with your therapist or another trusted adult) about the things that happened to you, but right now we're going to focus on identifying the kinds of things that are coming up for you day-to-day. This is a list of some of the things that people who have experienced trauma and stress describe feeling. If you are feeling that it might be helpful to label some of the concerns that are coming up for you, this list might be a good place to start. You may want to tick the experiences on this list that are true for you and write in any that are not on the list. If you start to feel overwhelmed by this list, put it away and go for a walk or have a snack and come back to it later (or not...you may want to put it away for years, or never find it helpful). If you'd like to share some or part of your responses with your clinician, that will probably be useful, but you never have to.

- ☐ Feeling on-edge, jumpy, or easily startled
- ☐ Feeling shut down or numb
- ☐ Flipping back and forth between feeling jumpy and feeling numb
- ☐ Feeling hopeless or like nothing good will ever happen
- ☐ Feeling helpless or like you will always be a victim
- ☐ Feeling like you are a bad person and/or deserve to have bad things happen to you
- ☐ Feeling like the world is a bad place
- ☐ Feeling like most other people are bad and will hurt you if they can
- ☐ Using food in a way that doesn't feel good (eating more or less than you want)
- ☐ Sleep problems (sleeping too much or too little, nightmares)
- ☐ Having no interest in school or having a tough time concentrating
- ☐ Using drugs, including alcohol or nicotine, in a way that doesn't feel good
- ☐ Having sex or using porn in a way that doesn't feel good to you
- ☐ Having sex in a way that doesn't feel good to your sex partner(s)

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- ☐ Dating or befriending people who are mean or violent
- ☐ Being mean or violent to your friends or the people you date
- ☐ Dating or befriending people who are "too nice" or who do anything you want
- ☐ Being "too nice" in a relationship, doing whatever someone else wants
- ☐ Getting in fights
- ☐ Uncontrollable thoughts or flashbacks related to your difficult experiences
- ☐ Cutting, burning, or other kinds of self-harm
- ☐ Feeling suicidal—thinking about, planning, or trying to kill yourself
- ☐ Feeling homicidal—thinking about, planning, or trying to kill someone else

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HELPING YOUR BODY CALM DOWN: HEART RATE VARIABILITY

This exercise is intended to help you bring your attention to your heart rate variability. You can do it anytime you like—it can be helpful when you're feeling anxious and stressed, when you're feeling tired and low, or just as an opportunity to check in with yourself.

Before you get started, you might find it helpful to rate your mood on a scale of 1–10, with 1 being a very bad mood and 10 being an exceptionally good mood. Below is a simple scale, you can also add in a word or a few words about how you're feeling (and why, if you like).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I'm feeling .....

.....

.....

Now that you have checked in with your mood, the next step is to check in with your heart. For this, you're going to start by finding your pulse. (For most people, it is easiest to find in the wrist of our non-dominant hand, and it will likely be felt most strongly in the front of the wrist closer to the thumb side. Some people find it easier to feel their pulse in the side of the throat near the base of the jaw.)

Once you have found your pulse, bring your attention to your heart rate. You will probably notice that, as you breathe in, your heart rate increases a little, and as you breathe out, it decreases a little. We don't exactly know why this happens, but the theory is that our bodies are making a micro preparation for action when we inhale and experiencing a micro relaxation when we exhale. This difference between our heart rate at inhalation and our heart rate at exhalation is called the respiratory sinus arrythmia (RSA), and it's a good thing! In fact, it seems that a greater difference between our heart rate at inhalation

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and our heart rate at exhalation (or, a larger RSA) indicates a more adaptive nervous system, and building nervous system adaptivity is really helpful for people who have experienced trauma and stress.

There are a few ways to increase RSA. For most people, the easiest and most accessible way is to slow down their exhale relative to their inhale. As you are feeling your pulse and bringing your attention to your breath, try experimenting with different breathing patterns. Try a short, sharp inhalation through your nose, followed by a long slow exhalation through your mouth. If you try that pattern of breathing for four rounds of breath, do you notice any difference in your RSA? Does your heart slow down more when you exhale in that way rather than in your typical way? What about if you experiment with other kinds of breathing?

There's no right or wrong way to change your RSA—this is simply an experiment to see if it's a helpful practice for you, and the exercise may need modification to be most useful for you and for your body.

You may find it helpful to check in with your mood now that you've completed a few rounds of RSA-focused breathing, so here's a follow-up scale:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I'm feeling .....

.....

.....

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HELPING YOUR BODY CALM DOWN: SMELL

Some people find that their sense of smell is very directly related to their mood. This is probably because our sense of smell is the earliest sense, the oldest sense, and the fastest sense...the part of our nose that does the smelling (the olfactory bulb) is directly wired to the part of our brain that processes smell. For some people, specific smells trigger anxiety or even flashbacks. And almost everyone finds that smells from the past bring back associated memories and can sometimes contribute to powerful emotional states.

We can use the power of the sense of smell to help ourselves feel grounded, comfortable, safe, and in our bodies in the present moment. Below is a list of some strong-smelling substances that people often have in their homes. You may choose to see if you can find a few of these in your house and spend five minutes or so sitting quietly and smelling each in turn to see if there is any that has a calming or energizing effect for you. You might also add to this list by finding other things in your home or a nearby store that smell good to you. Of course, don't try this exercise with smells you know to be emotionally activating for you, or with anything strong-smelling if you are very sensitive to odor. You also want to avoid anything with strong chemical odors that might make you feel lightheaded or high. And, as with anything else that anyone suggests about your body, stop if it starts to make you uncomfortable.

Before you get started, you might find it helpful to rate your mood on a scale of 1–10, with 1 being a very bad mood and 10 being an exceptionally good mood. Below is a simple scale, you can also add in a word or a few words about how you're feeling (and why, if you like).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I'm feeling . . . . . .

. . . . . .

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Things to try	Like	Don't like	Helpful	Not helpful
Coffee				
Lemon or citrus				
Cinnamon				
Cloves				
Cardamon				
Garlic				
Paprika				

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Things to try	Like	Don't like	Helpful	Not helpful
Cocoa powder				
Fruit or fresh fruit peel (apple, banana, pineapple)				
Popcorn				
Essential oils or massage oil				
Scented candle				
Dryer sheet				
Grass, dried leaves, flowers, pine needles				

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Things to try	Like	Don't like	Helpful	Not helpful
Bath products				

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You may find it helpful to check in with your mood again when you've had some time to focus on olfaction, so here's a follow-up scale:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I'm feeling .....

.....

.....

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HELPING YOUR BODY FEEL ENERGIZED: BURSTS OF INTENSITY

One strategy that many people find effective for improving their mood very quickly is a short burst of high-intensity exercise. This can be whatever exercise is safe for you, feels like a challenge, and quickly increases your heart rate. Some people like jumping jacks or skipping rope, some people do well with a fast walk, some people like body-weight activities like pushups. Please only do high-intensity exercise if it is both physically *and* psychologically safe for you.

You may want to use a mood scale before and after the activity of your choice to have additional information about if it's helpful to you.

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HELPING YOUR BODY FEEL ENERGIZED: THE ICE CUBE

I often encourage people who are experiencing a sense of nervous system dysregulation to experiment with a change in temperature, and the simplest way to do that quickly is with an ice cube. One of the people I work with told me about a TikTok about "that (freakin') ice cube" in which a patient gets angry that their therapist keeps recommending this…but the person does, in fact, find it helpful to use the ice cube to help with regulation. So I realize that you may already have a love/hate relationship with temperature change for nervous system regulation! However you currently feel about it, I'd encourage you to give it a try and just see if it's helpful to you. If you already know that it's helpful to you, consider this a reminder to reach for that ice cube (or cup of tea or other temperature shift) when you are having a tough body time.

There are all kinds of ways to use temperature change to feel more connected and integrated in our bodies. Some people like to take a cold shower or get into a sauna, and in many cultures access to hot and cold plunges is commonplace. If you have access to those types of resources and find them helpful, great! Of course, many of the times in which we experience dysregulation, we will not have access to these things, but there are workarounds that might include emergency hot or cold packs, water from a bathroom or kitchen tap or hose, and, of course, the ice cube.

There's no right or wrong way to use temperature change for nervous system reregulation, but here is one method to try with hot and cold packs. This can be modified for different bodies, certainly, but is written for people who have two hands and have sensation in both of those hands.

1. Activate the heating and cooling elements of the packs (you might also try asking someone to do this for or with you).

2. Hold the heating pack in one hand and the cooling pack in another hand.

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3. Bring your attention to the hand in which you are holding the cold pack. What is happening in that hand that lets you know you are holding something cold? How do the tips of your fingers feel? How does your palm feel? Do you notice any change in the color of your skin? In the moisture level on your skin? What happens if you squeeze the cold pack and then release it?

4. Now bring your attention to the hand in which you're holding the hot pack. What is happening in that hand that lets you know you're holding something hot? How do the tips of your fingers feel? How does your palm feel? Do you notice any change in the color of your skin? In the moisture level on your skin? What happens if you squeeze the hot pack and then release it?

5. You may want to go through this cycle of attention a couple of times. If it feels right, you might also try transferring the cold pack to the hand in which you were holding the hot pack, and the hot pack to the hand in which you were holding the cold pack. Or you may choose to put down one or the other and hold one of them with both hands.

6. When you begin to notice an increase in your feelings of regulation, you may want to experiment with bringing your attention to the places of dysregulation. Is your heart beating really fast? Is your stomach hurting? Does your throat feel tight? What is going on in your body that lets you know that you're feeling dysregulated?

7. If you identify a way in which your nervous system is signaling to you, you might choose to bring the heating or cooling to that part of your body. If your chest is tight, some heat on it might help it expand. If your temples are throbbing, some cooling might help them settle. Know that you don't have to change or fix anything, but that you have the option of offering your nervous system some additional support.

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HELPING YOUR BODY BALANCE: THE COLD PLUNGE

This exercise may stimulate the dive reflex and can be especially helpful if you notice that your heart is beating very quickly. It is sometimes used in emergency rooms for managing tachycardia (fast heart rate). The idea is to bring cold pressure to the center of your forehead at the same time as you hold your breath and have a positional change…in other words, you're fooling your body into thinking that you're diving into cold water.

Here's how it goes:

1. Get an ice cube or cold pack or ask someone to bring you one.
2. Take a deep breath.
3. Holding your breath, press the ice cube against the center of your forehead and slowly lean forward in your chair.
4. When you are ready to inhale, take the ice off your forehead and slowly inhale while returning to upright.
5. Repeat as needed.

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WHEN YOU WANT WORDS: CHOOSING YOUR TIME

If you have had a traumatic or stressful experience, you might be experiencing a lot of pressure to talk about it. The adults in your life—including your therapist—may push you to talk about it in efforts to help you, or you may have been required to talk about it in court or to a therapist or doctor as part of a court process. But that's a lot of what other people want from you, and it might sometimes feel like what *you* want is getting lost. So, I want to start by saying clearly, just in case no one has said this part to you yet: your story is *yours*. You never have to tell it, you can tell it when and how you want, and your relationship to it can (and will) change many times over your life. There might be parts that are confusing right now that feel very clear later, and there might be parts that seem obvious right now that feel very different later. All of that is normal. It's also pretty normal that the adults in your life want more information, but that doesn't mean you have to provide it. You have every right to say:

"I don't want to talk about that right now."
"This conversation is not feeling good to me."
"I'm getting dysregulated and need to change topics."
"Stop!"

It may be that there comes a point at which you *do* want to talk in more detail about traumatic or stressful experiences. The story is also yours to share when you want to share it. You have every right to say:

"I'd like to talk about some hard stuff. Is this a good time/can we find a time?"
"I'm feeling really upset and triggered. Can we talk?"
"There's a tough story I need to tell you."
"I want to talk about this, and I need to do it slowly. I want to get my fidget first."

Sometimes it can feel easier to share with a friend or romantic partner than a therapist or parent, and sometimes our friends have every

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intention of being there for us. Sometimes they can really show up! And sometimes, even with their good intentions, it is too much for them. I would really encourage you to share with a therapist, or other trusted adult, first. You may also want to look at the worksheet titled Trust and Discernment before sharing anything out. Trusting other people is really good for our mental health...if the people we trust are trustworthy. If you're feeling hesitant about offering the trust of telling your story, waiting—and focusing on your regulation—might be more helpful to you right now.

When it comes to talking about the traumatic and stressful things that have happened to you, there are a few things you should know. First, *you* have control of that story, and *you* get to decide how and when you tell it, and who you tell it to. No one has the right to that story but you. It may be that other people know what happened and are talking about it in your school or community. That's really wrong (and might be illegal), but it doesn't take away from the fact that the story is yours and yours alone.

Now, you have the right to choose to tell your story. You might choose to tell it to your clinician, or a trusted adult in your life, and if you decide to share your story, those are probably the places to start. Most of the time when people start talking about traumatic and stressful events, it is pretty tough and can be very upsetting. If this is true for you, telling your story to your friends might be overwhelming—for your friend and for you.

If you do decide to talk with your therapist about traumatic and stressful experiences you have had, it will probably be most helpful to do this when they know something about you and the things that help you feel centered and grounded. Talking about traumatic and stressful experiences can trigger a flashback, which is unpleasant and unhelpful. You and your therapist can develop a plan together for what to do if you start to have a flashback or start to feel dissociative. A lot of times people think that flashbacks or dissociation are a

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necessary part of the process of talking about trauma and stress, but we're finding more and more that this is not true.

You may decide that the first place you want to tell your story is to yourself, in writing and journaling. Just like when we tell our story to others, it can be easy to get overwhelmed or check out (or both) when we write about our experiences. Below are some thoughts about ways to take care of yourself when you're engaging in this difficult work.

- Protect some time. You might want to spend just 5–10 minutes writing, and in this case may need an hour of total protected time to settle in, engage with your writing, and then reregulate.

- Protect your nervous system. If you know about yourself that you tend to shut down or dissociate, do some stretching or a body scan before you get started. If you know about yourself that you tend to get overwhelmed, do a breathing exercise that you find helpful, and stick with it until you feel calm.

- Protect your space. Ideally, you will have privacy, a comfortable place to sit, and a safe place to leave the document that you create. For some people, this might mean doing your writing in your therapist's office, or at your local library.

- Protect your recovery. The time after you finish writing is as important as the time before. Will you need some water and a snack afterward? What about your favorite piece of music? Would it be helpful to plan some time to take a walk with a friend, or to sit quietly under a weighted blanket?

While there's no wrong way to go about recovery, there are helpful and unhelpful actions, and helpful and unhelpful people. After you spend some time writing about things that have happened to you is probably not a good time to use alcohol or other substances, or to spend time with people who typically don't help you feel good or in environments that are overstimulating or understimulating.

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In the same way that you want to be careful with yourself before and after your writing, you also want to be careful with yourself during the practice. If you start to feel overwhelmed or unsafe, **stop** and bring your attention to how you're feeling. If bringing your attention to your breathing, or doing some grounding, helps you feel more connected and calmer, consider whether or not you **want** to continue writing. If it doesn't feel right, don't push yourself. You are not being lazy or weak in taking the time that you need to feel centered before you continue.

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WHEN YOU *DON'T* WANT WORDS: OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

Although talking about traumatic and stressful experiences can be helpful sometimes, it's not the only thing that's helpful, and it's not helpful to everyone. Hopefully, you have found some ways to help your body feel better in your work on embodiment and regulation. There are also ways to help your mind feel better that have nothing to do with talking about your stressful experiences. You also may want to express the story of what happened to you, but not through talking about it directly. There are all kinds of ways you can engage with your story. Focusing on doing something you enjoy, whether or not you ever use it as a medium for communication, is going to be helpful to the parts of your body, brain, and psyche that are struggling to navigate your trauma. If you use something you enjoy to also communicate something about the experiences you had, that could be helpful in other ways, but you never have to use the things you enjoy to communicate if you don't want to. If there are things on this list that you are interested in but have never tried, this is a great opportunity to try something new! If you're interested in something that requires supplies or specialized equipment that you don't have and can't afford, it's also a great opportunity to find out about resources at your school, community center, or library.

You may choose to do a regulating activity before you begin, or to rate your mood on a mood scale before and after. But mostly the focus here is on having fun and letting the activity lead you in new directions for play or skill-building...and any or all of these can be a part of your recovery or simply a fun part of your life.

- Visual arts: Drawing, painting, collaging, taking photos, making zines...
- Fiber arts: Crocheting, knitting, sewing...
- Fashion: Styling or cutting hair, make-up skills, making jewelry, clothing design...

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- Writing: Poetry, journals, short stories, screenwriting, playwriting...
- Performance art: Dance, drag, acting, improv...
- Design and fabrication: Woodworking, metal work, 3D printing...

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PREPARING FOR RESILIENT COMMUNITY

When we have experienced trauma and stress, it can feel easy for these experiences to really take over our lives, and it's pretty normal to feel like they are the most central thing in your life...for a while. And for most people, the impact of trauma and stress is a part of their lives. Working with trauma and stress, the hope is not necessarily that it gets smaller in your life. Rather, the hope is that your life itself gets bigger, so that the trauma and stress have a proportionally smaller role. If we add a dropper full of dye to a bucket of water, the entire bucket of water turns the color of the dye. If we add a dropper full of dye to the ocean, there will still be some effect, but the vastness of the ocean absorbs the power of the dye. This part of your treatment is about working toward having a life that is vast and expansive and capable of absorbing all kinds of things, both good and bad. Having that kind of life takes practice and commitment. It also takes time, so don't beat yourself up if that's not where you are right now. We are working toward building your expansiveness, not presuming that it should be there already. As you start moving toward engaging with your life in a different way, focusing on pleasure and joy can be a real container for the difficult things that are going to arise. What are some things that you enjoy doing in your life? If there's nothing you enjoy, what are some things that you used to enjoy? What are some things you'd like to try?

Separate from things you enjoy, used to enjoy, or think you could enjoy, what are some things you're really good at? If you don't feel good at anything, this might be a time to ask trusted adults in your life, a close friend, or your therapist. They probably have some ideas about your strengths, even if it's hard for you to see them right now.

Now that you've identified some areas of strength, and some things that you enjoy or think you could enjoy, let's think about the ways in which you want to bring these strengths into a community setting. What kinds of spaces do you like to be in? Are you most comfortable in a boisterous setting with a lot of activity? In more subdued and

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quiet situations? Are you excited about sharing skills, or are you most interested in working toward a common goal?

While spaces often self-select for type of person, you might also think about the kind of person you are most often close with. Do you get along with introverts or extroverts? Do you like talking about things with other people, or doing things with other people? There are no wrong answers—the intention is just to think deeply about the kinds of relationships that will feel most satisfying to you as you work toward having the kind of life that you want.

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TRUST AND DISCERNMENT

When we have had traumatic and stressful experiences, it can make it really hard to trust other people, even when we have safe people in our lives. Sometimes these experiences also make it *too easy* to trust people, which can be dangerous when the people in our lives are less safe or not trustworthy.

Even though it can be hard to trust again, and to trust the right people, we know that being able to get support from others is a really big part of recovery. Here are some questions to help you think about some people in your life who might be able to support you in your recovery process, and steps to take to start building trust if that feels right for you. You can print a lot of versions of these questions if you want to think through trust with a lot of different people. Also, your answers will probably change over time.

I would like to trust (name of person). (Name) is my (parent/sibling/friend/therapist...).

I think (name) is trustworthy because when I (told them about a problem I was having/asked them for a favor/talked about my feelings with them), they (listened carefully/didn't tell anyone else or told me they were going to tell another safe person so I could get more help/did what they said they would do). I worry that I can't trust them because (sometimes they laugh at me/my heart races when I imagine it/I don't have a specific reason, it's just hard for me to trust people). Add more reasons in the grid below.

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	Reasons to trust	Reasons not to trust
Mind		
Body		

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TAKING SPACE, GIVING SPACE

It may be that when you have thought about who you want to trust, and how much you want to trust them with, you realize there are people in your life that you don't trust very much, or that push you for trust faster than you're comfortable with. You may also find that there are people in your life that seem to trust you too much—they may share information or stories that feel overwhelming to you, or ask for a lot of your time and energy in dealing with the crises that are coming up in their lives. Whether someone is asking for more trust than you want to give, or asking you to hold too much, it's a good opportunity to consider your boundaries and limits. These situations can give you good practice in setting boundaries and in saying "no" in relationships.

Saying "no" in relationships can feel very hard, especially if you have been in the role of trying to make other people happy for a long time. This can lead to anger and resentment, or the sense that other people should try to guess what we're thinking and feeling. It may also indicate that you are spending a lot of time trying to guess what other people are thinking and feeling, and working to respond to that instead of getting clear with yourself about what you want. Also, if we can't say "no" when we want to, we can't really say "yes" either.

If you find it difficult it say "no" when someone pushes against your boundaries, you could try an exercise that is adapted from self-defense classes. Tell a friend, or caregiver (or your therapist if you'd like) that you're going to practice saying "no" to their requests for two minutes. Set a timer, and let them make any outlandish requests they want. Your only response in that two-minute period should be "no"—no explaining, no compromising. When you're done, spend another two minutes talking about what it was like for you, or simply track your mood before and after.

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PARENT AND CAREGIVER WORKSHEET: IDENTIFYING YOUR VALUES

If you are reading this, it is probably because at some point your teen, or an adolescent that you care for, has told you that they are, or think they might be, a different gender than the gender you thought they were. If this is the case, let me just start by saying that you must be doing a really great job—your teen trusted you enough to talk with you about something really vulnerable, and that's a big deal.

You might be feeling a lot of different things. Some parents or caregivers report feeling confused, delighted, angry, scared, sad, excited, and more (sometimes all at once). I believe that you want what is best for your teen. I also know you might be getting a lot of conflicting information from a lot of different people, and it can be hard to know whom to trust.

As of this writing, there are a lot of trustworthy resources in the field, as well as plenty of misinformation and disinformation. But first let's take a moment to tune in to the person whose decisions will always be with you…yourself. At the end of the day, *you* are going to be accountable for your own decisions about how you connect with your teen, and how you hold your relationship with them in this vulnerable time.

To help get you started thinking about gender and your teen, here are some different positions people can take on gender. They all have some middle ground. Put a mark on the line between the statements that is closest to where you see yourself. The last part of this sheet is the stub of a statement with space for you to fill in the rest. It may be helpful to show this to your teen's clinician, so that they have a sense of where you're coming from and what kinds of resources might be helpful to you. You may also use this sheet in conversation with your family therapist, your own therapist, and/or your co-parent(s).

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I believe there are only two genders	_____	I believe there are many genders
I believe gender is based on the body you were born with	_____	I believe gender is multifactorial
I believe gender is fixed	_____	I believe gender is changeable
I believe it is morally or ethically wrong to change your gender	_____	I believe it is ethically or morally neutral or positive to change your gender
People changing gender seems like a trend to me, and I am worried about my teen getting caught up in it	_____	I think there have always been people who wanted to change their genders
Regarding gender, my role as a parent is to keep my teen from making a big mistake	_____	Regarding gender, my role as a parent is to support my teen in getting what they want

I care about my teen, and am most focused on:

(Some options might be preserving or building our relationship/preserving or building their health and wellbeing/preserving their future/keeping them from making big mistakes)

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PARENT AND CAREGIVER WORKSHEET: EXPRESSING YOUR VALUES

Now, you may be reading this having already had an initial reaction to your child that included feelings you wish you hadn't expressed. Or you might feel fine with what you expressed but be recognizing that your child was harmed by your revelations. Ugh. That's a really tough place to be. I think we can all empathize with the experience of saying something in the moment that we wish we could take back or wish we'd thought through more carefully. That said, how you approach the repair is going to teach your child a lot about working through conflict in important relationships. Many parents find it helpful to take an approach along these lines:

> First of all, thank you for telling me that you want to use a different name and pronouns. That took a lot of courage, and I'm glad you felt able to share your experience with me. I'm really sorry that I didn't respond with the kind of openness and acceptance you were probably hoping for in the moment. I imagine my anger/sadness/disbelief was pretty jarring for you, and I realize you might be feeling pretty hurt…and angry, too. I know I can't take back what I said, and you have every right to feel hurt and angry about it. And also, I want you to know that I love and support you, and care deeply about your happiness. I want to know more about what gender identity means to you, and what kind of support you are looking for in terms of your gender identity and expression. A lot of what you say is going to be new to me, and I might take some time to understand and digest what you tell me. But I really want us to be able to talk about these things together, and I'm open to hearing what you have to say, at the pace that feels right for you.

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PARENT AND CAREGIVER WORKSHEET: WHEN TRAUMA HITS HOME

If you are reading this, it is probably because your teen, or an adolescent that you care for, has told you that they had a traumatic or extremely stressful experience. That can be really hard to hear. And also, you must be doing a great job—your teen trusted you enough to talk with you about something that's very vulnerable, and that is a big deal.

You may be getting a lot of different information about the kinds of challenges teens experience when they have had traumatic or stressful experiences. You might be noticing differences in your teen and perhaps you have been wondering why they seem so different. You may also find that these differences in your teen—or your teen's disclosure around trauma and stress—are leaving you feeling jumpy or on edge or even angry. You might also find that something your teen has disclosed to you is activating your own difficult memories or intrusive thoughts of things that have happened to you.

If you find that your own trauma is getting stirred up, please find additional help in this difficult time. Being able to show up for the teenager in your life is deeply tied to being able to show up for yourself.

There are a lot of things to know about how trauma and stress can impact teens, but let's start with what might be happening for your teen right now. Here is a list of things that people who have a loved one who has had a traumatic experience sometimes report noticing in that person. Take a look and tick the ones that feel like they're coming up for your teen and write in any that you're noticing but that aren't on this list. If you start to feel overwhelmed by this list, put it away and go for a walk or have a snack and come back to it later. It could be helpful to share this list with your teen's clinician.

- ☐ Seeming on edge, jumpy, or easily startled
- ☐ Appearing checked out, shut down, or numb

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- ☐ Flipping back and forth between jumpy and checked out, but not really a lot of other emotional range otherwise
- ☐ Appearing hopeless, listless, and not enjoying fun things
- ☐ Having a hard time standing up to bullies
- ☐ Bullying others
- ☐ Seeming to seek out mean people or dangerous situations
- ☐ Eating difficulties (over- or undereating, eating foods that don't seem very appetizing, eating or restricting food intake at strange times)
- ☐ Sleep problems (sleeping too much or too little, nightmares)
- ☐ No interest in school or extracurriculars, skipping class or extracurriculars
- ☐ Using drugs, including alcohol or nicotine
- ☐ Multiple sex partners, seeming compulsivity around sex, perhaps STIs or unplanned pregnancies
- ☐ Fights at school or at home
- ☐ Uncontrollable thoughts or flashbacks
- ☐ Cutting, burning, or other kinds of self-harm
- ☐ Expressing suicidality or homicidality

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PARENT AND CAREGIVER WORKSHEET: GROUNDING WITH YOUR TEEN

Adolescents who have had exposure to trauma and stress will likely need a great deal of support from their caregivers to be able to fully flourish. It is wonderful that you are dedicated to supporting the adolescent in your life as they continue on this voyage of recovery. That said, it is not your responsibility (nor is it in your capacity) to fix their problems or eliminate the challenges they're facing. Right now, the adolescent in your life is working with their clinician on developing a sense of safety and stability in the context of a world that can often be unsafe and unstable. They'll be working on specific techniques to build safety and stability but, of course, will sometimes still make bad choices or be more erratic some days than others.

Right now, it would probably be most helpful for you to ask the adolescent in your life what techniques they like best for grounding and feeling safe. You might ask them to teach you the technique and ask if it would be OK to do it together sometimes. You might also recommend they practice the technique (or do the technique with them) when you see them getting anxious, overstimulated, or shut down. Now, this is invitational for you both. That is, you don't have to engage with the adolescent in your life in this way, and they don't have to tell you or teach you about the practices they prefer. But if this is a way that you connect, you might find it helpful to note a time you interacted with the adolescent in your life in this way, and what the outcome was.

Big emotional responses, such as flashbacks, meltdowns, or sudden shutting down, can feel very alarming and disruptive—to the adolescent in your life, and also to you. It could be helpful for you to have something handy that might be helpful for soothing sudden dysregulation or to reach for in times of crisis. For many people, a temperature change is useful for this. You may want to keep reuseable chemical heaters or instant cold packs handy in your home or vehicle and simply activate the heating or cooling element when you or the adolescent

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in your life starts to get dysregulated. This is a simple, wordless intervention that has the capacity to be quite powerful—give it a try and see if it works for you.

Start by talking it over with the adolescent in your life and asking if it would be OK to try something different when you see they are starting to get elevated or shut down. Show them the temperature elements and try out the intervention when you're both feeling calm so that you both have a sense of how it goes. (It's almost never a good idea to try to surprise someone who has had stressful or traumatic experiences, and during a flashback is not the best time to find out that any particular intervention is really emotionally disruptive!) Once you've had a practice run, ask if it would be OK to try it out during a time when the adolescent in your life is a little dysregulated, or just starting to get dysregulated, and see if it is helpful. You might know that they are getting dysregulated because you notice their voice or breathing change, or because they seem to be tensing up, or because they're getting flushed or clammy. You might also notice because *you're* starting to feel overwhelmed, and you think it might be in reaction to whatever is happening with the adolescent. In this case, if they reject the intervention, you could try it on yourself and see if it helps bring down the stress of the conversation.

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PARENT AND CAREGIVER WORKSHEET: CONNECTION AND STABILITY

Different families have different relationships with routine—some are very routine-oriented, while others are more improvisational in approach. During this period in which the adolescent in your life is working on recovering from exposure to trauma and stress, routines can be extremely helpful, although rigidity can be counterproductive. If your family or support system is fairly improvisational in approach, you might consider establishing a weekly routine. Prioritizing dinner together one night a week, or making a habit of taking a weekly walk with the adolescent in your life, or spending time one day a week working on a shared project together, has the capacity to be very grounding for all concerned. If your family is extremely routine-oriented and perhaps somewhat strict, would there be any benefit to loosening the reins a little during this period of recovery? Co-creating a shared plan for this with the adolescent in your life can be helpful for clarity, setting expectations, and building buy-in across the board.

Take a few moments to reflect on your parenting style and/or the way you relate to the adolescent in your life. What routines are already in place? What about these routines feels harmonious or discordant? What is your relationship with routine in your own life? How do you want to feel with the adolescent in your life? How do you currently feel when you're together?

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PARENT AND CAREGIVER WORKSHEET: TENDING TO YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

It can feel really difficult when someone we love has had a traumatic experience. For many parents and caregivers, the desire can be to press the adolescent to talk about the experience, sometimes pressing them to discuss it in detail, out of our own anxiety (or, sometimes, frustration with the pace of recovery). This can also come up for parents or caregivers who have themselves had traumatic and stressful experiences and perhaps been encouraged or even pressured to talk about it before they were ready. If you find yourself feeling insistent about getting the details of an experience out of an adolescent or even feeling angry or frustrated they won't talk with you about it, it is a good time to take a step back and calm yourself down. Ask yourself why you feel the need to know everything about this person's experience right now? Is it to better support them? To question their story? To make yourself feel better?

Now, sometimes quite the opposite is true—adolescents who have had traumatic and stressful experiences sometimes get flooded by memory and feel they have to disclose everything *right now.* You may have been with the adolescent in your life during a period when they seemed uninterruptable about their experience, blurting it out in detail even as you wished they would slow down. It could be that you felt swamped and overwhelmed by this experience. If this is something that comes up between you and the TGE adolescent with trauma exposure in your life, it can be most helpful to have some stock phrases ready to help slow them down or even stop them when you're feeling overloaded. You might want to practice saying these a few times to other people in your life to get the hang of them.

I want to pause you there because I think what you're saying is really important and I don't want to rush.
Can we slow down? I'm starting to lose the plot.
Can we have some water before we keep talking?

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I'm starting to feel confused about time, and I think you might be, too. Can we get grounded?

Let's get the list of grounding techniques before we keep going. Is there one you feel might work well right now?

I really understand how difficult it is to find the line between wanting someone to know that they *can* talk to you about everything and letting them know they don't *have* to talk to you about anything. I also really understand the desire to know everything the adolescent in your life is thinking and feeling and experiencing—you want to keep them safe and you want to know their struggles. But this is (yet another) time to follow where your adolescent leads. They are going to have to figure out their own ways of living with the experiences they have had, and while you can support them in their recovery, you cannot make them recover or do the work of recovery for them.

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