



## Medical Trauma: What Healthcare Professionals Need to Know

### What Is Medical Trauma?

Medical trauma is a psychological and emotional response to serious illness, injury, pain, or medical treatment that feels overwhelming, frightening, or out of the patient’s control. Even with appropriate care and no complications, patients and families may still experience medical trauma. Medical trauma can stem from direct experiences (e.g., pain, procedures) and is often followed by secondary stressors (e.g., changes in appearance or function, financial strain) that compound its psychological impact.

### Why This Matters

- Healthcare professionals care for patients and families during some of the most vulnerable and distressing moments of their lives. Despite best intentions and high-quality care, some patients may leave the healthcare system feeling frightened, overwhelmed, or emotionally harmed.
- The psychological consequences of medical trauma can contribute to changes in the disease course (e.g., severity), changes in engagement in care (e.g., under or overutilization), heightened emotional distress, agitation, and loss of trust in providers.
- Each patient encounter is a chance to contribute to safety, dignity, and healing. Even small efforts to reduce fear and foster trust can have lasting impacts.

<i>Know the Signs of Medical Trauma</i>	
<b>HANDS</b>	
<b>Heating Up</b>	Escalation during visits including heightened distress, nervousness, agitation and/or strong beliefs about the medical stressor
<b>Avoiding Care</b>	Missed visits or inconsistent engagement, non-adherence with medical advice or recommendations
<b>Not Saying No</b>	People-pleasing, hesitancy to ask questions, desiring procedures or exams to go quickly
<b>Difficulty with Trust</b>	Heightened vigilance about the body, care team, or healthcare systems
<b>Shutting Down</b>	Not speaking, trouble with decisions, difficulty understanding or processing information, misuse of benzodiazepines, alcohol, opioids, or other substances for emotional regulation



## Support Your Patients

- **Preview What's Coming.** Offer a brief explanation of what to realistically expect
  - “Next, we’ll take your blood pressure”
- **Offer Micro-Choices.** Providing small options. Support empowerment.
  - “Would you prefer to sit or lie down?”
- **Normalize Emotional Responses.** Acknowledge distress. Reduce shame.
  - “It’s common to feel nervous in this setting”
  - “Is there anything I should know that might be especially difficult for you?”
- **Recognize and Respond to Signs of Distress.** Look for nonverbal cues (e.g., flinching, silence, tearfulness, agitation). Check in before and after.
  - “Is anything about this situation feeling difficult or uncomfortable right now?”
  - “How are you feeling after your procedure?”
- **Repair Quickly When Needed.** Take ownership. Restore trust.
  - “How might I make things more comfortable for you?”
- **Leverage Social Support.** Include support persons when possible. Provide direction on how they can support.
  - “It is helpful to bring in personal comfort items to support your loved one.”
  - See our *Medical Trauma: A Guide for Support Persons* fact sheet for more information.
- **Reduce Risk for Re-Traumatization.** Resist sharing others’ trauma stories or asking for trauma details without consent.
- **Humanize the Interaction.** Connect. A kind word, a light moment, or using someone’s name can support safety, dignity and esteem. Honor differences in response to medical trauma and preferences for support.



## Supporting Your Own Wellbeing

### Strategies for Professional Sustainability

- **Have a Plan.** Know your signs of overwhelm. Identify strategies ahead of time that will help you tend to yourself and still be able to return to work.
- **Practice Self-Compassion.** You are not expected to resolve trauma. Your role in recognizing distress and responding with care is valuable.
- **Integrate Brief Recovery Moments.** Small practices, such as a few deep breaths, a moment of quiet, or a brief conversation with a colleague, can offer meaningful restoration.
- **Debrief When Possible.** Informal check-ins with peers or team members can help release emotional burden and build community.
- **Set Boundaries When Feasible.** Protect time off, delegate tasks when appropriate, and recognize personal limits.
- **Utilize Team-Based Resources.** When a patient's needs exceed what you can provide in the moment, involve behavioral health, social work, or other support services when available. Present these services as a component of integrated care – not a punishment or last-ditch effort.
  - See our [Medical Trauma Clinician Fact Sheet](#) for more details on psychological interventions

### For further information check out:

- Our full collection of [Medical Trauma](#) educational materials.
- [Health Care Toolbox](#) resources for managing secondary traumatic stress.
- [Managing the Psychological Impact of Medical Trauma](#) by Flaum Hall and Hall for a comprehensive overview of medical trauma and its consequences in adults.
- [SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#) provides a comprehensive guidance for clinicians seeking to adopt trauma-informed care approaches. A brief summary is also available from the [Center for Health Care Strategies](#).
- [The Wendt Center Resources for Healthcare Workers](#) for tips and information on coping tools and wellbeing at work.