



UNDERSTANDING COMPLEX TRAUMA

FIELD GUIDE

BY JAMIE ATEN, PH.D. & KENT ANNAN, M.DIV.



SPIRITUAL FIRST AID™

Spiritual First Aid
Wheaton, Illinois
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INTRODUCTION

Not all wounds are visible.

Complex trauma, which is sometimes called chronic trauma or relational trauma, develops when someone experiences repeated or prolonged harm, often in situations where escape wasn't or isn't possible.

Unlike post-traumatic stress disorder, which tends to focus on a single event or experience, complex trauma recognizes that for some, there is nothing “post” about their traumatic experience.

It can stem from experiences such as childhood abuse or neglect, domestic violence, human trafficking, or war, as well as years of living under threat, poverty, or chronic stress. Complex trauma can also arise from other prolonged or overwhelming circumstances.

Over time, these experiences disrupt the development of safety, trust, and self-regulation, leading to pervasive impacts on identity, relationships, and overall functioning.

Before moving forward, it's important to note that complex trauma isn't an official diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), but it is



recognized internationally in the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11)* as *Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD)*. These are two of the main references that mental health and healthcare professionals use to define, diagnose, and guide treatment for trauma-related conditions.

For everyday helpers, understanding this distinction matters because many people live with the effects of complex trauma without having a formal diagnosis, yet still need compassionate, informed care.

Scripture affirms the deep reality of such suffering: “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18, NIV). Improving is possible, but it requires spiritual fortitude and holistic care.

In the pages that follow, you’ll explore the psychology of complex trauma, recognize its signs and effects, and discover practical ways to support survivors toward safety, recovery, and healing with peer-to-peer support.





COMMON SIGNS OF COMPLEX TRAUMA

Whereas acute trauma results from a single overwhelming event, complex trauma develops from prolonged exposure to threat, abuse, neglect, or instability—often beginning in childhood or within relationships meant to provide safety.

Over time, the body and brain adapt to survive in an environment that feels persistently unsafe. These adaptations can remain even when the original danger has passed, leaving individuals constantly on alert for potential harm.

The prolonged activation of this stress response is often described as the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn cycle. This cycle can reshape how the nervous system, emotions, and relationships function (van der Kolk, 2014).

The brain learns to anticipate danger, prioritizing survival over connection and rest. Everyday stressors can then trigger disproportionate reactions—not because of weakness, but because the body has learned vigilance as protection. People living with complex trauma may experience:

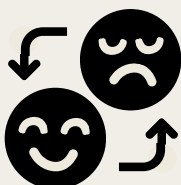


Chronic Hyperarousal



Many survivors live in a heightened state of alert, as if danger could return at any time. They may feel constantly tense, easily startled, restless, or unable to relax, even in safe environments. Sleep difficulties and physical exhaustion are also common.

Emotional Dysregulation



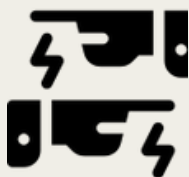
Emotions can feel unpredictable or overwhelming. Survivors may struggle to identify what they feel, experience sudden waves of anger, sadness, or fear, or feel emotionally numb. This fluctuation can make it difficult to respond calmly to everyday stress.

Negative Self-Concept



Long-term trauma can distort how people see themselves. Survivors may carry deep feelings of guilt, shame, or unworthiness and believe they are permanently damaged or undeserving of care. These internalized beliefs can shape identity and behavior.

Relationship Challenges



Connection can feel unsafe or uncertain. Survivors may fear closeness, have difficulty trusting others, or find themselves withdrawing to avoid potential hurt. Relationships may be marked by patterns of self-protection or emotional distance.



Dissociation



When emotions or memories become overwhelming, survivors may mentally detach as a way to cope. They might feel disconnected from their body, emotions, or surroundings —experiencing moments where they lose track of time, forget where they are, or feel like they're watching themselves from outside.

These responses are not personal failings. They reflect the body's remarkable and intelligent design to preserve life in the face of overwhelming threat. However, over time, the same instincts that once ensured survival can become barriers to feeling safe, connected, and calm.

When caregivers, churches, and organizations understand these responses as survival strategies rather than symptoms to fix, they can respond with greater empathy and wisdom—creating environments where survivors can gradually rebuild stability, trust, and emotional regulation.

Recovery often involves retraining the body and mind to recognize safety, restoring connection with others, and rediscovering a sense of purpose and hope. Understanding these patterns lays the groundwork for providing care that truly supports long-term recovery and wholeness.





IMPACT ON BLESS NEEDS

Since complex trauma affects the whole person, the Spiritual First Aid BLESS framework helps caregivers see overlapping impacts and offer care that restores safety and dignity. The essential first step is understanding how trauma affects the five BLESS Needs—Biological, Livelihood, Emotional, Social, and Spiritual. This insight guides a compassionate and practical care response that promotes holistic healing:

Biological Needs



Survivors often live in a heightened state of stress, leading to fatigue, pain, or disrupted sleep and appetite. Prolonged cortisol release can harm immune and heart health. Helping survivors learn to regulate their body and restore physical balance is foundational to recovery.

Livelihood Needs



Complex trauma can disrupt work and daily stability. Survivors may struggle with employment, finances, or responsibilities due to triggers or focus issues. Stable structures and safe, consistent environments help rebuild a sense of control and confidence.



Emotional Needs



Emotional dysregulation can cause feelings of overwhelm or numbness. Survivors may avoid or suddenly express emotions. Trauma-informed care emphasizes grounding, self-compassion, and gradual exposure to emotions within safe relationships to help survivors rebuild emotional regulation over time.

Social Needs



Because trauma often occurs in relationships, healing must also happen through them. Survivors may long for connection yet fear it at the same time. Supportive community and peer relationships can rebuild trust and re-teach safety through consistency, empathy, and respect for boundaries.

Spiritual Needs



Trauma can shake a person's image of God and sense of meaning. Survivors may ask, "Where was God when this happened?" or struggle to pray. Theologian Shelly Rambo (2010) calls this the "middle space" between death and resurrection when hope feels out of reach. Gentle spiritual companionship, lament, and honest faith conversations can help restore connection with a compassionate God.





COMPLEX TRAUMA CARE: BEST PRACTICES

Caring for those who've endured complex trauma requires patience, presence, and a commitment to walking with them at their own pace. Recovery isn't linear, and healing takes time. Grounding care in trauma-informed principles and the Spiritual First Aid approach allows us to support the whole person and help survivors take steady steps toward healing:

Create Environments of Safety



Safety is the first step in all trauma recovery. Physical, emotional, and relational safety must come before deeper processing. This begins by ensuring individuals are out of harm's way and have daily stability. Caregivers, churches, and organizations can support this through privacy, consistency, and clear boundaries.

Approach Care with Humility



Begin by listening with openness rather than offering quick solutions. Ask gentle questions like, "How can I help you feel safe right now?" This approach honors the survivor's experience, builds trust, and lays the groundwork for genuine relationships.



**Build Trust
Through
Consistency**



Trust grows slowly. Survivors notice whether caregivers keep promises and respect autonomy. Avoid rushing closeness; instead, communicate reliability over time. As Proverbs 3:3 reminds us, “Let love and faithfulness never leave you.”

**Normalize
Trauma
Responses**



Educate survivors and communities that trauma reactions are normal physiological responses, not character flaws. Understanding this reduces shame and encourages engagement in care.

**Model Calm
& Stability**



Through calm communication, consistent routines, and dependable actions, helpers convey reliability and care. This steadiness helps survivors feel anchored and builds confidence that support will remain as they move through recovery.

**Encourage
Grounding
& Regulation**



Grounding techniques—like deep breathing, the 5-4-3-2-1 sensory exercise, or stretching—help calm the body’s alarm system. Consider pairing practices with prayer or Scripture meditation (e.g., Psalm 46:10).



***Support
Access to
Trauma-
Informed
Counseling***



Professional therapy—especially approaches like EMDR, somatic therapies, or trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy—can help integrate traumatic memories safely. Churches and organizations can establish referral networks to connect with Christian and faith-accommodative therapists.

***Address
Livelihood
Stability***



Provide or connect survivors with assistance for employment, housing, or education. Predictability in daily life restores dignity and control. As Philippians 4:19 reminds us, “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”

***Strengthen
Social
Support***



Healing from complex trauma thrives in safe and supportive relationships. Compassionate friendships, peer groups, and support ministries, create a sense of belonging that counteracts isolation. Encourage clear norms of confidentiality and respect to help survivors feel secure, valued, and connected as they heal.



***Encourage
Healthy
Coping
Practices***



Promote healthy practices such as regular sleep, movement, journaling, art, music, time in nature, and mindful prayer. These restorative rhythms activate the body's natural calming systems, provide safe outlets for emotion, and nurture overall well-being throughout the care process.

***Integrate
Spiritual
Practices of
Lament &
Hope***



Biblical lament offers honest language for pain while holding space for God's faithfulness. Reading Psalms of lament, such as Psalm 13, helps survivors recognize that grief and faith can coexist. This practice allows people to express sorrow within the safety of God's presence, fostering recovery and renewal.

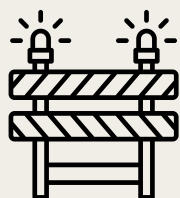
***Reduce
Shame
Through
Compassion***



Shame often lies at the heart of complex trauma, shaping how survivors see themselves and others. Respond with empathy instead of correction, using gentle words that affirm worth and belonging. Simple phrases like "You are cared for," "You are not alone," and "It's not your fault" can help restore dignity.

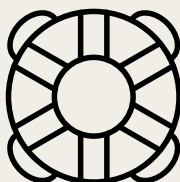


**Encourage
Boundaries &
Empowerment**



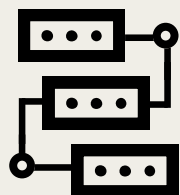
Many survivors have experienced a loss of control, leaving them hesitant to trust their own voice. Empower them to make choices about their healing journey and honor their pace. Supporting autonomy in this way helps re-establish a sense of agency and strengthens confidence in their ability to get better.

**Offer
Ongoing
Support if
Possible**



Recovery from complex trauma unfolds gradually over time. Churches and helpers can offer stability by maintaining ongoing connections through regular follow-ups, check-ins, and growth opportunities. A steady presence communicates care and patience, reinforcing that healing is possible even when progress feels slow.

**Use SFA's
BLESS CPR
Framework**



The SFA model (Step 1. BLESS Triage, Step 2. Care with Practical Presence, Step 3. Provide Coping Practices, and Step 4. Refer and Resource) offers a structured yet compassionate framework. Helpers should collaborate to identify which BLESS Need the helpee feels is most pressing, offer grounded presence, and connect survivors to deeper care when needed *by referring them for professional support*.



CONCLUSION

Complex trauma leaves deep marks, but it does not have the final word. God's story of redemption includes restoration for minds, bodies, and relationships broken by harm. By addressing the BLESS Needs, we participate in that healing work. Compassion, safety, and faithfulness create conditions where survivors can slowly rediscover hope. Caring for those impacted by complex trauma is sacred work. It is an invitation to reflect God's steadfast love to those rebuilding trust in themselves, others, and the One who makes all things new.

— “

He comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

—2 Corinthians 1:4

” —

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CO-FOUNDERS



Jamie Aten, Ph.D., is the Co-Founder of Spiritual First Aid. He is also the Founder and Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute, Blanchard Chair of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership, and Co-Coordinator of the Trauma Certificate Program at Wheaton College. He is both a Hurricane Katrina and a late-stage early-onset cancer survivor. As a trauma psychologist, Jamie has responded to and researched disasters and mass traumas around the globe. He has published nine authored and edited books and over 150 scholarly publications, including some of the top peer-reviewed journals in psychology. His research has been supported by over \$7 million in awarded grants. He is frequently cited, interviewed, and published in outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *BBC News*, *Psychology Today*, *Religion News Service*, *Moody Radio*, and *Christianity Today*. In 2016, Jamie was awarded the FEMA Community Preparedness Champion Award at the White House. He also received the Early Career Award and Applied Psychology of Religion and Spirituality Award from the American Psychological Association's Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. He is co-author and co-host of the award-winning *The Better Samaritan* (column and podcast) at *Christianity Today*. You can follow Jamie on LinkedIn.



Kent Annan, M.Div., is the Co-Founder of Spiritual First Aid. He is also the Co-Director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute and Director of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership at Wheaton College. His humanitarian work has included living in England, France, Albania, Kosovo, and Haiti. Kent co-founded the nonprofit Haiti Partners. He previously served on the board of directors of Equitas Group, which focused on child trafficking issues in Haiti and Southeast Asia. Kent writes for publications such as *The Washington Post* and *Christianity Today*. He is the author of four books, including *Slow Kingdom Coming: Practices for Doing Justice, Loving Mercy, and Walking Humbly in the World*. In addition, he is co-author and co-host of the award-winning *The Better Samaritan* (column and podcast) at *Christianity Today*. You can follow Kent on LinkedIn.





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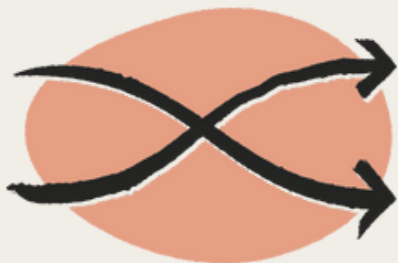
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