



# Trauma in the Face of State Violence:

A Guide for Legal Workers and Activists

National Lawyers Guild  
Healing Justice Program





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*Healing Justice is a political strategy conceived in 2005, and formally launched by the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective to intervene on and respond to generational trauma and systemic oppression, and build community/survivor led responses rooted in southern traditions of resiliency to sustain our emotional/physical/spiritual/psychic and environmental well being. It was more broadly introduced to the movement at the 2007 and 2010 U.S. Social Forums to lift up the inseparability of healing and justice and to encourage more recognition of the long history and necessity of healing and transforming trauma in the process of resistance and liberation.*

*The NLGSF looks to this history and is informed by it as we seek to integrate support for members as they witness and are impacted by state violence.*



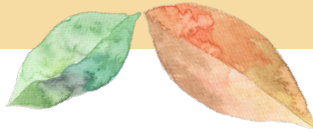
The ways we respond to trauma are impacted by who we are, how we grew up, our identities, social and political context, and experiences with oppression and privilege. These trauma responses often impact how we show up in our lives, in relationships with others, including coworkers, clients, and comrades, and in the movement. The effects of trauma can be pervasive, and when these responses are left without attention they can be reenacted in ways that are destructive to ourselves and to the relationships and movements we care about. This pamphlet was created to provide introductory information about trauma, common trauma responses, and resources for accessing support as a part of building more resilient movements for justice.

As the legal arm for movements fighting for social change, the work of the NLG can involve both witnessing and experiencing trauma. We fight for people within the confines of systems designed to harm and oppress, and we bring our own histories to this work. We go to prisons and detention centers; defend people in court; attend protests and actions; staff hotlines; listen, witness, and record state violence.

This **vicarious trauma** of being a witness to brutality and violence can impact us in some of the same ways that experiencing trauma ourselves can. Traumatic experiences may not be preventable in our work, but how we hold and work with them is a choice.

**Trauma** describes a painful or distressing experience in which someone does not have the internal or external resources to integrate, digest, cope and/or release the impacts of stress on the body, mind, heart and spirit. A **trauma response** is how a person responds to trauma which is often based on early life experiences or previous experiences of trauma, but can vary across time and context. The most common responses include: **fight, flight, freeze, appease, and dissociate**. People often employ more than one of these responses and there is no better or worse response.

In fact, **trauma responses are instinctively protective**. They are initially developed to support our survival and keep us safe. Many of us experience more or less intense forms of betrayal, shame, harm, oppression, abuse or bullying during childhood and have well-practiced trauma responses by the time we are adults. However, the trauma responses that we used to keep us safe as children often do not serve the same purpose in our adulthood. They can become our automatic response to any type of conflict or difficult situation, and cause breakdowns on personal, professional and movement levels. In this way, trauma responses become less useful in keeping us safe and can unintentionally create harm over time.



## COMMON TRAUMA RESPONSES

TRAUMA RESPONSE	WHAT IT MEANS	WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE
FIGHT	Pushes back, verbally or physically: initially developed in an attempt to defend self or others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Taking a stand/righteousness</li><li>• Getting bigger than the other person in body language, stature and tone</li><li>• Intimidating or threatening others</li><li>• Being physically aggressive</li><li>• Taking up space physically and/or energetically</li><li>• Creating and/or engaging in conflict</li><li>• Presenting as hard or critical</li></ul>
FLIGHT	Leaves, runs away, hides, avoids: initially developed in an attempt to get away from dangerous or harmful situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Literally leaving a situation (walking away, ending a conversation)</li><li>• Avoiding conflict</li><li>• Experiencing an increase in anxiety or panic</li><li>• Always on the go/staying busy</li></ul>
FREEZE	Shuts down, numbs out, dissociates: initially developed to stop the body and mind to sharpen automatic senses in the face of danger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Difficulty making decisions</li><li>• Difficulty speaking up during a conflict</li><li>• Isolating oneself</li><li>• Depression</li><li>• Detachment</li><li>• Avoiding contact with others</li></ul>

<p><b>APPEASE</b></p>	<p>To placate or pacify another: initially developed to neutralize someone who is or appears to be harmful or dangerous</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becoming smaller and shrinking, in both stature and presence</li> <li>• Nodding and smiling in agreement</li> <li>• Putting your needs, interests, and even ethics aside to tend to another person</li> <li>• Over apologizing/apologizing when there is no need to</li> <li>• Being agreeable</li> <li>• Lacking boundaries</li> <li>• Shifting to accommodate other people's needs</li> <li>• Lack of feeling or knowing your own needs</li> <li>• Letting others take the lead</li> <li>• Disengaging from conflict</li> </ul>
<p><b>DISSOCIATE</b></p>	<p>To disconnect or separate from without physically leaving: initially developed to remove self mentally and physically from emotional, mental and physical pain, to not feel it, or to feel it less</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numbing out</li> <li>• Lacking awareness about what is going on around you</li> <li>• Feeling checked out/spaced out/floaty as the norm</li> <li>• Lacking presence</li> <li>• Avoidance</li> <li>• Not remembering conversations or interactions</li> <li>• Feeling out of your body, as if you are watching yourself rather than existing in yourself</li> </ul>



**AM I EXPERIENCING A TRAUMA RESPONSE?**

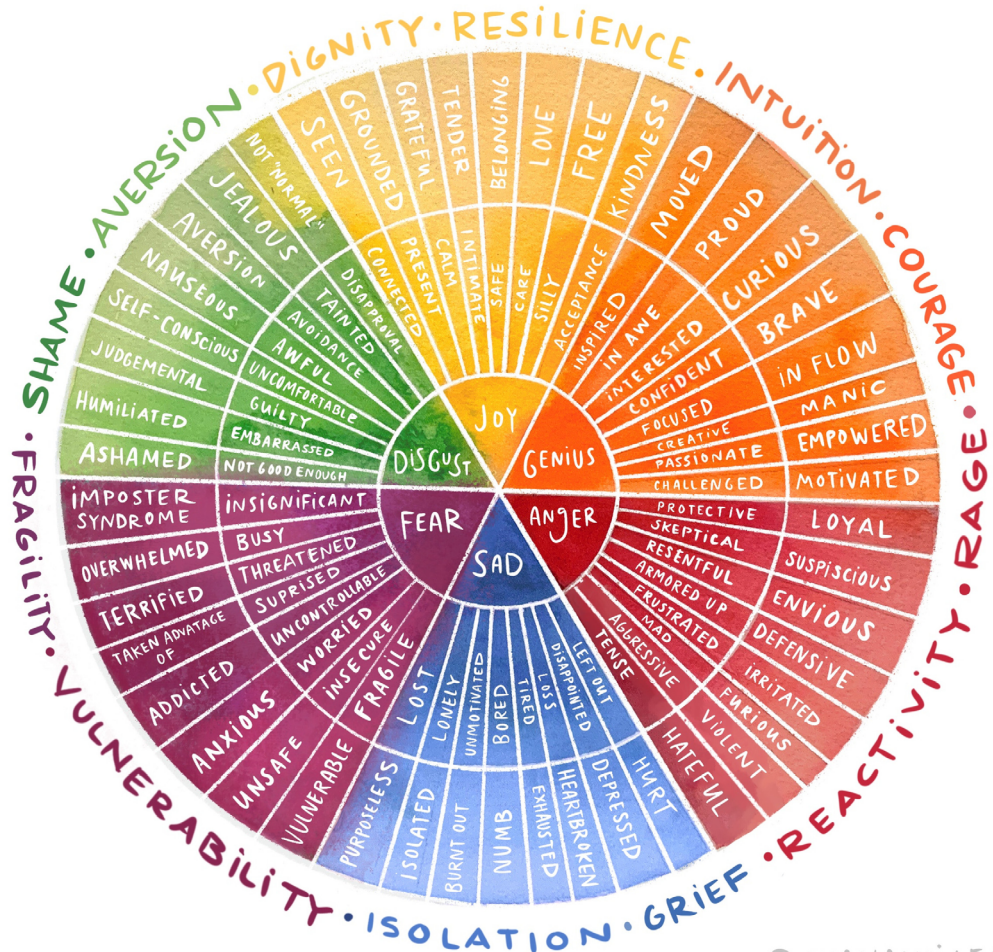
*Take some time to reflect on the following questions. This is not a diagnostic tool but rather a tool for self-assessment and understanding.*

- Are you having trouble sleeping?
- Have you noticed an increase of use in substances?
- Do you find yourself holding your breath?
- Have you had any changes in appetite?
- Do you have new, different, or worsening pain or fatigue?
- Are you experiencing a sense of helplessness or hopelessness?
- Have you been irritable and/or quick to act out?

## WHAT AM I FEELING?

For many of us, experiences of trauma and oppression limit our range of sensation and emotion. Learning to specifically and accurately identify our feelings can help us better understand ourselves, our experiences and the support we need. Use the wheel below to help identify more of your emotional landscape.

Developed by  
Abby Van Muijen





## TOOLS FOR RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF STATE VIOLENCE

The goal in **trauma healing** is regeneration: to honor the protective qualities of our trauma responses and intentionally transform them into something that keeps us safe while also supporting the relationships, contributions and life we want. Healing and regeneration occurs through awareness, choice, and practice. There are many different tools to help build awareness of our trauma responses, intentionally unravel deeply held impacts in our bodies, and ultimately take on new practices that help us align our actions with our values and desires for personal, political, and professional lives.

### **BEFORE AN ACTION**

- There are multiple issues of safety to consider before participating in an action. This pamphlet focuses on issues of trauma and mental health as they might be impacted or reflected in work with the NLG. Please see Know Your Rights resources on the nlgf.org website for other things to consider.
- Tell people where you are going and when you plan to return
- If attending a high risk action, be sure to include any relevant information about your mental health on your jail support form (also found on the NLGSF website)
- Plan to go with a buddy
- Bring: medications in original prescription bottle, water and snacks, adaptive devices

- Get a good night's sleep and eat some nutritious food before if possible
- Assess your capacity, role, risk level, and skillset to determine if/how you will participate

### **DURING AN ACTION**

#### **Grounding**

- Take three deep breaths
- Feel your back against a chair, a wall, or leaning on a friend
- Notice the parts of your body that are making contact with the ground

#### **Resilience**

- Bring to mind a place of resilience—this could be somewhere in nature, your bedroom, or the feeling of hugging a loved one. Feel the different sensations of this experience: What does it smell like? Sound like? Let this place of resilience fill out into your body as if you are there now.

#### **De-escalation**

- Inhale through your nose and then increase the depth of your exhale out of your mouth
- Slow your pace, your voice, and anything else you can do to slow down

#### **Boundaries**

- If you need space, notify your comrades and/or fellow NLG legal workers
- If you need to and are able to leave, do not hesitate to take a break or leave the area entirely

## When in Doubt, Fall Back on Your Rights

- Ask “Am I free to go?”, “Am I being detained?”
- Say “I am going to remain silent”, and “I want to speak with a lawyer”
- If possible, do not say anything other than these questions or statements

## AFTER AN ACTION

- Debrief your experience with a trusted someone
- Take a shower or bath and let the water wash over you
- Lay down on your back in a place with low/no stimulation for 10 minutes
- If you notice any shaking or have the impulse to move, follow it
- Take a walk, bounce, shake, vibrate, and/or move your body
- Do the things that make you feel good in your body while keeping you safe

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Extra support or resources are available to you if needed. NLG-SF Bay Area Members can request one-on-one practitioner support through our Healing Justice Program by emailing [healingjustice@nlgsf.org](mailto:healingjustice@nlgsf.org)

If you are part of an NLG chapter that would like to build out local healing justice work, feel free to contact us for support and consultation. Members at other NLG chapters can request support by emailing the national office at [membership@nlg.org](mailto:membership@nlg.org)

Practitioner support may also be found via the networks below. If you are a practitioner and can offer your support services, reach out to get plugged into our healing justice network by emailing [healingjustice@nlgsf.org](mailto:healingjustice@nlgsf.org)

You can also look into these networks to find a therapist:

- Asians for Mental Health: [asiansformentalhealth.com](http://asiansformentalhealth.com)
- Generative Somatics Practitioners Network [generativesomatics.org/resources/find-practitioner/](http://generativesomatics.org/resources/find-practitioner/)
- Inclusive Therapists (Culturally Responsive Therapists): [inclusivetherapists.com](http://inclusivetherapists.com)
- Latinx Therapy: [latinxtherapy.com](http://latinxtherapy.com)
- Melanin & Mental Health: [melaninandmentalhealth.com](http://melaninandmentalhealth.com)
- National Deaf Therapy: [nationaldeaftherapy.com](http://nationaldeaftherapy.com)
- Open Path (Low Fee Sliding Scale): [openpathcollective.org](http://openpathcollective.org)
- Queer & Trans Therapists of Color: [nqttn.com/directory](http://nqttn.com/directory)
- Therapy for Black Girls: [providers.therapyforblackgirls.com](http://providers.therapyforblackgirls.com)
- Therapy for Black Men: [therapyforblackmen.org](http://therapyforblackmen.org)
- Therapist Neurodiversity Collective: [therapistndc.org/directory](http://therapistndc.org/directory)
- Therapy for Queer People of Color: [therapyforq poc.com](http://therapyforq poc.com)





