

Having Safe Conversations About Difficult Experiences

A short guide for trusted supporters of people
with intellectual disability



The **National Centre of Excellence in Intellectual Disability Health** made this guide.

The information was written in May 2026 by Madison Booth, Grace Eriean (placement student from Macquarie University), Bryana Fochesato, Makrina Tsinoglou and Jenna Zhao.

The guide was made by reviewing available resources on trauma and consulting with people with intellectual disability and their supporters.

Experts and people with intellectual disability reviewed this document. We thank Blue Knot Foundation for their expert review and for generously sharing their time and knowledge.

This guide gives general information only. It does not give safeguarding or legal advice. You should look for the requirements in your local context.

© 2026 National Centre of Excellence in Intellectual Disability Health.

This guide is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. This guide may be shared freely for non-commercial purposes, provided it is not altered and the National Centre of Excellence in Intellectual Disability Health is acknowledged as the source. To request permission for other uses, contact nceidh@unsw.edu.au.

About this guide

Sometimes the people we support have been through very difficult or upsetting experiences. This can affect how they feel, behave or communicate. This guide provides practical ways for supporters to listen, respond and offer support in a safe and respectful way, without pressuring the person to talk or share details.

The information in this guide can help to inform conversations when:

- something distressing has happened to the person you support
- the person tells you something that has been affecting them
- you notice signs of trauma or distress in the person
- you want to know how you can better support the person.

Understanding trauma

Trauma is a response to a distressing experience that overwhelms a person or makes them feel unsafe, powerless or stressed. Sometimes experiences continue to negatively affect a person long after the event has happened.

Not everyone uses the word “trauma” to describe their experiences. Some people with intellectual disability may prefer words like:

- stressful experiences
- bad memories
- things that happened
- feeling unsafe.

People with intellectual disability are more likely to experience distressing, traumatic or unsafe experiences in everyday life. This can include bullying, assault, abuse, neglect, exclusion, discrimination and unsafe relationships.

Trauma or distress can show up in different ways, such as:



Avoiding
certain
people
or places



Changes
in mood or
personality



Becoming
quieter
or more
withdrawn



Sleep
difficulties



Appearing
worried, fearful
or hesitant



Acting out
or risky
behaviour



Changes in
relationships



Physical
symptoms
such as
headaches,
stomach pain
or body pain

Family members, carers and support workers are often the first people to notice when something is wrong.

Not every change in behaviour means that the person is experiencing trauma. However, supportive conversations can help people with intellectual disability to feel heard, understood and safe.

Your role in the conversation

Your role is not to investigate, fix or act on what happened. Your role is to:

- help the person feel safe and heard
- better understand how you can support the person
- help connect the person with further support if needed.

Sometimes you will be the one to start the conversation. Other times, the person may come to you. The tips in this guide can support you either way.

Mandatory reporting and disclosure

If a person discloses abuse, neglect, assault or another criminal or reportable issue, you may have legal or organisational responsibilities to report concerns or seek further support. Follow your organisation's policies and local safeguarding requirements.

For further information see **IDMH Connect**.

Before you start the conversation

If you are thinking about initiating a conversation, consider:

- **What do I hope this conversation will achieve?** The purpose should always be about supporting the person, not trying to get answers or to pry.
- **Am I the right person to have this conversation?** The person may feel safer talking to someone they know well and can trust. You can always ask the person if there is someone else they would rather talk to.
- **Am I in the right headspace?** Consider whether you have the emotional space to be fully present and supportive.
- **Will I need to share any information with anyone else?** If so, be upfront and honest about this before asking questions.

Suggesting the idea of a conversation

It can help to gently raise the idea of a conversation and see how the person responds. Avoid starting difficult conversations abruptly or under pressure. Tell the person why you want to talk and give them time to decide if they would like to.

Make sure they know:

- there is no pressure and they can say no
- you will not be upset if they do not want to talk
- it is okay to come back to the topic at another time
- talking will not stress or burden you
- they can bring someone else they trust if it helps
- they can write or draw their thoughts down first.

**If the person says they are okay,
but you are still worried, it is okay
to check in again later.**

Preparing for the conversation

If the person would like to have a conversation, think about what will help the person feel comfortable, and involve them in these decisions where possible.

- Choose a quiet, private and familiar place where you will not be interrupted.
- Choose a time when the person is calm enough to have a conversation and is not rushed or in the middle of another activity.
- Offer items or activities that help the person feel calm. For example, they might prefer to talk while colouring-in, going for a walk, using a fidget tool or with a support animal.
- Have the person's communication supports available such as visual aids or communication apps.
- At the start of the conversation, ask if there is anything that would make it easier for the person to talk or share how they feel.
- Agree on a way for the person to signal that they want to stop or take a break. This could be a word, a gesture or a visual card.

During the conversation



Tip 1. Ensure safety

Your main job is to help the person feel safe throughout the conversation.

- Check that the person is comfortable.
- Watch for signs of distress such as becoming agitated, withdrawing or changes in tone or behaviour. Some people with intellectual disability may show distress through behaviour and body language rather than words.
- Stay non-judgemental, show empathy and offer reassurance. For example, you can acknowledge how the person is feeling by saying things like *“That sounds like it was really hard”, “Thank you for telling (or trusting) me” or “I appreciate your courage”*.
- If the person becomes upset, slow down, take a break or stop. Focus on helping the person feel safe and supported. It is okay to finish the conversation at another time.



Tip 2. Listen more than you talk

Good listening helps the person feel safe and shows that their experience matters.

- Give the person extra time to respond. People with intellectual disability may need longer to process questions and respond, especially when the topic is sensitive.
- Show that you are paying attention and do not interrupt the person.
- Reflect back what you heard and check that you have correctly understood everything that they shared.

Avoid comparing the person's experiences to someone else's and minimising or dismissing what they say. For example, do not say things like *"cheer up"*, *"it wasn't that bad"* or *"you'll feel better soon"*.



Tip 3. Respect choice and control

The person is always in control of what they share, when they share and who they share with. Pushing can cause harm and reduce trust.

- Frame questions around choice. For example, you could say *“Can I ask...”* or *“You do not have to answer this”* before asking a difficult question.
- Respect privacy. Always get consent before sharing what the person has said and be transparent about any information you are obligated to share.
- If the person does not want to share, reassure them that this is okay and remind them that you are still there if they change their mind.

Do not ask for details about what the person has experienced. Let the person choose what they want to share.



Tip 4. Communicate in ways that work for the person

People with intellectual disability communicate in different ways. Difficult emotions or conversations can make communication even harder. Use your knowledge of how the person communicates best and be prepared to adapt along the way.

You could:

- offer a small number of clear choices if the person is finding it hard to respond. For example, *“Do you feel sad, worried, tired or something else?”*
- refer to familiar events rather than days or weeks if the person finds it hard to understand time concepts. For example, ask *“How did you feel when you went to day group yesterday?”* rather than *“How long have you been feeling upset?”*
- follow the person’s lead on language. Use the same words that the person uses to talk about their experiences rather than using your own.



Tip 5. Be mindful of power dynamics

People with intellectual disability may be more likely to go along with things or say what they think you want to hear when they perceive an imbalance of authority, such as with a carer or support worker. At the same time, the person may hold back because they want to avoid upsetting you or worry about losing the support they rely on. Both can make it hard to know how the person is really feeling.

- Check-in with the person over time, rather than simply accepting “yes” at face value.
- Offer real choices and make it clear that it is okay to say no.
- Watch for non-verbal signs of discomfort, such as fidgeting or avoiding eye contact, even when the person’s words suggest they are okay.
- Be aware of your own reactions. Responding with visible distress or judgement can make it harder for the person to be honest with you.

Ending the conversation

Avoid ending the conversation abruptly after heavy topics. Focus on what might help the person feel supported and empowered afterwards. You can:

- ask what helps the person feel better and encourage helpful routines or activities to help the person cope with difficult feelings or experiences
- offer to help the person find the right support
- ask the person if they would like help to share anything relevant with other key supporters. This could include triggers, situations that might affect the person's sense of safety or comfort, and ways that supporters can help
- shift the conversation to something light before you finish, such as something the person is looking forward to in the coming days.

Think about what the person might need immediately after the conversation. They may need rest, quiet time, someone they trust nearby or extra support.

If appropriate, check in again later. Ongoing support and follow-up can build trust and safety.

Further support

You can help the person connect with further support if they want.

Share support options clearly and at the person's pace. Avoid pressuring the person to seek help before they are ready.

Support options may include:

- their GP
- a psychologist (if they already have one)
- helplines (see options on the next page).

If you are worried about the person's safety, follow local safeguarding processes.

If the person is in immediate danger, call 000.

Helpline	Operating hours	Services
Blue Knot 1300 657 380	7 days a week, 9am-5pm AEST/AEDT	Trauma specialist support for adults impacted by complex trauma as well as their families and supporters
SANE Australia 1800 187 263	Monday to Friday, 10am-8pm AEST/AEDT	Mental health support for adults including those with intellectual disability
Medicare Mental Health 1800 595 212	Monday to Friday, 8.30am-5pm (except public holidays)	Mental health support for anyone. Can connect you with local services
Lifeline 13 11 14	24/7	Crisis counselling and suicide prevention services
13YARN 13 92 76	24/7	Crisis support for First Nations peoples

Looking after yourself

These conversations can be emotionally demanding. You might feel affected by what the person shares with you.

After a difficult conversation, you might like to:

- talk to someone for emotional support. This could be someone you trust, your manager (if you are a paid supporter), an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or a psychologist. Be mindful of confidentiality when sharing anything about the person or their experiences
- take time to do something you enjoy or that helps you unwind.



www.nceidh.org.au

National Centre of Excellence in Intellectual Disability Health

Email: nceidh@unsw.edu.au | Telephone: +61 2 9065 8076