



FIRST RESPONSE TO TRAUMA

FIRST RESPONSE AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT
IN TRAUMA AND TRAUMA RECOVERY





re/alliance

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FIRST RESPONSE & COMMUNITY SUPPORT IN TRAUMA & TRAUMA RECOVERY

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PART ONE

Providing immediate support

The ways that people react to crises

Everybody responds to crises in a different way. For some people, a crisis can be a traumatic event, which can leave lasting harm in their lives. Starting by recognising the signs of how people react can help us respond in the most appropriate way. These emotions can express themselves in many ways, and every person experiences them differently. But here are some examples of how you may notice someone's reaction.



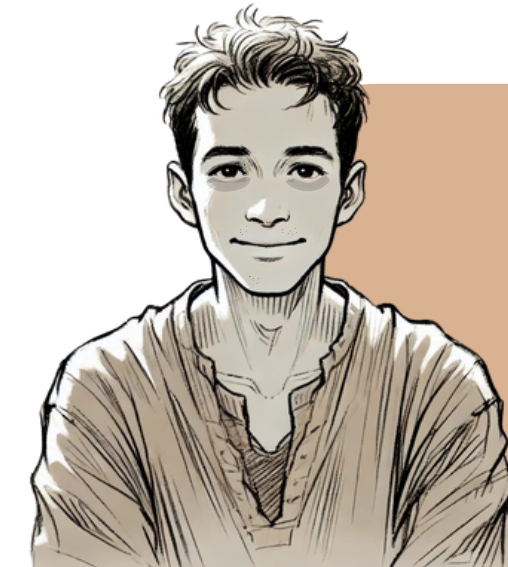
Anger

- shouting
- erratic behaviour



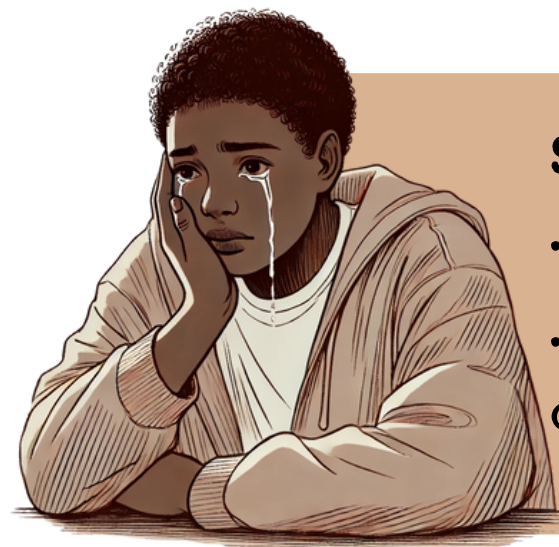
Panic

- change in breathing
- trouble focussing



Denial

- avoiding talking about the crisis



Sadness

- crying
- emotionally distant



Withdrawal

- not speaking
- body language shut off



Trauma is a response to distressing events that can significantly affect individuals and communities. Trauma impacts people differently. The effects of trauma can last for a long time, influencing how people see themselves and interact with others. However, developing coping skills and building supportive communities can help healing.

Community responders can make an important difference in the aftermath of crisis



DO

- ✓ Make sure you are both in a safe place to talk, or move to a place of safety
- ✓ Remain calm and reassuring and be responsive to what people need
- ✓ Provide what practical support you can, find out if people need food, shelter, or are looking for someone
- ✓ Ask people's names and use these when speaking to them
- ✓ Link people with specialist services who can provide the help that you can't
- ✓ Be honest about what you can and can't do
- ✓ Be available to listen when people are ready to talk
- ✓ Be aware of cultural and religious differences in your body language and response

DON'T

- ✗ Pretend you can resolve things outside your control
- ✗ Press people to talk about what's happened or force help on people who may not want it
- ✗ Pretend you understand or say you do, as their situation and response may be very different
- ✗ Enter someone's space without asking permission, respect their privacy
- ✗ Touch or embrace people without their permission
- ✗ Use complex language when speaking or feel the need to fill silences
- ✗ Judge or question people's actions or reactions, people respond to crisis in different ways and at different speeds

Useful responses to people in crisis

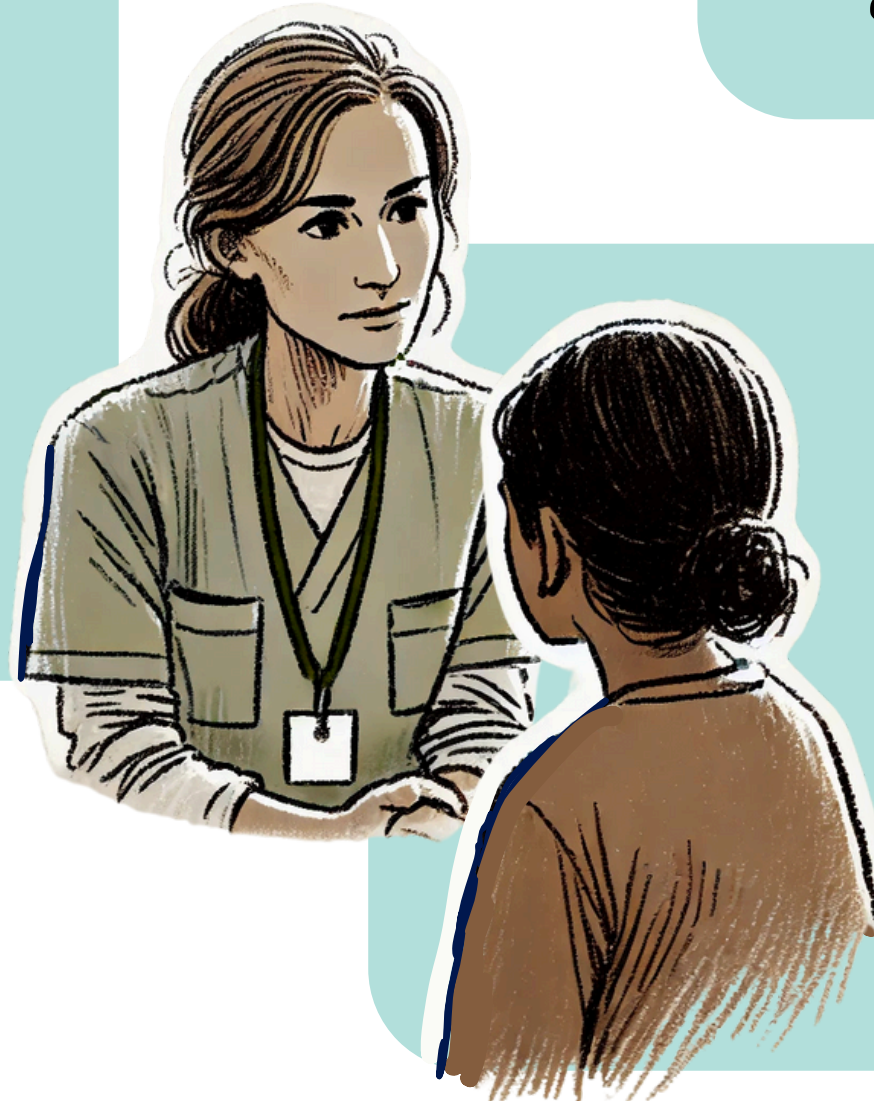


BODY LANGUAGE

Mirroring someone's stance: sitting if they are sitting, leaning forwards or back to reflect their stance

Nodding to show you are listening

Remaining calm but responsive, despite the difficult things they may be telling you



Make sure your tone of voice reflects the care and respect you want to convey.

SAYING

'I understand how you feel' (rather than 'I know how you feel')

'That sounds very difficult'

'I can see this is really painful for you'

'Do you want to try and tell me what's happened'

The importance of active listening

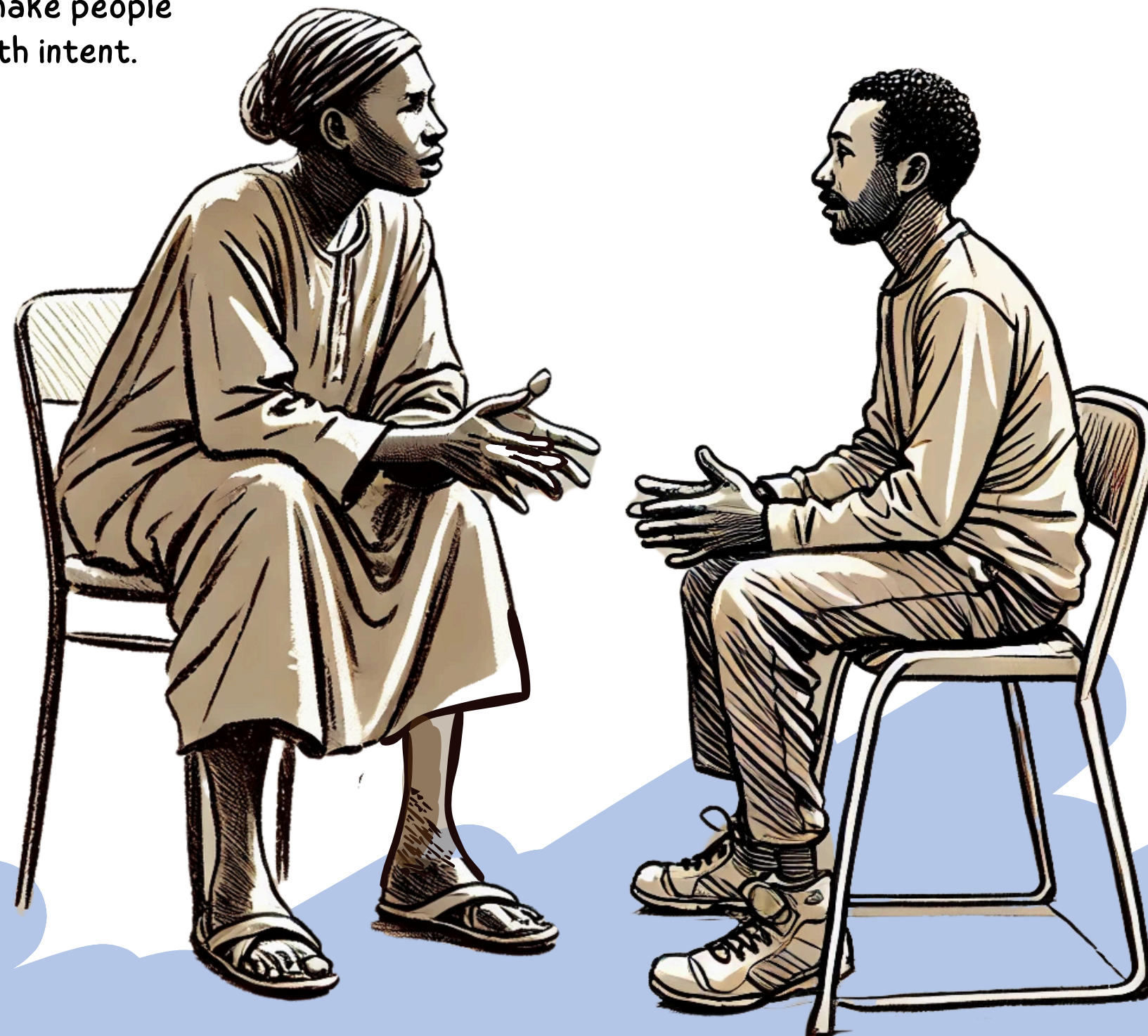
Listening actively means listening with attention. **If you can make someone feel really listened to you have already begun to provide valuable emotional support.** It can make people feel valued to have someone listening to them with intent.



When they have finished speaking check you have understood them correctly



Use the same terms as the person speaking to acknowledge what they have said and show you have heard them



Be respectful at all times



Let someone talk without interrupting them



Acknowledge how difficult things must be without pretending you know what they've been through

Be honest about what you can and can't do

You may be able to offer:

- Support
- Food and shelter
- Temporary safety
- Links to security services

You can't

- Change what has happened
- Know what will happen in the future
- Be sure that everything will be alright



It's important to be honest. Don't make promises that you can't keep!

Look out for the different signs of trauma and try to gauge when someone cannot cope with these and will need specialist support. Untrained community responders can provide some care, but people experiencing acute shock or trauma will need to see a professional.

Flashbacks or frequent nightmares

Sensitivity to noise or to being touched

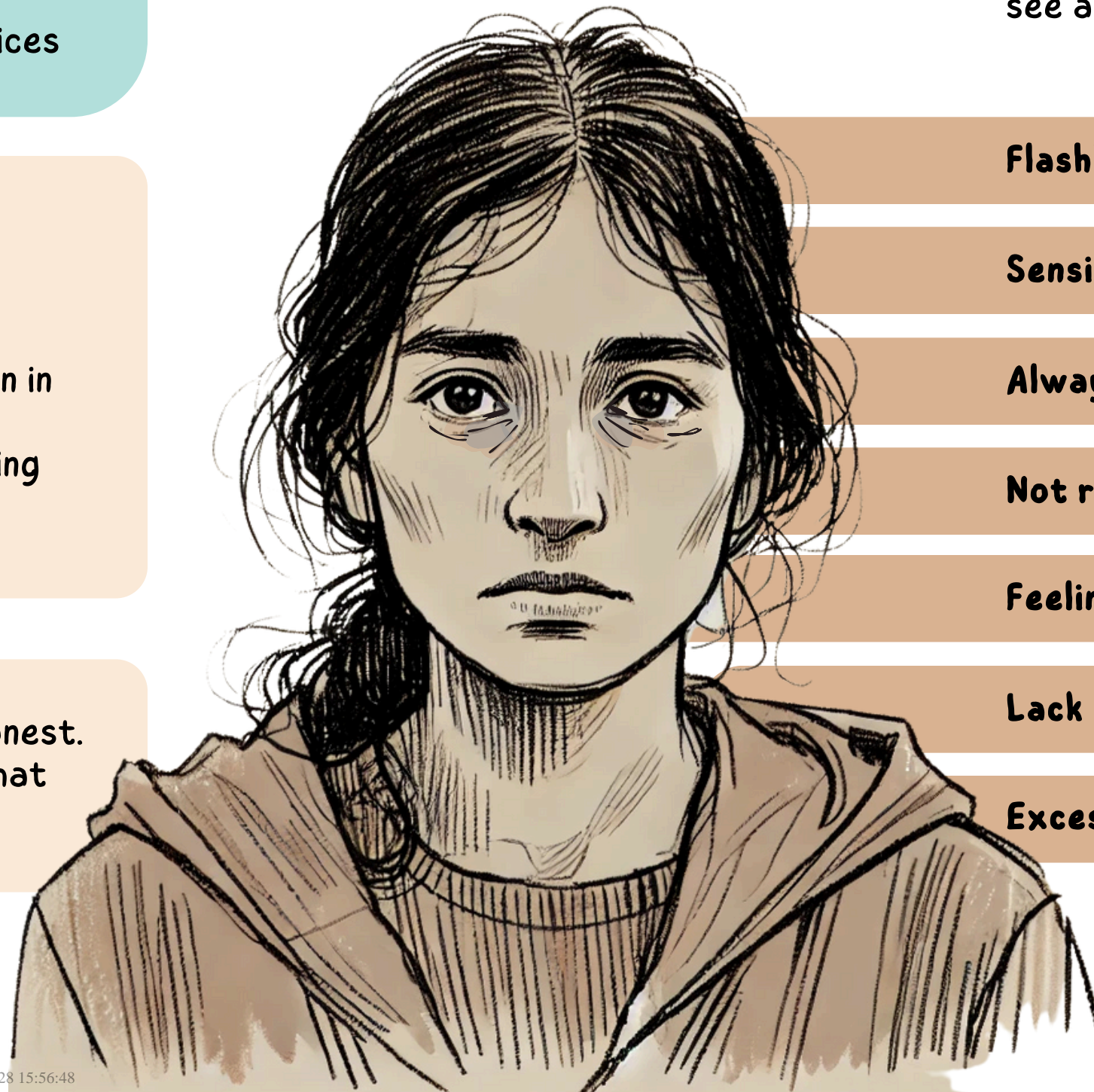
Always expecting something bad to happen

Not remembering periods of life

Feeling emotionally numb

Lack of concentration or irritability

Excessive alertness, anxiety, anger or sadness



Connect people with other services if they are available



Red cross or Red Crescent to trace family members



UN or UNHCR for shelter or food



Medical services for physical or extreme emotional treatment



Community kitchens for hot food and drink

Develop a simple record keeping and referral form so you can make these connections easily. This could include the name and date of birth of the person you are helping, their country of origin, and where they are staying. Make sure any personal details are kept very secure so other people cannot access them without permission.

- Have details of these services with you at all times and keep them updated

- Make sure it is safe to make the journey to these locations before sending people there, and send someone with them if possible

- Record key details of who you have seen and any injuries you recognise, so you can inform these services

- Try to keep records of everyone you see so you can inform any family members who may be looking for them



An illustration of a woman with dark skin and curly hair, smiling, in the foreground. In the background, there is a refugee camp with several small huts, a fenced-in area with people, and solar panels on the roofs. Overlaid on the image are six teal callout boxes with white checkmarks, each containing a self-care tip. The top box is a header, and the others are arranged around the woman.

Look after yourself and know when to take a break

✓
Sleep when
you can

✓
Don't take on
more than you
can manage

✓
Make sure you
have people to
talk to

✓
Eat and drink
regularly

✓
Exercise or do
things you enjoy to
manage your stress

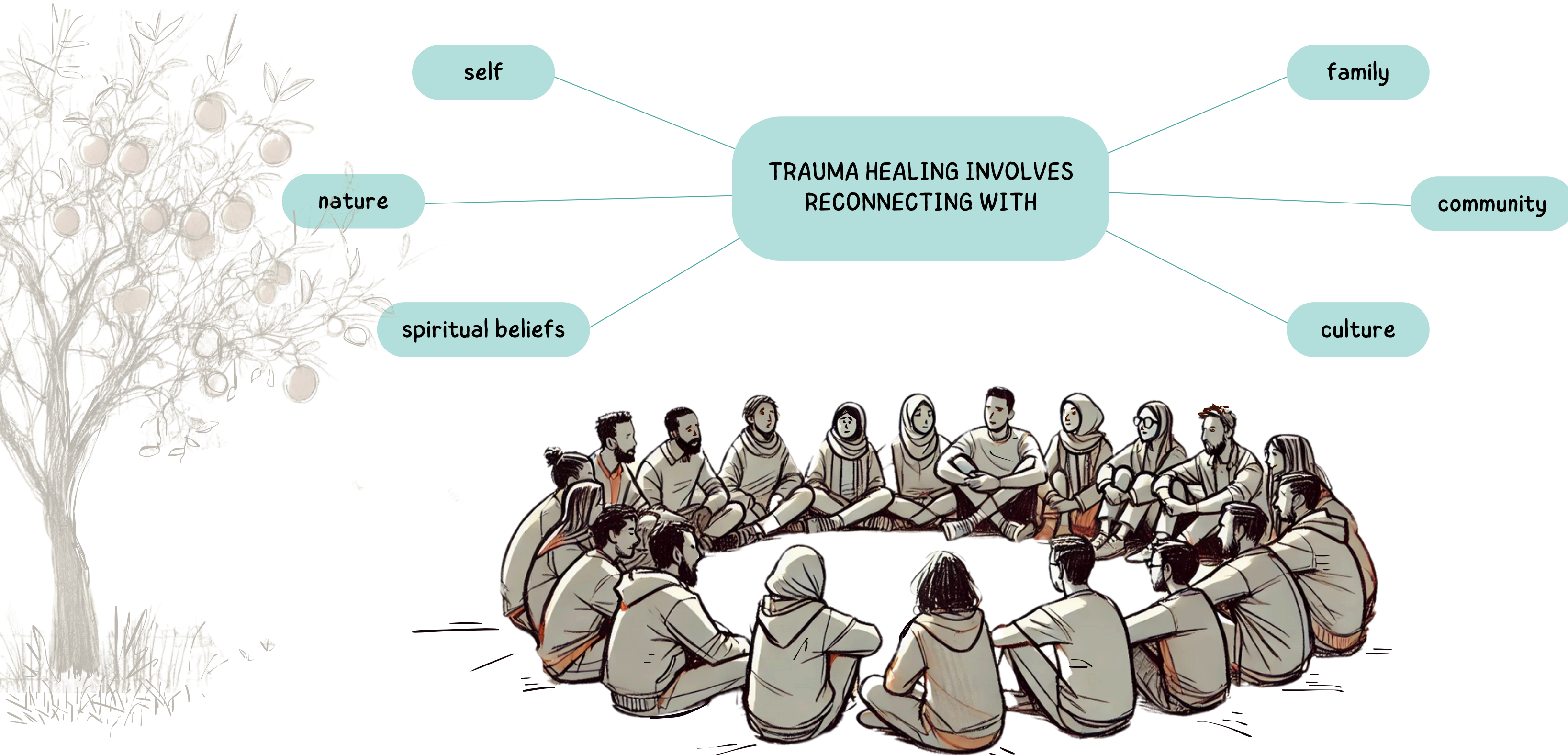
✓
Recognise
when you need
time out

PART TWO

Regenerating hope and community connection

Creating conditions for reconnection and healing

After trauma people often feel fearful, isolated and alone, losing trust in themselves and others. Once a situation has stabilised it is important to start rebuilding personal, family and community connections. After shared trauma, shared healing is important. Finding ways to connect and share experiences with others can be an essential first step.



Reconnecting with self

People first need to be able to forgive themselves for surviving when others might not have. They need to reconnect to their sense of self worth. Traumatic events are powerful and can leave people feeling helpless. So where possible, enable people to do things for themselves so they can rediscover their inner agency and power.



✓ Be available to listen to people individually if they need it

✓ Create conditions for people to take actions for their own wellbeing

✓ Encourage people to rest and be gentle with themselves

✓ Teach simple exercises like breath-work that people can do themselves

Breath and meditation

Simple meditation or breathing exercises may help in times of stress. You can guide people through a simple breathing exercise, or teach people how to do it themselves.

- 1 Take a deep breath in. You may like to close your eyes but some people may not feel comfortable or safe to do this. That's okay!
- 2 Hold your breath while you count slowly to four. One... two... three... four.
- 3 Slowly breathe out to the count of four.
- 4 Hold your breath out for four seconds, then breathe in again for four seconds. Repeat!

Art and image making can be used by individuals or groups to explore deep feelings

Organise spaces where people can paint or draw to express their feelings in a creative way. Invite individuals to talk about the images they have created. Some people may not be ready to talk, and that's okay.

Give people the opportunity to create images in groups if they would like to. Creating wall art together can also be a means to share messages of hope to the wider community as well a witness to people's strength and resilience.



Reconnecting with family

People may need help in reconnecting with their family, especially if they have had a shared traumatic experience. Families look different, and this may be a chosen family or a traditional family. Helping a family talk together in a healthy way can be an important step in a healing process.

Being with a family in talking through difficult things that have happened can help them to raise issues they would not otherwise feel able to speak about.

When feelings are raw and difficult, providing a supportive presence and making sure everyone has the opportunity to be heard can make a significant difference.

People may need support to reconnect with their families, physically or emotionally, and to forgive and accept each other.



Working with family members to challenge difficult beliefs

Individuals can become isolated in families by the beliefs of other members, such as attitudes to women or menstruation, attitudes toward protected groups such as LGBTQ+ people, or the reactions of spouses whose partners have been abused.



Isolation is always painful, especially after trauma. Working with all family members individually can also help them to see through their own pain and avoid blaming other family members for things that weren't their fault.

Reconnecting with culture

Sports or cultural practices can bring communities together, taking them out of their individual pain and immersing them in a shared experience.

dance

sport

music

ceremony



Some significant ceremonial practices have included:

- Sharing the calabash
- Telling stories around a fire or writing down painful thoughts and burning them in a fire ritual
- Using the gong or drum to raise positive emotions and to cast out negative ones
- Using soap and ritual washing to wash away painful memories
- Exchanging peace plants or sharing a pipe



Reconnecting with nature

Being alone or with others in nature can connect people with something bigger than themselves and the present crisis.

Creating green spaces also creates hope. Encourage people to spend time in green spaces or think about setting up a peace garden where people can contribute to making things grow. Seeing plants grow can help people think longer term, and teach people to care for life.

Farming together also provides people with company, connection with nature, and access to fresh, nutritious fruits, vegetables and fungi. Planting and harvesting signifies hope in the future.



Reconnecting with spiritual beliefs



Reserve a space where people can meditate or pray



Help people to remember beliefs that have sustained them in the past



Try to ensure spiritual leaders are on hand to listen to individuals



Host a religious ceremony for the whole community that includes different beliefs and practices

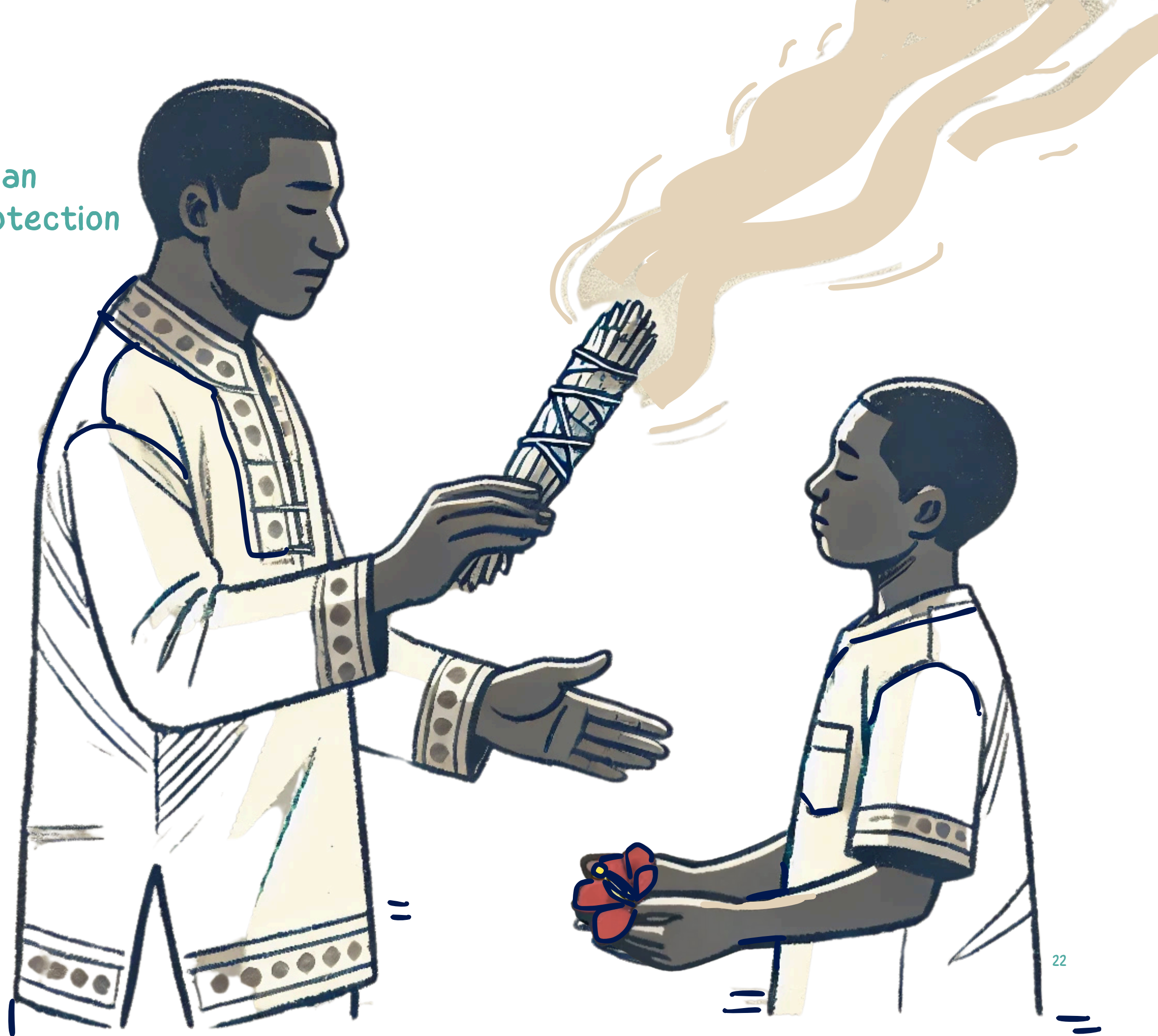


Using texts, songs and rituals to evoke an awareness of spiritual or ancestral protection

Rituals can be used to cleanse the environment or the person.

Be sensitive to different spiritual beliefs and practices within the same community, don't assume everyone will be ready to join in.

Memorials for those lost are important to recognise and accept their passing.



A black and white illustration of a rural community. In the foreground, a man in a light-colored shirt and dark pants stands with his head tilted back, looking up at the sky. To his left, two women wearing headscarves sit at a small table, drinking from cups. In the background, there are several small houses with solar panels on their roofs. A wind turbine is visible in the distance. In the foreground, there are raised garden beds with plants. The sky is clear with a few birds flying. A teal speech bubble with white text is overlaid on the image.

Help people to identify their own sources of strength and support,
through their beliefs, their families or their communities.



TRAUMA HEALING

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