



## Trauma-Informed De-Escalation Dr. Meagan Corrado

### 1. Stress, Crisis, & Trauma: The Continuum



### 2. Stress

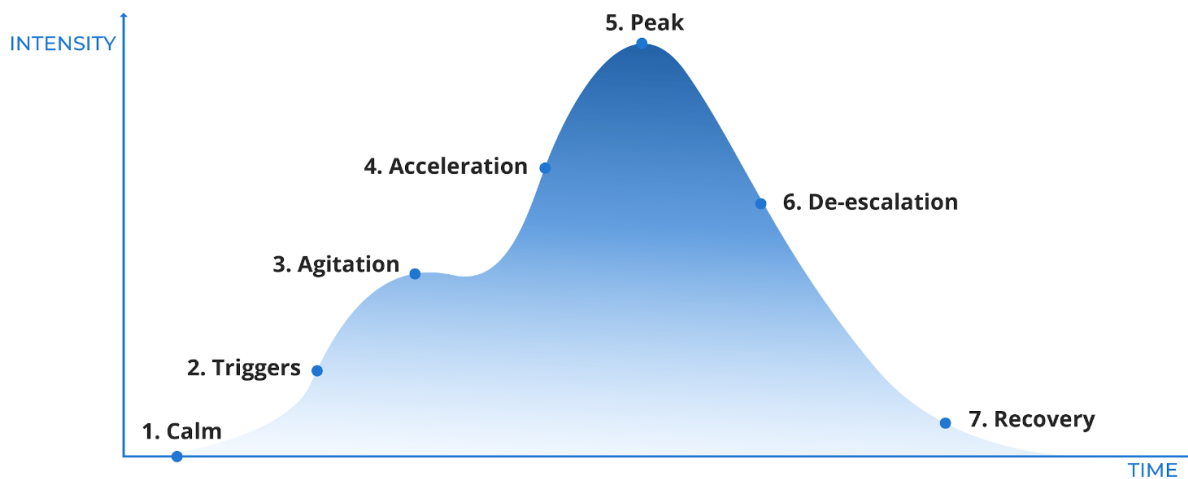
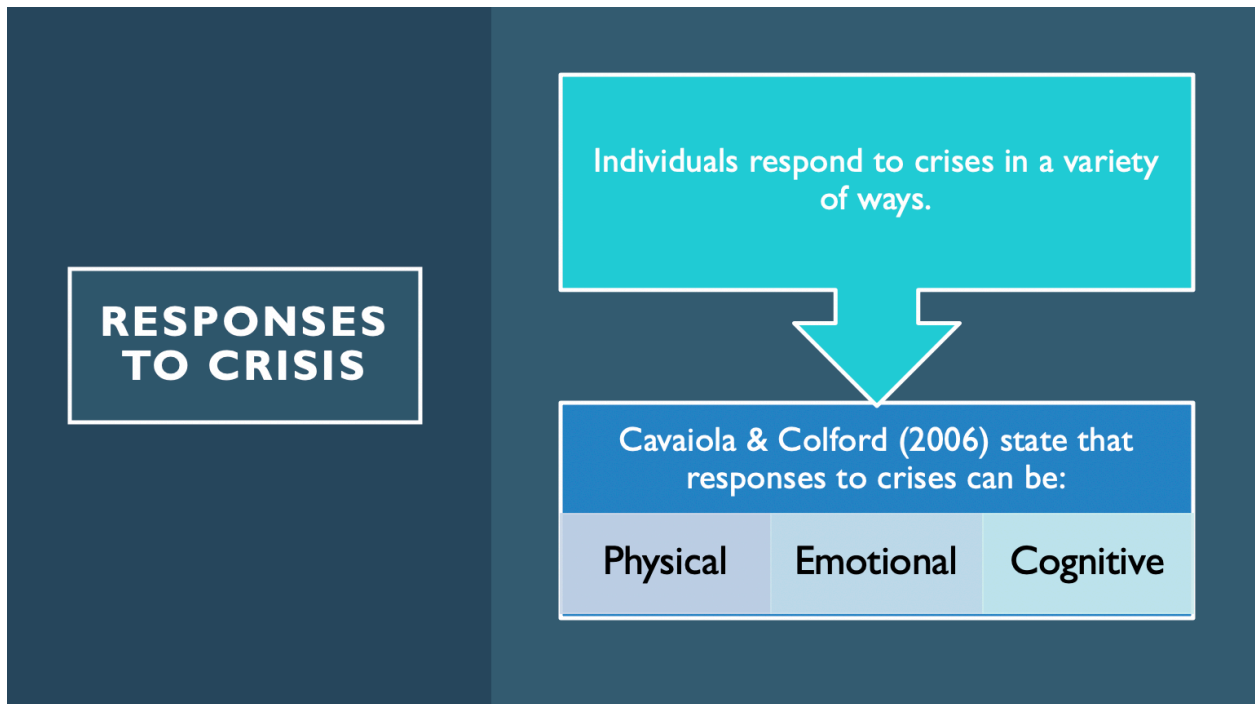
- Stress is a normal experience for all individuals and communities.
- There are different definitions for stress:
  - Something that causes an individual to have a visible reaction and results in their need to either positively or negative respond to the situation (Yeager & Roberts, 2003).
  - Something that happens in a person's environment that is overwhelming and that the person believes will stretch their ability to cope in a healthy way (Dulmus & Hilarski, 2003).

### 3. Defining Crisis

- There are many definitions for a crisis:
- Everstine & Everstine (2006) define crisis as a situation that disrupts the status quo, leaves the person feeling powerless, and causes the individual to feel "that things might never be the same."
- According to Lindemann, a crisis causes an imbalance in an individual/system. A "hazardous event" disrupts the person/system's ability to stay balanced. This makes it difficult for them to cope in healthy ways and makes the person/system particularly vulnerable (Roberts, 1996).
- Cavaiola & Colford (2006) refer to a crisis as "a time for decision-making, a turning point, or a moment of reckoning."



- Roberts (1996) defines crisis as a “triggering incident [that] poses a serious threat to the person’s safety and survival.”
- Yeager & Roberts (2003) state that crises create “distress and functional impairment.” The individual or system’s ability to maintain stability is disrupted. Coping strategies that previously helped the individual or system no longer work.





## Seven stage crisis intervention model

(Roberts, 1996)



## 4. Defining Trauma

### DEFINING TRAUMA

“Trauma is any event or experience (including witnessing) that is physically and/or psychologically overwhelming” (Courtois, 2014).

“Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of the trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force...Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (Herman, 2015).

“Trauma is an experience that causes a person to feel afraid, overwhelmed, out of control, and broken. Trauma affects how people view themselves, others, and the world around them” (Corrado, 2019).



TYPES OF TRAUMA  
(BRIERE & SCOTT,  
2006)

Natural disasters

Mass interpersonal violence

Large-scale transportation accidents

House or other domestic fires

Motor vehicle accidents

Rape and sexual assault

(Briere & Scott, 2006)

TYPES OF TRAUMA  
(BRIERE & SCOTT,  
2006)

Stranger physical assault

Partner battery

Torture

War

Child abuse

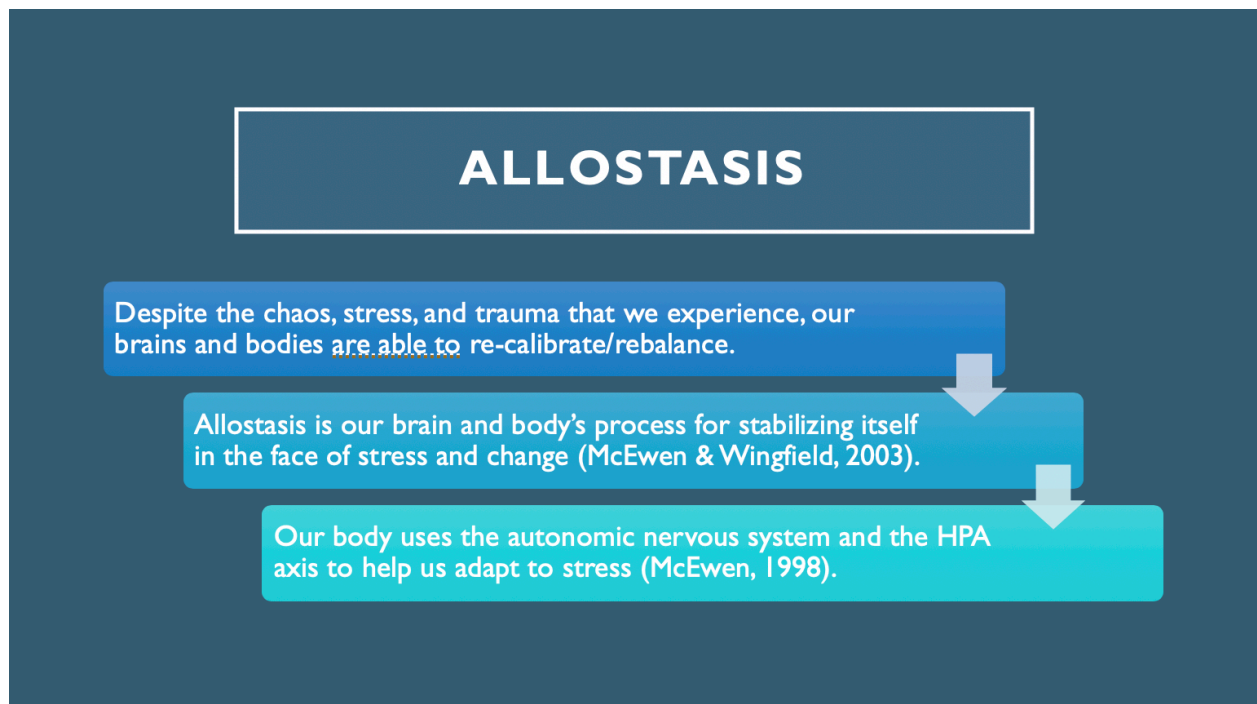
Emergency worker exposure to trauma



Trauma impacts people in many different ways. Trauma survivors may express that:

- They feel broken and don't know who they are anymore.
- Their thoughts, feelings, and memories are all over the place.
- They are not living up to their potential.
- They have trouble in relationships.
- They think and act differently.
- They have a negative view of themselves, other people, and the world.
- Trauma changes the nervous system, creating psychological, emotional, and physical problems.
- Van Der Kolk (2015) states, "The survivor's energy now becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos...These attempts to maintain control over unbearable [physical] reactions can result in a whole range of physical symptoms."
- Sometimes trauma survivors over-react, under-react, or have trouble figuring out who/what is safe and who/what is dangerous (Briere & Scott, 2006).
- This can have a negative impact on relationships and interactions with others.

## 5. Toxic Stress & Allostatic Load

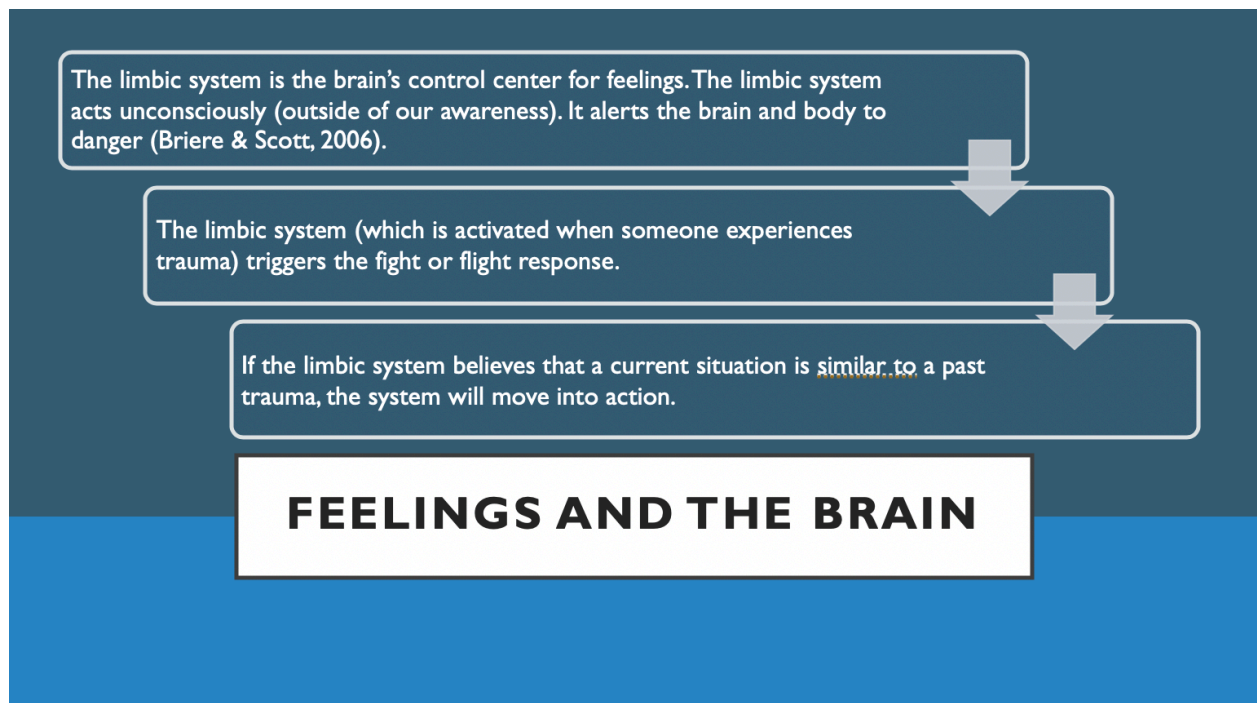




- Although allostasis helps us adapt and survive in the face of stress, crisis, and trauma, we can experience allostatic load if we put too much pressure on this system.
- While allostasis is a protective survival mechanism, if it is used too much, individuals can experience significant health consequences including disease, heart complications, and death.
- Allostatic load results when the allostatic systems are overworked or fail to shut off after the stressful event is over (McEwen, 1998).

## 6. Trauma & Feelings

- Trauma survivors often have difficulty expressing and managing feelings.
- They experience intense emotions but may not have the skills necessary to identify feelings, share them, and express them.







## FEELINGS AND THE BRAIN

- Sometimes things happen in a person's environment that trigger memories and feelings in the trauma survivor.
- As a result, the limbic system sends the person into fight or flight mode.
- Sometimes the trauma survivors we interact with may experience emotional or visual flashbacks.
- Their limbic system may cause them to become explosive or illogical.

### 7. Agitation & Escalation

## AGITATION AND ESCALATION

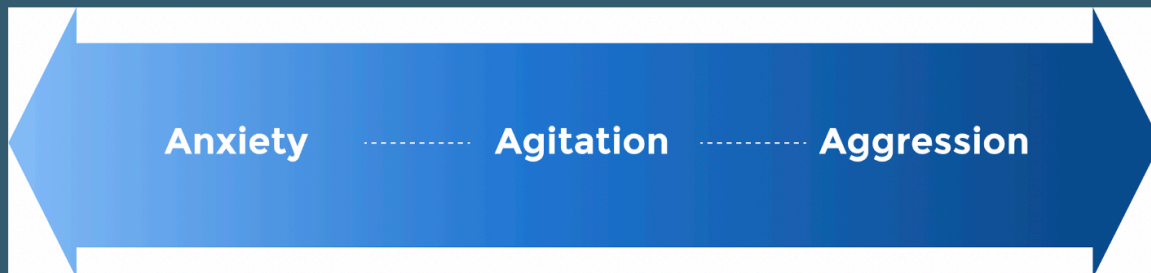
Individuals experiencing stress, crisis, and trauma may become anxious.

Anxiety can lead to agitation.

Agitation can then lead to escalated emotions.



## The continuum



- How can you identify whether or not someone is agitated?
- Signs of agitation include repetitive movements that do not have a clear purpose such as “foot tapping, hand wringing, hair pulling, and fiddling with clothes or other objects” (Richmond et al., 2012).
- Agitated individuals may also engage in verbal repetition (Richmond et al., 2012).
- Sometimes anxiety and agitation escalate.
- Johnson & Delaney (2007) define escalation as circumstances “that increase, intensify, or enlarge” or circumstances “in which the behavioral intensity (e.g. loudness, agitation, or disruption) increase.”
- Escalation involves an intensification of feelings or behaviors.

## 8. De-Escalation with Trauma Survivors

Richmond et al (2012) identify key guidelines for helping people de-escalate. These include:

- Respect personal space.
- Do not be provocative.
- Establish verbal contact.
- Be concise.
- Identify wants and feelings.
- Listen closely to what the person is saying.
- Set clear limits.





- Limit setting must be reasonable and done in a respectful manner.
- Offer choices and optimism.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

**When supporting an individual experiencing stress, crisis, and/or trauma, it is important to:**

- Think carefully about how and when to intervene. You don't want to intervene too early or too late.
- Be aware of your meta-communication including your "posture, intention movements, eye contact, proximity, touch, and facial cues" (Price & Baker, 2012).

When supporting an individual experiencing stress, crisis, and/or trauma, it is important to:

- Be careful about use of excessive force or assertion of power/control. This can escalate rather than de-escalate an agitated client.
- Understand that there is a difference between using a directive tone and an aggressive tone.
- Support the client in identifying "alternatives to aggression...by offering alternative activities" (Price & Baker, 2012).



## 9. Safety



- It is important to remember that safety looks different based on the person and the environment. The following questions are important to ask when seeking to provide a safe environment for participants:
- How physically close or far away are you from the client?
- Is there a clear pathway to the door?
- How confidential/private can your meetings be?
- How can you create safety in your verbal communication?
- How can you create safety in your non-verbal communication?
- How can you provide the participant with opportunities for choice/control?



## CREATING SAFETY

When creating safety, it is also important to consider the following:

- How do cultural differences impact your client's' perception of safety?
- How can you create conditions that meet the safety needs for different clients?
- How do traumatic experiences affect clients' perception of safety?
- How can a client's perception of safety change throughout the course of your interactions with them?

### 10. Power & Control

- Trauma survivors have had experiences over which they had no control.
- Sexual assault, physical abuse, death, and incarceration involve a loss of power/control.
- This sense of helplessness can impact a client's interactions with you.
- Clients who have already experienced a sense of helplessness and powerlessness may be even more reactive to you and the decisions that you may make for them.



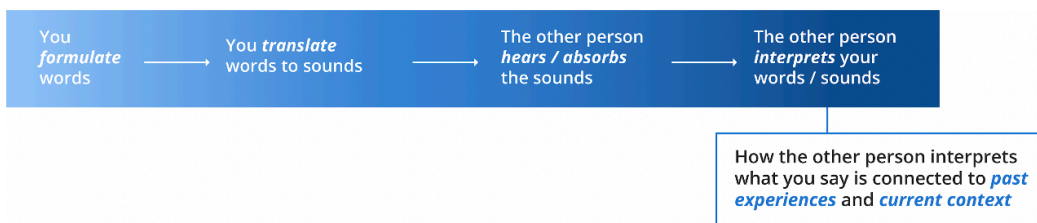
**POWER AND CONTROL**

Sometimes clients may have strong reactions to you. It is important to remember that although these strong reactions may seem personal, they may not be.

Consider the following:

Who or what do you represent to the client?	How does the client perceive you and your role in the context of power and oppression?
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## 11. Communication

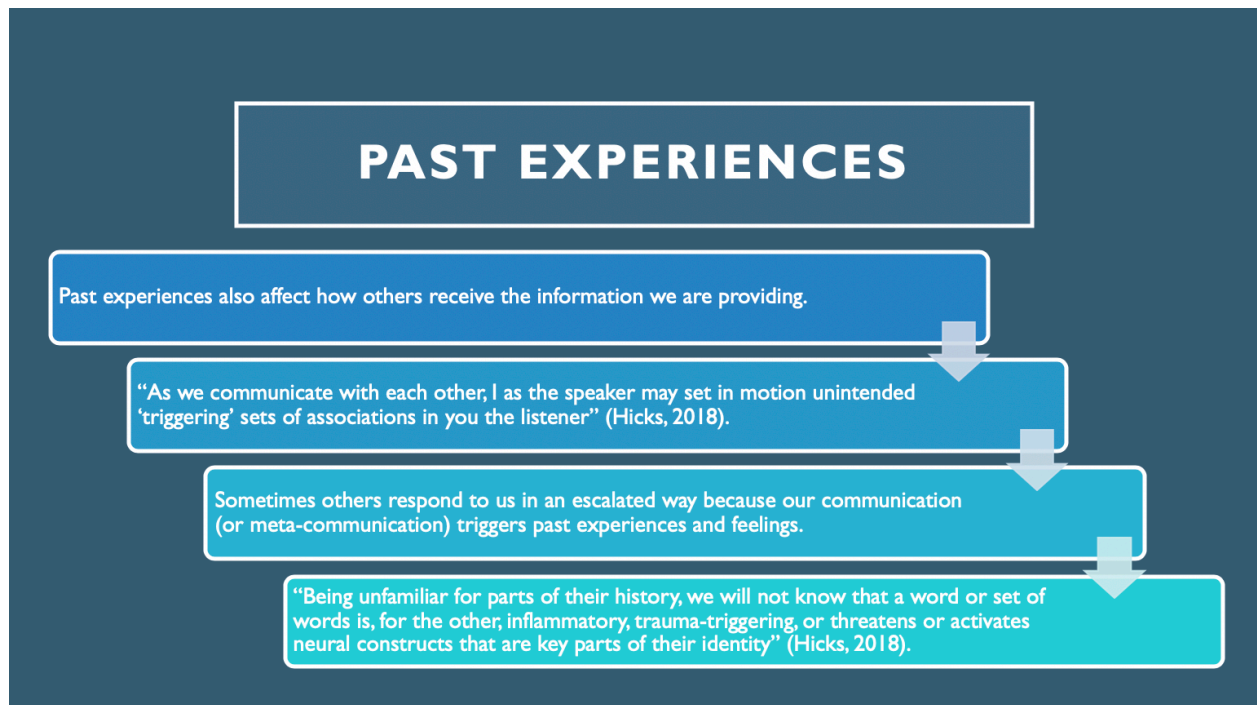


# COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Hicks (2018)



- “Meta-communication” refers to communication beyond the words that we say.
- Meta-communication includes tone, energy, attitude, and demeanor (Mayer, 2000).
- “We can injure with the words we choose and how we deliver them, with what pitch, tonal dynamics, volume, and accompanying facial expressions and body postures and movements that are part of the speech act” (Hicks, 2018).
- We can also establish connections, create safety, and de-escalate difficult situations with effective use of meta-communication.



## 12. Empathy

- Empathy is important when seeking to support individuals who are in crisis, have traumatic pasts, or are in danger of escalating.
- Segal (2018) states that empathy includes interpersonal and social qualities:
  - Interpersonal empathy is “when someone else understands what you are feeling or what you are going through and you feel ‘heard’ and validated.”
  - Interpersonal empathy involves mirroring the person we are speaking to and stepping into their shoes.
  - Social empathy is “the ability to understand people and other social groups by perceiving and experiencing their life situations.”
- Mirror Neurons
  - In the 1980s, scientists accidentally discovered what are now called “mirror neurons” (Iacoboni, 2008).



- Italian scientists were studying macaque monkeys in a lab. The monkeys were connected to machines. One of the scientists reached for an object. When the scientist reached for the object, part of the monkey's brain lit up on the machine (region F5).
- The scientists discovered that even though the monkey was not physically reaching for the object, its brain lit up as it watched the scientist.
- This led to the discovery of mirror neurons.
- Mirror neurons enable us to feel the same emotions that are experienced by those around us (Iacoboni, 2008).
- We do not have to actually experience pleasure or pain ourselves in order for our own brains and bodies to respond (Iacoboni, 2008).
- Mirror neurons help us understand the emotions of other people by some form of inner imitation. (Iacoboni, 2008).
- Mirror neurons enable us to feel what others feel so that we can connect with and understand their experiences.

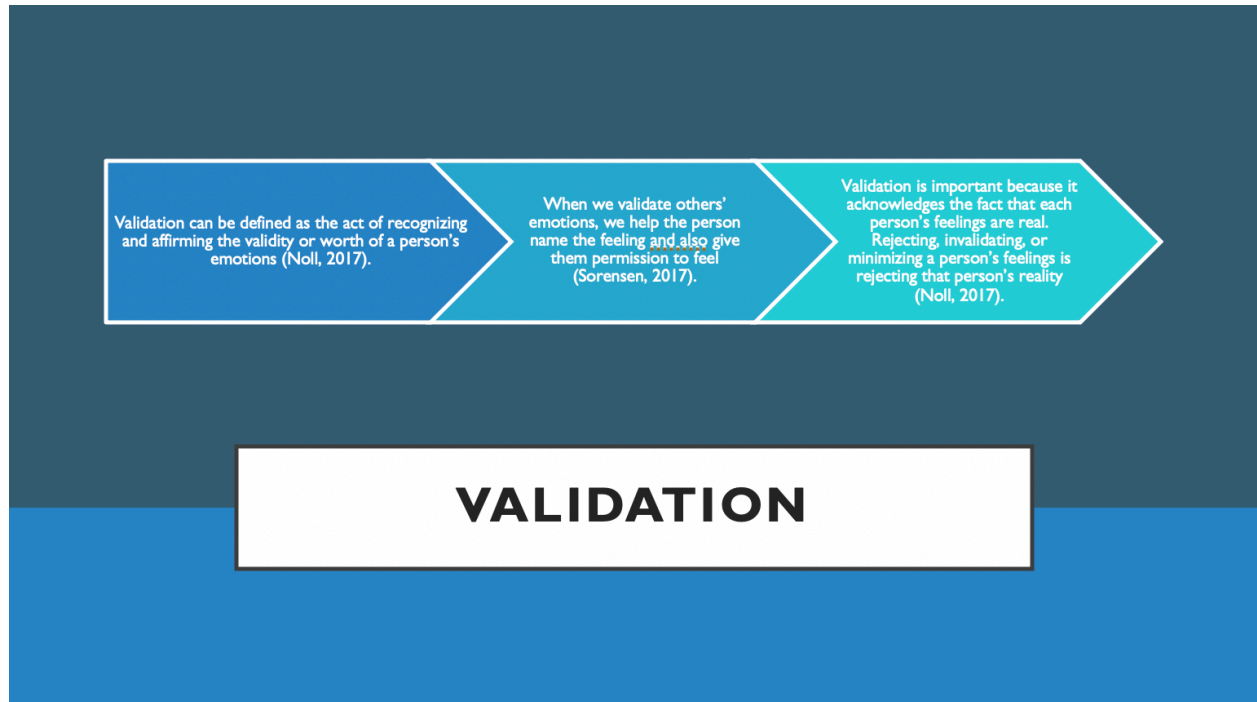
### 13. Naming Feelings

- Sometimes people experiencing stress, crisis, and trauma do not have the words to describe what they are feeling inside.
- Helping people name their emotions can help them de-escalate.
- **Affect labeling** is the process of listening to another person's emotional experiences and reflecting back those emotions (Noll, 2017).





## 14. Validation



- Examples of validating remarks include:
  - *"I understand why you feel..."*
  - *"What is it like for you to feel..."*
  - *"It makes sense why you feel..."*
- While validation can support individuals in de-escalating, invalidation can cause a situation to escalate.
- Invalidation occurs whenever we are told we shouldn't feel the way we feel [or] we are dictated not to feel the way we feel (Noll, 2017).
- Examples of invalidating responses include:
  - *"You'll be fine."*
  - *"It could be worse."*
  - *"Don't worry; things will work out."*

### Resources

- [www.storiezguide.com](http://www.storiezguide.com)
- Dixon, S. (1979). Working with people in crisis: Theory and practice. St. Louis: C.V. Mosby. Chapter 3



- Colvin & Scott. (2015). Managing the cycle of acting out behavior in the classroom. Thousand Oaks: Corwin. Chapter 3
- Everstine, D. & Everstine, L. (2006). Strategic interventions for people in crisis, trauma, and disaster. New York: Routledge. Chapter 2
- Cavaiola, A. & Colford, J. (2006). A practical guide to crisis intervention. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Chapters 1 and 2
- Mayer, B. (2000). The dynamics of conflict resolution: A practitioner's guide. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Chapter 1
- McLaren, K. (2013). The art of empathy: A complete guide to life's most essential skill. Boulder: Sounds True. Chapters 1 and 2
- Sorensen, M. (2017). I hear you: The surprisingly simple skill behind extraordinary relationships. Autumn Creek Press. Chapters 2 and 3
- Stevenson, S. (1991). Heading off violence with verbal de-escalation. Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services, 26, 6-10.