



Stress vs. Trauma: How to Tell the Difference

This handout is designed to help you recognize the difference between everyday stress and trauma—both of which impact our nervous system, but in different ways. Understanding the difference allows us to respond with care and choose the tools that support our healing and resilience.

Definitions:

Stress

- A normal response to life’s demands and pressures
- Often temporary and situation-based
- Can motivate or help us adapt
- Symptoms reduce when the stressor is resolved

Trauma

- An overwhelming experience that exceeds our ability to cope
 - Leaves a lasting imprint on the nervous system
 - Can be caused by a single event or ongoing exposure
 - Can disrupt sense of safety, memory, and connection
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How They Feel in the Body

Category	Stress	Trauma
Body	Muscle tension, headaches, fatigue	Numbness, chronic pain, freeze/shutdown responses
Emotion	Irritability, overwhelm, frustration	Fear, shame, helplessness, emotional numbing
Thinking	Racing thoughts, distraction	Intrusive memories, dissociation, confusion
Behavior	Avoidance, snapping at others	Isolation, hypervigilance, loss of interest

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Can I return to calm after the challenge passes?
- Is this stress related to something specific and time-limited?
- Does this experience make me feel unsafe, powerless, or disconnected?
- Are my reactions bigger than the situation warrants?



Why It Matters

Recognizing trauma is essential for:

- Knowing when we need more than a wellness tip—we need trauma-informed care
- Offering ourselves compassion instead of criticism
- Avoiding burnout by responding appropriately to what we're carrying

Supportive Tools

For Stress Relief:

- Deep breathing
- Physical activity
- Music, movement, nature
- Talking with a friend

For Trauma Healing:

- Grounding techniques (5 senses)
- Therapy with a trauma-informed clinician
- EMDR, somatic therapy, cultural rituals
- Support circles or community healing spaces

Affirmation: *"My experiences are valid. I deserve tools that honor what I've been through."*

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Serving Latinx communities with care, cultura, and clinical integrity

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