

Hooked and Trapped: Understanding the Link Between Substance Use and Human Trafficking in At-Risk Youth

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Content Advisory & Emotional Safety

This training includes discussion of substance use, exploitation, and human trafficking involving youth.

Participants are encouraged to engage in ways that support their well-being, including stepping away if needed.

Educational Disclaimer



This presentation is for educational purposes only.



Content reflects the presenter's professional perspective and does not represent official policy.

Self-Care, Regulation & Presence

- Self-care is foundational to ethical and effective practice.

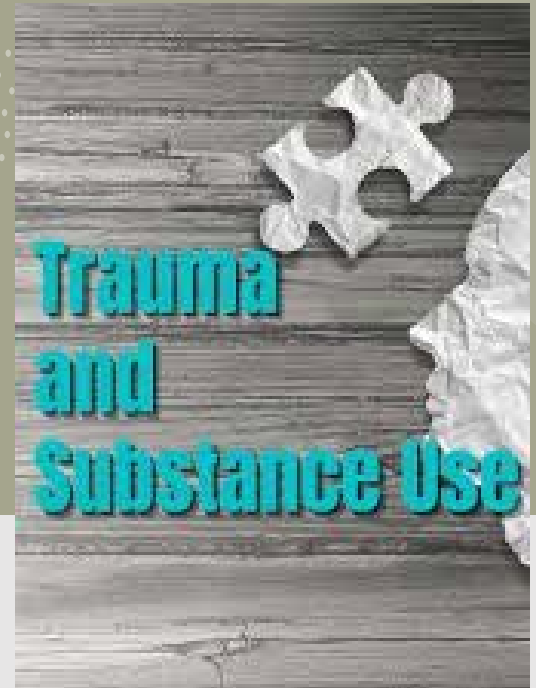


What is one thing you did this morning to support your well-being?

Learning Objectives

Be	Participants will be able to:
Identify	Identify how substance use increases vulnerability to trafficking.
Recognize	Recognize behavioral and contextual red flags.
Describe	Describe trauma-informed, culturally responsive strategies.
Understand	Understand prevention and collaboration roles.

Why This Training Matters



- Substance use does not occur in isolation
- It often intersects with trauma, instability, and unmet needs
- Traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities
- Youth may not identify themselves as victims

Meet Kaleo (Composite Case)

- 14-year-old, 9th grade
- Native Hawaiian
- Housing instability (staying with relatives and friends)
- Referred for attendance and substance use concerns
- Daily cannabis use; occasional alcohol

How Substance Use Increases Vulnerability

- Impaired judgment and increased risk-taking
 - Heightened need for money, substances, or shelter
 - Increased dependence on others for access or supply
 - Reduced ability to recognize or exit unsafe situations
- (OVC, 2020; Reid et al., 2019)



The Bidirectional Relationship

- Substance use can increase risk of exploitation
 - Trafficking often involves forced or coerced substance use
 - Substances may be used to:
 - Control behavior
 - Maintain dependency
 - Numb trauma and distress
- (OVC, 2020)



Youth-Specific Vulnerabilities

- Youth are at higher risk due to:
- Brain development and impulsivity
- Desire for connection, belonging, and approval
- Limited power, resources, and autonomy
- Difficulty identifying exploitation

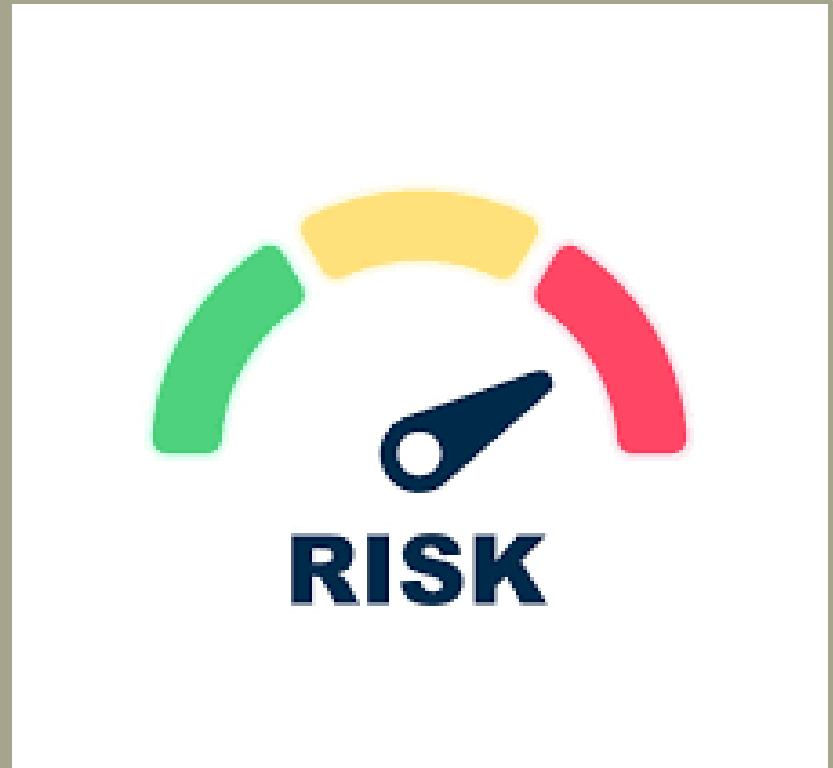
(NCTSN, 2017)



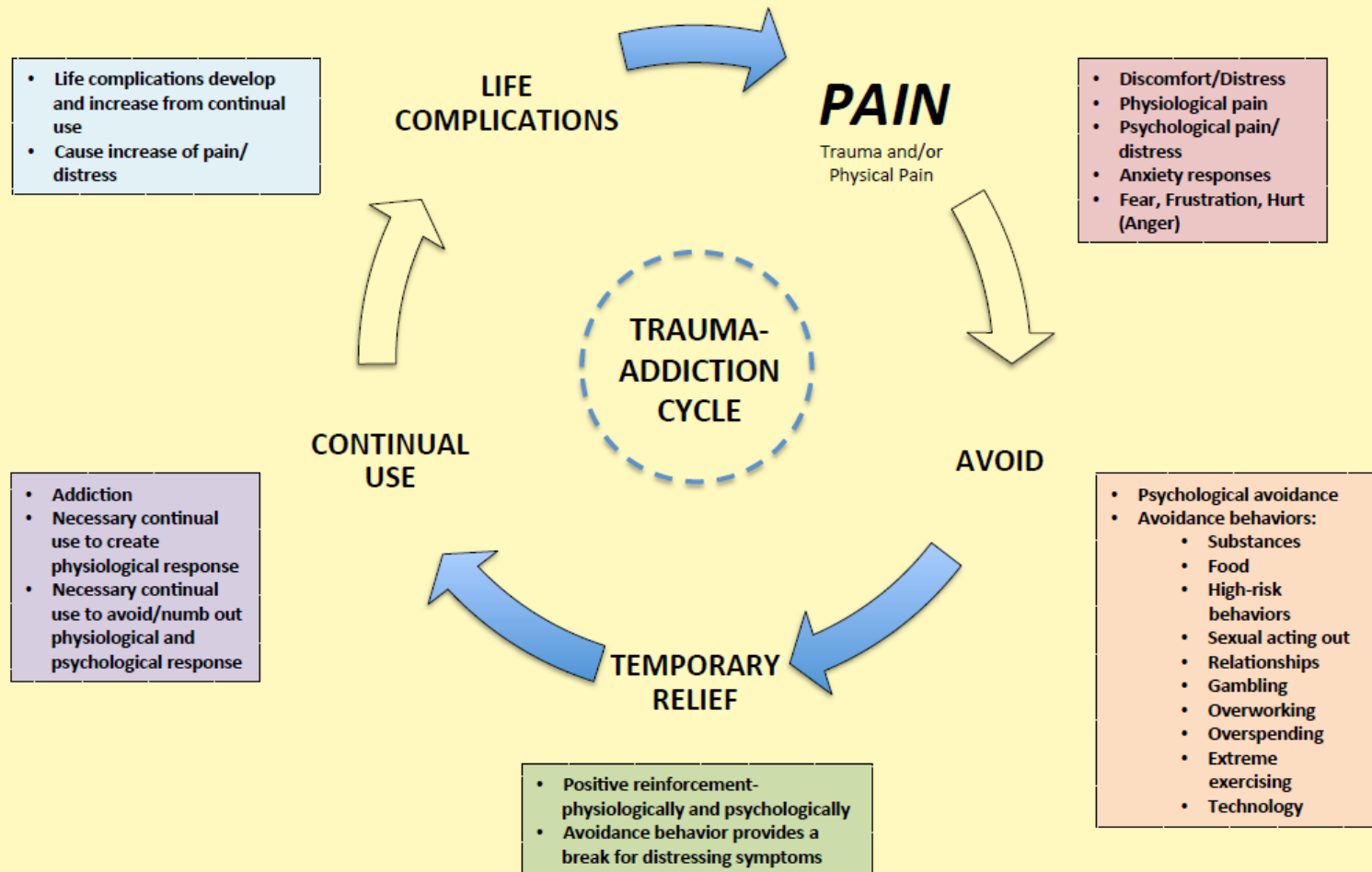
Situational & System-Level Risk Factors for Youth

Increased vulnerability when youth experience:

- Family conflict or lack of supervision
- Running away or housing instability
- System involvement (child welfare, probation, justice)
- Prior trauma, abuse, or neglect
- Untreated mental health needs



The Trauma-Addiction Cycle: How Life Behaviors are Used to Avoid/Receive Physiological and Psychological Responses



Kaleo: Substance Use & Vulnerability

- Cannabis started as coping
- Use increased to daily
- Dependence on older peers for access
- Substances tied to relationships

Key Takeaway

- Substance use is often a signal, not the core problem
- Vulnerability $\neq$ choice
- Early awareness can interrupt exploitation
- Your relationship may be a critical protective factor



Red Flags—What We Mean (and What We Don't)

- Red flags are patterns, not proof
- No single behavior confirms trafficking
- Indicators often overlap with substance use, trauma, or survival needs
- Awareness supports safety—not investigation

(Polaris Project, 2020; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021)

Behavioral Red Flags in Youth

- Sudden changes in behavior or mood
- Increased secrecy about whereabouts or relationships
- Withdrawal from family, school, or trusted adults
- Escalation or change in substance use patterns
- Heightened anxiety, irritability, or emotional reactivity

(Polaris Project, 2020; National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), 2017)

Substance-Related Behavioral Indicators

- Unexplained access to substances
- Reliance on others for supply, transportation, or money
- Using substances to cope with stress, fear, or exhaustion
- Increased tolerance or risky use behaviors
- Resistance to discussing substance use changes

(Office for Victims of Crime, 2020; Reid et al., 2019)

Contextual & Environmental Red Flags

- Older controlling partner or peer
- Sudden access to gifts, money, phones, or rides
- Housing instability or frequent running away
- Excessive absences from school or programs
- Online relationships that feel secretive or pressured

(Polaris Project, 2020; U.S. Department of Justice, 2018)

Kaleo: Contextual & Environmental Risks

- Unstable housing
- Reliance on non-caregiving adults
- Limited supervision
- Disrupted school routine

System-Involved & Situational Risk Factors

- Youth may be at higher risk when they experience:
- Prior abuse, neglect, or complex trauma
- Child welfare or juvenile justice involvement
- Family conflict or lack of supervision
- Mental health challenges without adequate support
- Economic instability or unmet basic needs

(HHS ACF, 2021; NCTSN, 2017)

Red Flags: Key Takeaways

- Red flags are **patterns**, not proof
- No single behavior confirms exploitation
- Substance use may signal **vulnerability**, not intent
- Context matters as much as behavior
- Awareness supports **safety and connection**, not investigation

(SAMHSA, 2014;)



Interpreting Red Flags—A Trauma-Informed Lens

- Ask “**What might be happening?**”, not “What’s wrong?”
- Focus on safety and connection first
- Avoid confrontation or demands for disclosure
- Use curiosity, consistency, and collaboration
- Document observations, not assumptions

(Hopper et al., 2010)

Why Response Matters More Than Recognition

- Recognizing red flags is only the first step
- How we respond can increase or reduce harm
- Youth may not be ready—or able—to disclose
- Safety and trust come before answers

(SAMHSA, 2014; Hopper et al., 2010)

Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-informed responses prioritize:

- Physical and emotional safety
- Choice and control
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Empowerment over compliance
- Connection and consistency

(SAMHSA, 2014; Harris & Fallot, 2001)



What Trauma-Informed Responses Look Like in Practice

- Use curiosity, not confrontation
- Normalize hesitation and mixed feelings
- Focus on concern, not suspicion
- Avoid demands for disclosure
- Document observations, not conclusions

(Hopper et al., 2010; Office for Victims of Crime, 2020)

Cultural Responsiveness—Why It's Essential

- Culturally responsive care considers:
- Family roles and collectivist values
- Cultural views of authority, shame, and help-seeking
- Historical and systemic mistrust
- Language, communication style, and non-verbal cues
- Community strengths and protective factors

(SAMHSA, 2014; NCTSN, 2017)

What NOT to Do (Even with Good Intentions)

- Avoid:
- Confrontation or interrogation
- Ultimatums or threats
- Promising confidentiality you can't keep
- Pressuring youth to disclose
- Acting alone without consultation
- **Bottom of Slide – Sources**

(Polaris Project, 2020; OVC, 2020)

Engaging Kaleo: Trauma-Informed & Culturally Responsive Care

- Safety before disclosure
- Relationship before answers
- Curiosity over confrontation
- Cultural context matters



Trauma-Informed & Culturally Responsive Takeaway

- Safety comes before disclosure
- Trust develops over time
- Curiosity is protective
- Culture shapes meaning and response
- You don't have to solve this alone

(SAMHSA, 2014; Hopper et al., 2010; NCTSN, 2017)



Protective Factors Within Youth-Serving Support Settings

- Protective factors include:
- Stable, trusting adult relationships
- Predictable structure and routines
- Nonjudgmental support around substance use
- Skills for coping, boundaries, and decision-making
- Access to safe referrals and resources

(SAMHSA, 2014; NCTSN, 2017)

Collaboration Is a Safety Strategy

- Collaboration helps:
- Reduce isolation and blind spots
- Share responsibility for safety
- Improve continuity of care
- Prevent youth from falling through gaps

(HHS ACF, 2021; Office for Victims of Crime, 2020)



Knowing Your Role (and Your Limits)

Your role includes:

- Observing patterns and changes
- Prioritizing safety and connection
- Consulting with supervisors and teams
- Making informed referrals when needed

Your role does *not* include:

- Investigating or proving trafficking
- Confronting suspected exploiters
- Acting outside your scope or alone

(Polaris Project, 2020; SAMHSA, 2014)



Coordinated Response—What It Looks Like

- Effective collaboration includes:
- Supervisor consultation
- Multidisciplinary team coordination
- Clear communication across systems
- Shared safety planning
- Respect for youth voice and autonomy

(HHS ACF, 2021; OVC, 2020)



Coordinated, victim-centered collaboration



Prevention & Collaboration—Key Takeaways

- Prevention is relational, not reactive
- Substance use programs are protective spaces
- Collaboration strengthens safety
- Clear roles reduce harm
- You are not alone in this work

(SAMHSA, 2014; HHS ACF, 2021; Polaris Project, 2020)



Closing Grounding: One Protective Action

- Silently identify one small protective action you can take in your role.
- This action supports safety, connection, or prevention.

Examples:

- • A question you'll ask with more curiosity
- • A red flag you'll view through a safety lens
- • A colleague or supervisor you'll consult
- • A way you'll strengthen connection with youth or families

No sharing required.

Holding Hope in This Work

- Exploitation thrives in isolation — healing happens in connection.
- Awareness can interrupt harm.
- Consistent, caring adults are powerful protective factors.
- Small, trauma-informed actions create safer pathways for youth.
- You may not always see the impact of your work — but it matters.
- Thank you for showing up with compassion, professionalism, and care.

References

Foundational Frameworks (Used Throughout the Training)

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Substance Use, Vulnerability & the Bidirectional Relationship (Objective 1)

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