The primary goal of Real Tools: Responding to Multi-Abuse Trauma is to help advocates and other service providers understand the safety, autonomy, recovery, wellness and justice needs of people who are impacted by multiple co-occurring issues. The manual is designed to go beyond theory to give advocates and their community partners practical tools to address those needs.

Because the social service system is so fragmented, cooperation between providers from a wide variety of disciplines is essential. The authors hope the manual can serve as a bridge between advocates and other service providers so that individuals with multi-abuse trauma issues can get their needs met, no matter where they enter the social service system.

This manual was created with maximum user-friendliness in mind. The authors hope the manual will be widely used for training advocates and other service providers, creating support groups for individuals coping with multi-abuse trauma issues, and educating and advocating in the community.

The first section, “Multiple Layers of Trauma,” presents an overview of multi-abuse trauma, and discusses the special safety, recovery and wellness issues involved when individuals are coping with co-occurring problems in addition to interpersonal violence.

The section “How Should Advocates Respond?” offers guidelines for empowering individuals with multi-abuse trauma issues, along with special issues to be aware of. Also included are tips for creating a welcoming environment and gaining the trust of the people you serve, as well as a discussion of practices that may inadvertently re-traumatize survivors.

“A Closer Look at Individual Issues” explores in more detail several co-occurring issues that may be involved in multi-abuse trauma. These include complex trauma from past abuse, substance abuse or dependence, psychiatric issues, disabilities, social oppression, historical trauma and intergenerational grief, poverty, homelessness, exploitation by the sex industry and incarceration.

The section “Working with Other Providers” offers tips for building the alliances that are such a necessary component of adequately serving individuals with multi-abuse trauma issues. This section also discusses the philosophies and priorities of other providers, including substance abuse counselors, mental health providers, indigenous providers, child welfare caseworkers and criminal justice personnel.

“Self-Care and a Healthy Workplace” discusses the importance of maintaining a healthy work environment and addressing the risk factors for burnout and vicarious trauma.
Because providers who work extensively with trauma issues are at high risk for vicarious trauma due to the nature of the work, this section emphasizes that self-care is not a selfish indulgence, but rather is essential to the individual provider’s health and to the welfare of the people served.

“Assessing Needs” offers a number of pointers for reducing intake stress, asking those “sticky” questions and discussing possible co-occurring issues, as well as forms to help you make appropriate referrals where necessary.

In “Training Providers,” you’ll find a variety of creative ideas for keeping training costs within your budget while getting your message out to other providers, guidelines for organizing and conducting training sessions, and sample training topics complete with handouts.

“Community Education and Activism” emphasizes the importance of educating the public about the needs of the people you serve. You’ll find tips for improving media coverage, grass-roots coalition-building and lobbying legislators as well as using social media to promote your message and safe ways for survivors to work for change.

In “Organizing Support Groups,” you’ll find some tips, general guidelines and a sample overall format to create support groups for survivors of multi-abuse trauma, along with suggested support group topics.

Finally, we offer more than three dozen handouts suitable for photocopying and using with support groups or trainings; a variety of Power and Control Wheels; and lists of additional resources.

As part of the research for this manual, the authors interviewed several advocates and other providers who work extensively with people who have multiple issues. The authors also interviewed several people who have survived and transcended their experiences of multi-abuse trauma. Vignettes or “survivor stories” based on these interviews are sprinkled throughout the various documents in this manual to help illustrate the concepts presented. To protect the confidentiality of the survivors we interviewed, no real names have been used.