

A Primer on Trauma

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**Recognizing and Assisting
Clients Affected by
Traumatic Experiences**

Trauma: Psychological Wounds

- **TRAUMA**: An emotional shock that creates substantial and lasting damage to the psychological development of the individual; something that severely jars the mind or emotions.
- **Traumatic Experiences** threaten a person's sense of integrity (overall psychological well-being) and (physical) survival:

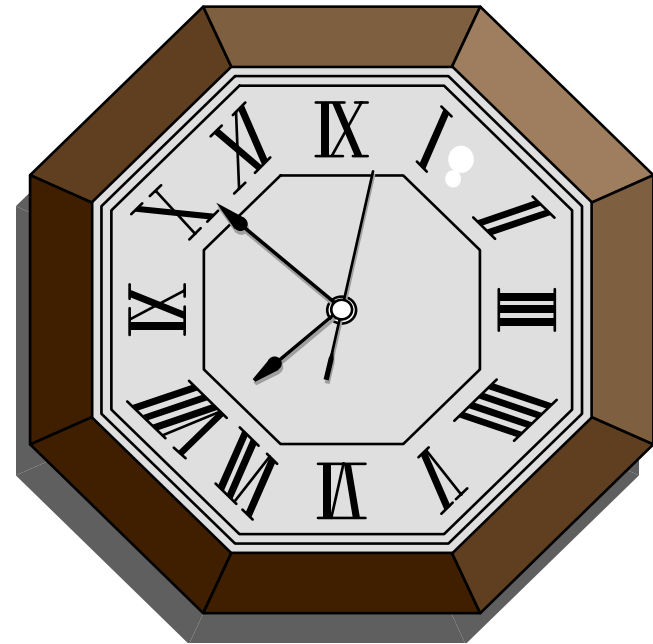
Violence such as rape, battering and sexual and physical abuse are obvious threats to a person's INTEGRITY and SURVIVAL. Other types of mistreatment over a long period may also be, including:

- Being treated like an object, like a non-person without feelings
- When no respect is shown for an individual's boundaries
- Punitive treatment directed at a victim -- "it's your fault"
- Hurtful language that is oppressive, diminishing a person's dignity

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

(Sources: "Theory Behind the Concept: The Trauma-Based Approach; Friends Hospital Sanctuary Program pamphlet for patients and National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, Alexandria, Va.)

- Traumatic Experiences often are primarily the result of violence. No matter how exposed we are to violence on TV and in other media, the impact of being personally victimized cannot be compared...
- Some trauma survivors become trapped in time, re-experiencing trauma through flashbacks, panic responses and re-enactment of situations that resemble the original trauma
- **A person may never completely forget any major trauma or crisis in their lives.**



Time often stands still for those traumatized, even though life has gone on.....

Consequences of Trauma

- Many ills in later life-- crime, drug addiction and welfare dependency -- may trace back to abuse during childhood
- A 1999 New York Times article reported mounting evidence that indicates a disproportionately large number of women on welfare were sexually abused as children.
- Many experts believe this helps explain many of the so-called hard cases remaining in W-2, welfare systems nationwide

Mental Health Facts:

(U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher's Report, late 1999)

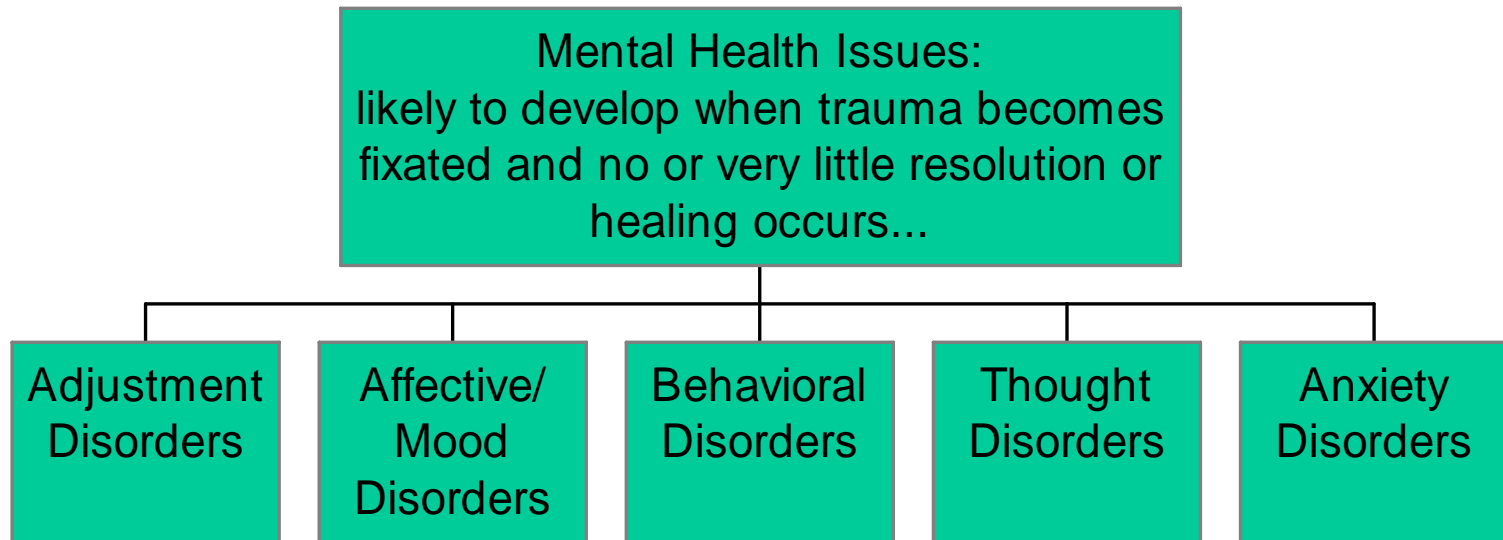
- Mental disorders are defined as: conditions marked by alterations in thinking, mood and behavior that cause distress or impair a person's ability to function
- **One in every five Americans experiences a mental disorder in any given year...**
- **Half of all Americans have such disorders at some time in their lives....**

“Problems in Living” reflect the human condition, said Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz.

Many problems arise from difficulties with adapting to life, coping and dealing with change...

PTSD and Other Mental Health Issues

A common human response to overwhelming life events:
PTSD -- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder/Syndrome



Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors Associated with Traumatic Experiences

Dissociation



- Is a defense mechanism in which overwhelming and disturbing thoughts, feelings and memories are removed from one's consciousness
- Many people dissociate to protect themselves. Over time, however, such coping skills that once worked may no longer be helpful; in fact can get in way of life and living...
- It may interfere with a person's ability to function and reach her/ his full potential.

An Example:

Reactions to Sexual Assault

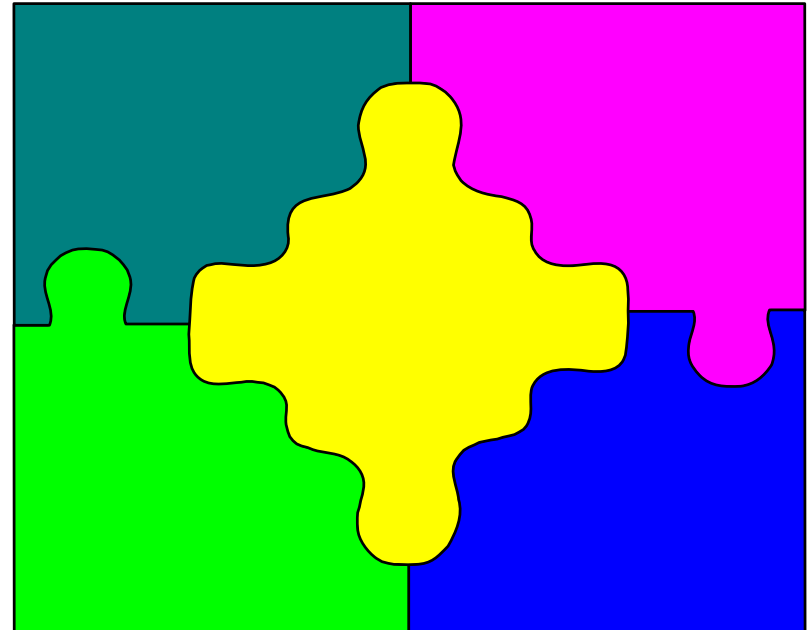
(Source: Aurora Health Care / Sexual Assault Treatment Center; (414) 219-5555)

- Immediate Reactions: Anxiety, fear, disbelief, self-blame, anger, trying to forget and not talking about incident...
 - In days / weeks that follow: Disruption of daily living routines such as eating, sleeping, concentrating, working, making decisions...
 - As more time passes: Outward appearance may seem normal, but individual is likely to have ongoing inner struggle: fears, depression, concerns for personal safety
 - Eventually: Many benefit from professional counseling and/or supportive others (family, mate, friends, their faith community).
 - Recovery: With time, the assault may begin to fade into the background.
 - Healing always takes time...the process is different for people
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- Sexual Assault / Abuse is never invited nor deserved -- no matter what the circumstance.**

Words that Reflect the Pain...

(From Judith Hermann's book, Trauma and Recovery)

- “Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of 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.”
- “Traumatized people suffer change to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God. Their self-esteem is assaulted by experiences of humiliation, guilt and helplessness. Their capacity for intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear. The identity they have formed prior to the trauma is irrevocably destroyed.”



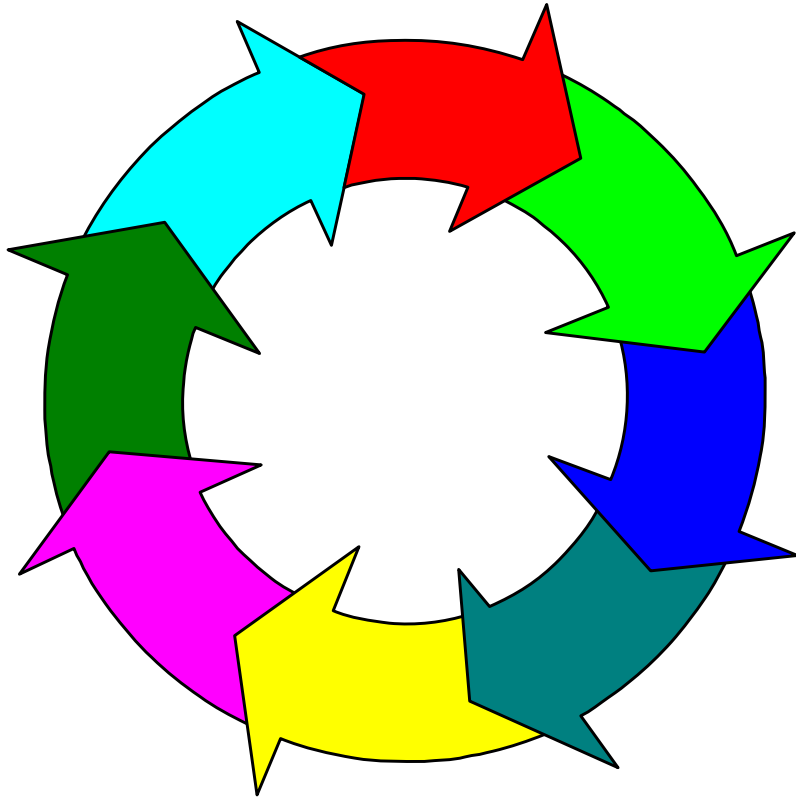
Long-Term Effects: *Physical, Emotional, Social and Spiritual Aspects*

When Helplessness and Hopelessness Go to Extremes: Many

survivors of trauma suffer post-traumatic effects which may manifest as self-injury, difficulty with interpersonal relationships, repeated victimization, low self-esteem:

- **Suicide attempts or pervasive thoughts/wishes** (many see death as only way to get rid of their inner pain/turmoil)
 - **Alcohol and drug abuse/addictions** (begin taking drugs to self-medicate or relapse/ return to substance-use habits)
 - **Impulsive Behaviors with major long-term consequences** (doing something out of character like robbing a store)
 - **Continuously Putting themselves in risky situations** (frequent casual sex without protection; w/o regard to AIDS, other STDs: driving while under influence of alcohol or other drugs)
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A Victim / Survivor's Penetrating Insights...



- “With abuse, you suffer loss of soul, loss of self and loss of meaning...In the “system,” you must fight everyday, every minute, to keep from feeling worthless -- to keep your spirit alive.”
- K.W., from a survivor trauma advisory group

Community Retraumatization

Societal/ Environmental Issues Affecting Clients

that Staff Should Be Aware Of, Try to Avoid and Why

- *Environmental insults and insensitivities* -- reconvey messages of worthlessness and inferiority
- *Denial, discrediting, Ignoring, Minimizing or Silencing of Abuse* -- reenacts Past Trauma
- *Exerting Power and Control Over Client* -- replicates Power Imbalance of Original Trauma
- *Being Pathologized and Blamed for Abuse* -- replicates abuser's message that "it's your fault"
- *Failure to Listen, Take Seriously* -- conveys worthlessness, replicates abuse
- Being Treated as if you aren't intelligent, as if you don't have a brain
- Not having opportunity to be productive, or being set up for failure through unrealistic expectations
- Using Helpful Techniques and Theories in Hurtful Ways
- *Using Diagnosis as Labeling* -- shames and Stigmatizes
- *Misdiagnosis* -- invalidates experience of survivor, leads to maltreatment and is retraumatizing
- Being expected to trust people who have hurt me or who allowed others to hurt me -- replicates relationships with abuser and those who should have protected me
- *Lack of Privacy and Violation of Confidentiality* -- replicates childhood abuse
- Protocols that make no sense and Rule that are made and changed arbitrarily by providers -- replicates environment of abuse

What Helps, What Hurts...

(From: Maine Trauma Advisory Groups Report, "In Their Own Words: Trauma Survivors and professionals they trust tell what hurts, what helps, and what is needed for trauma services," 1997)

Professionals who treat Survivors of Trauma have said that mental health and other social workers are often uncomfortable with intense anger from their clients. Some examples:

- "They are used to sadness and shame from women."
- "They find male anger scary. Yet...anger can be a mask for pain, a way to deflect pain. One way (many) do this is to constantly be angry and blame the system for personal problems."
- "With men, anger is up-front first. It is hard to call or to see an angry person as a victim."
- "...It is difficult to learn when (one's own) anxiety is high."

STAFF SHOULD EXAMINE THEIR OWN ASSUMPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS TO CONSIDER WHAT REALLY HELPS, WHAT MAY HURT THEIR WORK WITH CLIENTS...

Themes in Coping and Recovery

- Trauma is an isolating experience for someone. Safe connections with others are essential to healing process.
- Human beings want to avoid feeling helpless above all else. Events feel more traumatic when experienced with helplessness and loss of control.
- The guiding principle of recovery is to restore (personal) power and control to the survivor of trauma.

Resiliency of the Human Spirit Must Always be Recognized.

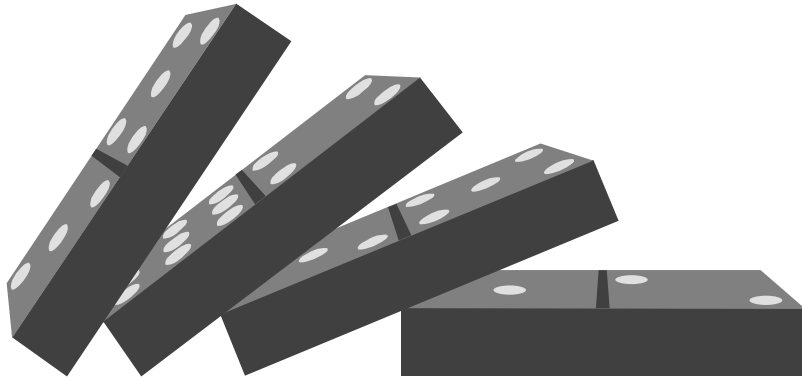
Staff should be careful not to be oppressive in their dealings with clients. Our efforts should assist and support their healing...

Sending Messages of Hope

CM STAFF SHOULDN'T PLAY THERAPIST AND NEVER FORCE ANYTHING ON CLIENTS, BUT HERE ARE SOME HEALING MESSAGES TO SEND THEM DURING THE BRIEF TIMES YOU HAVE CONTACT WITH CLIENTS:

- * Be open to viewing change as a challenge
- Develop goals, values and purpose. Make plans
- Persist. Stay committed to your progress even when the going gets tough
- Address your health -- see a doctor, counselor, get exercise, learn ways to manage stress
- Communicate -- Learn to express yourself, ask for what you need, seek good things
- Deal with setbacks and go forward.
- Have faith in positive outcome
- Learn when to seek control, when to let go and whether to practice acceptance
- Find humor; learn laughter
- Learn from mistakes
- Maintain perspective
- Build self-confidence -- learn one's strengths, remember successes
- (Tips from Erik Olesen's book, "12 Steps to Mastering the Winds of Change.")

Removing the Stigma and Shame-- Breaking the Cycle of Pain



- When we encourage clients to get counseling, we are basically saying it's OK to admit that help is needed; that in fact it is a strength. It can be very humanizing, depending on how it's done, if we help remove the stigma.
- When people truly begin to deal with their own issues, they're less likely to impose their pain onto others. In this way, individuals contribute to the well-being of future generations. They help break the cycle of overwhelming pain from being passed one generation to another.