

Trauma Recovery Program

CORE CONCEPTS AND SKILLS

Grateful Acknowledgement

The Trauma Recovery Program embraces the core concepts and skills of the “Trauma Model,” a treatment model developed by Colin A. Ross, M.D. With his permission, the Program utilizes Dr. Ross’ concepts in conjunction with the expertise and skills of the facilitator-therapists. Dr. Ross has generously provided resources and support during the development of the Trauma Recovery Program.

Concepts and Skills

Grounding

Trauma survivors are experts at keeping their bodies in the present while their thoughts and emotions are somewhere else. The Trauma Recovery Program teaches group members to utilize their five senses to keep their thoughts and emotions in the present, both in and out of the program.

Processing Feelings

The primary agenda of traumatized persons is to disconnect from their feelings. They become “phobic about their feelings,” developing extreme strategies to avoid their feelings. Group members are encouraged to experience their feelings while learning strategies to manage them effectively. The ultimate goal is to experience their deep sadness and grieve the losses they have experienced due to the trauma that occurred.

Attachment Ambivalence

Humans have a biological need to be connected in relationships. For young children, life itself depends on these connections. When an individual is traumatized by physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, there is also a biological urge to recoil from the source of the injury. This contradiction in biological urges, to connect or to recoil, creates ambivalent feelings about attachment. The more that the individual’s real, or experienced survival depends on an abuser, the more dramatic the internal conflict.

Cognitive Distortions

Survivors of childhood trauma are prone to cognitive distortions. Their understandings of the world and people are based on their traumatic experiences a long time ago, but then they make them general rules instead of looking at each new situation and judging it for itself. They become so used to thinking in certain ways that when something new comes along, they do not see the event or person for itself, but instead move into their automatic thought patterns. It is very hard to correct cognitive distortions because “they seem true.” In reality, they are at least partially distorted, if not entirely inaccurate. Cognitive distortions tend to “fan the flames” of survivors’ feelings, which then lead to more extreme behaviors. As survivors correct their cognitive distortions, the intensity of their feelings diminish and behavior will become less extreme.

Core Concepts and Skills (cont'd)

Calming Body Stress Response

Trauma survivors tend to carry a lot of stress in their bodies. This is because they react to negative triggers in the present as if the triggers are as threatening as the traumatic events of their childhoods. These physical changes induce a sense of urgency which escalates negative emotions and activates behavioral responses. Therefore, it is imperative that survivors learn skills to interrupt their physical stress responses. Prayer, meditation, yoga, guided imagery, and exercise are a few of the techniques known to be effective. Just as the body can learn to respond to a negative trigger with a stress response, it can learn to respond to a negative trigger with a relaxation response.

Locus of Control Shift

Children who have been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused, place the locus of control for the abuse with themselves. Often, an abuser promoted this mind set. Beyond that, this mindset helps the victim avoid feeling helpless, vulnerable, and powerless in the face of the abuse. For victims, if the abuse is happening because "I am bad," they can always hope that, if they change, the abuse will stop. In its original context this is a protective illusion. When that illusion is generalized across experiences, it keeps the victim locked in a cycle of bad feelings, self-abuse, and destructive relationships.

A major focus of the Trauma Recovery Program is to contradict the locus of control shift, a step-by-step process which initially leaves survivors feeling exposed and vulnerable, but eventually leads to self-acceptance, grieving, and healing.

Victim/Rescuer/Perpetrator Triangle

In the original situation of abuse, there was a victim, a perpetrator, and a failed-rescuer. Victims of abuse reenact this triangle in other relationships, assigning themselves, and finding others, to assume prescribed roles on the triangle. In the Trauma Recovery Program group members are educated about this process and taught skills in self-caring and mutually respectful relationships.

Forgiveness

In this program forgiveness is not about forgiveness by God; it is about forgiveness by a person who has been deeply and personally injured or harmed. Forgiveness is a series of conscious thoughts and actions, an inner response, which includes letting go of a desire for vengeance or harm toward the offender and letting go of negative emotions such as resentment. Letting go creates a positive change in the injured person's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Forgiveness restores a sense of personal power and can lead to improved interpersonal relationships.

Forgiveness is often confused with other things. It does not require an apology or even contact with the person who caused the harm. It does not mean to forget the injury, to condone what happened, or even to tolerate injuries. Forgiveness does not require reconciliation with the offender, because that person may be dangerous, unavailable, or dead.

The Trauma Recovery Program helps group members to understand the concept of forgiveness, and support them as they take the first steps in a long and demanding process.

Core Concepts and Skills (cont'd)

Prayer

One of the most important parts of Jesus' ministry was to bring healing to those in darkness and pain, and so the Trauma Recovery Program is situated in the ambience of prayer. Prayer helps the group members to center themselves in the present space and time.

In each session of the Trauma Recovery Program, we always ask for the healing power of Jesus' Spirit to flow into and through the group members, to help others to heal and to be healed ourselves.

Grief

Grief is at the core of the feelings which trauma survivors try to avoid. The grief stage comes late in trauma recovery because survivors set up defenses against the deep pain they will experience during grieving.

The content presented by survivors during the early stages of therapy focuses on the bad things that happened to them during the trauma. The content of the grief stage focuses on the good things that should have happened during their childhood, but didn't. As survivors mourn the childhood they didn't have, the extravagant behaviors and defenses become quiet, and the benefits of recovery work begin to emerge externally as well as internally.