


**Precious Moments:
Protecting Long Term Health &
Mental Health in the Aftermath of
Sexual Violence**

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Assumptions

Sexual Violence is objectively traumatic and has the potential to cause long-term harm if not resolved and healed from.

Unresolved trauma negatively impacts individual and community health and mental health, our quality of life, our ability to be effective in our work, and our capacity to create just societies.

Many immediate responders and those supporting survivors have histories of trauma that can impact the quality of our interventions.

Immediate responders and those supporting survivors through various systems can help prevent long-term problems from traumatic injury.



How We Get Hurt

Accident - “things happen”

Abuse - intentional/patterned

Oppression - the institutional, systematic mistreatment of one group of people by another.

Contagion/Hypnotic - impacted by others' hurts (e.g. historical, internalized)



Traumatic vs. Other Memory

Limbic System

Frontal Lobe

Access may be impaired

Processing is non-linear


Disrupted attachment

Stored terror



Defining Trauma


- “an experience that is (or experiences that are) emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking, often resulting in lasting mental and physical effects”
- “an event that is outside the range of usual human experience and which is so seriously distressing as to overwhelm the mind's defenses and cause lasting emotional harm”
- “an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms people's normal coping mechanisms”



“Trauma is not a disorder but a reaction to a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situations in the real world and, indeed, to a world in which people are routinely wounded.”


“Trauma is a concrete physical, cognitive, affective, and spiritual response by individuals and communities to events and situations that are objectively traumatizing. On a simple level, for the most part, people feel traumatized or wounded because they *have been* wounded.”

~ **Bonnie Burstow**



“Trauma occurs in layers, with each layer affecting every other layer. Current trauma is one layer. Former traumas in one’s life are more fundamental layers. Underlying one’s own individual trauma history is one’s group identity or identities and the historical trauma with which they are associated.”

~ **Bonnie Burstow**



“Betrayal trauma occurs when the people or institutions we depend on for survival violate us in some way.”

~ **Jennifer Freyd**



Context & History Matter

Primary Distress is the Sexual Violence

- When the person is safe, the distress tends to be ameliorated.
- Psychological injuries do not meet the criteria for clinical diagnosis, but the person may be suffering great distress.

Long Term Exposure (e.g. Domestic Violence)

- Exhibit the behavior of a hostage held captive for an extended period
- Post Traumatic Stress Reactions
- Depression
- Affective, dissociative and anxiety responses



Childhood Exposure Can Complicate Recovery from Sexual Violence Later in Life...

Impact of Childhood Victimization

- Lack of boundary development and attachment
- Dissociative Responses

There may be no "self" to return to....




Survival Response Can Become Patterned & Rigid

- Denial or lack of memory
- Avoidance
- Altered belief systems
- Addiction/compulsion
- Depression/numbness
- Violence/aggression
- Risk taking
- Self-Abuse



Immediate actions that can help counter alienation should be encouraged and supported. Examples include:

- Listening to the story – as one human to another
- Allowing the survivor to name the experience
- Helping to debunk myths about the survivor's community/affiliation
- Recognizing the process (and your role in it) as a potentially healing social ritual
- Helping the survivor identify community ties, traditions, and models they can rely on or return to
- Physically moving with the survivor – walking
- Include survivor voices in your workplace and practices



Guiding Principles

(for care givers, survivors, families, and the community)

- Safety - immediate/long-term, basic needs, safe space, advocacy
- Healing - therapeutic, strength-based, effective
- Liberation - empowerment focused, partnership models
- Justice - prevention, intervention, activism and social change



The Benefits

- Short-term health and mental health
- Long-term health and mental health
- Social reparation and healing