Trauma, Spirituality & Faith
An Overview of the Interplay as Survivors Risk Connection and Recovery

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Trauma: Defined by Characteristics Rather than Event

Unable to make sense of the experience

Unable to stay present

Unable to integrate feelings

Unable to understand what is happening
The Breadth of Experiences
Trauma: Outcome

Perceived threat to sanity, life, bodily integrity

Changes in:

- Body and brain
- Judgment
- Frame of reference
- Memory
- Beliefs
- Feelings skills (self-capacities)
Compounding Factors

What life looks like, sounds like, feels like, language, food, colors

Soil, activities, access to resources, beliefs, culture, clothes, community
Extreme Coping Mechanisms

• All behavior has meaning in context
• Person’s best effort at coping with what is overwhelming: to keep themselves safe, preserve choice, make meaning
• Often considered a “symptom” of mental disorder when context is not considered
• “How does this behavior help?”
Shifts in Focus when Receiving Care
To Reduce Crises, Strengthen Self-Capacities
Self-capacity #1: Positive Inner Connection to Others

- Recipes
- Books
- Photos
- Ring-tones
- Songs
- Chosen Tattoos
- Places
- Pets
- Holidays
- Scents
- Dances
- Scars
- Knick-knacks or Tchotchkes
- Clothing
- Jewelry
Self-capacity #2: Managing Strong Feelings

Child’s Game: “Pin the Tail on the Donkey”
Self-capacity #3: Feeling Worthy of Life
RICH Relationships: Where Trauma Heals

RESPECT

Connection

Information: Seeking and sharing

HOPE
Challenges of a Mental Health Paradigm

- Everyday language
- Increased connection
- Feeling worthier
- Identity: neighbor, friend, worker, member, advocate, volunteer

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- Psychological language
- Risk of stigma, isolation
- Self as sick
- Identity: victim, survivor, patient, consumer, peer, client, diagnosis
• Trauma usually occurs in *relationship* (that is, other people are involved)

• Healing and recovery require relationships

• Faith communities are in the relationship business

• Members of Faith communities have histories of trauma

Relationship after trauma is difficult to risk, develop, sustain
Spirituality and Faith Communities

- Offer meaning beyond self
- Place of meaning-making
- Place for singing, chanting, meditation dancing, and sometimes drumming
- Many people who may be supportive, helpful
- Extend services
The Role of Ritual: Comfort, Connection, Soothing, Deepening, Joining
Faith Communities: Model

RESPECT

Information: Seeking and sharing

Connection

HOPE
Self-Capacity #1: Faith Communities & Positive Inner Connection to Others

Worship
Symbols
Songs
Small group gatherings
Prayer beads
New stories

Colors
Texts
Calendar
Friendships
New Memories
Gatherings
Self-Capacity #2: Faith Communities & Managing Strong Feelings
Self-Capacity #3: Faith Communities & Feeling Worthy of Life

You're the Risk
I'll always take
Yoga--and Why It’s Important

- Rewires the brain
- Regulates the breath
- Restores awareness
- Places the person in control
- Connects person to their body in a controlled manner
- Offered (sometimes) by faith communities
Challenges in Faith Communities

- Dogma
- Tendency to use stigmatizing language
- Risks of shame-based organizations
- Distortions about consequences of trauma, origins of refugee status
- Unspoken need to keep people in need
- Histories of trauma in members, leaders
Universal Need: Managing Vicarious Trauma

- VT is result of exposure, compounds personal history
- Results in same impact as direct experience
- Requires management to be able to continue the work well
- Service providers / faith leaders are vulnerable
Walking the Talk..

- Awareness
- Balance
- Connection
- Increase your self-capacities
- Foster RICH® relationships
- Make meaning in your life
- Foster faith for yourself
Resources

• American Association of Pastoral Counselors, www.aapc.org

• International Society for the Study of Traumatic Stress Studies, www.istss.org


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