



TREM Trauma Educational Responses

Trauma Specific Education: Group leaders maintain psycho-educational stance through interventions such as the following:

- A. Providing information about trauma and explaining common trauma related experiences (e.g. defining a flashback, citing prevalence data, describing common responses to abuse or violence).
- B. Describing specific links and mechanisms between experiences of trauma and sequelae (e.g. abuse may lead to vulnerabilities in relationships because women are afraid of other people's responses to them).
- C. Accurately labeling members experiences (e.g. "When someone forces you to have sex, that is rape.")
- D. Emphasize general shared experience. (e.g. "You are not alone in blaming yourself. Many women who have been abused think that the abuse was their fault.")
- E. Adjust information to fit group needs and preferences. Mini lectures and academic discourses are out. Short, succinct, and accessible sound bites are in.

1. Introduction

"Many women have told us that that at some time in their lives they have been experienced abuse. When I say abuse I'm talking about having been physically abused which is when someone hits, slaps, kicks, or shoves you. Or they have been sexually abused, which is when someone touches you when you don't want to be touched. Or emotional abuse is when someone says hurtful, critical things to you like "You should never have been born," or "You're worthless"."

"We know that women who have been abused often experience problems in their lives directly related to the abuse. Some women report depression and anxiety. Other women become addicted to substances. Some have eating disorders like overeating, anorexia, or bulimia. Lots of women tell us that they have a hard time controlling their emotions. And most women report difficulties having healthy relationships."

2. What It Means to Be a Woman

"After abuse many survivors have negative feelings about being a woman. They have come to believe that their physical weakness caused them to not be able to defend

themselves. Some also come to believe that being victimized and being a woman goes hand-in-hand.”

“Sometimes in abusive households the negative images of women are taught and reinforced early. Girls are told that they are not as smart or only good for housework. They are also told that if they are not virgins then they are “sluts” or “whores”. Some girls are given these labels even when they are forced to have sex. “

3. What Do You Know and How Do You Feel About Your Body?

“We often hear from trauma survivors that they hate their bodies. Their bodies often caused them a lot of pain. They think to themselves ‘If only my breasts or my butt weren’t so big then maybe he wouldn’t have been attracted to me’. This resulted in them no longer taking information in about their bodies.”

“For many trauma survivors going through ordinary women’s bodily experiences can be painful. For instance, having their period can be hard because the first time they bled was when they were sexually abused. So every time they have their menstrual cycle they might experience a flashback to the abuse.”

4. Physical Boundaries

“Experiencing abuse is the ultimate boundary violation. Someone has entered your physical space and touched you physically and possibly sexually without your permission. What we know is that trauma survivors react in two very different ways to these boundary violations. Some survivors become very guarded and won’t let anyone into their personal space for fear of being hurt again. For other survivors these boundary violations become normal. They are never modeled good boundaries and so they never learn to set boundaries themselves.”

“Often trauma survivors learn not to set physical boundaries. They learned from very painful experience that if they said “no” to the abuser they got hurt worse. So they quietly accepted the perpetrator being in their physical space to avoid further injury. Now as adults they are not even aware that they have the right to ask someone to get out of their space.”

5. Emotional Boundaries

“Survivors of trauma experience the trauma as an abandonment. They were violated by a person who should have loved, cared, and protected them. Instead that person hurt them in the worst way possible. They also feel that the caretaker who didn’t protect them from the abuser also abandoned them. Often as adults they have had one broken relationship after another. So the prospect of saying ‘no’ to someone they see as another possibility of being abandoned. So they say ‘yes’ to try to avoid this.”

“The experience of trauma causes survivors to feel dirty and sometimes stupid. They have low self-esteem and are sure no one likes them or accepts them for who they are. They are not comfortable saying ‘no’ to people because they have a fear of not being liked. So they will say “yes” just so they are not alone.”

6. Self-Esteem

“When we were in grade school there was a saying that ‘sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me’. We know that is not true, don’t we? Words do hurt.

And unfortunately abusers have said so many hurtful things, that those messages have become the tapes going around in people's heads. Messages such as "you'll never amount to anything", "you're stupid", or "you should never have been born". These messages have caused low self-esteem for many survivors."

"Many survivors have turned to strategies to help them cope with the effects of the abuse. Some of these strategies have been things like drug and alcohol use. These strategies have caused problems in their lives contributing to even lower self-esteem."

7. Self Soothing

"Survivors of abuse often experience flashbacks and memories of the abuse as well as depression and anxiety. Sometimes survivors look for ways to handle these symptoms. Often their strategies turn out to be the feel good now, pay later strategies. It is important for survivors to find new strategies to self soothe that don't have these high costs."

"All of us need to have ways to make ourselves feel better when we are stressed out, sad, lonely, or maybe depressed. For survivors of abuse, they might also experience flashbacks and memories of the abuse. Instead of doing alcohol and drugs, having indiscriminate sex, or spending money we don't have, we need to develop strategies that work but don't hurt us at the same time."

8. Intimacy and Trust

"We hear from many women in these groups that they find it hard to feel that they can really trust another person and feel emotional closeness with them. That makes sense. Most survivors are abused by someone they know and someone they should have been able to trust. Instead that person hurt them. Now they keep people at arm's length so they don't get hurt again."

"Trauma survivors want to have healthy relationships. The basis of all relationships is the ability to trust another person. This is one of the hardest thing survivors do. They were abused by someone they trusted and now they doubt their ability to choose people who won't hurt them like the perpetrator did."

9. Female Sexuality

"For many survivors their first sexual experiences were not under their control. Their abuse left them with the feeling that either sex was hurtful or if they enjoyed the sex they were 'sluts'. We want women to know that they can control their sexual experiences and liking sex doesn't mean you're a whore."

"Sex for women survivors can be difficult. They might have difficulties trusting their partner and feel unable to ask for what they like sexually. It is important for survivors to know that its okay if they want to explore ways to still be sexual without having to depend on others for their pleasure."

10. Sex With A Partner

" Because of abuse, survivors come to sexual relationships with a lot of baggage. Many have never asked themselves what they want because the key to their survival was always 'what does the perpetrator want'. Now they are not sure what attracts them to another or what gives them sexual pleasure."

“For many survivors their first experience of sex was their abuse. It gave them messages that sex was an act when a person controlled or hurt another. Or that sex was how you got what you needed. They were often introduced to sex at a very young age. This led them to having sex very young with lots of different partners. As adults they often don’t know how to have sexual relationships with others that are mutually satisfying.”

11. Transition Session

“It can be hard for trauma survivors to accurately assess themselves. They are so used to relying on the opinion of others that they are not sure when they have made progress or not.”

“It is often surprising to women that they like this group and feel safe here. They are accustomed to not trusting other women keeping their guard up. Their experiences of abuse have also led them to believe that only bad things happen to them. So sometimes women are waiting for the group to go sour because they are convinced that nothing good ever happens for them.”

12. Gaining an Understanding of Trauma

“For many survivors the abuse was the biggest secret of their lives. Often their very survival depended on keeping that secret. So trying to understand what abuse is and how it affected them is new and scary. It means going deeper into those forbidden waters.”

“Many survivors think that if I think about and talk about the abuse I will get worse. So they try to stuff it to the back of their minds. We believe that understanding the abuse and naming it for what it is helps people to recover.”

13. The Body Remembers What the Mind Forgets

“Survivors tell us that they have lots of aches and pains. They go to the doctor and are told “its all in your head”. What we know is that the body stores the memories of the abuse. So when they are under stress, that stress reveals itself in the aching shoulder from the dislocation 15 years ago or the upset stomach they used to get when emotionally abused.”

“Sometimes survivors hate their bodies. They might believe that it was their body’s fault that they were abused. ‘If only my breasts hadn’t developed so early’ or ‘it was my big butt that caused him to notice me’. Other survivors feel betrayed by their bodies. Their body responded to the abuse with an organism telling them that they enjoyed this horrible act. For these and other reasons survivors disconnect from their bodies.”

14. What is Physical Abuse?

“Often the abuse that was done to us was normalized. ‘You are a bad kid so you are asking to be beaten.’ We are given the message by the abuser that we deserved it, that it is the only way to deal with children, and that everybody does it to their kids. When we begin to realize that this was abuse and not punishment, then we have to admit that we did it to our own kids.”

“We often hear from survivors ‘Oh, I gave as good as I got.’ Then we ask them, ‘What kind of injuries did he give you?’ ‘He broke my arm and another time I had to get 20

stitches.’ And then we ask ‘And what did you do to him?’ ‘Well, I scratched him once and another time the lamp I threw almost hit him.’ It is normal to want to defend yourself and not to feel like a victim all the time, but we also need to recognize the difference in strength and power. The consequences for female domestic violence survivors are often very painful.”

15. What is Sexual Abuse?

“Women have different reactions to having been sexually abused. Some women never want to have sex again and avoid sex as best they can. Other abuse survivors were abused when they were young and that early introduction to sex leads them to having a lot of sex with a lot of different people. What we know is that when women are abused they aren’t taught that sex is a loving act between two people committed to each other, rather they learn that sex is about power and control and is often the way you get what you need.”

“Women are given a lot of misinformation about sexual assault. One woman thought that because she had an orgasm while she was incested that she must have liked it, so it wasn’t abuse. We can’t control when we have an orgasm. Another woman told me that she became pregnant after a rape and her mother told her that it wasn’t rape if such a beautiful baby was the result of it. It is still rape even if a wonderful new life is created. Another woman said she had always learned that if the sex is between a husband and wife then it is not rape. Even if you are married, you still have a right to say ‘no’ to sex. If your husband forces you to do it, then it is rape.”

16. Physical Safety

“Sometimes when women have been abused they become hopeless. They believe that life is filled with one bad thing after another and that there is nothing they can do to stop all these bad things from happening to them. Often they even stop doing little things that might keep them safe, such as not going out late at night to buy a pack of cigarettes. They believe that life just happens to them and that they are not in control of it.”

“In order to protect yourself and make sure you are safe you have to care enough about yourself to take the necessary steps. Many trauma survivors have such low self-esteem that they don’t value themselves or their lives enough to do that. What that means for their lives is that they are playing Russian Roulette and not using condoms when they have sex, they are giving their phone numbers and addresses to virtual strangers, and hanging out in dangerous neighborhoods.”

17. What is Emotional Abuse?

“Many women think that if they are not hit or touched sexually then its not abuse. That is just not true. Emotional abuse is just as damaging. Sometimes the abuser uses control tactics such as needing to know where you are all the time or monitoring your phone calls or going with you whenever you go out. Other times the abuser uses put-downs to keep you feeling inferior and that no one will want you. They do that by telling you that you are worthless or that you’ll never amount to anything or that you’re ugly and no one else would want you.”

“Often times people tell survivors ‘Just get over it’. Well, it’s not that easy. The emotionally abusive messages survivors receive are often told to them over and over again until they believe them. Then as adults they find themselves very angry, sometimes depressed, afraid to speak their minds, and feeling hopeless.”

18. Institutional Abuse

“Many institutions such as churches, schools, substance abuse agencies, and mental health centers are set up to help people. But often those institutions and the people who work for them end up abusing the people they are supposed to be helping. Sometimes they do it, say when an employee sexually abuses a student and the school covers it up. Other times they do it when their normal ways of helping people are abusive, such as using shame and taking away a person’s power and control.”

“What is difficult about institutional abuse is that survivors often feel even more powerless to report what has happened to them. They are convinced that no one will believe that the priest or minister would touch them like that. Or they know that the jail or the substance abuse agency thinks it is just fine for staff to talk to them in a degrading way.”

19. Abuse and Psychological or Emotional Symptoms

“What we know to be true for many trauma survivors is that the abuse has caused them to feel depressed or anxious or like they always have to be on guard. Then people recognize this behavior and label them as crazy or give them a diagnosis. What those people don’t recognize, and sometimes we don’t ourselves, is the part the trauma played in the difficulty. We thought we were mentally ill, without understanding what caused this symptoms.”

“Many of you probably realized that you have symptoms or behaviors such as excessive crying, difficulties modulating you emotions, and feeling sad all the time. Sometimes treaters suggest that you go on medication for these difficulties. What they don’t understand is that the behavior is caused by the abuse you’ve experienced. A pill is not necessarily going to take away the bad memories of the abuse. Rather you need to be able to talk the abuse you’ve experienced and work through it.”

20. Trauma and Addictive or Compulsive Behavior

“The thing about alcohol and drugs was that they did help at first. They helped you to stop remembering the awful things that were done to you or they helped you to feel less depressed or anxious or they help you to feel something instead of being numbed out all the time. But that is the seductive thing about drugs and alcohol isn’t it? At first you are in control of them and they help you feel better. But then what happens? They start controlling you and they no longer make you feel good. But you have to use just to feel normal.”

“Sometimes we look at the weird things we do and say to ourselves ‘why am I doing this?’ Why am I not eating? Why am I always cleaning my apartment? Why am I washing my hands all the time? We learned that we couldn’t control the abuse that was happening to us. We couldn’t predict it nor could we stop it. So we looked for things in our lives we could control. I can control what food I put in my body. I can control how clean my apartment is. I can feel not so dirty by washing my hands frequently. We are constantly trying to find ways in our lives to get back the power and control our abuser took from us.”

21. Abuse and Relationships

“Many of us grew up in homes where there was abuse going on. The only relationships we witnessed were abusive ones. This left us with distorted views about what was

normal and what isn't in a relationship. So now we're adults and we think women get hit by their partners, that is just what happens. Well, that is not just what happens. So now we need to check out relationship issues to find out what is healthy and to be expected and what is not."

"Manipulation is often a part of abusive relationships. Sometimes we don't recognize that what our partner is doing is manipulation. When they say 'if you really loved me you'd have sex with me' or 'a good wife would have dinner ready for me when I get home'. We start to doubt ourselves. We wonder if we should be a better partner and have sex even if we don't want to and cook dinner even if we've been working all day too."

22. Family-Myths and Distortions

"In families where abuse was occurring it is not uncommon for members of the family to put a different spin on events. 'What doesn't kill us makes us stronger.' As survivors we came to believe these explanations or stories. Some of us believed them because it was better than facing the reality that people who said they loved us were actually hurting us. Others of us believed them because denying how bad things were was the only way we could cope and live through it."

"We have all heard 'what goes on in this house, stays in this house.' Secrets went hand and hand with the abuse. Sometimes there were so many secrets that family members didn't find out until years later that what was happening to them was also happening to someone else in the family. These secrets are crazy-making because they leave us feeling alone in our pain and shame. We don't know that we are not the crazy one. The crazy one is the abuser."

23. Family Life: Current

"Many survivors are still in contact with people who abused them or people who didn't protect from the abuse. As we begin to deal with our histories of abuse, we might want to start talking about what happened to us. We need to be aware that many family members might feel threatened by this. They are often not ready for the secrets to be exposed or possibly for people to start pointing fingers of blame at them. Most perpetrators of abuse and caretakers who covered up abuse do not admit to what they have done."

"As we recover from abuse and make positive changes in our lives, we see the positive effects it has had on our lives. We want others to experience this also. Sometimes we are adamant that this kind of change is just what they need. One of the challenges is remembering that we can only change ourselves. We can help to educate and inform others about the impact of abuse, but the change in them needs to come from within themselves. It is not something we can force on them."

24. Decision Making: Trusting Your Judgment

"Often trauma survivors were caught between a rock and a hard place. If they made the wrong decision, they might get further abused. But the right decision was often hard to figure out. Because the "right decision" was whatever the abuser said it was and that could change with the abuser's mood. This difficult past with decision-making often haunts survivors in the present and causes them to feel fear when it comes to decision making."

“Decision making is a skill. Part of this skill is being able to trust your judgment and your sense of reality. But years of abuse has clouded your ability to rely on either. Often you have been told too many times ‘You’re stupid,’ ‘You’ll never amount to anything,’ or ‘You couldn’t find your way out of a paper bag’ to be able to trust your intelligence and judgment. And your sense of reality has been clouded by being forced to accept the abusers’ definition of reality. So being able to trust your judgment and gain confidence in your ability accurately assess your reality are skills you need to acquire.”

25. Communication: Making Yourself Understood

“When you grow up in an abusive home you learn in-direct communication. You send off two messages at the same time. For, instance you say ‘no’ with your body language and ‘yes’ with your mouth. This allows the abuser to pick up on the message they want to hear.”

“Often in abusive homes, things that you said were used against you. If you said you’d like to go to a movie with your friend, the abuser made sure that didn’t happen just to punish you. That left the survivor unwilling to communicate their wants and desires for fear that others would deny them. Now we need to learn that communication is a good thing and that we don’t need to fear it.”

26. Self Destructive Behaviors

“We often developed strategies to either help cope with or defend against further trauma. Many of these coping strategies were helpful at the time, but turned out to be self-destructive over time, strategies such as using drugs or having lots of sex. Our challenge now is to develop strategies that still help us to cope, but without the downside.”

“Self-destructive behaviors were usually developed to help us cope with the trauma that we were experiencing. Now we realize that they are not helping us, but rather they are hurting us. So we now that we need to stop doing them. But this is often hard and takes a lot of work. We must really love ourselves enough to do this work. And loving ourselves means letting go of those negative messages about ourselves. We are loveable. We deserve something better.”

27. Blame, Acceptance, and Forgiveness

“It is important for survivors to put the blame where it belongs. Some of you were told by the abuser or others that you liked it or you asked for it. Remember, abuse done to a child is never the child’s fault. Put the blame where it belongs; solely on the abuser. This is an important step in recovery and healing.”

“Survivors believe that forgiving the perpetrator, or the caretaker that didn’t protect them, will help them to let go of the awful thing that happened. Many survivors have a very hard time forgiving the abuser and/or caretaker. Forgiveness is your choice. You get to decide whether or not you forgive. Maybe for some of you it is not realistic. Maybe for you acceptance that this awful thing happened is more realistic.”

28. Feeling Out of Control

“Many survivors tell us about the experience of feeling that their emotions control them and not that they control their emotions. Given what has happened to you, it is understandable that you are angry/rageful or possibly depressed. Most of you did not have good role models for controlling these emotions. Learning the skill of how to

express these emotions in non-damaging ways will allow you to take back emotional control.”

“It is not uncommon for trauma survivors to tell us that they feel fine one second and 2.2 seconds later they are ready to kill themselves or someone else. We call this an inability to regulate emotions. Trauma survivors have difficulty doing this because they had to stuff emotions for many years for fear if they expressed these emotions, the abuser would hurt them more.”

29. Relationships

“Trauma survivors want to have healthy relationships, but have rarely witnessed positive relationships. And sometimes we have learned some unhealthy relationship patterns from these not-so-positive relationships we witnessed. We need to take responsibility for the unhealthy behaviors and attitudes we bring to relationships.”

“Trauma usually leaves survivors feeling very bad about themselves. Often we look to relationships to help us to feel loved and to affirm that we can’t be that bad if someone wants to be with us. But in that quest for a relationship, sometimes we move too fast. We meet someone, tell them everything, move in together, and become too intense too soon. We need to slow down that process and give our relationships a foundation that will make for a lasting relationship.”

30. Personal Healing

“Many trauma survivors feel that they will never be ‘recovered’, but what they hope is that they are on the road to recovery. In order to try to determine if they are on that road, many survivors look to see if their relationships have improved, their ability to self-soothe themselves is greater, and if they have an easier time setting physical and emotional boundaries with each other.”

“Survivors often express a desire to help others who have been through similar experiences. Some survivors help others by becoming AA/NA sponsors. Others reach out through educating others through their church or other community events. Other survivors feel the best way is to parent their own children or grandchildren differently. Helping to stop the cycle of violence is incredibly important.”

31. Truths and Myths About Abuse

“Survivors have often been taught messages about abuse that have been blaming and shaming. ‘You asked for it.’ ‘You like this when I do this to you.’ A part of our recovery is knowing the truth about abuse. We didn’t ask for it. It wasn’t our fault. We didn’t like it.”

“Survivors often minimize what happened to them. They believe that if they call it something else, then it wasn’t such a big deal and they won’t be so affected by it. It is important that we are clear that the things that happened to us were abusive, we survived, we coped, and we can recover from them while still naming them for what they were.”

32. What It Means To Be A Woman

“Trauma survivors often enter the TREM group with very negative views of other women. Often those views reflect the low self-image we have of ourselves. Women often find that a big part of recovery is feeling empowered and beginning to love themselves.”

When female survivors love themselves, then they can love other women like themselves.”

“Often trauma survivors believe that being a woman means you are a victim and always will be a victim. It is important for us to realize that woman and victim are not the same thing. You had bad things happen to you, but you survived and coped. The trauma and abuse were a part of your life, but are not your whole life.”

33. Closing Ritual

“Often trauma survivors have felt abandoned. They were abandoned by the person who should have loved them and instead abused them. Then they might have felt abandoned by the caretaker who didn’t protect them from the abuse. We do not want you to feel abandoned by this group. While we will no longer be meeting weekly, we go forward with the strength and knowledge that we have gained together and will take with us.”

“Sometimes we have avoided saying ‘goodbye’. Goodbyes meant loss and we all lost so much in our lives. Instead of seeing this as a loss, try to view it as a gain. You have gained new friends, new understanding, and new information. We are leaving better, stronger, more empowered women.”