

## Week 2: What are the Effects of Abuse and Trauma?

### Welcome back

We hope that you found last week useful and if you have any questions, please feel free to ask.

The aim of today's session is to look at the range of effects of abuse and trauma.

### What can be the physical effects of abuse and trauma?

#### **Our bodies are hurt when we are physically and sexually abused.**

This can be obvious- a black eye, a broken arm, bruises, sprains and stiffness. Or it can be less obvious- an infection or internal injuries following a sexual assault, being chronically tired following nights of disturbed sleep, your joints hurting following repeated abuses, or miscarriages and pregnancy problems due to assaults. Sometimes injuries (particularly where you were too young or are too frightened to get proper treatment at the time) can cause chronic pain.

#### **Another way our body is hurt is when the build-up of stress and fear starts to affect our health.**

People who have been abused often describe migraines, irritable bowel syndrome, muscle aches and other illnesses that can be at least partly caused by being severely stressed over a long period of time. Executives in big companies can complain about stress and get ulcers and they get sympathy.

#### **Our bodies can also be damaged by the way we have tried to cope with abuse and trauma.**

Some survivors will have learned to cope with difficult feelings about their experiences in different ways, some will eat too much or eat the wrong things. Some cope by drinking more than they know they should or use drugs to block out the pain and the memories. Some cope by cutting or burning themselves, again perhaps to help them deal with overwhelming emotions, to bring themselves back in touch with the present or because physical pain is easier to deal with than emotional pain.

In the short term these strategies might give temporary relief, but in the longer term they can be very damaging to our health. We understand how these strategies develop but hope we can give you some other ideas about how to manage the feelings that you have.

#### **Sometimes we stop taking care of our bodies and ourselves.**

After our body has been hurt and violated (often by the people who are supposed to love us and look after us), it can be hard to think about looking after it. You might not feel you are important enough to take care of yourself. We hope this course will help you to feel like you should value yourself and start planning how to take care of yourself.

**After abuse, some of the ways your G.P. and other health services offer to take care of you may be very difficult to accept and do.**

Women can find internal examinations and smear tests upsetting. Men can feel embarrassed about sexual problems or intimate examinations or may find asking for help difficult and can sometimes find it even harder to approach professionals with health issues.

**It is important to remember that there is a close link between your physical and mental health.**

When your mood is low or anxiety is high, you will feel physically worse, with more aches and pains and more tiredness. As you learn about the emotional part of the effects of abuse, this can also improve your physical health.

Although we want you to look at the possible links between your physical health and your life experiences, it is important to keep in mind that you are more than an abuse survivor. There will be aspects of your physical health that are unrelated to what happened to you.

### **What can you do...?**

- Take a look at your health and wellbeing as a whole. Are there areas where you are aware of links between your experiences and what you feel like physically? Does the person you are being treated by (G.P; specialist medical person; Nurse; Physiotherapist) have an understanding of the links? Do you feel able to talk to them about it?
- By attending this course, we hope that you will learn (or start to learn) to value yourself and your body and find some ways of taking care of yourself.

- By coming to the course, we hope you will learn safe and non-damaging ways of coping with what happened to you.

## **What can be the Emotional or Psychological Effects of Abuse and Trauma?**

If you fell off a skateboard and broke your ankle, you would easily accept that the fall was responsible for the injury. Similarly, if you were involved in a car crash at 60 miles per hour you would accept there was a greater risk of more serious injuries than a car crash while parking your car.

In the same way, emotional or psychological 'injuries' following abuse are a NORMAL, understandable response to these events. Experiencing the psychological effects of abuse is not a failure in survivors but a sign that you have experienced trauma.

Emotional or psychological distress, which can last many years or even decades, is a normal, if upsetting, response to abuse. The more severe or long term the abuse has been increases the risk of psychological difficulties.

Other things that increase the risk of psychological distress are being abused by someone close to you such as a parent/ caregiver or partner, having more than one abuser, having no or little other supports and having a lot of other difficult experiences. But remember you are an individual.

However, you can learn (with lots of practice) to manage these difficulties.

**There is a wide range of psychological or**

## emotional effects of trauma:

Some survivors will experience some of them, others many of them (just like occasionally someone walks out of a high speed car crash with just a few bumps and bruises while others will be seriously injured).

Some survivors experience these difficulties from the first days after their experience; some may find that after a long time without difficulties they will suddenly start. This may be triggered by a stressful life event, such as losing a job, having an illness or living through another trauma.

Some may find that their difficulties have resolved or become easier over time, but this is not always the case. Although there are patterns that we know about in the psychological effects of abuse, you are still an individual and will have your unique experience.

Many survivors, particularly those who are further through the journey of recovery describe some positive emotional and psychological changes through dealing with their trauma.

This might include increased resilience (feeling stronger and having an ability to cope with or tolerate difficult things), increased empathy for others and an ability to 'put things in perspective'.

However, this course is focussed mainly on the impacts of abuse and trauma which survivors find difficult to cope with and so will describe some helpful exercises for coping with and managing the problems many people experience after trauma. We hope that by practicing some of what you learn you will be able, over time, to grow and feel stronger yourself.

This is a list of some of the psychological

'injuries' that survivors tell us about. If you feel that some of these describe how you have been feeling, remember these are normal reactions.

It is a good idea to mark those that you feel applies to you and then you can use this list to plan what you will focus your attention on.

## Difficulty managing your emotional responses to situations:

- ▶ **You may feel overwhelmed by day to day stresses.** Things might really get to you and you feel that coping is hard. You may feel like your emotions are on a rollercoaster, lots of ups and downs and very little in between.
- ▶ **You may feel very anxious or panicky.** People sometimes feel jumpy and overreact to certain noises, places, physical sensations or smells. You may experience panic attacks at times. These are times when anxiety reaches an unbearable level and people are often certain that they will have a heart attack or pass out.
- ▶ **You may feel very low in mood or depressed.** You may feel tearful, lacking in energy, feel like you are not interested in the world around you. Some people lose their appetites and others will feel they want to eat a lot.
- ▶ **You may find it difficult to calm yourself down.** At times this can lead to more difficulties such as with eating, drinking or using drugs to help you to feel calm. Other survivors may become over concerned about cleanliness or counting things.

- ▶ **All of these can contribute to sleep being difficult at times.** Some people find it hard to get to sleep, often because their thoughts are racing and they feel wound up. Others find they wake early and can't drop off again. Some may be wakened by bad dreams and nightmares.
- ▶ **You may find it difficult to express anger or at times feel really angry and not know what to do.** This anger can lead to aggression for some survivors. This may result in other difficulties with relationships and possibly, the law.
- ▶ **You may find difficulties sexually,** either feeling very shut off from your sexual feelings or feel you don't have control of choices sexually.

### Difficulty in 'staying in the present' or feeling 'switched off':

- ▶ **You may experience flashbacks,** feeling as if your abuse or trauma was happening again.
- ▶ **You may experience nightmares,** waking up feeling very frightened.
- ▶ **You may feel numb** or out of touch with your feelings
- ▶ **You may be forgetful,** some survivors forget aspects of their abuse or other times in their lives
- ▶ **You may feel you have to keep thinking about what happened to you** or thoughts of it pop into your mind when you don't want it to
- ▶ **You may feel like the world seems unreal at times,** or that you feel unreal at times
- ▶ **Some survivors hear voices** that distress them, many describe hearing the voices of people who hurt them, although this is not always the case.

### Difficulty with how you think about yourself:

- ▶ **You may feel helpless**
- ▶ **You may feel shame,** or guilt or self-blaming about what happened to you.
- ▶ **You may feel that no-one can understand** what happened to you or that your experiences have made you different from other people.
- ▶ **You may have confused or mixed views about your abuser/s,** which can be very upsetting. You may remember the 'good times' and find losing this part of the relationship difficult.
- ▶ **You might find it hard to stop the relationship with the person who has abused you** or is still abusing you.
- ▶ **You might find it hard not to believe what the abuser told you or is telling you.**

### Difficulties with relationships with other people:

- ▶ **You may feel you want to isolate yourself or withdraw from relationships.**
- ▶ **You may find close, particularly sexual, relationships difficult.**
- ▶ **You may feel that you can't trust people.**
- ▶ **You may find it difficult to take care of yourself or be assertive** and so be at risk of being hurt again.

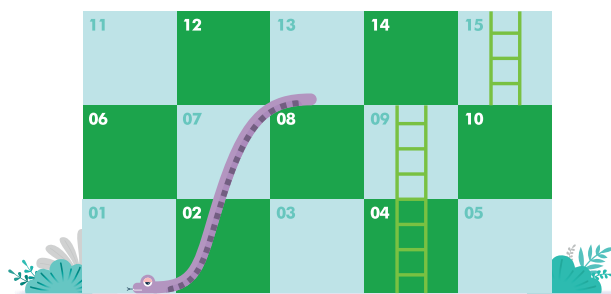
## Difficulties with how you see the world:

- ▶ **You may find your beliefs about the world, or your religious beliefs have changed.**
- ▶ **You may feel hopeless or despairing.**  
Remember to look after yourself safely if this is the case. Please contact one of your supporters if necessary.

There may be things that are not covered by this list. Try to keep a note of these here:

The aim of this course is to offer some practical advice and suggestions to you to help you to cope better with many of these difficulties.

Recovery from trauma could be described in terms of playing snakes and ladders. Everyone on the course may be starting from different numbers depending on what happened to them, how long ago it happened and what else (good and bad) that has happened in their lives since.



Some will be on number 1 and have lots of snakes (hurdles) to get over but we hope the advice in the course will be like ladders or shortcuts on the way up. Others will be on number 95 and just have a few last questions they want answered. Most of you will be somewhere in between. Please be patient.

When thinking about making changes that are recommended in the course remember the golden rule of the '3 P's'. These are:

- 1. Preparation**
- 2. Practice**
- 3. Patience**

The other message that you will hear a lot is '**BE GOOD TO YOURSELF**'. Reward yourself for any success, remind yourself that you are surviving and that's reason enough to be proud of yourself (although you probably don't feel like that).

There is a planning sheet in the key points handout.

We know it is difficult, but please try to keep coming to the course. If you are considering not coming back, please speak to one of the course facilitators or your 'link person' and they can see how we can support you to come back.