



ACTIVITY

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Learning More About Trauma



ACTIVITY:

Exploring the affects of and possible responses to trauma.

BACKGROUND:

Many faith leaders have not been subjected to domestic or sexual violence. They may struggle to understand how sexual and/or domestic violence can traumatize a victim, or how that trauma may affect the everyday life of a survivor. This exercise will afford them the opportunity to consider sexual and domestic violence through the lens of trauma. The exercise will build a framework for understanding the physical and emotional symptoms of the trauma of sexual and domestic violence by connecting them to other forms of trauma. Finally, the exercise will provide the opportunity for participants to name and discuss responses to trauma that they have experienced that are helpful or hurtful.

GOALS:

1. To explore and discuss the physical and emotional effects of trauma.
2. To better understand the trauma that affects survivors of sexual and domestic violence by relating it to the trauma that participants have themselves experienced.
3. To acknowledge that trauma survivors, perpetrators, and those affected are included in any group of people, including congregations.
4. To consider the similarities and differences between domestic and sexual violence trauma and trauma caused by other factors.
5. To suggest that participants have a framework within which to understand trauma resulting from domestic and sexual violence.
6. To identify responses that participants have experienced that are helpful and/or effective.
7. To identify responses that participants have experienced that are not helpful or effective.
8. To use this existing knowledge to build an understanding of responses to survivors of domestic and sexual violence that could be helpful and effective.

OBJECTIVES:

At the end of this activity, participants should be able to:

1. Name some of the physical and emotional effects of trauma.
2. Understand that various forms of trauma result in similar effects.
3. Acknowledge that survivors and victims of sexual and domestic violence, like other trauma survivors, are not easy to identify and may be present in any group of people.
4. Differentiate between helpful and hurtful responses to trauma that participants have experienced.
5. Appreciate how trauma could affect victims in their everyday lives.
6. Evaluate possible responses in light of their potential impact on trauma survivors.

ESTIMATED TIME: 45 minutes

MATERIALS: Outline of exercise (below)
Flip chart and markers
Tape



Facilitator Talking Points

- ❖ Although you may not have received training about domestic or sexual violence, these are forms of trauma, and you may know more about trauma than you think. This exercise is meant to gather some of the wisdom in the room about trauma.
- ❖ Talking about trauma can be potentially re-traumatizing. Please take care of yourself during this exercise if necessary by leaving the room quietly or by listening to the exercise but not participating.
- ❖ I'd like to invite you to think for just a few minutes about something traumatic that has occurred in your own life that has nothing to do with sexual or domestic violence. Don't say what it is out loud, just think for a minute about a time you were traumatized. It might be a car accident, an illness or injury, perhaps a time you lost a job



◇ Give participants 5 – 7 seconds to think about a time they were feeling traumatized.

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- ❖ Now I'd like for you to consider what you were feeling emotionally in the moment when you were traumatized.



◇ Give them another 5 - 7 seconds to think about how they were feeling emotionally.

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- ❖ Now I'd like for you to consider what you were feeling physically in the moment when you were traumatized.



◇ Give them another 5 - 7 seconds.

◇ Bring the group back together with a comment such as, "OK, you've all done hard work considering a traumatic incident that you've experienced. Let's talk about it."

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- ❖ I don't want you to reveal just yet what the traumatic incident was that you were thinking about, but I do want you to help me make a list of what you were feeling.



◇ At the top of a flip chart page, write "Trauma-Related Emotions." Invite participants to call out the emotions they were feeling. Make a list.

» The list will look something like: anger, frustration, terror, anxiety, pain, disbelief, and so forth.

» *Keep this list. Take it off the flip chart and tape it to a wall where everyone can see it.*

◇ *At the top of a second flip chart page, write "Physical Symptoms of Trauma." Invite participants to call out some of the physical symptoms they experienced during the traumatic incident. Make a list.*

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» *The list will look something like: sweaty palms, heart palpitations, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and so forth.*

» *Keep this list. Take it off the flip chart and tape it to a wall where everyone can see it.*

◇ *Ask whether 2 - 3 volunteers would be willing to share the traumatic incident they were thinking of. Typically, participants name car accidents, the loss of a loved one, or illnesses and injuries. Take a moment to thank them for sharing and to acknowledge their loss or pain.*

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- ❖ I didn't ask you to describe the trauma symptoms of a domestic or sexual violence survivor, but amazingly all of us have had some experience in our lives that helps us understand trauma, and trauma symptoms are somewhat universal. Like the traumatic incidents that you just named, domestic and sexual violence are forms of trauma.
 - ❖ Since we have all experienced trauma, we have a framework to begin to understand what it's like to be a victim or survivor of sexual or domestic violence.
 - ❖ Look around this room. Notice that none of us look like trauma survivors. We're all holding it together pretty well. None of us have 'trauma survivor' stamped on our foreheads! Probably no one walked into the room and thought, "wow, what a bunch of trauma survivors." It's the same with victims of sexual and domestic violence. Just because you look out in the pews and don't see someone with bruises or a black eye or their arm in a sling, that doesn't mean that there aren't survivors sitting in those pews looking back at you. Assume that wherever two or three people are gathered together, there are:
 - ❖ people who have survived sexual and domestic violence,
 - ❖ people who have perpetrated sexual and domestic violence,
 - ❖ people who were raised in a violent home, or who witnessed domestic violence or experienced sexual violence as a child,
 - ❖ and people who know a family member, friend, neighbor, or co-worker who is a survivor.
 - ❖ Now that we've established some of the similarities between traumatic things that we've all experienced and domestic and sexual violence, it's important to point out the differences as well.

- ❖ For many of you, the trauma occurred and then it stopped. Your family and friends rallied around for support, time went by, and life returned to normal. However, domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that recurs. Sexual violence can also happen again and again. Before you can heal, it's happening again. As domestic and sexual violence continue, they typically become more frequent. So, it begins to affect your life 24/7. It's your everyday reality. You don't have time to heal, time to gain perspective, time to think through what's happening, before it's happening again. Imagine if you were in a car accident every week!
- ❖ After trauma, many of us try to regain control over our lives. If you were hit on the freeway, you might use back roads. If you were affected by a tornado, you might move to the mountains. Similarly, victims of sexual and domestic violence think, "If I just do this, or if I just do that . . ." Unfortunately, nothing the victim does will change the violence because it's the abuser who is in control. This contributes to the victim's sense of being "out of control" and "crazy."
- ❖ During many traumas, life stops while you deal with it. If there is a death in your family, no one expects you at work the next day. If you are gravely ill, people understand and offer to help. But victims of domestic and sexual violence are often shamed or terrified into silence, so no one else knows what's going on. Life doesn't stop for the victim. She is living a nightmare 24/7 while also getting the kids to school, getting to work, presenting herself to the outside world as though nothing is wrong, and trying to stay one step ahead of the perpetrator.
- ❖ In the midst of the trauma you were thinking of, can you imagine making a life-changing decision? In fact, grief and trauma experts tell you not to make any life-changing decisions for a year after a major loss or trauma. Yet, this is exactly what we are asking victims of domestic and sexual violence to do. Decide whether to have a medical or forensic exam or have any kind of medical intervention. Decide whether to leave home. Whether to take your kids out of school or leave your job. Whether to get a divorce or end a relationship. Whether to disappear and not even tell your family and friends where you are. Whether to prosecute. Whether to change your life/school/home/job so you are no longer near your assailant. Imagine yourself here (point to the emotional and physical affects of trauma that you taped on the wall) trying to make major, life-changing decisions.
- ❖ So let's think for just a minute about how people responded to you when you were traumatized. Things that people say to you or do for you can be both helpful and not so helpful. What did people say to you that was helpful?



◇ *On the top of a piece of flip chart paper, write "What Was Helpful?" Invite participants to remember back to their traumatic event. What were some of the things that people said or did that were helpful, or that made them feel better? The list might look something like:*

» *I'm really sorry this happened.*

- » *You didn't deserve this.*
 - » *What can I do to help you?*
 - » *My thoughts and prayers are with you.*
- ◇ *You may discuss these BRIEFLY as you are adding them to the list. There may be some controversy because what's helpful for one person may not be for someone else. Point out comments that:*
- » *offer genuine support,*
 - » *express solidarity,*
 - » *acknowledge that what happened was terrible, or*
 - » *acknowledge that the survivor didn't deserve this.*
- ◇ *Keep this list. Tape it to a wall where everyone can see it.*
- ◇ *On the top of the next flip chart page, write, "What Wasn't Helpful?" Invite participants to name some of the things that people said that were not helpful or did not make them feel better. Make a list. The list might look something like:*
- » *You shouldn't have done [fill in the blank]. Then this wouldn't have happened.*
 - » *Stories from the "helper" about how their trauma is/was much worse.*
 - » *"I know exactly how you feel."*
 - » *The "helper" jumping in with "quick fixes" based on a superficial understanding of the trauma.*
- ◇ *Discuss these BRIEFLY as you are adding them to the list. There may be some controversy because what's unhelpful for one person may not be for someone else. Point out comments that:*
- » *blame or judge the trauma survivor,*
 - » *imply that the trauma was the survivor's fault,*
 - » *imply that the survivor deserved the trauma,*
 - » *make the "helper" the center of attention instead of the survivor,*
 - » *provide "quick fixes" or glib responses to a deep-seated and complicated problem, or*
 - » *sound fake or superficial.*

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- ◇ *Keep this list. Tape it to a wall where everyone can see it.*
 - ◇ *If you have time, you can also invite participants to consider faith-based responses that were either helpful or hurtful and record these on the “Helpful” and “Not Helpful” lists. Briefly discuss these as well. What made the comment helpful? What made it unhelpful? Not everyone will agree.*
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- ✦ You may have come in here not too sure how to respond to a survivor of domestic or sexual violence, but collectively we’ve gathered up a lot of good wisdom about this. You knew a lot more about trauma than you thought, and you identified some helpful responses as well. The helpful responses you’ve experienced:
 - ❖ acknowledge that you don’t deserve this,
 - ❖ acknowledge that what happened shouldn’t have happened,
 - ❖ acknowledge that it’s not your fault,
 - ❖ don’t judge you or blame you,
 - ❖ don’t tell you what to do,
 - ❖ stay focused on you,
 - ❖ affirm that you have a right to be safe and whole.
 - ✦ Thank you for your hard work. We’ll be building on your wisdom all day.
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- ◇ *Provide a short break or time for a stretch and then move on.*
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