ACTIVITY: Exploring the effects of trauma.

BACKGROUND: Many faith leaders have not received training on domestic or sexual violence. They may struggle to understand how sexual and 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, emotional, and spiritual symptoms of the trauma of sexual and domestic violence by connecting them to other forms of trauma. By viewing domestic and sexual violence through the lens of trauma, this exercise will help participants better understand how domestic and sexual violence can affect a victim. Because you will be asking people to talk about trauma, this exercise might be upsetting for some. If you have the capacity, consider asking a colleague to be available for anyone who is particularly moved by the exercise.
GOALS:
1. To explore and discuss the physical, emotional, and spiritual 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.

OBJECTIVES:
At the end of this activity, participants should be able to:
1. Name some of the physical, emotional, and spiritual 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. Appreciate how trauma could affect victims in their everyday lives.

ESTIMATED TIME: 30 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.

❖ Researchers have learned that trauma is more important than we had previously thought. For example, trauma experienced in childhood can have effects throughout the lifespan. The recurring trauma that you might find in an abusive relationship can also have long-term effects on the victim.

❖ 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 or any type of abuse. Please 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.

❖ 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.

❖ 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.

❖ Finally, I’d like for you to consider what you were feeling spiritually at the time 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.”
 pièces of a Bigger Picture Training Model

❖ I don’t want you to reveal 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 left of a flip chart page, write “Emotional Symptoms of Trauma.” 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 visible throughout the training.

◊ In the middle of the 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.

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

◊ Keep this list visible throughout the training.

◊ At the top right of the flip chart page, write “Spiritual Symptoms of Trauma.” Invite participants to call out some of the spiritual symptoms they experienced during the traumatic incident. Make a list.

◊ The list will look something like: questioning my faith and why this happened to me, feeling distant from my religious community, looking for spiritual guidance, and so forth.

◊ Keep this list visible throughout the training.

◊ Invite everyone to take a deep breath and bring their thoughts back to the present day as we transition to the discussion.
Similarities

✦ **Universal Framework** - 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 thought about, 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.

✦ **Not So Obvious** - 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 your congregation or community 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 there. Assume that wherever two or three people are gathered together, there may be:

✦ 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/or

✦ people who know a family member, friend, neighbor, or co-worker who is a survivor.

✦ **More Than a Label** - And just as you do not want to be defined for the rest of your life by the trauma you experienced, neither do victims and survivors of domestic or sexual violence. Just like you’re more than a “victim of a car crash” or “person who experienced a bad break-up,” survivors are also more than the trauma they have experienced from abuse.

✦ Now that we’ve established some of the similarities between trauma that we’ve all experienced and the trauma of domestic and sexual violence, it’s important to point out the differences as well.
Differences

✜ **Repeated Trauma** – For most of us, 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!

✜ **Trying to Regain Control** - 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.”

✜ **Life Doesn’t Stop** - 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. They may be living a nightmare 24/7 while also getting the kids to school, getting to work, presenting themselves to the outside world as though nothing is wrong, and trying to stay one step ahead of the perpetrator.

✜ **Life-Changing Decisions**: 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 press charges. Whether to change your life/school/home/job so you are no longer near your assailant. Imagine yourself here (point to the lists you made of emotional, physical, and spiritual affects of trauma) trying to make major, life-changing decisions.

✜ Thank you for working with us through this exercise. This is tough work, and talking about trauma can be re-traumatizing. It is really important to take care of yourself. So, before we return to the here-and-now, I will read a short breathing meditation. Feel free to close your eyes and listen, if you would like.
A Breathing Meditation

Breathe in peace, breathe out anxiety.
Breathe in light, breathe out hopelessness.
Breathe in joy, breathe out pain.
Breathe in health, breathe out sickness.
Breathe in trust, breathe out fear.
Breathe in rest, breathe out panic.
Breathe in the breath of life that connects all living things.

Take a moment to be thankful for one thing that has happened today that you have not yet had time to be thankful for.

(Adapted from “A Breathing Meditation” by Naomi Levy)

❖ Thank you for your hard work. We’ll be building on your wisdom all day.

◊ Provide a short break or time for a stretch and then move on.

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