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# ENHANCING KNOWLEDGE

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## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMA TRIGGERS

### WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma refers to experiences that feel threatening or totally overwhelming. They can be sudden events or ongoing incidents that cause someone to feel a threat to their physical safety or sanity. Examples of traumatic events include car accidents, neglect, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse, as well as physical and sexual assault. Trauma “is not a disorder, but a reaction to a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situation in the real world. Trauma is a concrete physical, cognitive, affective, and spiritual response by individuals and communities (Burstow, 2003).” Trauma is subjective and unique to the individual’s experience of the event or ongoing conditions. For example, two people could experience a car accident in the same car, and one could find it traumatic while the other does not.

The overwhelming nature of trauma means that trauma survivors and

their actions don’t always make sense to other people. This resource about trauma is for you to get a better understanding of how the trauma of childhood sexual violence affects survivors into adulthood. This resource is not going to address formal diagnosis of PTSD, C-PTSD, or any other psychological diagnoses, because advocates do not diagnose. The advocates’ role is support while survivors explore and navigate healing, and faith in survivors’ wholeness and resilience.

This resource is not designed to be used by survivors, but instead to help advocates develop skills around supporting survivors. As you reflect on this information, it will become an ingrained part of your advocacy practice.



## LET'S TALK ABOUT THE WORD "TRAUMATIC"

In recent years, people have started to use the word "traumatic" in common conversation, using it to describe situations that are stressful. Survivors who have lived through traumatic events, however, know that traumatic and stressful are not the same thing. Everyday hassles, like a confrontation with a friend or dealing with unemployment can be challenging, difficult and stressful. Traumatic events, however, go beyond challenging, difficult and stressful. A traumatic event is one that overwhelms the physical, emotional, and spiritual defenses.

In contrast to the over use of "traumatic" in common conversation; some survivors of trauma may not feel that what they experienced was bad enough to be considered traumatic, when it actually was. This is in large part because they were able to cope through dissociation, that can give a person some perceived distance from the traumatic event. Dissociation can leave a survivor feeling as though the incident or series of incidents weren't that bad. They may not initially perceive what happened as traumatic. This is a common experience for adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A SURVIVOR IS TRIGGERED?

Trauma profoundly affects memory. Normal memories include several aspects:

- narrative memory -- the verbal story of what happened
- visual memory -- what the person saw
- sensory memory -- what the person felt in their body and senses, and
- behavioral memory -- what they did

Traumatic memories split the verbal story from everything else. A survivor may be able to talk about the event but won't be able to feel what happened or a survivor may have all the feelings but won't have the words to tell what happened. Traumatic memories are stored differently than non-traumatic memories. The parts of the brain that hold traumatic memories are the parts that watch for danger and turn on the defense systems.

Traumatic experiences can affect perception in three main ways.

## **FLASHBACKS**

The survivor may re-experience a past traumatic incident as if it is happening in the present. They may see, hear, smell, or feel things that others presently with them do not. The memories come up, or are triggered, because something in the survivor's daily experience is reminding them of the traumatic incident. Oftentimes, these triggers are subconscious and prompted by things the survivor is experiencing but are unaware of.

## **STRUGGLE WITH SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS**

It may be hard for survivors to tell what is actually happening between them and another person and mistake neutral interactions for dangerous or abusive ones. Survivors also may not accurately recognize danger when it appears in a social interaction.

## **NAMING AND UNDERSTANDING THE TRAUMA**

Because trauma disrupts how memory is stored, and particularly the verbal memory, some survivors might not have full or comprehensible memories of what happened. Additionally, some people who commit sexual violence will seek ways to confuse a child's memory or awareness of what is happening (for example, abusing a sleeping child). These issues can cause disorientation or self-doubt for adult survivors.

In advocacy practice and fields like psychology and neuroscience, ‘trigger’ has a precise and narrow definition: the activation of traumatic memories. However, people have been using the word “triggered” in common language to describe an uncomfortable situation, often times connected to a challenging, difficult or stressful experience. This casual usage of the word does not involve the activation of a traumatic incident. As we discussed earlier, trauma is a response to an overwhelming physical and/or emotional threat and a trigger is something that activates the traumatic memory and the brain’s defense systems. The overuse of the word “trigger” for uncomfortable situations tends to water down the original meaning of the word. For survivors who have experienced trauma, being “triggered” causes much more than discomfort, it causes a re-experiencing of a life threatening and/or psychologically overwhelming event.

Triggered flashbacks may leave the survivor feeling panicked, angry, disoriented, physically pained, grieving, or numb and shut down. In order to manage the painful feelings triggered by the reminder, survivors of trauma may cope in ways that are instinctive to them but confusing to other people: by dissociating, minimizing, or trying to control seemingly unrelated aspects of their environment. People who are triggered can also become very compliant or accommodating and agreeable when they experience the traumatic reminder. The accommodation is a survival skill that survivors have learned in the experience of the violence.

## **WHY DO SURVIVORS STRUGGLE TO FEEL LIKE THE ABUSE HAPPENED TO THEM?**

When overwhelming trauma is repeated, the only way of dealing with it may be to escape it in your head, which is called dissociation. The person dissociates themselves from what is happening by 'checking out' from the incident and pretending that the abuse or trauma is happening to someone else. Although an incredible coping mechanism, survivors who dissociate end up feeling disconnected from what happened, as if it is a scene from a movie, rather than their own experience.

This is why many survivors struggle to feel that anything bad actually happened to them – they're afraid that they are making it up. It can be very confusing for other people to see survivors claiming that they suffered terrible abuse but do not seem upset by it. Many survivors of child sexual abuse are likely to suffer from physical illness and pain, depression, or ways of coping such as substance abuse or eating disorders, that don't seem related to the abuse but are a direct result of the abuse and the coping mechanism that helped them survive it.

Trauma disrupts a person's sense of self and inner harmony. The more that advocates understand trauma and its effects, like dissociation, the more advocates are able to support a survivor's journey towards wellness and happiness.

## **“Enhancing Knowledge: A Brief Introduction to Trauma Triggers”**

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