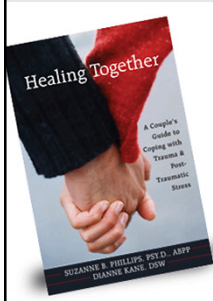


Helping Couples Heal Together in the Aftermath of Trauma

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**IDMH LESSONS FROM ADVERSITY:
Strengthening Preparedness with
Reflections from 9/11
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www.couplesaftertrauma.com

This Workshop Film Clip – Scene 21



- ☐ Will address the impact of trauma, disaster and combat stress on marriages.
 - ☐ Is based on the recognition that in the aftermath of trauma, a couple's relationship is both the locus of pain and an important source of support and resource for recovery.
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First: What is Psychological Trauma?

- ❑ van der Kolk (1997) "result of exposure to an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms a person's coping mechanisms."
- ❑ Yassen and Harvey (1977) Trauma results in "the disruption of physical, relational, and environmental autonomy and loss of safety and physical integrity."
- ❑ van der Kolk: "It is the ability to derive comfort from another human being that ultimately determines the aftermath of trauma, not the history of the trauma itself."

WHAT HAPPENS TO US IN THE FACE OF A TRAUMA / DISASTER?

- We lose our sense of safety and predictability
 - The world seems dangerous
 - Survival is not assured
 - We can lose our trust in others
 - We feel scared, isolated and ashamed
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Factors That Affect An Individual's Response To Trauma

- ❑ Characteristics of the Event
 - ❑ Intensity and Proximity to the Event
 - ❑ Personal Characteristics- *History, gender, age, prior trauma exposure and attachment style*
 - ❑ Meaning of the Event
 - ❑ The Aftermath – *"The Un-events"*
 - ❑ Resiliency Traits
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How and Why Trauma Impacts Relationships

- ❑ Since the Impact of Trauma can be to feel disempowered and disconnected from ones self and others it of course impacts relationships.
 - ❑ When one individual is dramatically affected by an event, it will impact those closest.
 - ❑ It's difficult to know how to help a partner cope, even when both spouses are suffering from the same loss.
 - ❑ Each person will experience different emotions and thoughts about the event.
 - ❑ "Trauma puts up a wall that for a time locks a couple out of their familiar world and leaves them frozen in the traumatic event. Suddenly there is no past, and the future feels impossible.". (Phillips, Kane)
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The classic **symptoms** of trauma each create an understandable disturbance in intimate connections .

- **Avoidance:** Detaching, shutting down, numbing out
 - The necessary numbing where one can't cry, can't feel, can't talk about it, precludes intimacy and involvement through constriction of feelings.
- **Re-experiencing:** Not here moments
 - The presence of intrusive recollections of the traumatic event in thoughts, images, nightmares and flashbacks takes one away from participation in the here and now.
- **Hyper-arousal:** Flooding weariness and edginess
 - Reacting physically, neurologically and psychologically as if still in danger makes the normal routines of family life nearly impossible to tolerate. The sound of children's chatter, infant crying, sibling squabbles et al often lead to angry outbursts, overreactions and ultimately to isolation.
- **Each affects the ability to be connected in the present moment**

Evidence

- In trauma exposed adults, anger and hostility are associated with PTSD in the aftermath of all types of traumatic events. (Orth & Wieland, 2006)
 - Sexual and intimacy problems have been associated with both war exposure and combat trauma. (Solomon, 1993; Matsakis, 1996; Riggs, Byrne, Weathers & Litz, 1998)
 - And of course w/ those w/ sexual abuse history
 - Among male and female Vietnam veterans 38% of the marriages dissolved within six months of their return from Southeast Asia (Kulka et al, 1990)
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Evidence

- Since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, the divorce rate has increased from 2.6 percent in 2001 to 3.6 percent in 2009.
 - Overall military divorce rate leveled off in 2010 after a consistent increase over the previous five years (Amy Bushatz Pentagon stat report 2010)
 - The divorce rates released by the Pentagon do not include data on Reserve and National Guard members or on service members who divorced after leaving the military.
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Trauma follows us home

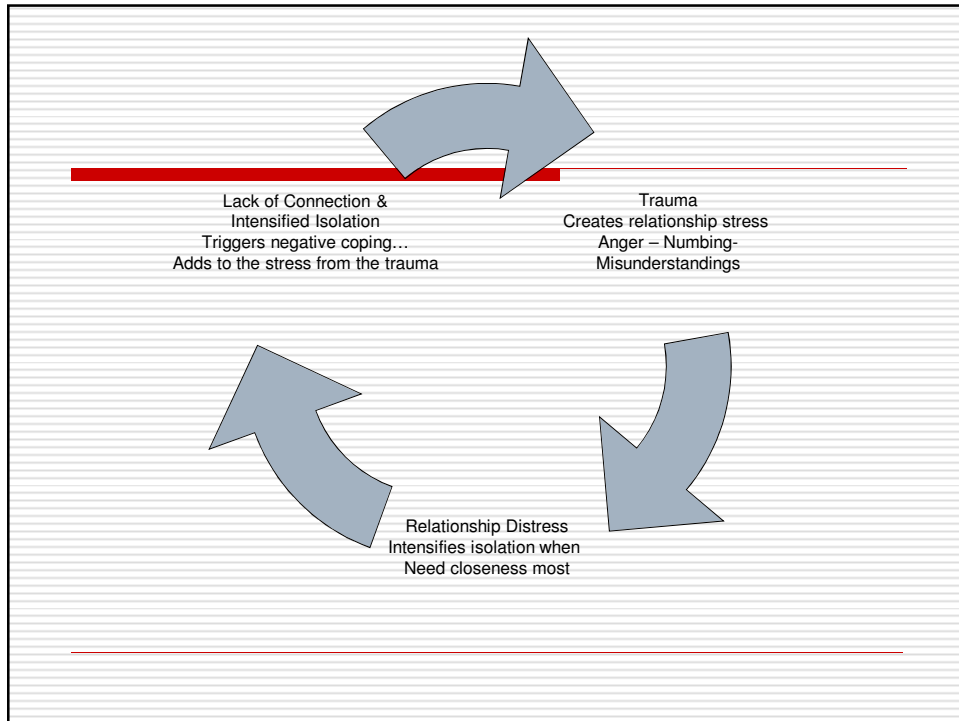
from combat zone-car accident-dr. office

- ❑ I'm Different
 - ❑ We are Different – trauma has changed the relationship
 - ❑ When can't share what is happening with our partner we are misunderstood, misinterpreted get critical or feel criticized. We withdraw which triggers negative relationship patterns
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FILM – Scene 10

❑ Reactions





If Trauma is about helplessness, loss and disconnection, a relationship that is safe and caring is a powerful antidote.

“Emotional attachment is probably the primary protection against feelings of helplessness and meaninglessness”

McFarland and Van Der Kolk (1996 p 24)

An attachment bond...

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.
"Pooh," he whispered.
"Yes, Piglet?"
"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw.
"I just wanted to be sure of you."



16

Attachment Theory 101

- John Bowlby (1907-1990)
 - "Humans are hardwired to connect from cradle to grave"
 - Seeking and maintaining contact is a prime motivation
 - Isolation is traumatizing
 - Our very survival is predicated on our ability to attach to a primary caregiver. We attach to another for protection from predators or harm and for nourishment and nurturance.
 - Research indicates that our desire and need for nurturance (care and attention) from another is even stronger than our need for nourishment (food). **And that this nurturance must be consistent enough that we can count on it.**
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Adult Attachment

- ❑ The need to attach to another is a lifelong need, especially in times of stress, illness, or threat. It is not a sign of immaturity or dependence. It is a healthy human need to seek out comfort and feel connected (emotionally close) with another primary person.
 - ❑ A secure connection offers a safe haven from which to explore the world.
 - ❑ The more connected, the more autonomous and separate – offers a safe base to return to
 - ❑ Accessibility and responsiveness builds bonds, reduces arousal and increases security
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Attachment Style

Attachment styles are habitual strategies for engaging with others that involve working models of the self

- ❑ Secure
 - ❑ Insecure
 - Anxious – preoccupied
 - Avoidant
 - ❑ Dismissive
 - ❑ Fearful
 - ❑ Disorganized
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Attachment : Self and Other

		Thoughts About Self	
		Positive	Negative
Thoughts About Others	Positive	Secure Attachment Higher self-esteem Higher sociability	Anxious Attachment Lower self-esteem Higher sociability
	Negative	Dismissive Attachment Higher self-esteem Lower sociability	Fearful Attachment Lower self-esteem Lower sociability

Trauma Disrupts Typical Attachment Patterns

- Containment, regulation of affect, safety of protest, patterns of repair, patterns of intimacy may be altered.
- Even securely attached relationships are thrown.
- Insecure attachment makes 3 core elements in relationship difficult:
 - Affect regulation, information processing and communication
 - Trauma compounds this difficulty- fighting on 2 fronts
- Need more support and less able to ask
 - Spouse often confused, overwhelmed and often kept in the dark about the details of the trauma

GOALS FOR INTERVENTIONS FOR TRAUMA AND DISASTER

- Reestablish stability, predictability, and security
 - Physical equilibrium and daily routines
 - Rebuild trust, decrease isolation, shame
 - Normalize and validate responses to trauma
 - Provide an opportunity to grieve
 - Foster reconnection with self, others, and future
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Couples Road to Recovery

- **Establishing Safety**
 - Finding a Safe Place
 - Verbalizing attachment Needs
 - **Remembering and Mourning**
 - Revisiting the Trauma
 - Bearing witness
 - Reconstructing the Event
 - Mourning the Loss
 - **Reconnection**
 - Proximity to care giver soothes nervous system (innate affect regulator)
Judith Herman (1997)
 - **"Pain Shared Is Pain Divided"**
Lt. Col. Dave. Grossman (2004)
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Finding a Place for Trauma

"The action of telling the story in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory" Judith Herman (1997)

Film Clip: Scene 24



Principles of CPFA

Being a Compassionate Presence

"The best defense is to have a loved one stand in the dark beside you"

Establishing Safety

Identifying and Responding to Needs

Practical Assistance & Coping Skills

Support

☐ Direct

Advice
Trying to fix it
Practical, logical,
rational
About problem not
person

☐ Indirect

Validating
I trust you
We will work on this
together
About person not
problem

Accessible – Responsive – Engaged

Are u there – Will u respond – will u stay involved?

What Interferes?

- After Trauma the signals are not clear
 - If I am stressed and can't tell you...I distance myself...we stay distant awhile
 - When you pull away I think you don't care, or are not interested. Then get mad and we argue
 - Hard to turn to the other for comfort
 - Seen how prior insecure attachment makes this more difficult
 - Often difficult for non-trauma spouse to express needs
 - Silence takes up more space in home, intensifies conflict (protest)
 - Anger may or may not erupt openly
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The Relationship Between Trauma and Anger

- ☐ Physical Response
 - ☐ Mask of Other Feelings
 - ☐ Anger and Depression

 - ☐ FILM Clip: **Fireproof**
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How And Why Anger Erupts

Group Exercise

- ☐ What did you notice in film?
 - ☐ What factors contribute to anger erupting and continuing?
 - ☐ What fueled the anger?
 - ☐ What is each feeling and doing that contributes?
 - ☐ What could either do to de-escalate?
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How and why Anger Erupts

- ☐ Efforts go unrecognized
 - ☐ Feel uncared for
 - ☐ Dis-regulated -say more than intend
 - Attacking behavior
 - Anger covers hurt
 - ☐ Neither is able to ask
 - ☐ Changes in Needs
 - ☐ Denial of Feelings
 - ☐ Need to Blame
 - ☐ Need to Regulate Feelings
 - *Displacement*
 - *Projection*
 - ☐ Miscommunication
 - Distance regulation
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Behaviors that “Fuel the Fight”

- ☐ Inability to See Broader Context
 - Taking Anger Personally
 - Ignoring the Circumstances
 - ☐ Inability to Self Observe
 - Denial of need for personal space
 - ☐ Verbal Aggression
 - ☐ Using Silence as Punishment
 - ☐ Creating Shame
 - ☐ Use of Alcohol or Drugs
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Anger Management

- ☐ Safety
 - ☐ Disengagement and Reengagement
 - ☐ Presumptions of Knowing
 - ☐ Working Resolutions
 - ☐ Prioritizing Relationships
 - ☐ Forgiveness
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Fears and Rewards of Asking for Comfort

- ☐ Afraid of being seen as weak or needy
 - ☐ Maybe partner won't care or will respect you less
 - ☐ Connection helps overcome fear but takes courage
 - ☐ Deriving comfort from another = sign of strength and strengthens relationship
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Dancing in the Dark

- The disruption of Intimacy between Partners is often part of the collateral damage of Trauma.
 - Goal: to help couples understand how and why trauma disrupts their sexual functioning and to offer strategies for reclaiming, renewing or re-inventing their intimacy
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Reclaiming Intimacy

- The assault of unexpected trauma and loss can create enough stress and distrust to make partners feel like strangers.
 - The touch, the trust, and intimate knowing that couples can share is an invaluable emotional and physical source of transforming and healing.
 - Any intimate reconnection even just holding hands changes the feeling state.. It is the nonverbal validation of a connection.
 - Pillow Talk: Being present, relaxed and sharing confidences in dark is very difficult post trauma.
 - Even if unable to go to sleep ...spend some time together
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Resiliency

- "... the capacity to find a way back to successful adaptation and functioning even after a period of disorganization and disruption (Roisman, 2005)"
 - The properties linked to resilience lie in the "We" not the "I" and arise through the process of connecting (Samuel Shem & Janet Surrey 1998)
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Resiliency Factors

- Hardiness
 - Commitment
 - Control
 - Challenge
 - Positive Outlook
 - Support Networks
 - Humor
 - Individual and couple resiliency traits
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The Healing Power of a Couples Group

Being with other couples helps to

- ❑ Normalize Impact of Trauma on Relationships
 - ❑ Re-establishes a sense of “we” in presence of others
 - ❑ Supports couple problem solving skills
 - ❑ Supports tolerance of differences as witnessing the broad range of “solutions” others bring
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“suffering is a given... suffering alone is intolerable”

- Emotional isolation is dangerous
 - Connection especially important at times when we are most vulnerable
 - Separation, Stress, threat, transition uncertainty
 - Loving relationship best antidote to stress/trauma
 - Emotional connection with loved one best source of resilience and strength
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Remember

"Relationships need not be the collateral damage of trauma but rather invaluable resources"



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