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Welcome to the Navigating Guilt After Trauma Workshop



Goals of the Sexual Trauma and Guilt Workshop are:

- To gain awareness on the emotional and psychological on how sexual assault affects feelings.
- To understand how societal and cultural factors influence the way survivors perceive and experience guilt.
- To gain awareness on factors contributing to guilt after sexual trauma.
- To gain coping strategies and self-care techniques to alleviate guilt.

What is Guilt?

Guilt has many definitions but the one most appropriate for this workshop defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary online is:

“feelings of deserving blame especially for imagined offenses or from a sense of inadequacy”.

Healthy Guilt vs Unhealthy Guilt

It is important to identify the difference between healthy guilt versus unhealthy guilt. Healthy guilt allows us to feel bad for something we might have done that is considered wrong or inappropriate. However, it allows us to try to put things right and seek amends, which can lead to healing. In contrast, unhealthy guilt is when someone may feel bad for something they have not actually done or had no control over. It can be negative because it can lead people to emphasize self-punishment and trap survivors in guilt. It is an irrational belief that needs to be changed.

- Be paralyzing
- Prevent growth and the development of a healthy sense of self
- Interfere with how we feel about ourselves, how we behave and how we relate to others
- Make us feel very negative about ourselves
- Make us want to withdraw and hide away from others
- Reduce spontaneity and our ability to be fully present
- Affect our sense of belonging
- Make us feel fearful in relationships.

Unhealthy guilt is most seen in people who were neglected, rejected, humiliated or emotionally, physically or sexually abused in childhood, and those who have experienced domestic or sexual violence. What might you experience if you suffer from unhealthy guilt?

- Feeling guilty about things you have not actually done
- Feeling self-conscious and anxious
- Analyzing your behavior in a range of situations and conversations to see what you might have done wrong or should have done better
- Thinking negatively about yourself and always feeling ‘less’ than others
- Being self-critical, self-attacking and self-persecutory – inner critical voice
- Being consumed with negative thoughts about yourself, and endlessly ruminating over these
- Engaging in self-harm and self-destructive behavior
- Constantly apologizing and saying “sorry”
- Feel overly responsible.

Let’s be clear that guilt is different from shame. Shame is fueled by secrecy, silence, and judgment. It can become more intense over time and can be triggered in a range of situations not necessarily related to a particular event or anything you might have done. Abusers often control the person who they are harming by making the person feel ashamed. They might do this by telling their victim that they are responsible for the abuse, either through provoking the abuser or because they ‘like’ and ‘want’ what is being done to them. This can lead to a cycle of shame in

which the current shame a person feels triggers memories of other experiences of shame, which can intensify the feeling of it.

What is Sexual Trauma?

Sexual abuse is used to describe an act that is imposed on another person without their consent. This can be a one-time event or an ongoing experience. Sexual trauma alludes to the physical and psychological challenges endured by survivors of sexual assault. Examples of sexual trauma and abuse could be sexual assault, rape, sexual harassment, sex trafficking, childhood and familial sexual abuse, and sexual violence in relationships.

What is the Impact of Sexual Trauma?

An estimated one in five women and a quarter of men in the United States have experienced forceful or unwelcome sexual contact. Children are commonly affected by sexual trauma as well. Around one in nine girls, and one in fifty-three boys will face sexual assault at the hands of an adult.

Emotional and Psychological Effects of Trauma:

- **PTSD:** The effects of sexual trauma may cause symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to emerge in survivors. Nearly 75% of sexual assault survivors met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD one month after an assault and 48% still meet the criteria one year after the assault. Sexual assault survivors may experience symptoms in the immediate aftermath of their assault such as vivid nightmares, feeling numb, guilty, or depressed, and being easily startled or irritable. Survivors may also choose to avoid thoughts or feelings of the traumatic event and may stay away from reminders of the trauma such as people, objects, and places.
- **Depression:** It's normal for survivors to have feelings of sadness, unhappiness, and hopelessness. If these feelings persist for an extended period of time, it may be an indicator of depression. Depression is not a sign of weakness and it's not something you should be expected to "snap out of." It's a serious mental health condition and survivors can often benefit from the help of a professional.
- **Anxiety:** People who have experienced any sort of sexual trauma are most likely to develop anxiety disorders. Posttraumatic stress disorder is more related to child sexual abuse than other anxiety disorders.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD):** OCD is a disorder marked by unwanted thoughts, fears, and repetitive behaviors meant to reduce thoughts and fears. For survivors, it's a way of feeling in control of their lives, but it gets to a point that it becomes impairing to live a healthy life.
- **Eating Disorders:** Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and avoidant restrictive food intake disorder can be experienced by a

sexual abuse survivor. Eating disorders can become a maladaptive coping mechanism for trauma.

- **Trust Issues:** Since sexual abuse is a boundary violation, survivor's perception of when or how to set boundaries may be impacted. Additionally, survivors find it difficult to trust other people as well as themselves and their perceptions. They may also place an inappropriate amount of trust in everyone.
- **Flashbacks:** During a flashback it can be difficult to connect with reality. They can be triggered by fairly ordinary experiences connected with the senses, like the smell of someone's odor or a particular tone of voice.
- **Emotional dysregulation:** Survivors may find it difficult to regulate their emotions during stressful and frustrating times.
- **Depersonalization and derealization:** Both are forms of dissociation. Derealization is when survivors may feel like the people and words around them are unreal, foggy or dreamlike. Depersonalization is when people's actions and thoughts seem to be happening to another person or like they're watching them from the outside.

Societal and Cultural Influences

Survivors' multiple intersecting cultural identities may affect how survivors cope with an assault, including whether and how they seek help, as well as how microsystems and exosystems within a given culture respond to survivors. Survivors from cultural groups that encourage personal responsibility generally or for collective welfare may experience more self-blame, shame, and internalization of stigma after an assault. For example, in some cultures, if someone was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, they may experience shame stemming from how the abuse affected their family's image. This is an example of a culture that may emphasize collectivism as the survivor may have distress related to the effects of their assault on those in their family and/or community. Collectivist values may prioritize the needs of their community rather than individual needs. If the perpetrator was within the community, this can cause a survivor to not want to tell other people or identify the perpetrator as it can bring shame to their immediate family, broader cultural group, or cause discrimination. To add on, many cultures such as South Asian, East Asian, and Anglo-American cultures emphasize respect towards fathers or older male relatives which may cause survivors to not tell anyone about their abuse.

Collectivist norms may also serve as a protective factor. Survivors in cultures that place value strong and central mother-child relationships. This may encourage disclosure of child sexual abuse and promote access to social support for the child, which can lead to improved mental health. Racial/ethnic identity may serve as a source of resilience for survivors. Survivors may find ethnic pride, practices, and shared ethnic identity with others beneficial as a source for healing.

Additionally, cultural norms about emotions and trauma may affect how survivors experience and react to traumatic stress. A study was done comparing the concept of PTSD within Chinese

medicine and the Western's conceptualizations of PTSD. Chinese trauma survivors are more likely to report physical symptoms than Western survivors. They are more likely to view emotions like sadness or fear in balance with other emotions. However, the West may conceptualize these emotions as negative, which may encourage harmful emotional avoidance. Norms encouraging coping on one's own may discourage a survivor from receiving help. Cultural norms influence how trauma and emotions should be discussed with others. In more individualistic cultures, sharing one's distress with others is seen as beneficial. In collectivist cultures, emotional self-control and discretion in sharing personal troubles may be more highly valued. Survivors from cultures that discourage emotional expression may frame disclosure as unhelpful and decide not to disclose their trauma-related emotions to others. Internalizing emotional problems may reduce access to external support and have been theorized to contribute to outcomes such as suicidal ideation in Asian survivors of sexual violence.

Factors Contributing to Guilt After Sexual Trauma

There are many factors that contribute to guilt after experiencing sexual trauma.

Self-Blame

Sexual abuse survivors often blame themselves for the trauma they experienced. Victims may shame themselves into thinking they were "asking for it" or there is something wrong with them that caused the abuse to happen in the first place. They may have been frozen in the moment and now blame themselves for not fighting harder. They believe that they had a part to play and that they could have somehow prevented it. Survivors may feel like they led the perpetrator on or they somehow "deserved" the abuse. All these thoughts that a survivor may feel about the abuse may cause them to form a distorted self-perception of themselves, preventing them from reaching out for help. Self-blame is a protective strategy that helps us to survive in the presence of someone who has power and control over us, and who could harm us if we resisted or disclosed the abuse.

Self-blame can:

- Help our minds to protect us
- Provide a way to make sense of what has happened to us
- Help to avoid overwhelming feelings of anger, grief, or betrayal
- Help us to survive in an unsafe or stressful situation, such as living with someone who's harmed us
- Make us wish we could have done something differently at the time, even though we couldn't have
- Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) blame themselves or feel guilty or ashamed for not protecting siblings or others from being harmed
- Self-blame is also a way of keeping the secret and protecting the non-abusing parent/carer.

It is important to note that placing blame, guilt, or shame on yourself is a common response following traumatic events like these. However, it is important to recognize that the responsibility for the abuse lies with the perpetrator, not with you. Understand that no one deserves or asks for abuse, and the guilt and shame belong to the abuser, not the survivor. Even

though self-blame can be very hard to cope with, with time and support you will be able to start feeling differently. You might feel confused or overwhelmed if someone else says it wasn't your fault, although hearing this can also be a relief.

External Pressures

Victim blaming attitudes marginalize the survivor which makes it more difficult for them to come forward and report the abuse. Being made to feel guilty and ashamed for something you are told you have done, even though you haven't, is in the interest of the abuser as it:

- Makes it easier to control you
- Ensures your silence and secrecy
- Makes it impossible for you to tell someone about the sexual assault or sexual abuse
- Prevents you from being in touch with the harm done to you
- Pushes down any anger about what happened to you.

If a survivor of abuse experiences shame and guilt, it can also benefit the abuser as it makes the survivor feel less helpless and vulnerable, as self-blame and feeling guilty can give the survivor the illusion of control in which they can imagine that it is their fault in the future if the abuse were to happen again. This also may make the survivor less likely to seek help. It is NOT the victim's fault or responsibility to fix the situation; it is the abuser's choice. By adopting a victim-blaming mindset, society permits the abuser to carry out sexual assault or relationship abuse without taking responsibility for their acts.

Internal Pressure

External pressures can become internalized. This can make us feel or believe ourselves to be inadequate, flawed, defective, and bad. It can cause us to have a negative view on our self-worth, and to subject ourselves to self-criticism, self-loathing, and self-persecution. It can make us put ourselves down and be critical of ourselves, perpetuating shame.

Healing and Coping Strategies

There are numerous coping strategies to alleviate feelings of guilt in survivors. Let's explore the different healing and coping strategies that may be useful.

Therapeutic Approaches

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a highly effective form of treatment, which focuses on your experiences in the present. It works on the principle of breaking the vicious circle between a person's thoughts, feelings, behavior and physical symptoms. This form of therapy helps people understand how their thoughts influence anxiety and avoidance. By doing this, they can then start to challenge their fears. CBT is a talking therapy that works on identifying the original trigger of your thoughts, feelings, and anxiety with you then becoming aware of your beliefs and emotions surrounding these. CBT works on challenging these issues and participating in exposure work using coping strategies.

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy is a process that uses eye movements, sounds and repetitive motions to help clients process and come to terms with

traumatic memories more quickly than talking therapy alone. Interactive psychotherapy techniques are used to relieve psychological stress. During EMDR therapy sessions, you will be asked to revisit traumatic or triggering experiences in brief doses while the therapist directs your eye movements. EMDR is thought to be effective, because recalling distressing events is often less emotionally upsetting when your attention is diverted.

Body-centered psychotherapy helps you to gain access to memories, emotions and beliefs that are otherwise beyond words and cognition. If you have struggled to understand how your body and mind are seemingly on different pages, body-centered psychotherapy can get them to communicate again. By paying closer attention to the messages our body and mind are expressing, you can begin to lead a healthier life, both physically and psychologically.

Prolonged exposure therapy is a type of exposure therapy that can be especially useful for survivors who are struggling with PTSD and may find themselves engaging in avoidance. For example, they may be avoiding certain people, places, situations, or memories. A therapist who specializes in prolonged exposure therapy may help gradually expose yourself to these potential triggers when you feel ready and safe to do so. Some exposure methods, these therapists include may be imaginal exposure, virtual reality exposure, and vivo exposure. Imaginal exposure involves thoroughly imagining or speaking about the traumatic event and your therapist may assist you in coping with difficult emotions or physical sensations that pop up. Virtual reality exposure helps take imagined exposures to another level by incorporating realistic sights and sounds which are happening in a controlled and safe environment. Vivo exposure occurs after working with some imaginal exposure, your therapist can help you identify some triggers, such as specific places, that you avoid due to trauma. Then, you will plan together to expose yourself in real life to these triggers between your sessions. You will start off small and build confidence in yourself along the way.

Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) helps people recognize the underlying thoughts that are driving their guilt, which often involve feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, and personal responsibility for the traumatic event. Once these thoughts are identified, clients practice challenging them and replacing them with more accurate, positive, and empowering thoughts. CPT helps clients develop a healthier and more positive sense of self which can help improve self-esteem, renewed confidence, and an overall sense of well-being.

Self-Care Techniques

Self-care doesn't need to be about setting lots of really challenging goals. It can be any activity that helps you to feel more safe, comfortable, and healthy. Some self care activities may include:

Balanced Meals: By eating balanced meals, we give our bodies the fuel they need to fight off illness and work well throughout the day.

Sleep: Sleep is one of the most important things for our physical and mental health. Lots of victims and survivors experience sleep problems. But here's some tips that you can try to help you fall asleep. You can try to be active during the day so that you can feel tired when it is time for bed. You can try listening to calming music or nature noises to help you go to sleep. Avoid watching anything upsetting or too exciting before bed and avoid looking at screens.

Regular exercise can improve your health, help you sleep better and reduce feelings of sadness and anxiety. It can also make you feel stronger and more in touch with your body.

Avoid alcohol and drugs as they can harm mental health. Abstaining from drugs and alcohol will benefit your health overall and prevent the worsening of symptoms.

Journaling helps us work through what is going on in our minds. It can be helpful to write down our thoughts as it helps us process any emotions that come up. It can be dangerous and unhealthy to suppress our emotions. It is helpful to write about positive and negative emotions so that you are not always focused on negativity. To help you get started here are some questions to consider as you write:

- What specific events or actions do I feel guilty about?
- How has this guilt affected my life and my healing process?
- What messages do I tell myself about this guilt?
- How can I begin to challenge and reframe these thoughts?

Healing from Unhealthy Guilt and shame

Some tips to heal from unhealthy guilt include:

- Separate and resolve healthy guilt to uncover unhealthy guilt
- Transfer guilt back onto the abuser, and those that harmed you
- Practice self-compassion
- Seek connection with others
- Exercise self-compassion to shift feelings of shame and move away from self-criticism or proof of inadequacy

Additionally, here are six steps to help transform shame into self-compassion:

Step 1: Understand the nature of shame. Shame is normal and the brain's way of dealing with the threat of disconnection.

Step 2: Label shame for what it is: an emotion. Giving it a name helps you to get some distance between you and the emotion.

Step 3: Replace judgment with curiosity. Curiosity about your emotions can help you to shift into a more caring and understanding perspective

Step 4: Acknowledge the inner critic which amplifies your shame. Remind your inner critic that you are a work in progress trying to navigate the best you can.

Step 5: Practice what is helpful, not harmful. Try to speak to yourself like you would a friend. Ask yourself what would be helpful for recovering from shame rather than perpetuating it through shaming self-attack.

Step 6: Build shame resilience and counterbalance shame with authentic pride by reminding yourself of all the things you have achieved or mastered, such as having survived or still having hope.

Somatic Exercise

Somatic exercises can help people with trauma reconnect with their bodies and calm their nervous system. It focuses on a bottom-up approach to trauma therapy which means that rather than starting a conversation about emotions about emotions or cognition, this approach focuses on how the body responds to trauma and how that, in turn, affects the brain. Trauma causes the sympathetic nervous system to go into overdrive, and it's hard for people who have experienced trauma to regulate their nervous system back into a state of calm awareness. Here are a few exercises that may be helpful:

Heel Drops: Begin by standing and letting your eyes relax so that you're not really focusing on anything. Slowly raise yourself up on your toes, then drop back onto your heels. Develop a slow rhythm, and as you do try to focus on how it feels in your hips and lower back. Try to relax in this area. Continue for at least one minute. Try and do this exercise to the best of your ability.

Wave Breathing: Stand still and let your hands rest on the front of your thighs. As you inhale, reach your chin upwards and slide your hips backward, creating an arch in your back. Pause, and then move your head towards your chest and bring your tailbone forward. Pay attention to your spine the way it moves along with your breath.

Swaying: Simply allow yourself to sway back and forth, like a reed in the wind. You can close your eyes if you want. This rocking movement helps release any tension that may be built up. Relax and let yourself unwind.

Body Scans: This is meant to raise awareness of what is happening in your body and where you are carrying tension or pain.

- Find a comfortable position. This can be sitting, standing, or lying down.
- Think about how each part of your body feels, your thoughts, and feelings on each part of your body.
- Start with your head and work your way down, taking as long as you needed.

Posture Exercises: Our bodies hold tension in different ways– both physically and psychologically. Exercises to improve muscle alignment and promote a balanced and upright posture. Here are a couple of posture exercises:

- Shoulder blade squeezes: Sit or stand with your back straight, Squeeze your shoulder blades together. Hold for a few seconds, then release.
- Chin tucks: Sit or stand with a straight spine. Gently tuck your chin toward your chest. Hold for a few seconds, then return to a neutral position.
- Cat-cow stretch: Start on your hands and knees. Arch your back upward (cat), then lower it down and lift your head (cow).

Empowerment and Advocacy

“What do you do for your own empowerment?
In what areas do you lack empowerment in your life?”

People cannot take what was not given to them. You are not what happened to you, and your body is yours and yours alone. You can choose to share it with others, but you will always belong to yourself. There are multiple ways to empower yourself.

Find a safe space where you can talk about what happened. What are ways that can empower yourself? A trusted friend or family member is a good start. Therapy is a great way to work through complex emotions that come with an assault. Support groups can be a great way to bond with others who have had a similar experience as you and it is a great way to heal and grow together.

Do something you love with your body. You can do your favorite form of exercise, go dancing, and take a bath. Surround yourself with people who make you feel loved and cared for. The more you surround yourself with them, the more you will feel you are worthy of love and respect. Self-care can be a way of empowering yourself too.

Getting involved in your community is a great way to connect with others while connecting with yourself. Consider volunteering with sexual assault agencies that can help you empower other survivors or other agencies where you meet other women and work together to help women and girls achieve their dreams. Through empowering yourself and empowering others, the power you felt an abuser has over you will fade.

The most important thing of all is remembering to be patient with yourself. You have always been worthy of the love you are working towards giving yourself. The power you have has always been there, you just need to be able to feel it.

Conclusion

Here are some key takeaways from the workshop:

- Differentiating between healthy and unhealthy guilt is crucial. Healthy guilt can lead to positive actions and empathy, while unhealthy guilt is irrational and self-destructive, often stemming from trauma and abuse.
- Sexual trauma has profound psychological and emotional effects, often leading to PTSD. Survivors may experience flashbacks, nightmares, and difficulties with trust and boundaries, significantly impacting their daily lives and relationships.
- Effective therapeutic approaches, such as CBT, EMDR, and body-centered psychotherapy, can significantly alleviate feelings of guilt. Additionally, self-care practices like healthy eating, regular exercise, and journaling are essential for managing emotions and fostering healing.

- Empowerment strategies, including finding safe spaces for discussion, engaging in activities that promote self-worth, and participating in community support groups, are vital. Recognizing personal empowerment and advocating for oneself and others can aid in overcoming the powerlessness felt due to trauma.

You are not alone in this journey, and your courage in addressing these difficult topics is a powerful step toward healing and reclaiming your sense of self. Thank you for your participation, and please remember that this handout, additional activities and resources will be sent to you after this workshop is over. Your journey to healing and empowerment continues beyond this workshop, and we are honored to be a part of it.

Additional Resources

This packet provides additional resources that may be useful for you.

Positive Psychology: 16 Compassion Focused Therapy Techniques & Exercises

RAINN: National Sexual Assault 24/7 Hotline: 800-656-4673

National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine: Guilt vs. Shame

John Hopkins Medicine: Somatic Self-Care

Self-Compassion- Dr. Kristen Neff

Gilbert Compassion Handout: <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/GILBERT-COMPASSION-HANDOUT.pdf>