

What is Trauma?

Trauma is the result of a situation or situations that are shocking and emotionally overwhelming, often involving actual or threatened death, serious injury, or threat to physical integrity; these situations are often called “traumatic events”¹.

Trauma is often associated with a state called “crisis”. Crisis is a response to a stressful or dangerous event and it is a point when emotions overwhelm rational thinking processes and typical coping skills.

When situations are overwhelming or severely distressing our bodies and our brains try to adapt to the perceived threat. This means that hormones such as adrenaline are released that cause us to focus on protecting ourselves in ways that are instinctual and basic. Fight and flight are two of the most basic components of this, but as humans have adapted and evolved with our environments they are certainly not the entire spectrum of reactions. Freezing is also a common instinctual reaction to trauma, especially the trauma of sexual violence -- when we do not perceive, on an instinctual level, that we can win a fight or flee effectively we will sometimes “freeze”, or comply, in order to survive the threat that is in front of us. This constant focus on survival can cause stress, which in turn leads to a trauma or crisis response.

Crisis Response

Trauma is a reaction that is personal and individualized—no two people react in exactly the same way to traumatic events or crisis. However, through decades of research and work with those individuals that are experiencing crisis, there are some reactions that do seem to occur with a large number of survivors. Some of these reactions are listed below. It is important to remember that these are **NOT** the only reactions that people have to trauma. These are simply what are most commonly seen and they are listed here in order to provide insight on how trauma and crisis affect cognition, behavior, emotional and physical well being, and spiritual health.

Survivors?

People that have experienced trauma are often referred to as “survivors” in order to acknowledge what they have accomplished—surviving a traumatic, distressing, dangerous ordeal.

The Real Story:

There are myths about sexual violence that are fairly common. These myths are often harmful because they can discourage victims from seeking help and also normalize sexual violence in the minds of perpetrators and the larger society.

- MYTH: Sexual violence is about sex and arousal.
- ✓ TRUTH: Sexual violence is typically about control
- MYTH: Trauma and sexual assault are only problems for women.
- ✓ TRUTH: While it is true that sexual violence can be committed by men against women, it is not limited to this construct only. Men are also victims and women can perpetrate sexual violence.

¹ Psychological First Aid Training Manual. SUNY New Paltz. May training 2016.

- Agitation
- Sleep or appetite disturbances
- Physical symptoms (ie: headache, dizziness, etc)
- Intrusive thoughts, “triggers”
- Indecisiveness
- Chronic worry and stress
- Sense of disbelief or unreality
- Impaired memory
- Emotional reactions such as shock, fear, anger, guilt, or numbness
- Hypervigilance and being easily startled
- Isolation
- Increased substance use/abuse
- Loss of world view or spiritual beliefs
- Inability to trust
- Crisis of faith

Sometimes these responses can be extreme or severe and cause long term issues including substance abuse, self-harm, and severe depression. How to effectively cope with some of these responses will be discussed in the later section on coping and healing.

Trauma and Sexual Violence: Overview

Sexual violence is a blanket term that is used to describe any assaultive form of sexual contact or harassment. This can range from rape, to forcible touching, to coerced sex acts, to harassment and everything in between. Sexual violence is traumatic in the same way that many crimes are, however it also differs due to its unique nature.

Sexual violence is often committed so that the perpetrator can exert control over his/her victim. Because of this, sexual violence is often characterized by a victim being overwhelmed or manipulated. This leads to a feeling of not having control over what is happening to them. This part of sexual violence based trauma can be very difficult to overcome and is often significant. When someone’s control is taken from them they often experience not being able to trust, heightened anxiety, and other intense emotional and physiological reactions. Restoring a sense of empowerment and safety are crucial in order for healing to begin.²

People that have experienced this specific form of trauma have been shown to exhibit often intense trauma symptoms. These symptoms have been equated by some researchers in the field with the symptoms shown by combat veterans returning from war.³ In much the same way as veterans in a combat situation, survivors of sexual violence are often exposed to an extreme and violent situation under circumstances that they have little to no control over where their bodily autonomy and survival are threatened.⁴

It is important to remember that all survivors react differently to the trauma that they are exposed to. Some survivors may appear to heal rather quickly, while some may take longer to accept, understand, and heal from the trauma that they have been exposed to. All survivor reactions are valid reactions. No one can dictate how or when someone else heals. It is possible to help healing by being a supportive and non-judgmental friend, spouse, or family member, but the needs of the survivor should be central to this process. As a survivor, it is important to communicate what you need from your support people in order to ensure that they are able to help you in the best way possible. More information about the interaction between survivors and support people will be discussed in the next section.

- A quick note on sexual violence and the criminal justice system: These crimes deal with inter-personal actions and reactions and are often hard to define concretely. A good rule of thumb is to respect the survivor’s wishes (whether that survivor is you or someone you are supporting through healing)—if the survivor feels they have been violated then they are a survivor in need of healing. This idea is not always directly supported by the criminal justice system. Often we see sexual violence go unreported or unpunished. This does not mean that a crime was not committed or

² Herman, Judith. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books: New York.

³ Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*.

⁴ Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*.

that your experience as a survivor is invalid in some way. The inability of the criminal justice system to prove a case against an accused perpetrator, or the inability or unwillingness of a victim to come forward, does not mean that trauma has not occurred.

Trauma and Sexual Violence: Childhood Abuse

The most commonly cited statistic currently, is that one in ten people have experienced some sort of sexual abuse before their eighteenth birthday.⁵ Many of these children never come forward and even fewer make reports to law enforcement. The reasons for this vary from survivor to survivor and sometimes this can cause feelings of guilt or shame into adulthood. Children typically do not fully understand how to respond to a dangerous or abusive situation and not reporting or telling an adult is never the child's fault. Non-abusive parents can often interpret this as a failing on their part, but this is not often entirely accurate either. The blame for both the abuse and a feeling of not being able to tell anyone about the abuse belongs to the abuser.

The trauma of childhood sexual abuse can have long lasting effects. Childhood sexual abuse is often referred to as keeping someone else's secret. This phrase captures how childhood sexual abuse can feel even into adulthood—as if you are carrying a heavy burden that isn't fully your own. Feelings can range from rage and guilt to depression and self-blame and everything in between. It is not unusual for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (ASCSA) to carry nightmares, intrusive thoughts, triggers, and anxiety into their adulthood when this trauma goes unhealed. Constructing and maintaining healthy boundaries can be exceedingly difficult for ASCSA due to the abuse serving as a backdrop to learning these skills in childhood.

A CDC-Kaiser Permanente study on Adverse Childhood Experiences (referred to as ACES) found startling correlations between childhood abuse and neglect (including sexual abuse) and affects in adulthood. Essentially, this study found that adverse childhood experiences can disrupt development, lead to high risk behaviors, and, potentially, to social problems, disability, and even early death. The more adverse experiences a child experiences, the higher their risk for problems later in life that we often thought were unrelated—such as smoking, poor work performance, sexually transmitted infections, poor academic achievement, etc.⁶

Regardless of how long ago the abuse occurred, there is never a bad time to start healing. Much of what will be provided in this program can be used for survivors of a variety of trauma.

Trauma and Sexual Violence: Male Survivors

Trauma affects everyone differently and healing is a very personal process. The resources, skills, and information given here are meant for any survivors of sexual violence. With that said, it is important that we take a moment to look at how male survivors specifically respond to sexual violence.

For many years sexual violence and assault were considered women's problems and our culture reinforced this belief. Today, we know that sexual violence can be more than just rape and can be perpetrated by any gender against any gender. However, since cultural norms die hard, male survivors are often less discussed leaving some feeling as though their experiences and feelings aren't valid. As mentioned previously, if you feel as though you have been violated then you are a survivor in need of healing. Similarly, many of us live in a culture where men are expected to be strong and tough; things like vulnerability and compassion—integral in the healing process for many—are often discouraged.

Feelings of guilt and self-blame are often experienced after sexual violence and for male survivors these can be even more pronounced. Men sometimes believe that they should have been strong enough to stop the assault, that they should have

⁵ Darkness to Light. D2L.org

⁶ CDC-Kaiser. 1997. Adverse Childhood Experiences Study. Retrieved from: cdc.gov.

reacted differently in some way. The same fight/flight/freeze response that was mentioned earlier is at play in any dangerous situation and is not a function of gender. For example, if your brain perceived that you were in danger with no clear way out, your brain would decide that freezing was your best option. It is also important to remember that arousal is a biological function that can happen whether you like what is happening, don't like what is happening, or feel indifferent about what is happening. Even if some aspect of the assault felt good at some point, this does not mean that an assault did not occur. What we feel physically and biologically does not always coincide with what we are feeling emotionally or psychologically. Unwanted sexual contact—of any kind, in any way, by anyone—is assault. Feelings of being violated, of shame, anger, or anything in between are natural.

Line 6, a non-profit organization that works specifically with male survivors of sexual violence, breaks down the key facts surrounding sexual violence and male survivors:

As a male survivor, you have the same right to reclaim yourself, your history, and your world as any other survivor. You have a personal right and personal responsibility to healing and recovery. See the resources section for more resources for male survivors.

Trauma and Sexual Violence: Abuse in Prison

In 2003 the United States Congress acknowledged the epidemic of sexual assault in American prisons and jails. We know today that around 10% of people that are incarcerated experience sexual violence while incarcerated.⁷ Part of this acknowledgement was the further acknowledgement that incarcerated survivors of sexual violence need to heal in the same ways as survivors on the outside.

Sexual violence while incarcerated can cause the same range of emotions as any other trauma. It is common to feel rage, helplessness, depression, and guilt. The system that you are currently part of has a responsibility to protect you while you are incarcerated. It is okay to feel as though you have been betrayed, to feel angry, and to feel as though you aren't safe. We will look more in the next section at the unique challenge to healing trauma while in prison. Right now, it is important to remember that you have a right to feel what you are feeling while focusing on maintaining your composure and following the rules of the facility that you are in. This can be especially difficult for survivors who's trauma occurred in the prison itself.

Often, feelings of guilt and self-blame are especially significant to incarcerated survivors. All people have weaknesses and have done things that they wish they wouldn't have done. No one can fully say that they have no regrets and have never wished they could change something they did or didn't do in the past. Making mistakes is part of the human condition. Regardless of these mistakes, no one deserves to have sexual violence committed against them. No matter where you live, what you've done and why, you do not deserve to experience violence at the hands of another person. An international human rights organization focused on ending sexual violence in detention facilities sums it up thusly: "Rape is not part of the penalty".⁸ If you have been assaulted while incarcerated I hope that the information in this program can help you to begin to heal, as well. Please see the resources section for information on how you can seek outside help if you would like to.

This packet will focus on the trauma that can occur as a result of experiencing sexual violence. It is possible to heal trauma and grow from the experience. The first step is learning about trauma and understanding it, the second is being able to "speak" your own trauma. With this in mind, this packet will include information on trauma as it relates to sexual assault, as well journaling prompts and activities for considering trauma in your own experience whether you've experienced trauma directly or need to know how to better understand and support a friend or

⁷ Just Detention International. *Hope Behind Bars: An Advocate's Guide to Helping Survivors of Sexual Abuse in Detention*. Retrieved from: justdetention.org

⁸ Just Detention International. *Hope for Healing*

loved one that has experienced trauma. Further, this packet will also include exercises and information to help you cope with trauma in everyday life including how to handle nightmares, triggers, and intrusive thoughts, as well as where to turn for help if necessary. How to Cope and How to Heal

Coping with and healing from trauma is a deeply personal endeavor that will look different for everyone. Survivors of sexual violence are some of the toughest people I have ever met, and no one knows what the survivors need better than the survivors. What follows here is information on how to cope and how to heal. Not everything will work for you and that's okay. Healing is often a process of trial and error—of trying something out and seeing if it works, continuing using that skill/exercise if it does, or tossing it aside if it doesn't. This process is dynamic and does not follow set rules or timelines. Use this information in whatever way works best for you and your healing, or to support someone else in their healing.

A word about healing while incarcerated

Working with trauma and healing from trauma is difficult even under ideal circumstances. Prison is not an ideal circumstance, as any of you reading this probably know far better than I do. This does not mean, however, that it cannot be done. If you are reading this in order to more effectively cope with a trauma that you have experienced I urge you to take your time when working with the first stage of recovery—safety. Understanding how you respond to your trauma is exceedingly important so that you can take advantage of some of the self-care exercises that are to follow. Whether the trauma occurred twenty minutes, two days, six months, or thirty years ago, I urge you to reach out to your local rape crisis service provider or mental health provider. In most states, as of 2015, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards have been applied (see section on PREA). This means that, among other things, you have access to outside rape crisis services that can help to ensure that you aren't working through this trauma alone.

Basic Deep Breathing:

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable, and breathe deeply.

While you inhale count to six.

Hold your breath for a count of two.

Exhale for a count of six.

Hold for a count of two.

Repeat.

Beginning to Heal: Establishing Safety

Reestablishing a feeling of safety is critically important to the healing process. Unfortunately, this can be one of the most difficult aspects of healing from trauma, especially for incarcerated survivors. For many, prison can feel like an inherently unsafe environment, especially if the trauma occurred while incarcerated. It is important to remember to start small and focus on things that you have control over—yourself.

**Note: What follows are suggestions for coping. Keep in mind that healing is personal and that you know what you need better than anyone else. Whatever coping skills you have found that work are valid as long as they are healthy for you and don't hurt anyone else or put you in further danger through violating facility rules and regulations. You can use what follows, modify the skills here as you need, or come up with something entirely different. All that is important is that it is healthy and works for you.*

Establishing Safety: Self and Body

Often the first thing that survivors notice is that their sleeping and eating patterns have been disrupted. Being mindful of how much or how little you are eating is a good way to keep yourself focused and strong. Take a day to see what your eating patterns look like right now: are you eating less than normal? If so, be sure that you are eating at least a little bit at every mealtime. Are you eating more than normal? Eat slowly and focus, make sure that you are stopping when you are full. Often, survivors seek to regain control by being very focused on eating which can often lead to an eating disorder. Remember that food helps our body to create and maintain hormones that regulate our emotions and cognition (thinking). In order to help ourselves to heal, we should focus on getting enough calories to get us through the day from foods that are healthy and have

nutritional value. This is not always easy in prison since you have little control over what you eat in most cases, but it is important to try and to do your best. Listen to your body and treat yourself with kindness.

-Getting to Sleep and Handling Nightmares

Sleep is also essential to healing. While healing from trauma falling asleep is often difficult due to what we call “hypervigilance”, meaning you feel unsafe or anxious and therefore can’t calm down enough to fall asleep. Also, nightmares are a very standard feature of trauma and healing that can greatly disrupt sleep patterns. Both of these things are an often temporary part of recovery and healing, so focusing on how to cope with these can be critical for getting you back on a healthy sleep cycle. I always suggest that my clients strive for four hours of good, uninterrupted sleep. Right now that may seem impossible, but it’s a good goal to have to keep you rested enough for the work of healing.

Being able to bring yourself to a state of calm before falling asleep can help you to get to sleep and can also reduce the risk of having a nightmare. If you feel like you can’t relax because you are afraid of someone coming into your cell/cube/dorm start brainstorming what you can do to feel safe. Can you put something in front of the door so that you’ll hear it move if someone comes in? Do you have someone nearby that wakes easily that is willing to alert you if someone is coming in your space? Consider the staff on your unit/block at night. Would they notice someone coming in? Is it possible and would it be helpful for you to try to sleep at a time when people are still awake and vigilant?

❖ Deep breathing for anxiety and hypervigilance:

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable, and breathe deeply. While you inhale count to six. Hold your breath for a count of two. Exhale for a count of six. Hold for a count of two. Repeat. Count your exhales and try to count ten; start over if you need to.

- ✓ By focusing on your breath in this deep and mindful way your brain is able to calm down and not be so scattered.

❖ Deep breathing and visualization for comfort/to reduce nightmares:

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable. Breathe deeply. Inhale for a count of six. Hold for two and picture something that brings you comfort—see this thing in your mind. Exhale for a count of six. Hold for two. Repeat.

- ✓ By drawing your attention to something that is comforting to you, you not only calm your brain down and give it a break from the hypervigilance, you also get it focused on something calming.

❖ Nightmares

If you are woken by a nightmare first bring yourself down from the anxious state that you are in. Start by breathing deeply and reminding yourself that you had a nightmare. Look around the room and start naming what you see in your head (“I’m in bed in my cell. There’s the window. There’s my desk. There’s the letter I’m writing.”) in order to call yourself and your focus back to the present. Journaling about what you experience in your dream or nightmare can also help you to clear your mind in order to fall back asleep (more information on journaling can be found at the end of this section).

Intrusive Thoughts: also referred to as “flashbacks”, an intrusive thought is an intense memory or emotional revisiting of the trauma.

Triggers: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and/or feelings that cause intrusive thoughts.

Establishing Safety: Triggers, Reactions, and Emotional Well Being

Hypervigilance is a state where your brain is stuck in the fight/flight/freeze mode, causing an intense reaction to any stimulus or provocation. This type of feeling is often experienced by survivors of sexual assault. Hormones that keep us alert and

focused flood the brain and an unexpected event can elicit an extreme reaction. This hypervigilance can also cause us to revisit our trauma in an intense way. We refer to these moments as intrusive thoughts, and to what causes them as triggers.

Intrusive thoughts and triggers are among the most common and unwelcome symptoms of unhealed trauma. Experiencing intrusive thoughts (often called “flashbacks”) and being triggered can often cause a replaying of the extreme emotional distress, fear, and chaos caused by the traumatic event. Often, survivors report feeling as if they are back in the traumatic moment, “seeing” the trauma, or are being threatened again, though this is not always the case. Re-experiencing this fear can be difficult to cope with and can lead a survivor to be generally fearful of going out in public, being around people, or doing anything that may be unpredictable.

A trigger is something that causes an intense reaction and remembrance of the trauma. Sometimes triggers are easy to identify, but this is not always the case. Often seeing, smelling, tasting, or hearing something that was present during the trauma can serve as a trigger. If you were assaulted by someone you often see, for example, hearing that person’s voice may trigger an intense memory and/or emotional reaction. But sometimes what triggered these memories and emotions is not always clear and trying to identify them can be difficult or even dangerous as you run the risk of being triggered again. Identifying triggers can be helpful because it helps the survivor to understand how he/she copes best. If a trigger can be identified it can be avoided or prepared for. For example, if you know that the smell of food in the mess hall is triggering, you can prepare yourself before you go to the mess hall since you know that trigger will be there. Whether or not you should try to identify a trigger is up to you and this decision should be made based on what you feel is best for your healing.

Tips for identifying triggers:

- ✓ When remembering a flashback be sure to use coping skills and self-care (such as deep breathing, visualization, etc) if your emotions start to get intense
- ✓ Journal about the intrusive thought. This helps to identify the trigger and helps to get your feelings out.
- ✓ Understand that triggers don’t always make sense—not every trigger is going to be rational.
- ✓ Remember to be aware of all senses—taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing. For example, smell is closely linked to memory and is often a trigger.
- ✓ Remember that triggers change and that it isn’t always necessary to identify triggers.
- ✓ Reach out to your local RCP for help and support

Coping with Intrusive Thoughts and Flashbacks

Whether you are able to figure out what triggered your intrusive thoughts or not, being able to cope with them is a good skill to practice. When considering this, start thinking about what works for you when you need to relax or stay calm. Have you been able to “talk” yourself down by having a conversation with yourself about what is happening or what you need to do? Does deep breathing work for you? Do you remember a time when you brought down your anxiety level? It’s okay if the answer is no. However, in many cases survivors have been using coping skills their entire lives without realizing it. You know yourself and what you need better than anyone else, even if it doesn’t feel like it right now; chances are you have skills that you don’t even realize. Since intrusive thoughts often cause the survivor to feel like he/she is reliving the trauma, coping with intrusive thoughts starts with being able to remind yourself that you are no longer experiencing the trauma. This starts with being able to pull yourself back to the present.

❖ Getting Back to the Present

When you realize that you have been triggered take a deep breath and try to focus on where you are. Look around you, what do you see? Tell yourself what you see. Focus on things that are different from where the trauma occurred. Take deep breaths. Some survivors find it helpful to repeat something to themselves such as “I’m safe”, some hum or sing quietly in order to focus on their own voice. Even repeating the date and time over and over again can remind you where you are and pull you back to the present.

If you can, sit on the floor or ground with your back to a wall and palms flat on the ground. Breathe deeply and focus on your breath. Feel the floor/ground and focus on how it feels under your hands and feet.

❖ Deep breathing for comfort

Calming down after a flashback is often similar to calming down after a nightmare and many of the same skills can be used for both. Revisit the deep breathing exercises mentioned throughout this packet.

❖ Coping with the feelings

After experiencing the intense feelings that are a hallmark of intrusive thoughts it is important to self-care. Self-care looks different for everyone because everyone handles emotions differently. The following are common self-care techniques:

Journaling

Exercise
(running,
walking,
yoga, etc)

Meditating

Drawing

“You know yourself better than anyone else...chances are you have skills that you don’t even realize.”

Singing

Practicing religious observances

Writing a letter home

Looking at
pictures

Reading

Talking to support
people such as counselors, people
inside, clergy, or people on the
outside

Establishing Safety: Environment and Surroundings

This can be perhaps the most challenging aspect of healing to accomplish in prison. While it goes without saying that prison is inherently dangerous, it is important to establish a general feeling of safety appropriate to your surroundings. While making this environment feel safe may be difficult it is not impossible.

All of the hormones and brain chemistry that we mentioned before can make it very difficult to feel safe, regardless of the presence of an actual threat. In cases like this you can use self-care to reestablish your feeling of safety, and also rely on your support system on the inside if you have one. Deep breathing and mindfulness can help you to remember that you are no longer in a place where your attacker has access to you. This also helps to calm you down and relax your mind so that your hormone levels can start to return to normal. Having people on the inside that you can check in with periodically or who understand that you are struggling in some way can also help you to feel safe. Assess your needs and what you are comfortable with—for some people relying on people inside may not be appropriate for your healing, or you may not feel comfortable asking for help, both of these are valid concerns and should be taken into account when looking for ways to cope. However, relying on others for help does not always mean that those people have to know what you are struggling with.

Sitting with someone in the yard, for example, may help you to feel less alone and vulnerable when outside even if that person has no idea that you have a trauma history.

Establishing a safe environment can feel extremely difficult if you are incarcerated in a facility where your attacker is present. One suggestion that I always make to my clients is to use the buddy system as much as possible if the perpetrator is in the facility with you. This does not mean that you have to tell other people what you have been through, but in many cases you are less likely to be harassed if there are other people around. Consider walking to the mess hall, to meds, or to the yard with someone or a group of people, or moving only on major movements if possible. Also, consider doing things at times when you are less likely to encounter someone that makes you feel unsafe (showering very early in the morning or at night, or when you know that that person will not be present, for example). You may not be able to change their schedule, but it is possible to change yours in order to minimize contact. Where do you most commonly see this person? Can you avoid that place? Can you ensure that you only see them when there are witnesses around?

In some cases this may be a good time to request a housing transfer, or even a facility transfer. It is not always easy to accomplish this, but it may be worth considering. What a transfer request looks like depends on your state and the facility that you are in and it is important to consider what you would need to do to request any of these accommodations. In some areas you need to have a compelling reason to transfer housing units and telling the facility about your assault may launch an investigation that you aren't ready for or that you don't feel is best for you. In those cases carefully consider your options, or even look at what reasons other than the assault that you may have to warrant a housing transfer (such as a programming change). Speak to other incarcerated folks or staff that you are comfortable with about what your options are, or utilize your law library if possible.

Safety Plan: a realistic and personal plan to avoid and respond to dangerous situations in a way that is based on the needs of the survivor.

Environment and Surroundings: Making a Safety Plan

A safety plan is a realistic, individualized plan for avoiding dangerous situations or coping with dangerous situations in a way that is healthy and minimizes risk. Safety plans begin with general coping skills in order to stay calm and rational during a dangerous situation. Any of the breathing exercises mentioned in this packet, or any of those that may have worked for you in the past are a great place to start. Practice these and utilize them often so that you are more likely to be able to remember them when you need to focus and stay calm. Remember, when you are in crisis your brain does not function in the same way that it would when you are calm so it is a good idea to write out a safety plan like the one found at the end of this packet and read it over frequently.

The second step in safety planning is to focus on how you can avoid danger. Avoidance of potentially dangerous people or situations can be especially difficult in prison or jail, but it is the most effective way to keep yourself safe. Sometimes avoiding dangerous people or situations means not going where you'd like, which can feel as though you are being punished for something someone else did. Assault is never your fault but often the only way to avoid dangerous people and situations is to limit your own movement and exposure to them. In many cases if you have chosen to report the assault you may be removed from certain programs or housing units in order to minimize your contact with your attacker.

If this person cannot be avoided or if you have chosen not to report, try to ensure that you are not in contact with them when you are alone. Limiting exposure to this person only while in large groups is ideal (on a major movement, for example), but even having just one other trusted person there can help you to feel safe and keep this person from harassing or assaulting you. Consider coming up with a code word that you can use with people you trust in order to bring awareness to the potential danger. Also, consider what tends to attract this person's attention. If the person in question is a staff member that intimidates you by pulling you aside for a pat-frisk at every opportunity, for example, can you avoid movement when that

person is on shift? If you have someone inside that you trust, working out a way to signal to you when there's a dangerous person making his/her way to where you are can be a good way to give yourself an opportunity to avoid a confrontation.

Next, think about how to react if you find yourself confronted with someone that is dangerous. It is important to take a good look at your surroundings. You may have a good idea of where you are most likely to see this person; if not, you know where you spend most of your time in the facility and can assess that area for safety. Picture that place in your mind, or even draw a picture of it. Try to picture the exits, cameras, where other people are likely to be, how you could make enough noise to alert someone that there was something happening. While this isn't always the case in prison, in many of these situations other people are your best escape. Being able to alert others that you are in danger may be crucial to your survival.

Finally, prepare a plan for what to do after a confrontation, even if the confrontation is not violent. Seeing someone that has assaulted you can be traumatic, even if the person doesn't confront you in any way. Start with some breathing exercises or mindfulness techniques that calm you down. Next, prepare coping skills—journaling, calling someone supportive, writing a letter, talking to a supportive person on the inside, drawing, calling a hotline if you have access to one—so that you can manage the heavy and complicated emotions that this confrontation may bring. If you plan to report the incident, document what happened when and where, as well as any witnesses that may have been nearby. If the confrontation was violent, determine how to best receive medical care. Think about who you know that may be able to help. Know how to request a medical call out and who you would notify if you needed medical care immediately. Also, keep in mind who in the facility is required to report an incident to executive staff or an investigative body and consider how that would affect who you go to for help.

Establishing Safety: Support Systems

Support systems refer to those people and professionals that provide us with support through the healing process. Sexual violence can be very alienating—it can make us feel like we cannot trust the outside world and the people in it. Through finding a support system we are reminded that the world is not our trauma and our trauma is not the world.

A support system can be made up of family, friends, professionals, and anyone else that you are comfortable reaching out to. Your support system may be made up of people on the inside, or people on the outside, or both. Some people in this support system may not fully know that they are part of your support system and that's okay. Support systems can be as big or as small as is comfortable for you.

When starting to think about your support system, think about those people that you have been able to rely on the most in your life. It's okay if this is a short list, or if there is no one at all. If you can think of people that you have been able to be open with, consider whether or not you feel comfortable turning to them for support. There is no reason to tell someone about your trauma if you do not feel comfortable doing so, however, being able to open up to someone that you trust and that can provide emotional support for you can be empowering and validating.

You determine who is in your support system and what kind of support you need. If you are struggling and need support from someone close to you, let them know. Reach out in whatever way you feel comfortable. It can be difficult to find people that you trust on the inside—telling your story may make you feel vulnerable. Not everyone needs to know the whole story. If all you need is to talk to someone to take your mind off of the memories you are experiencing, for example, this support can be found without telling anyone about the trauma if you don't feel comfortable doing so. Having someone to sit on the yard and talk about life with can be a huge help when you are coping with trauma, even if that person has no idea that you are struggling.

Take some time to think about what kind of support you need while you are coping and healing. Compile a list of people that you feel comfortable talking to about your trauma. Then start thinking about people that you can turn to without talking

about the trauma specifically-- people that can provide you with support just by being there to have a conversation with, play a game with, or listen to. Remember that in most states you have access to Rape Crisis Counselors as part of the 2003 Prison Rape Elimination Act. Counselors can help you to cope with trauma through providing information and resources, listening when you need to talk, and helping you to process the feelings that come with healing from trauma.

If you aren't ready to talk to someone, that's okay. Consider journaling to get your feelings out, or other forms of self-care. In the section on self-care we'll discuss journaling and how to help yourself handle feelings when you aren't able to talk to anyone.

Self-Care

Self-care is an often overlooked part of life. Self-care is how we keep ourselves going on bad days, and continuing moving forward even through difficult times. Even though you may not realize it, self-care is what has gotten you through your bid, whether you've been down three days or thirty years. Self-care looks different for everyone, but there are some common traits.

Essentially, self-care focuses on bringing some form of calm and relaxation to your mind and spirit. Some people do this through meditation, prayer, or mindfulness practices. Focusing on what is good or constant can be a vital form of self-care. For example, writing letters home not only communicates with the people we care about, but also helps our minds to focus on the fact that the world is still out there even if it seems so far away. Some self-care is physical, like running, yoga, or other

forms of exercise. Keeping your body healthy can help to keep your mind motivated and has

The world is not our trauma, and our trauma is not the world.

been shown to release hormones that help us to stay calm and feel less depressed, anxious, or scared. Self-care can also be creative—such as writing, singing, or drawing. This self-care helps to focus our minds on creating and gives us a break from the trauma, even if it's only for a few minutes.

Self-Care: Basics

We went over some basic self-care in the previous section on triggers. Focused breathing can help to focus our mind on what is in front of us, keep us from panicking, and help to calm us down. The basic technique is a deep breath in for six seconds, then hold for two seconds, then breathe out for six seconds, and repeat. This basic breathing technique can be used in a variety of ways and settings. To help manage triggers this can be used when you know you are going to be confronted with something that is triggering. For example, if you know you are going to be pat down, you can start deep breathing while you are waiting in line in order to keep you calm and bring down your anxiety level. When you feel yourself getting anxious, upset, or overwhelmed this kind of focused and mindful breathing can help you to calm yourself and bring yourself back to the present.

❖ Mindful Observation

While breathing deeply, it may help to focus on something in your immediate field of vision. This is called "mindful observation" and it can help to quiet your mind and bring you back to the present. Mindful observation is just finding something to look at—a picture, a wall, an object, a tree—whatever is around you at the time. While looking at the object start to mentally go through every

Basic Deep Breathing:

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable, and breathe deeply.

While you inhale count to six.

Hold your breath for a count of two.

Exhale for a count of six.

Hold for a count of two.

Repeat.

aspect of the object—does it look smooth? Is it big or small? How big does it appear to be? What color is it? Ask yourself these questions and talk yourself through them. By focusing your attention on this one object you can focus your mind and bring yourself back to the present when your thoughts and feelings get to be overwhelming. This can be especially helpful when you are experiencing intrusive thoughts or nightmares. Similarly, if you have an object that you typically have access to (wedding ring, picture, ID card, etc) you can use this same technique while holding that small object. Close your eyes if you can, breathe deeply, and hold that object. Feel every aspect of it and take yourself through everything about it—where did you get it and why? What does it remind you of? How long have you had it? This simple exercise can help to pull your mind away from the intrusive thoughts and give it space to reconnect with the present in a way that is healthy.

❖ Mindful Visualization

Similar to mindful observation is mindful visualization. Visualization essentially refers to constructing an image with your mind. You can do this by closing your eyes or keeping them open. Breathe deeply and start to visualize something that brings you peace and comfort. This could be support people or family, a place that you used to go often that reminds you of happiness, something beautiful like a flower or animal, or anything else that you think could comfort you. Inhale for a count of six and when you pause picture this comforting thing. Try to picture every aspect of it as you exhale slowly. Pause, and then repeat. Call this image to mind whenever you are starting to feel stressed, overwhelmed, or anxious. Breathe in for a six count, pause and picture your comforting image, then breathe out, pause and repeat.

❖ Constructing a Safe Space

Another concept that can be helpful when trying to heal from trauma is the concept of a safe space. For my incarcerated clients this is often a place that exists inside of the survivor. Begin as if you would during a typical visualization exercise—breathe deeply, close your eyes if that works for you, and start to relax yourself. Then picture yourself on a path, or floating through the air. Continue floating/on the path until you come to a space entirely of your own creation. This can look like anything—a meadow, beach, house, room, whatever you want. Start to construct your safe space to be a place that you can visit when you need to feel calm and safe. Obviously, this safe space is not physical, so it is used for when you feel unsafe, not as a substitute for actual, physical safety. Your safe space can change-- you can add to it or alter it whenever and however you want to. This can be a great exercise to do while falling asleep, or when you know you will have to face a situation that makes you very anxious.

Self-Care: Meditation and Yoga

❖ Meditation

Meditation is an ancient art that focuses on quieting the mind and bringing about a sense of peacefulness. The practice of meditation began in India, China, and Japan around 5, 000 years ago and eventually became part of the spiritual practice of people of the Buddhist faith. However, many people practicing a wide range of spiritual practices (or none at all) have found peace and relaxation in meditation. The effects of daily meditation have been shown to have positive effects on mood, physical well-being, and emotional well-being, as well as in other aspects of daily life. There are many resources on meditation available to people that are incarcerated. If the facility that you are in has a library, consider seeing if there's books on meditation available, or if there's a meditation program available.

I am not an expert on meditation, or a teacher of this art, however, I do find the following meditation and visualization to be useful:

Sit or stand comfortably with feet firmly on the floor. Notice your soles and the sensations you feel. Notice how your feet feel with the connection they have made. Rest your arms gently by your side. Scan your body slowly for areas of tension- areas of

unrest or stress. Maybe your head or neck is tight. Maybe you notice your shoulders are held high. Let go of any knots in your stomach or your heart. Relax your arms, your hands. Relax your gluts and legs. Wiggle your fingers, wiggle your toes. Just relax. Now, notice your breathing. Just take a moment to become aware. Breath in deep, and breath out, pushing the air through your nostrils. When meditating if you get distracted just notice your thoughts then let them go. Accept your distraction then draw your attention back.

Inhale deeply and imagine roots, as if your body is a tree. Let your legs and the soles of your feet descend as if they are the roots of a tree. Your feet extend into the ground, deep into the core of the earth. These roots connect you to the energy and strength of the earth. Feel your energy move from the soles of your feet up through your head and into the sky. With each in breath, notice the cleansing energy come into your being. With each outbreath, release all of the tensions in your body and negative thoughts in your mind. With your next in breath, feel the power of the earth move through the roots of your feet up through your stomach and heart, to the top of your head. With your outbreath, gently release stress and anxiety; let it go into the air, and into the sky. From the roots deep in the center of the earth, draw energy up to the crown of your head. As you breath out, let your stress and emotions escape into the atmosphere. Continue to breathe deeply. Pull the energy from the center of the earth, feel the energy cleanse your body. Feel your outbreath releasing the tensions and worrisome thoughts you carry. You are encouraged to continue this breathing until you are relaxed, reenergized, and free from stress and tension.

Be sure to slowly come back to the present when you feel you are done.

Meditating before bed can be particularly helpful if you are experiencing nightmares or an inability to sleep. However, meditation can be tough in prison because it can be difficult to find a place or time that is quiet, which is often helpful for people just beginning. Further, it can be difficult to close your eyes and let your mind take over. It can feel as though you are shutting out the outside world and allowing your focus to turn inward, which can cause anxiety particularly if you already feel unsafe. If you aren't able to meditate comfortably, that's okay.

❖ Yoga

Another option for mindfulness practice is yoga. Yoga is another ancient art that started in India around 5000 years ago. Yoga is a physical exercise that focuses on combining the physical body with the mind, psyche, and spirituality in order to bring inner-peace and physical well-being. Again, if yoga is something that you would like to try, consider looking through the prison library, or contacting a program such as Prisoner Express or the Prison Ashram/Human Kindness Foundation.

The following are some basic poses and tips from my friend and yoga instructor EKB. Remember to only do what you feel comfortable doing and listen to yourself—don't do anything that could cause injury.

To Focus on the Present, Bring Comfort, and Combat Depression:

-Child's Pose

Kneel on the floor with big toes together and sitting on your heels. Separate knees to about hip width.

Become mindful. Breathe deeply and focus on a specific intention (combating depression, lessening anxiety, comfort, etc). Focus on this intention and keep it in your mind throughout this session.

Exhale and lay your torso down between your thighs. Allow your back to broaden and lengthen.

Lay your hand on the floor along your torso, palms up, and allow shoulders to fall towards the floor.

Stay in this position focused on your intention as long as you need.

-Reclined Butterfly

Lay down flat on your back with your toes together and knees bent and out and close to the floor.

Place one hand on your heart, and one on low belly.

Breathe deeply and allow your mind to go quiet. Focus on your intention and allow yourself to relax.

Stay in this position as long as you need.

Basic Yoga Tips (Lozoff, 1985):

-Pay attention to every moment. Allow your mind to focus on what you're doing and hold your concentration.

-Stretch, don't strain. Focus on lengthening your spine, but only as far as your body is able to go. Don't force a pose.

-Coordinate breathing with the movements. Breathe in when the body is expanding or reaching upwards, breathe out whenever it folds or closes.

To Center, Help Sleep, and Release Tension

-Supported Bridge

Lay flat on your back with knees up and shoulder width apart.

Place a pillow, block, or book under your lower back.

Breathe deeply and focus your mind.

-Spinal Twists

Sit on floor with legs out and back straight.

Breathe deeply and pull one knee toward

Exhale and twist your body so that your up.

Repeat on other side as necessary.



chest.

opposite arm is resting against the back of the leg that is

For finding strength and reducing stress:

-Pigeon pose⁹

Begin on hands and knees.

Bring right knee between hands and extend left foot back and rest on floor.

Press fingertips into floor and lift chest upward.

Repeat on other side.

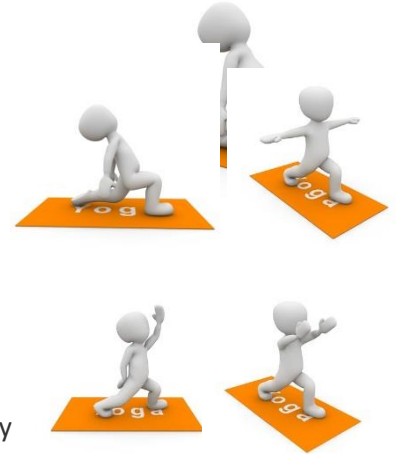
-Camel Pose¹⁰

Kneel on the floor with your knees hip width and thighs straight. Press your shins and the tops of your feet firmly into the floor.

Rest your hands on the top of your pelvis with your fingers point to the floor

Lean back and try to bring your hands off of your pelvis to rest on your feet (see picture).

Only bend as far as you can without hurting yourself.



-Warrior Poses¹¹

Warrior poses are great ways to find strength and reduce stress. These poses convey courage, survival, and stability. There are a variety of warrior poses that can be worked into a series of their own, or into a Sun Salute (see handout).

Yoga can be difficult in prison because it is very visible. Consider whether or not you are comfortable with practicing something so visible and how you will handle potential questions from other inmates and staff.

Self-Care: Journaling

Journaling is one of the self-care practices that I suggest most often to my clients, and it has been mentioned a few times in this packet already. Journals can be made out of paper that you have available to you, sent in by support people, or bought at commissary and they can be exceptionally helpful. A journal is a good place to tell your story, and/or write down your thoughts or feelings so that they do not build up and overwhelm you. The feelings that come with experiencing trauma can feel very heavy and very big. Sometimes, when these build up, it can feel like you'll explode if you don't find a way to get these thoughts and feelings out of your system. This can cause you to experience stress, be irritable, or just feel badly in general. Without people that you are comfortable discussing these feelings with this can result in unhealthy coping mechanisms—such as substance abuse, outbursts of anger or frustration, or opening up about your story in a way that you aren't ready for. A journal can help to counter this and give you a safe space to express yourself.

⁹ Image courtesy of yogawithamey.com

¹⁰ Image courtesy of 3dman_eu

¹¹ Image courtesy of 3dman_eu

Basic journaling starts with writing whatever you are comfortable with. Some people feel comfort after writing out their story and/or experience. Others just like to start by writing out how they are feeling. Suggestions on how to journal are called “prompts” and they can vary widely. Consider starting with the following journal prompts:

“Today I have been thinking a lot about _____. When I think about this I feel _____ because_____.”

“One thing that brings me comfort is_____”

“Who am I?”

“What do I want people to see when they look at me?”

“What do I want for myself?”

“How has this trauma experience changed my life?”

“What parts of myself do I conceal? Why?”

“What is my purpose for being here?”

Journaling can also help you to explore self-care techniques that work for you. In your journal you can write out things that bring you comfort and peace and how you can use these things to bring you peace when you need it. You can also explore what makes you feel overwhelmed, what brings back memories of the trauma(s), and how you feel after you experience intrusive thoughts.

It is always important to give your mind and spirit a break from thinking about the trauma that you have experienced. While working to heal is important, it is also important to take time off to “just be”, or to do something unrelated to this work since it can bring back so many memories and heavy feelings. Journaling can help with this as well since they can be a good place for drawing, writing poetry, stories, and letters to family, and other forms of creativity that can help to occupy your mind.

Beginning to heal from trauma and cope with the memories and feelings that trauma brings involves the two main concepts we discussed here: establishing safety and self-care. These can often feel like big undertakings and it’s important to find help along the way. Never hesitate to reach out to your local rape crisis service, Just Detention International, or any other service you’re comfortable with for additional assistance. Always focus on managing feelings in a way that is healthy and effective for you.

Resources

This section is intended to give you access to more information and support while you are healing. Not every state has the same standards for supporting survivors of sexual violence, so remember to look for things specific to your state or even your facility. It can often feel like you can’t trust anyone but yourself, but working to find support through the healing process can be very helpful.

Resources: PREA

The Prison Rape Elimination Act (referred to as PREA) was passed in 2003 and signed into law by then President George W. Bush. PREA intended to reduce and, eventually, eliminate sexual abuse and assault in US detention facilities, including state,

local, juvenile, federal, and immigration detention centers. This ambitious goal started with research led by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). In 2012, the BJS estimated that around 200,000 inmates had experienced sexual assault while incarcerated (JDI). That's nearly ten percent of our prison population. Based on similar research conducted after the law was passed in 2003, the federal government created the PREA Standards. These standards ensure that correctional and detention facilities have certain standards that they must maintain, including a zero tolerance policy for sexual assault, separation of adult and juvenile offenders, and specific accommodations for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender inmates. Further, the standards allow for the following in regards to survivors of sexual assault:

Access to outside medical, including evidence collection (typically called a Forensic Rape Exam or "FRE") by a trained nurse/doctor (referred to usually as a SAFE or SANE nurse/doctor).

Access to HIV PEP, medicine to treat sexually transmitted infections, and emergency contraception

Access to protective custody

Access to confidential rape crisis services

Access to reporting options including in-facility options, and third party reporting options

If you feel ready to contact a rape crisis service for help healing from sexual assault you can contact your local rape crisis center, your statewide sexual assault resource center (such as the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault) or JDI at:

Just Detention International
3325 Wilshire Blvd
Suite 340
Los Angeles, CA 90010

Resources: New York State Prisons

For anyone struggling to cope with sexual violence of any kind in Attica, Albion, Orleans, Wyoming, Livingston, or Groveland Correctional Facilities rape crisis services are available through:

RESTORE Sexual Assault Services
PO Box 349
Albion NY 14411

For all other New York State Facilities please contact:

New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NYSCASA)
Attn: PREA Outreach
28 Essex Street
Albany NY 12206

A Word on Reporting

The decision to report a sexual assault is a deeply personal decision for any survivor. When that assault took place within a correctional facility this decision becomes even more difficult in some cases. As someone that works to reform criminal justice systems and correctional facilities, and to eliminate rape and sexual assault, I would love to see every rapist prosecuted and

brought to justice. But, unfortunately, the real world doesn't always make that a possibility. As with any other part of this packet it is important that you remember that you are the expert on your situation. No one knows and understands your unique circumstances better than you do.

Things to consider when thinking about reporting start first with safety. Consider if reporting will keep you safe or put you at a higher risk for violence or targeted harassment. Find out what protections are offered to reporting individuals and what circumstances warrant that protection. For example, in New York State someone that reports sexual assault will be separated from the person they accuse while the investigation is going on and afterward if the allegation is proven.

Next, consider the investigative process. As with any allegation of sexual assault, the investigative process can go on for a long time, require the survivor to speak with investigators multiple times and sometimes answer uncomfortable questions. The investigative staff will ask about the assault, any prior relationship that you had with the perpetrator, and the circumstances of what happened. They may examine you, take evidence such as sheets or clothes, and question other people that may have been witnesses including facility staff and other inmates. This can feel invasive and it is okay to reach out for support during this process should you choose to report. In many states you have the right to a victim advocate through a rape crisis service during this process. All of this can feel as though you are being punished for being the victim of a crime, and the reason that the investigators need to be so thorough is because they cannot discipline a perpetrator without evidence that the crime was committed. Unfortunately, in the United States legal system it is not enough that the crime happened, there must be proof that it happened. Investigators will look for this proof, if they find it the claim is considered substantiated (true), if they don't it is considered unsubstantiated (not proven).

The final but possibly most important consideration is retaliation. Retaliation refers to actions on the part of others in response to your report. Take time to prepare yourself for the possibility that the person you report against may have other people that will have access to you. Friends, coworkers, and others may form an opinion about the report that you make and treat you differently due to that. This can mean having to deal with remarks about your report, verbal harassment, and even physical assault. If any of these people have a job that gives them access to services within the facility those services might be slow getting to you or you could lose them entirely. For example, one client noticed that his packages were being delayed coming through the package room after he reported. Though we could never prove it, it was suspected that the person sorting and delivering mail was a friend of the person he made the report against.

Considering all of these factors it can be hard to believe that anyone would ever report. But people do and they do so for a variety of reasons. In many cases people report because it allows the facility and system to provide them with some protections. Without a report many facilities cannot offer things such as housing transfers, program transfers, or protective custody. For some, they want to see the person that hurt them brought to justice. Others feel like reporting is the right thing to do, or that it is part of regaining the control that was taken from them during the assault. Whatever the reasons, reporting can help the survivor to feel like they are taking back control, that they are refusing to be silent in the face of someone that told them to shut up, and that they are standing up for themselves and others who are still unable to do so. As long as the survivor is informed and feels comfortable with their decision, they should do what they feel is best for them and their healing.

If you choose to report, it is important to do so as soon after the incident as possible. Record the name of the perpetrator and the names of any witnesses that may have been present. Keep anything that could have evidence of the other person on it—bed sheets, clothes, etc—and be prepared to give these things to the investigators. Record the date and time of the incident as well as the dates and times of any retaliation that occurs. The most important thing to remember when reporting is to be honest. Investigators should interview you after you make a report of sexual assault and answering their questions honestly and openly helps them to investigate properly. For example, if you don't know the answer to a question tell them that you don't know. Don't give answers that you have to guess at or that you don't know for sure. Remember to stay calm during the interviews and breathe deeply—being interviewed as part of an investigation can be intimidating, use your self-care.

**Note: Due to the PREA requirement that facilities take a zero tolerance stance on sexual assault, in most cases all facility staff and volunteers are required to report any sexual assault that is brought to their attention or face disciplinary sanctions. In some states this even applies to clergy. The PREA guidelines for your state and facility should be available to you via the law library, executive staff, JDI or your local rape crisis service provider.*

Resources and Further Reading

For further reading and support I highly suggest the following:

Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman.

A foundational piece of literature on the subject of trauma and sexual violence. Herman discusses trauma, healing, and how to reconnect.

We're All Doing Time by Bo Lozoff

Written by the founder of the Prison Ashram Project (see below), and focused on healing and finding strength while incarcerated through meditation and yoga. As of this writing, this book is available for free to people that are incarcerated through the Prison Ashram Project/Human Kindness Foundation in both English and Spanish.

Just Detention International's Survivor Packet

A packet of information for incarcerated survivors. Can be reached through confidential legal mail:

Cynthia Totten Esq
CA Attorney Reg. #199266
3325 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 340
Los Angeles CA 90010

Prisoner Express

Headquartered out of Ithaca NY Prisoner Express provides a variety of programs, newsletters, and publications of art and poetry created by incarcerated individuals. Prisoner Express also runs a Books Thru Bars program. For information contact:

Prisoner Express
130 Anabel Taylor Hall
Ithaca NY 14853

Black and Pink

Support for incarcerated LGBTQ people and allies. Black and Pink is committed to providing support to members through newsletters, pen pal programs, and other programs. For further information contact:

Black and Pink National Office
614 Columbia Road
Dorchester MA 02125

*Please note: mail to and from B&P is highly visible!

The Prison Ashram Project/Human Kindness Foundation

This project focuses on a way of life guided by the principles of simplicity, dedication, and spiritual practice. The Prison Ashram Project was founded by Bo Lozoff to spread the practice of meditation and spiritual enlightenment to incarcerated individuals. This project sends books to incarcerated individuals all over the world that focus on spiritual

practice and meditation and also corresponds with incarcerated individuals regarding rehabilitation and spiritual progress. Contact:

The Human Kindness Foundation
PO Box 61619
Durham NC 27715

Supplement A Information for Support People

Support Systems: Being There for a Loved One

Being part of someone's support system can be difficult. Often, we don't know what to say, or don't fully understand what our loved one is going through. This section will explore how to be an effective support for someone that is healing and living with trauma.

An important part of being an effective support person is listening to the survivor and being there to help them cope through validating their experience and empowering them. Listening can often be one of the most effective ways to help a survivor. Some survivors feel like they need to tell their story to someone who will simply listen and not judge them. It's important for support people to put judgements and concern aside and simply listen. It is absolutely okay to worry about your loved one, but voicing that concern shouldn't get in the way of really listening to and hearing the survivor. The most important thing that you can do

Validation: helping a survivor to understand that it is okay to feel what they are feeling.

Empowerment: helping a survivor to realize their own strength and take control over their story and their healing.

as a support person is believe the survivor. Because of how the brain reacts to trauma, memories of trauma sometimes don't make sense, or seem to be jumbled or missing parts. It's important to let the survivor tell you his/her story in his/her way without looking for clarification. Understand that you may never fully understand what happened and that's okay. The important thing is that you are there to listen.

Many survivors experience self-blame at some point in the healing process and this can be especially difficult for survivors of sexual violence while incarcerated. These survivors sometimes feel that if they had not gone to prison, not committed their crimes, or simply been "smarter" or not so trusting then they wouldn't have experienced the violence that they experienced. Survivors of sexual violence never deserve to be assaulted. As a support person it is important that you remind them that while they may have made mistakes in their past, none of those mistakes make them deserving of this trauma. When someone is incarcerated they are serving time for a crime that they have been convicted of; I can assure you that at no time did a judge sentence your loved one to be sexually victimized. Help your loved one to find balance between identifying ways to improve themselves in the future while serving their time, and healing from this trauma in a way that does not involve further self-punishment.

Being There For a Loved One: Reacting to a Disclosure

When someone discloses that they have been sexually victimized the person hearing this information can experience a lot of emotions very similar to what the survivor is experiencing. Anger, frustration, sadness, fear are all very common reactions to hearing that a loved one has been victimized. Be sure to remember that support people need to practice self-care also. Remember that the most important and helpful thing that you can do is listen and not judge. Here are some tips for handling a disclosure of sexual violence:

- How can I help you to feel safer?

Make sure that survivor is currently safe

- Ask: Was this recent? Do you feel safe?
- How to Help: Formulate a safety plan. Validate the survivor's feelings and empower them to begin the healing process.

Note: Not all survivors feel that reporting the incident is in their best interest. For support people this can be a very difficult concept to understand, but it is important that we support survivors in the ways that they need us to be there—this helps to empower them and helps them to recover some of the trust they lost in when they were victimized!

What to Say:

- I am sorry this happened to you
- I believe you
- You did nothing to deserve this
- This wasn't your fault
- I'm glad you told me
- I'm here to support you and help you heal

What to Ask:

- What can I do to help?
- What do you need me to do to support you right now?

Non-Helpful Responses:

- Prying for information
- "How could you let this happen?"
- Reacting in a highly emotional way
 - *Note: I understand that this is easier said than done however we want the survivor to focus on his/her emotional state, not also worry about how to help their support system cope with their assault.*
- Gossiping about what happened/not respecting the survivors privacy
- "Get over it"

Dear Friends, I hope this packet sheds some light on the experience of trauma. While the focus has been on trauma caused by sexual victimization, there are many ways to experience trauma. My hope is that you can read through this packet and learn some tips for coping with the trauma you have experienced in this life, and that you can assist those you know in their recovery from their traumatic past.

Many of us experience difficult episodes in our lifetime, and while they cannot always be avoided, better understanding of what happened and who we are at our core can help us process the event and move on to a richer fulfilling life. I wish the best for all of you, and I give thanks to Jessica for creating this packet. If you have any questions send them to us at PE and I will forward them to Jessica.

May your lives be bright and blessed-Gary

Trauma

Understanding, Coping, and



Healing



Survivor Psalm

I have been victimized
I was in a fight that was not a fair fight
I did not ask for the fight
I lost
There is no shame in losing such fights
I have reached the stage of survivor and am no
longer a slave of victim status
I look back with sadness rather than hate
I look forward with hope rather than despair
I may never forget, but I need not constantly
remember
I was a victim
I am a survivor