The Trauma Informed Approach: 
*Understanding Trauma and Stabilizing Vulnerable Victims*

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Words of Wisdom

Nothing is simple in human trafficking
- Hilary Axam

Trauma is **real** and it **significantly** effects victim’s recall
Learning Objectives

1. Understanding the Neurobiology of Trauma

2. Understanding Trauma Symptoms and Being Trauma Informed

3. Using Stabilization Strategies
My approach...

1. Present this from a **PRACTICIONER VIEW** of dealing with victims that have suffered prolonged trauma.

2. Accept that this **victim is likely different** from typical victims.

3. Emphasize **partnerships with advocates and social workers**...**they get this**.
Understanding Neurobiology of Trauma
What is Neurobiology?

The study of cells of the nervous system and the organization of these cells into functional circuits that process information and mediate behavior.

-ScienceDaily, 2017
Neurobiology helps to explain human behavior in terms of the activity of the brain

- The brain usually records the vast majority of the event, including, the who, what, where, why, when, and how

But this ignores the role of bottom up attention of the more primitive portion of the brain during a highly stressful or traumatic event

Hint: DO NOT overlook the manner in which trauma shapes the memory.
Critical Areas of the Brain

- thalamus
- hippocampus
- frontal lobe
- occipital lobe
- amygdala
Amygdala

According to science:
Region of the brain helps us process emotions and is also linked to fear responses

*Think: Survival, instincts, and motivations*

According to Patrick:

**ALARM....BRAIN SENSING DANGER** and sets off alarms when it encounters that danger

*Can prompt an instantaneous survival response.*
FILE CABINET .... STORES THE MEMORIES

But, when it senses danger it STOPS storing memories... it forces **cortisol** out to the brain to STOP the pain and survive

*Cortisol is the numbing effect similar to the anxious, nervous feeling before something happens*
Which leads us to this

WE WANT TO GET INTO THE CABINET TO GET INFO BUT UNABLE BECAUSE OF THE TRAUMA
Neurobiology of Trauma

• Anger, Irritability, Anxiety

• Flat Affect / no emotion

• Laughing/joking inappropriately

• Feeling disconnected or numb

• Difficulty concentrating, guilt, self-blame
WHAT CAN IT LOOK LIKE?

Victim could present as:

very angry,

flat emotions, or

on edge

It isn’t that they are not listening:

distracted by shock, anxiety, helplessness,
flashbacks, concern for safety and fear
Changes Can Affect Memory

- Story may come out fragmented and sketchy
- Victim has **inability** to recall events in sequence/context
- May believe the victim is lying, being evasive, or making it up as they go along
- Accuracy of the memory is not impaired

**Memory RECALL is the problem...**
Neurobiological changes during trauma can affect memory and storage and make recall more difficult.
When a victim is under attack, **attention may be focused on the details** that cause them the most fear.

- Primarily focused on **survival**
- Cavemen mentality: survive
- “The gun was this big!”...the sequence of events is off

*The brain is still capturing the events, it's just not in a neat, tidy box*
Funky stuff going on in the brain…

*Lifetime of trauma: neglect, abandonment, crises, abuse*

Be patient…

*Abandon the hope of linear and chronological story*
Impact of Trauma

- Stress hormones affect brain function
- Fight, flight, or freeze
- Time slows down
- Brain takes “snap shots” and breaks them up to process

“She gave no details. Said she couldn’t remember.”
“If it really happened, there’s no way she’d forget.”
Difficult to recall **specific** events because these **snap shots are stored all over the place**

- Memory is stored somewhere different than another memory **of the same event**
Remember...

- The more the neural system is activated, the more it will change and the more it will scatter memories.

- Memory is often corrupted by trauma; recall is impaired.

- Telling a story in chronological order is extremely challenging.
And, finally...

Because trafficking victims experience repeated and prolonged trauma, their brain is activated significantly more than a victim that experience a single traumatic event.

Memories will be even more scattered

Appeal to the victim’s senses...this is helpful with recall
Understanding Trauma experienced by the HT victim
What’s Important?

• Imperative to understand trauma and how it affects:
  • Victims’ response to services
  • Victims’ responses to the criminal justice process
  • Our response to victims

• Goals are to:
  • Avoid re-traumatization
  • Increase their safety
  • Increase the effectiveness and efficiency of interactions with victims
Consider that the victim...

- May not be ready/willing to talk
- Fear and *misunderstanding of systems* and laws
- Fear for *family* members
- Fear/distrust of law enforcement
- Other *urgent needs* (medical, malnutrition, sleep)
- Denial, avoidance, *fear of the unknown*
- Fear that disclosure is met with *disbelief, blame or negative consequences*
Common Mindset of HT Victims:

- Distrust law enforcement—they have been intentionally misinformed about their rights
- Do not self-identify as victims
- Current situation may still be better than the situation they left
- May show allegiance to their trafficker – “He’s my boyfriend and I love him”
FREE TIP

Do not say bad things about the trafficker!

- emotions and love, considered to be family, or has helped them
A lot of questions going on

• Am I in trouble?
• Am I going to be kept safe?
• Do I need a lawyer?
• When can I get my things back?
• Will I have to testify?
• Do I have to be here or talk to you?
The Person...

- Mental health disorders
- Drug addiction and recovery
- Involvement with criminal justice system
- Homelessness, Helplessness
- Medical problems and physical injuries
Think about PTSD as something external that happened to the victim; something wrong with what happened to you:

NOT that something is wrong with YOU

Fundamentally changes the brain’s structure and alters its functionalities
Trauma in Many Forms

- Physical or Emotional Abuse and Neglect
- History of Child Sexual Abuse
- Poverty
- Community Violence
- Discrimination (race, ethnicity, education, gender & sexuality, disability)
- Immigrant experience
- Losses (death, separation from loved ones)
- Sexual assault
- Domestic violence
EXTENDED PERIOD OF TRAUMA

- We look through the lens of this is a recent event...it is NOT
- Understand that this is likely a lifetime of violence, abuse
- Homes with domestic violence or perhaps sexual abuse or assault

Something occurred and festered....it was never properly addressed or incorrectly addressed
Traumatic Bonding

Ongoing cycle of abuse, with reinforcement of reward and punishment that creates powerful emotional bonds

Comfort from the very person that abuses
It begins with understanding the profound neurological, biological, psychological, and social effects of trauma on the individual.

This is accomplished using victim-centered practices and incorporates three elements:

- Realizing the prevalence of trauma;
- Recognizing how trauma affects all individuals you will come in contact with; and
- Responding by putting this knowledge into practice.
What to Expect after Victim Rescues

1. Challenges with interpreters, culture, housing, medical
2. Victims’ fear of deportation or of being arrested
3. Concerns victims have for their families’ safety
4. Victim has ties or feelings for the trafficker

Don’t Expect
- Victims to be happy about recovery
- Victims to recognize that they are victims
- Victims to initially tell the truth
Using Stabilization Strategies
Victim has endured trauma and you are not seen as a knight saving them

**Emphasize** that you will need to meet again from time to time to go over events and to ask questions

**Avoid questions** that insist on a chronological narrative
Start with Their Needs and Concerns

- Shelter/housing
- Medical/dental care
- Legal status (immigration, criminal)
- Mental health care
- Safety of self and of family in home country
- Fears around privacy and confidentiality
- Need to earn money
- Want to go home
- Feelings of Isolation
Pre-Interview Preparation

- Prepare interpreter
- Pre-brief team
- Prepare yourself

Set Realistic Goals in Your Mind
Rapport Building...All the Marbles

Minimize the **number of people** interviewing the victim

Consider the **physical surroundings** and comfort of the room you are in
Preventing for Challenges

- Spot trauma responses, survival strategies
  - *Easier said than done:* prepare in advance
- Have a plan to get back on track
- Know when you have hit a wall; take a break; or plan to end meeting
Set the Tone

• **Empower and engage** victim as active participant

  • *Why are we here? What’s this about?*
  • *Who are these people? What are they doing here?*

• **Alleviate pressure on victim**
Starting Strong and Setting the Tone

- Open with background, comfortable topics
- Defer and preface sensitive issues
Crafting Questions: Word Choice Matters

- **Don’t ask:**
  - *were you free to leave? OR were you coerced?*
  - *OR was it voluntary or involuntary?*

- **Don’t characterize:**
  - Don’t refer to *slavery, trafficking, OR exploitation*
  - Don’t label people as *victims*
### Getting to “Why?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of...</th>
<th>Try...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why didn’t you leave?</td>
<td>Did you ever think of leaving?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When was that?</td>
<td>Tell me about that...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was going through your mind?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why’s immediately put people on the defensive.
<table>
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<th><strong>Instead of...</strong></th>
<th><strong>Try...</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why didn’t you ask for help?</td>
<td>Tell me about the night the police came...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What happened when they got there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did you say anything?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What was going through your mind?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why did you come back?</td>
<td>Before you left, did they say anything to you about returning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Were they in touch with you while you were away?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did you ever think about not returning?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STABILIZE! First and foremost. And remember to **re-visit stabilization** of the victim as this is fluid

1. Put the Victim in control
2. Remember that humanity was taken away
3. Empower the Victim
4. Give Victim the control of conversation
SUGGESTIONS

You are not alone!

Listen and don’t judge

Don’t express shock

Every relationship has been broken by someone that let them down.

Never given anything that something wasn’t expected in return.
Ending Strong

- Emphasize *courage and strength*
- Thank victim for time, *not* statements
- Plan *together* for next steps
- Preparation and patience pay big dividends
- Utilize advocates, victim/witness specialists
ASK HTPU

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