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Creating Opportunities for Success: Working with Trauma Survivors in the Shelter Setting

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Functioning is determined by:

- Biology – genetic & congenital circumstances, & strengths & weaknesses that emerge over time
- Experiences – e.g., trauma
- Characteristics coping strategies
- Expectations – anticipated outcomes
- Current circumstances – opportunities & choices, resources & supports, demands of the situation

Why focus on violence & trauma?

- Violence is prevalent.
 - the majority of homeless adults have experienced victimization.
 - 1/3 of homeless women and over 1/4 of homeless men experienced an assault in the past year.
 - Almost 50% of homeless children have witnessed or experienced acts of serious violence.

Violence often results in trauma.

- Affects the body, mind, & spirit.
- Affects relationships.
- Effects can be lifelong.

Helping survivors cope well...

- may require replacing harmful ways of coping with helpful ways.
- is important in healing and recovery.

Understanding the “whole person”

- Will decrease the likelihood of clients being “triggered” in shelter.
- Will decrease “re-traumatization.”

Acknowledging your assumptions

- May be difficult.
- You may need support.
- Is critical to helping others.

Core values & guiding principles

- Violence is unacceptable.
- Trauma survivors have strengths.
- Providers work in partnership with survivors.
- Create opportunities for success.

Training objectives

- Increase knowledge, awareness, & understanding of trauma & its impact.
- Provide information about skills & strategies.
- Suggest self care strategies.

What is trauma?

- Trauma is the consequence of interpersonal violence that involves experiencing or witnessing serious threat or actual harm.

Triggers are...

- things that happen in the present that remind survivors of a previous traumatic experience & cause them to respond as they did in the past.

Re-traumatization is...

- creating a situation or relationship that causes additional trauma to a person who has survived past trauma.

A trauma survivor...

- has witnessed and/or experienced and survived trauma in the past.

Trauma affects self-image.

- Bad vs. Good
 - Survivors may come to see themselves as “bad,” and act “bad.”
 - Or, they may try to be “good” or “perfect,” to keep bad things from happening.

Trauma distorts body image & boundaries.

- Survivors may feel “unclean,” “dirty.”
- Survivors may have less clear physical & emotional boundaries.
- Shelter offers little privacy, no personal space.

What shelter staff can do

- Role model or provide examples of appropriate, clear boundaries & limits.
- Respect personal space & possessions.
- No sexual contact between staff & clients.

Coping skills are born of trauma.

- Characteristic “fight” or “flight” response.
- Responses may be triggered in shelter.
- Coping skills have kept them alive.
- Behavior may be misunderstood by professionals.
- Clients may be “mislabeled” by staff.

What shelter staff can do

- Look for patterns in client's behavior.
- Help clients find new ways of coping.
- Refer to mental health & substance abuse professionals when appropriate.

Trauma shapes relationships.

- People's experiences in relationships “teach” them about what to expect in relationships and how to deal with others.
- Survivor's relationship skills may be misinterpreted by staff.

What shelter staff can do

- Provide positive relationship experiences.
- Ask questions & explain actions.
- Give kind & thoughtful feedback.

The world is a bad place.

- Trauma survivors may come to expect the worst.
- Depression is common.
- Survivors may drink & drug to cope with bad feelings.

What shelter staff can do

- Identify strengths.
- Reinforce successes.
- Nurture hope.

“Reframe” deficits into strengths

- Exercise:

a “failure” 

“over protective” of children 

“manipulative” 

Promoting healing & recovery

- Connecting through communication
- Building relationships
- Empowering survivors
- Creating a safe environment

Connect through communication

- Words are powerful.
- How you talk matters—tone of voice, loudness, slang, swearing.
- Exercise: violent phrases

Build relationships

- Be dependable.
- Be clear.
- Note: a word about being “open”
 - “accepting,” be a good listener
 - don’t “share” to meet your needs

Empower survivors

- Powerlessness is a common consequence of trauma.
- Create an identity that doesn't center on trauma.
- Provide choices.

Create a safe environment

- Respect boundaries.
- Ask clients what would help them feel safe.
- Examples?
 - Be dependable
 - Ask permission
 - Others?

Creating opportunities for success

- “Self-efficacy” is a person’s belief that they can solve problems & meet the demands of life.
- Both clients and staff must feel a sense of self-efficacy.

Achieve success

- May be defined differently by different people.
- May be “big” or “small.”
- You are not measured by whether your clients “succeed” or “fail.”

Vicarious traumatization

- Shelter work is stressful.
- Vicarious traumatization (VT) is common & can affect your identity and beliefs, & feelings of connectedness, safety, intimacy, & control.

Self care strategies

- Negative – may temporarily feel good, but longer-term consequences are harmful.
- Positive – feel better, with no harmful consequences.
- Exercise: list some of each.

Assignment & take home message

- Complete Self-Care Activity
- Do something positive for yourself!
- Take care of yourself to take care of others

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