

UNC SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK CLINICAL LECTURE SERIES

Trauma and Unrelenting Crises

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*“Pain is inevitable but
suffering is optional.”*

SCENARIO

Multiple Vulnerabilities

- History of trauma
- Multiple hardships
- Diagnoses and settings

Trauma

Physiological Impact

- ACEs Study
 - Increase risk for 7 out of the 10 leading causes of death
 - 20 year difference in life expectancy for high numbers of ACEs
 - Controlling for high risk behavior, individuals with an ACE score of 4 or more are still more likely to develop heart disease or cancer

Neurological Impact

- Threats system activation
- Repeated exposure to threat alters brain development
 - Problem is compounded by difficulty distinguishing between real and perceived threats
- Increased rates of high risk behavior

Trauma Related Beliefs

- Brain is hardwired to organize perceptions and information
 - Create a belief system or narrative
- Trauma can disrupt these belief systems
 - Avoidance
 - Cognitive fusion

Themes in Session

- Avoidance
 - Takes many forms
 - Happens in and out of session
- Numbing
 - Only feel "alive" when reliving the past
- Stuck
 - Movement to healing is not a given, even with opportunity
 - AND some circumstances don't allow for much opportunity

Themes in Session

- Shame
 - About how they behaved during the trauma
 - About current responses, even decades later
- Relational difficulties
 - Trust
 - Disconnection
- Susceptibility to extreme emotions
 - For some this is biological predisposition
 - Trauma related
- Vulnerability to further crises

Activity

"How much of our professional training is geared towards staying in control of terrifying and confusing realities?"

- Bessel van der Kolk (2014)

Impact on the Therapist

- Cognitions
 - What are we telling ourselves about the client?
About ourselves as therapists?
- Emotions
 - Hopelessness, helplessness, resentment, anger, guilt
- Responses
 - How do these thoughts and feelings influence the process?

Impact on Therapy

- Therapists behaviors towards client
 - Paralysis
 - Abandonment
 - Rejection
 - Blame
 - Over-control
 - Avoidance
- Client perception of therapist responses

Solutions

Much of human suffering is related to love and loss, and the job of a therapist is to help people acknowledge, experience, and bear the reality of life.

—ELVIN SEMRAD

What's the Goal?



Capacity through **acceptance** AND **change**

Acceptance

Math Problems? Or Sunsets?

Acceptance

- Using Radical acceptance
 - Of the client, yourself and the process
 - Allowing
 - Of the world
 - Identifying your own "shoulds"
- Teaching Radical Acceptance

Acceptance

- Validation
 - Communication that another person make sense and are understandable to you
 - Why?
 - How?
- What does this look like with these clients?
 - "You are in hell."
- Functional validation

Change

Life Worth Living Goals



Cognitive Change

- Observation of thoughts
- Interpretation of events and self
- Therapist style
 - Use of validation as much as modification
 - Non-verbals
 - Balance
 - Positive reinforcement

Affect Regulation

- Affect Regulation Tasks
- Purpose of emotions
- Natural vs. manufactured emotions

Re-Connection

- To self
 - mindfulness
- Relationships
- Community
- Higher Power

Assessments

- Ways of Coping Checklist
- Reasons for Living

For the Therapist

Fostering Connection

- Mindfulness practice
- Creating and holding space
- Assumption of positive intent
- Self-involving self-disclosure

Secondary Trauma

- ABCs
 - Awareness
 - Balance
 - Connection

Capacity

- Growing capacity
 - Ability to tolerate
 - Clinical skills
 - Trainings, books
 - Own support
 - Therapy, peer support, supervision

"I don't deserve them. "



"And they don't deserve me."

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