

Working with Trauma Webinar Series



Episode 1: Working with Trauma in a Time of Trauma

by **Carolyn Spring**

WEBINAR 1



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reversing adversity

- Working with trauma is working with the suffering of human beings
- Working with trauma is about responding compassionately to that suffering
- Increased levels of suffering = increased levels of compassion
- Responding compassionately isn't easy if you're also being impacted

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- The theory, neuroscience and research around trauma provides a framework
- That framework:
 - makes the trauma manageable and containable
 - helps you better understand your client so that you can respond compassionately
 - provides a roadmap out of suffering

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- The point of learning/CPD is not to be more clever, but to be more compassionate
- Working with trauma is about relieving suffering
- At the core of trauma is a sense of isolation and disconnection
- The experience of trauma is so often in not being heard, seen, or 'felt'

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- Isolation is not new to many trauma survivors
- But that doesn't mean it's not damaging
- Being alone was never the way it was meant to be!
- In evolutionary terms, anxiety and distress when alone were a survival response

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- When we're alone, we may experience:
 - Anxiety (fight/flight)
 - Hypervigilance
 - Paranoia
 - Loss of self-confidence
 - Risk-aversion
 - Loss of sense of self
- Isolation is physiologically dysregulating

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- Social isolation has massive health implications
- Inflammation is our immune response to danger and threat (i.e. when alone)
- Digestive disturbances
- ‘Pooing our pants’ = a survival response
- Our source of risk has now shifted away from predators to infectious diseases

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- Our bodies are warning us that isolation is an emergency
- We are overriding our bodies to follow social distancing guidelines
- Trauma is located in the unsolvable paradox of seeking safety from dangerous people

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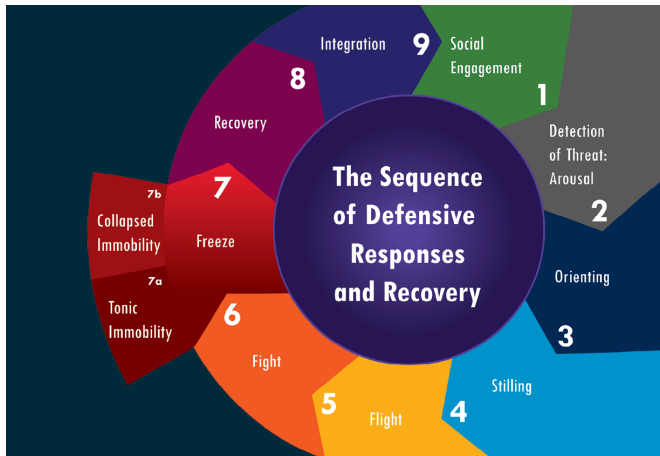
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- Integration is making sense of what happened
- We sit around the campfire and tell our story
- We make sense of it together
- Our wounds are tended to
- As a tribe we decide on what action we need to take
- Trauma recovery is about reconnection

- People get stuck in trauma when they get stuck in isolation
- Societally we are not good at sitting with suffering
- We instead blame the victims for having been mauled
- We blame them for their wounds becoming infected

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- Flashbacks are the unintegrated, unprocessed memories of an overwhelming event
- Flashbacks warn of us danger that we haven't dealt with
- Triggers are warnings of what isn't safe
- Our brain is trying to get us to **do something**

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- Often we're consorting with bears and then wondering why we're stuck in flight, fight or freeze
- Flight, fight or freeze is what we're **supposed to do** when we're around bears!
- The problem isn't 'mental illness' – it's the bears!

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- Trauma symptoms make sense:
 - Hyperarousal
 - Hypervigilance
 - Avoidance
 - Numbing
 - Flashbacks
 - Dissociation
 - DID

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- Our brains aren't faulty – they are trying to keep us alive!
- It wasn't our fault we were mauled by bears
- That's what bears do!
- It wasn't our fault that we froze
- Our reactions are not our fault
- It wasn't our fault we didn't get the support from our tribe to recover and integrate it

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- Six trauma dynamics:
 - Threat to life
 - Lack of safety
 - Powerlessness
 - Disconnection
 - Dysregulation
 - Disintegration
- A framework gives us a handle for trauma

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- How do we work safely with trauma while this trauma situation is going on?
- Everything has changed, but nothing has changed
- The dynamics of trauma are still the same
- The dynamics of trauma recovery are still the same
- Trauma recovery is still possible!

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- Trauma survivors' response to the crisis
- Amber: increase in distress
 - Increase in need for help
 - Signalling for help as a survival strategy
- Red: may appear 'calmer'
 - Numbness of disconnection and dissociation
 - Disengagement as a survival strategy

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- Let's not shame ourselves or others for how we cope
- We don't work with trauma by being judgmental, or critical
- We can reframe our behaviours and symptoms as 'best attempts to survive'
- This is a much more compassionate way to be

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- What work can we do right now?
- Historically we've thought of the work as mainly or only telling the story
- Abreaction and catharsis
- Narrative processing is only a **part** of trauma recovery (the campfire)
- You don't sit around the campfire while the bears are prowling at the edge of the camp

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- We can focus instead on:
 - Disconnection → connection
 - Dysregulation → regulation
 - Disintegration → integration
- Connection **is** ‘working with trauma’
- Being seen and heard, and feeling felt
- A client’s disengagement at the moment doesn’t need to mean the end of therapy

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- Many clients will be in survival mode right now (facing off with bears)
- Their social engagement system may not be online (ventral vagal circuit, green zone)
- With this offline, it’s difficult to remember how to relate properly
- Online therapy is an additional difficulty for some (especially cameras in abuse)

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- Offer connection at the level of human being to human being
- What does your client need most in terms of connection?
- Your connection with them **matters**
- There is no deadline on trauma recovery
- Walking alongside someone during a time of trauma is a reparative experience

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- The opportunity to be truly seen and heard and felt
- When we 'feel felt' it shifts something at a profound level on the inside of us
- It's the experience of belonging to the tribe
- Synchrony and belonging:
 - 'Clap for Carers'
 - 'The Blessing'

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- The way out of trauma is through reconnection
- Shame is the experience of not being part of the tribe
- Shame and trauma share the same neurobiological fingerprint
- Attune deeply to your clients

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- There's a lot of anxiety around
- A lack of self-confidence is an evolutionary response to isolation
- The core of your work with trauma comes out of your humanity ...
- ... working compassionately in response to the suffering of another human being

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- Do you need space to recognise how disconnected, dysregulated and disintegrated you also are?
- The starting point for working with trauma might be to work with your own trauma
- It's all going to be okay