ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF TRAUMA

PRESENTED BY:
FRANCINE STARK
Ecological Analysis of Trauma

OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this module participant will be able to:

- Discuss Trauma from an Ecological Perspective
- Understand the nature of traumatic stress.
- Understand the physiological effects of experiencing complex/chronic trauma and how this can affect behavior.
- Utilize basic strategies for responding to clients who may be experiencing post traumatic reactions and symptoms.
- Understand how clients with trauma backgrounds can be triggered and emotionally overwhelmed, and learn basic strategies to help de-escalate clients.
The Ecological Analysis of Trauma
Francine Stark
Executive Director
Hope and Justice Project
2012

Trauma
A single event or a process – series of events over time – which can tax or overwhelm a person or community’s resources and sense of well-being.

Ecological Analysis of Trauma
Person X Event/s X Environment
Trauma Response
**Trauma: individual experience with collective implications**

By Francine Garland Stark

*Trauma: a single event or series of events over time, which can tax or overwhelm a person or community’s resources and sense of well being*¹

In the discussion of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and child abuse, trauma is the common ground. In each type of abuse, individuals experience trauma as a series of events over time, a daily ordeal of doing ordinary things while protecting themselves from abuse, often through extraordinary acts of survival.

None of us is immune to experiencing trauma, however much we may try to protect ourselves. We are differentiated by the specific traumas we experience, the personal resources we possess, and the context in which we live. For some, trauma results in devastation of the spirit that is never repaired, with or without therapeutic intervention. For others, a similar trauma, while initially devastating, is blended into the person’s totality of experience and they recover successfully, with or without therapeutic intervention.²

Many of us have watched someone go through a traumatic experience. We are often surprised by their response, perhaps because it is different from how we believe we would respond ourselves or because we would expect that person to act differently based on what we know about them.

An ecological analysis of trauma provides a framework for thinking about trauma in a more holistic way. It places all of us in the experience as part of the environment, even if we were not witnesses to a particular experience. This is our opportunity to support individuals’ resilience to trauma and to reduce further incidents from happening through a collective response. It also helps us understand why people respond to trauma so differently.

---

¹"An Ecological View of Psychological Trauma and Trauma Recovery“, *Journal of Traumatic Stress, Vol. 9 No. 1, 1996*, Mary R. Harvey.

²Harvey, 1996

©2001, Spruce Run Association
As ‘helpers’ with the intent of responding appropriately and helpfully to people who have been traumatized, it is important that we keep in mind that many factors influence a person’s response to trauma. While millions of people have been raped, assaulted, and subjected to emotional degradation, their responses vary widely, individuals cannot be held to a particular standard for how to respond. Such a standard gets in the way of helpers being able to hear what the person they are helping feels, thinks, wants, and fears.

Differences among persons, events, and environments

People differ in color, age, language, religion, family structure, history, education, gender, perceived class, and any number of other ways. The relationship, if any, between the victim and perpetrator is important. Betrayal by a loved one, being assaulted by one’s intimate partner is different from being mugged on the street by a stranger and has different long-term implications.

Trauma is sometimes a single event, a car accident, a house fire, an ice storm. Sometimes it is a series of events: a parent coming home drunk every Friday and binging until Sunday night for ten years – being locked in your room while your father hurts your mother – being beaten by a new love, having believed you had found someone better than the last person in your life, who nearly killed you. Traumatic events differ according to where, when, and how they happened. How often did the events occur and over what period of time? Important differences include the presence and actions of witnesses, physical injuries, use of weapons, and characteristics of the perpetrator.

Environmental factors include both the physical realities of location and resources and the more intangible realities of a community’s response and shared beliefs. The quality of the response of the police, prosecutor, and judge in a criminal case may increase or decrease a victim’s sense of well-being. Similarly, a lesbian who has been assaulted by her lover may be reluctant to reach out for help if her family, coworkers, and others have shown intolerance for homosexuality. If a woman’s doctor has never asked about abuse, she may think he does not want to know or that he would think badly of her for what she is going through. Resources for the disabled, for communicating across languages, for housing, transportation, legal representation, employer flexibility all may play a part in one’s ability to repair their life following trauma.

©2001, Spruce run Association
Difference in trauma response

We all have ideas about how people would or should respond to trauma and are sometimes surprised when victims respond differently. For example, people who have never been abused by their intimate partner often say, “If my partner ever hit me, I would walk straight out the door and never look back.” From an ecological perspective, we see that responses differ widely given the dynamic among the person, event and environment. The following illustration lists some possible responses to trauma. It is important to note that not all trauma victims will experience these symptoms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptoms of Harm</th>
<th>Elements of Recovery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wide range of feelings: from helplessness to rage</td>
<td>Ability to remember or set aside memories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroyed sense of safety</td>
<td>Overcoming intensity of emotions and reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
<td>Positive self esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in the central nervous system</td>
<td>Ability to engage in supportive relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severed attachments to others</td>
<td>Placing trauma in perspective, internalizing self-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>and life-affirming interpretation of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive to explain why the event happened</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Creating an environment which supports resilience

Fundamentally, most people share a hope that someday the world will be a kinder place, that trauma will not be suffered by vast numbers of people every day. For those who are traumatized, we hope that they will have the support and resources readily available to recover their sense of well-being and wholeness, converting their experience of trauma into new strength and perspective.

“Applied to the realm of psychological trauma, the ecological analogy understands violent and traumatic events as ecological threats not only to the adaptive capacities of individuals but also to the ability of human communities to foster health and resiliency among affected community members. Thus, growing urban violence can be viewed as the inner-city counterpart of ‘acid rain’ – i.e., an ecological threat to a community’s ability to offer its members safe haven.”

Racism, sexism, and all forms of discrimination are excuses for hatred and contribute to violence. If we wish to both provide assistance to traumatized people and

---

3Symptoms of harm are based on Lesley Devoe’s “Trauma Principles” in “Caring for the Abuse Affected Child” Maine Child Welfare Training Institute, 1993. Elements of recovery are based on Dr. Harvey’s multidimensional definition of recovery discussed in her previously cited article.

4Harvey, 1996

©2001, Spruce Run Association
reduce trauma caused by one person against another, we must examine our attitudes and
the messages we promote in our community.

“Just as violent events can tax and overwhelm community resources, so
community values, beliefs and traditions can bulwark community members and
support their resilience in the wake of violence. … If misogyny and patriarchy are
seen as environmental contributors to sexual violence and as ecological threats to
the well-being of women, then community-based … crisis centers … and
community-wide intolerance of … violence can be recognized as ecological
supports to women’s safety and well-being.5”

From individual tragedy to the collective conscience

Over the years, a number of traumatic experiences once viewed as isolated,
regrettable incidents came to be understood as widespread problems requiring a
community-wide response. A community-wide response includes everyone, regardless
of their personal connection to individual events. It requires that we perceived that we
each have a role to play in fostering attitude changes in the community. For example, a
pastor may not know of any person in the congregation who was abused as a child.
However, if the pastor agrees that we have a collective responsibility to foster non-
violent, nurturing parenting practices, discussion of child abuse will be part of the
pastor’s messages to the congregation.

By helping to create a community environment in which emotional and physical
violence, discrimination, and denial are not tolerated, a community in which people
actively explore better ways to be in relationship with one another, we help all victims of
trauma.

In order to be effective agents of change, we must:

- Increase our understanding of abuse and violence
- Take responsibility for our own behavior and change those that are harmful to
  others
- Become knowledgeable about community resources available for referral and
  support, including crisis intervention services
- Work to change the community tolerance of abuse, both within our profession
  context and in the larger community
- Learn how to assess one’s effectiveness and maintain accountability as part of a
  coordinated community response to abuse
- Deepen understanding of how cultural beliefs and practices can affect social change
  for good or ill

5 Harvey, 1996.