"Resiliency 101: From Victim to Survivor"

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Some victims of childhood abuse perpetuate the cycle of violence while others grow to be safe, emotionally healthy, productive adults. Some choose to become the rescuers and healers—social workers, child advocates, prosecutors, therapists, physicians and police officers. Why are some victims continually re-victimized while others turn out to be happy, stable, high functioning grownups? Can we influence which path they will take? How?

This workshop identifies seven key steps to becoming a resilient survivor—factors that help a victim to overcome trauma and to develop a "survivor's perspective." Attendees will discover how to use the "language of resiliency" to identify and to reinforce victims' strengths, thus positively impacting their self-perceptions and their life scripts.

Obstacles to recovery from childhood abuse:

1) **Denial and Ignorance** (Families, institutions, investigators)

2) **Shame**
   The threats and admonishments "not to tell" made by both the perpetrators and others close to the child, keep child sexual abuse secretive and shame-based.
   The ways in which family members, the media and even some professionals interact with victims may appear to blame the victims. Often it is the shame that keeps victims from initially reporting and then it is the guilt for *not* having told that seals their silence.
   All shame should belong to the perpetrator alone.

3) **Stigma**
   Child abuse victims often encounter skepticism, disbelief and/or sensationalism when they speak out publicly. It is no wonder that most survivors fearfully guard their privacy.
   We saw how these obstacles prevented Jerry Sandusky's male victims and Larry Nassar's female victims from disclosing their abuse. Who could they tell? Who would believe them? Michael Jackson's alleged victims faced overwhelming challenges in even acknowledging sexual abuse.
   Any stigma or dishonor should belong to the perpetrator alone.

Seven Key Steps to Becoming a Survivor:

1) **Awareness**
   Victims need to first self-identify as victims and to gain a clear understanding of the trauma that they experienced.
   They can't become survivors unless they acknowledge that they were victimized—that something happened to them. (What did you survive? "I survived _____.")

By allowing them to disclose their histories and by labeling the abusive behavior as intentional and wrong, we begin to take away some of the shame.
"Your babysitter told you that it was OK for her to touch you. She sexually abused you. You were just a little girl, No matter what she said, *it wasn't your fault*." (*Marlee Matlin*)
"Your stepfather beat you for years. He knew that he was hurting you. He knew it was wrong. *It was not your fault. You did not deserve it." (Billy Currington)*
"Your cousin raped you. He was older and *he knew it was wrong*." (*Oprah Winfrey*)

2) Separation *There must be a fundamental psychological separation from the abuser.*
If victims continue to identify with their perpetrators, they may minimize the abuse, make excuses for the abuser and deny the degree of harm inflicted. Victims must perceive themselves as different from their abusers—not of the same character. They must make the conscious choice to separate. (*Tyler Perry; Matthew Sandusky, "Steven")*

3) Connection
Victims need opportunities to connect with healthy, safe adults: advocates, teachers, relatives, coaches, mentors and role models. Developing a meaningful relationship with just one stable, emotionally available, supportive adult can be highly therapeutic.
These crucial connections offer friendship and validation plus the opportunities to learn lifelong social skills. *(Drew Barrymore & Steven Spielberg; "Big Brother/Big Sister" mentors)*

4) Responsibility
A meaningful, positive self-concept grows out of successful and successive acts of responsible behavior. Victims gain independence by learning to be responsible for their own behavior. They need opportunities to learn how to set boundaries, how to make sound decisions, how to problem solve, how to work with others and how to be leaders.

Survivors help make the world better and safer for others by transforming their personal pain into constructive action. Survivors live rewarding lives of compassion and love for self and others. *(Oprah, Tyler Perry, Al Chesley, Kayla Harrison, Sheldon Kennedy, Dave Pelzer, Matthew Sandusky, Elizabeth Smart, Women's USA Gymnastics team, #Metoo)*

5) Empathy
To become a survivor, one must demonstrate both awareness and empathy. Recognizing the harm inflicted on them is the first step. Developing *empathy*—the ability to understand and care about other peoples' feelings—is crucial to breaking the abuse cycle. In order for victims of child abuse to heal, they must feel empathy for their child selves and be committed to never repeating the harmful acts which were done to them. *(Dave Pelzer)*

6) Laughter—the "gift of humor"
To be able to laugh at particular circumstances requires us to step back and to assume a new point of view. Victims are distanced a bit from their emotional pain. Seeing the humorous irony in even the bleakest of circumstances can offer new insights—plus emotional and physical release. ("Emergency room humor," movie- "*The Bucket List")*

7) Compassion and love for self and others

The victim's psychological, philosophical and spiritual interpretations of his or her traumatic experiences are critical, often overlooked parts of the recovery process. Victims did not deserve their trauma—not the rapes or the beatings or the assaults.

Victims of child maltreatment were not "born bad."
The victim, suffocating under layers and layers of secrecy and shame and guilt believes, "It *must* have been my fault. Heck, she told me it was all the time. I must be so awful, so unlovable. I must have deserved everything that happened to me."

The survivor has come to believe, "It wasn't my fault. I am a good and worthy person and I ***deserve*** to have a happy, healthy life, just like anyone else."

The *"Survivor Perspective:" We are defined not by what happens to us in life but by what we do with it." (--Anonymous)*
"The abuse is a part of me but it is not *me*."
"I may not forget it but I can work through it."
This *survivors' perspective* can make all the difference in their life trajectory.
"I ***deserve*** to have a happy, healthy life." "I ***choose*** to have a happy, healthy life."

"The Language of Resiliency"

Many people have a propensity for surviving trauma if they can learn to see themselves as strong, competent individuals. It is not just *what* happens to us but *how those experiences are described*—the language used and the complementary emotions solicited—that determines how we store the experiences in memory.

The identical life event can be destructive or neutral or even *empowering* for different individuals, depending on their perceptions about themselves and the experience. Guilt and shame do not have to be the forever-lasting legacies of childhood abuse.

Language-based intervention techniques to use with victims:

- **"Strength-building"**—deliberately selecting words that identify and reinforce victims' strengths, abilities and skills, thus constructively impacting his or her self-perception, perspective, behavior and perhaps even life script

- **"Re-framing**"—a conscious and intentional cognitive strategy that can be used to create a shift in perspective from negative to neutral or even positive; reinforced through repetition.

  Re-framing can help a "victim" to become a "survivor." Words matter!

Maria, 12, told her girl friends that last year she'd had sex with her older brother, 17. Now their moms won't let them be friends with her. *("Stay away from Maria. She's a slut.")* What can you say to Maria about the sexual assaults?

Instead of:	**Try saying :**
"Oh, I feel awful that happened to you."	"I'm so ***glad that you told*** someone." "It **took courage to tell** what happened."
"You had sex with your own brother?! OMG!"	"It was ***not your fault.***" "Your brother raped you."
"I hope you can get through this."	"Now that you've told, things can start to get better for you."

Possible follow-up responses with Maria:
"Lots of kids have experienced sexual abuse. They have grown up to become happy, healthy young adults." "They have told me about some things they did that helped them get through it." "Would you like to hear some of their ideas?"

Resources:

ACE: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. http://www.acestudy.org/ and http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html

"Does Maltreatment Beget Maltreatment? A Systematic Review of the Intergenerational Literature." Journal of Trauma, Violence and Abuse 13(3) 2012 Sage Publishing http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1524838012447697 7

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"Paper Tigers": A Documentary about Adverse Childhood Experiences http://www.socialjusticesolutions.org/2015/06/03/paper-tigers-documentary-adverse-childhood-experiences/ and https://kpjrfilms.co/paper-tigers/

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