



## Intro to Coping with Trauma

**Introduction:** The subject of trauma can be very sensitive particularly to individuals who have personally experienced trauma. Therefore the purpose of this exercise is simply to enhance a basic understanding of psychological trauma and then assess a need for more follow up on this topic. People participating in this exercise who have experienced trauma should not feel any pressure at this time to share their personal experiences while this general overview of the subject of trauma is being reviewed and discussed.

- **Trauma** – an experience that produces psychological injury or pain.

This definition is an oversimplification of something that can be a lot more complex. How trauma is actually defined can vary from person to person. Review and discuss the following **TRUE/FALSE** exercise below in order to increase understanding of what emotional/psychological trauma is about in greater detail

### Understanding Trauma: True/False Discussion

**Directions:** Review each item below and circle whether you believe each statement is **TRUE** or **FALSE**. Try to think about your reasons for each answer for further discussion. When complete discuss each item

- T F** 1. There is a limited range of situations and events that can be considered to be traumatic
- T F** 2. Two people can experience the same exact event with only one person of the two experiencing emotional trauma later in life
- T F** 3. You have to be directly affected by a situation or be “on the front lines” of a potentially traumatic event in order to experience trauma
- T F** 4. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, is characterized by re-experiencing trauma through intrusive thoughts, flashbacks or nightmares
- T F** 5. You have to be able to remember exactly what happened in order to experience trauma
- T F** 6. A potentially traumatic event does not always lead to trauma later down the line
- T F** 7. It does not have to be an just one event that is the source of trauma
- T F** 8. Humiliation or embarrassment is never the cause of trauma
- T F** 9. There are identifiable risk factors that can increase the likelihood of a traumatic reaction
- T F** 10. Resilience is someone’s ability to ignore, repress and hide from stress and adversity
- T F** 11. There is little that someone can do to increase their level of resilience
- T F** 12. There are absolutely no risks involved with getting high as a way to cope with trauma
- T F** 13. There are therapeutic treatments proven to be effective for survivors of trauma
- T F** 14. When trauma is interfering with overall life functioning it may be time to seek professional help
- T F** 15. People who experience trauma are doomed to a life of emotional suffering and hardship



1. **False** – There is no are no specific boundaries with regard to what can be defined as a traumatic experience. Someone may experience trauma from being teased or bullied as a child while others experience trauma from something such as surviving multiple life threatening attacks. There is a very wide range of situations and experiences that can be considered to be traumatic
2. **True** – Not everyone experiences traumatic events the same. In fact, in many cases some people improve with the passage of time while others experience lasting issues related to a traumatic event. For example, two people can be in the same car for the same terrible car accident and one person may experience ongoing anxiety, fear, and lasting stress months after the event, while the other person may barely even think about the accident months later.
3. **False** – Some people experience trauma just by witnessing an event. In some cases, people have been known to experience trauma just by hearing about a highly distressing or hurtful event. For example, a person may experience PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) after a friend or family member experiences danger or harm
4. **True** – PTSD is a mental health condition in which a distressing event causes extreme anxiety. Flashbacks, nightmares and uncontrollable thoughts are symptoms of this disorder
5. **False** – Unfortunately things such as abuse, neglect, violence, etc. can happen to toddlers and even infants, which can have a traumatic effect years later even not consciously remembered. Child abuse can leave a lasting emotional “scar” on children of any age
6. **True** – Quite often people naturally rebound with time even from tragic experiences while others suffer for years with something that may seem to be much more commonplace. Trauma is more about one’s sustained feelings, stress level and overall reaction to an experience as opposed to just considering the outward intensity of the experience itself. One person may survive a near death experience with no lasting signs of trauma while another person may spend a lifetime struggling due to being teased in the fourth grade, for example.
7. **True** – Although trauma can result from one specific event such as an accident, a onetime abuse incident or a violent crime, it also can be the result of a series of events (such as being assaulted or abused multiple times over the course of months or even years) or being exposed to an extended distressful situation, (such as incarceration, discrimination, or growing up in a neglectful or emotionally hurtful environment, for example)
8. **False** – People reflect on and react to embarrassing life experiences in different ways, however in some instances, there can be an extreme difficulty bouncing back from the resulting stress and humiliation
9. **True** – There are several risk factors that can increase the likelihood of experiencing trauma. (These factors don’t cause trauma they just increase the risk) Some of these are:
  - a. Lack of family or social support
  - b. The presence of other preexisting mental health issues such as anxiety or depression
  - c. High levels of existing life stress
  - d. Lack of coping skills
  - e. Genetics



10. **False** - Resilience is someone's ability to bounce back from, adapt to, or effectively endure and cope with stress and adversity. With time, patience and practice, we can develop and increase resilience
11. **False** – There is a lot that someone can do in order to increase resilience. Some of these are:
  - a. Maintain a positive support system
  - b. Develop and practice healthy coping skills
  - c. Nurture your own sense of self-confidence and inner strength
  - d. Establish a balanced, steady, and structured lifestyle. (For example someone who is employed, with stable housing, and able to manage routine responsibilities may be more prepared to cope with an unexpected stressor than someone who already lives a chaotic, unpredictable, “day to day” unstable existence)
12. **False** – Although getting high can feel like an escape from trauma, there is a risk of developing a pattern of ongoing psychological dependency on the drug as there can be a growing need to stay high to avoid dealing with trauma. Getting high may temporarily relieve the symptoms of trauma without addressing the source. Due to tolerance, this may require increased amounts of the drug or potential for progression to more intense “mind-numbing” substances in some instances
13. **True** – Therapeutic counseling techniques focused on learning to discuss and process trauma-related memories while also developing the ability to regulate related emotions have been shown to be effective for many trauma survivors
14. **True** - Obviously if trauma is impacting your ability to get through life or it is inhibiting your ability to manage your responsibilities and relationships, then it would be a good idea to seek help
15. **False** - Although trauma can be challenging to overcome and may take time, effort and patience, many people who have experienced trauma learn to adapt, heal and effectively cope. With effort and persistence, trauma does not have to prevent someone from leading a healthy, happy and successful life. Some individuals may require professional help however there is overwhelming evidence that just like with most physical injuries, people with emotional injuries can and do get better.



## Basic Rules for Trauma Therapy Group

When utilized correctly, group therapy can be one of the most effective ways to treat psychological trauma. There is something very powerful and effective when it comes to an open interchange in a group setting between individuals who share their experiences. There are some general rules that need to be followed for a trauma group to be able to function effectively:

1. **Safety** – Trauma group therapy should be a safe environment. Each person involved in the group should be able to feel that group is both a physically and emotionally safe place to share. There should never be any threats, insults, aggression or bullying allowed in the group process. Rather, group members should focus on empathy, understanding, support, and encouragement
2. **Non-Judgmental** – In line with being an emotionally safe environment, people in a trauma group need to be able to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings without fear of being judged, disparaged or criticized by others within the group
3. **Sensitivity** – In a trauma group, different things discussed can trigger a variety of reactions among others in the group at times in an unpredictable manner. It is important that individuals in the group remain sensitive to one another's feelings and reactions, with a view toward helping those in the group who may be anxious or struggling at one time or another in the group setting
4. **Respect** – Respect one another. Respect each other's feelings. Respect the group as a whole. To do this it is important to be considerate of one another's different viewpoints and backgrounds and it is essential to share group time by actively listening to one another and avoid monopolizing the group.
5. **Boundaries** – No one in a trauma group has the right to tell someone else what they should or should not be thinking or feeling. Rather, the group should be non-confrontational, focused a lot less on advice-giving and a lot more on listening, displaying empathy, support and acceptance.

(TEAR HERE) \_\_\_\_\_

## Secret Ballot: Assessing Interest Trauma-Focused Group Therapy:

Answer the following questions below. When complete tear off this short questionnaire and pass it up to the counselor/group leader for review. This provides an opportunity for group members to anonymously share interest in participating in future groups focused on trauma issues:

1. **Check One Below:**
  - I do not believe that I personally have any issues or concerns with psychological trauma
  - I feel that maybe I have some personal issues with psychological trauma.
  - I know for sure that I have some issues with psychological trauma
2. **Check One Below:**
  - I have no interest at this time in participating in a group focused on trauma issues
  - I have some interest in participating in future groups focused on coping with trauma issues
  - I have a strong interest in participating in future groups focused on coping with trauma issues

Additional Comments/Concerns/Questions: