



Therapeutic Approaches to Healing from Trauma

The Trauma of Sexual Assault

Sexual assault or abuse in any form may be experienced as traumatic to the survivor, meaning that the survivor feels that their safety, well-being, and even their life are directly threatened and they are powerless to stop the event. An incidence of sexual assault or abuse need not be physically violent in order for the survivor to experience it as traumatic.

Why do we experience a traumatic reaction to events like sexual assault? When we are threatened, our brains initiate the fight, flight, or freeze response. (We fight the person threatening us, we run from them, or we “play dead”). We have no conscious control over which response occurs. In some cases, the survivor experiences an extreme version of the freeze response called tonic immobility, in which the survivor is aware of what is happening but some or all of their body is paralyzed and unable to move. Regardless of the body’s response, if that response is not successful in protecting the survivor from the assault or abuse, the brain’s need for self-protection is thwarted and the incident is experienced by the survivor’s brain as traumatic. This trauma is sometimes stored within the survivor’s brain and nervous system, resulting in physical and emotional effects that can impact the survivor’s behavior, well-being, and quality of life.

Recovering from Trauma: The Role of Therapy

One might assume that professional counseling or therapy following sexual assault or abuse is necessary in order to heal from the trauma of the event. In many cases professional counseling is very beneficial to the survivor; however, it is not necessary or beneficial for *every* survivor. Additionally, there may be non-traditional approaches that are sufficient to help the survivor heal from the trauma, which may or may not involve professionals.

Factors that indicate professional counseling or therapy may be appropriate and beneficial:

- The survivor expresses a need or desire for assistance in managing traumatic symptoms or understanding feelings and behaviors related to the trauma
- The survivor is experiencing symptoms or behaviors that are affecting their ability to function normally within their daily lives, and/or their quality of life is diminished
- The survivor wishes to deepen their healing process or their knowledge about the effects of trauma on their life

Finding the Right Therapeutic Approach and Professional

There are many different forms of therapy for healing from trauma, some of which are discussed on the next page. Not every therapeutic approach is right for every survivor. Similarly, not every professional is a good fit.

Counselors/therapists are people with their own unique personalities, not all of which will fit well with every survivor. If a particular counselor doesn’t seem right, it’s okay to choose a different one.

In finding the right professional to work with, consider the following:

- Do they possess the appropriate education and certification?
- Do they have experience working with trauma survivors, particularly sexual assault and abuse?
- Are the location and available appointment times convenient?
- Do they accept your insurance and/or offer free services or payment plans?

Therapeutic Approaches to Healing from Trauma

Below are four of the most common traditional forms of professionally administered therapeutic approaches to addressing traumatic events such as sexual assault/abuse.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a common type of talk therapy (psychotherapy). It is a structured therapeutic method in which the client talks with a licensed professional about challenges and goals. It works by helping the client become better aware of inaccurate or negative thinking so that challenges can be viewed more clearly and responses to those challenges can be more effective. CBT is a therapeutic method that is proven to be effective for many types of issues and challenges (not just trauma). For more information, read here: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/cognitive-behavioral-therapy/home/ovc-20186868>

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

EMDR is a proven effective approach for enabling survivors of traumatic events to heal from the symptoms and emotional distress of the trauma. It is typically administered in eight phases, part of which involve the professional leading the client through a series of eye movements or other bilateral stimulation (such as taps or sounds) while the client visualizes images from traumatic memories. The eye movements “reprocess” the memory from being traumatic to being empowering, so that the client no longer experiences distress associated with memories of traumatic events. This method is also effective for dealing with current or anticipated future challenges. For more information, read here: <https://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/>

Somatic Experiencing

Somatic Experiencing is a proven effective approach for enabling survivors of traumatic events to safely discharge energy trapped in the nervous system and tissues of the body from the initial fight/flight/freeze response. It works by facilitating the completion of self-protective motor responses and the release of thwarted survival energy bound in the body, thus addressing the root cause of trauma symptoms. This is approached by gently guiding clients to develop increasing tolerance for difficult bodily sensations and suppressed emotions, and gently releasing trapped energy. For more information, read here: <https://traumahealing.org/about-us/#about>

Therapeutic Groups

Therapeutic groups are an approach for managing symptoms related to a variety of challenges and issues, including traumatic events. Groups are typically focused on one specific issue (such as sexual assault) and are led by one or more professionals who guide discussion and provide techniques for addressing challenges and symptoms. Group therapy can be beneficial by providing a built-in support network, peer accountability, and perspective from others who have endured similar struggles. For more information, read here: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/group-therapy.aspx>

Individual & Cultural Considerations

It is important to remember that each survivor is unique, experiencing and responding to traumatic events uniquely. A survivor’s cultural group, race, ethnicity, community, family, identity, gender expression, faith/spiritual beliefs, and history of trauma are all factors that influence and inform the type of support they need. There is no “one size fits all” approach to healing from trauma. For more information about sexual assault, trauma, and resources in Ohio, visit www.oaesv.org or contact us at info@oaesv.org.

Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence: 216-658-1381 / 888-886-8388 / info@oaesv.org / www.oaesv.org

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