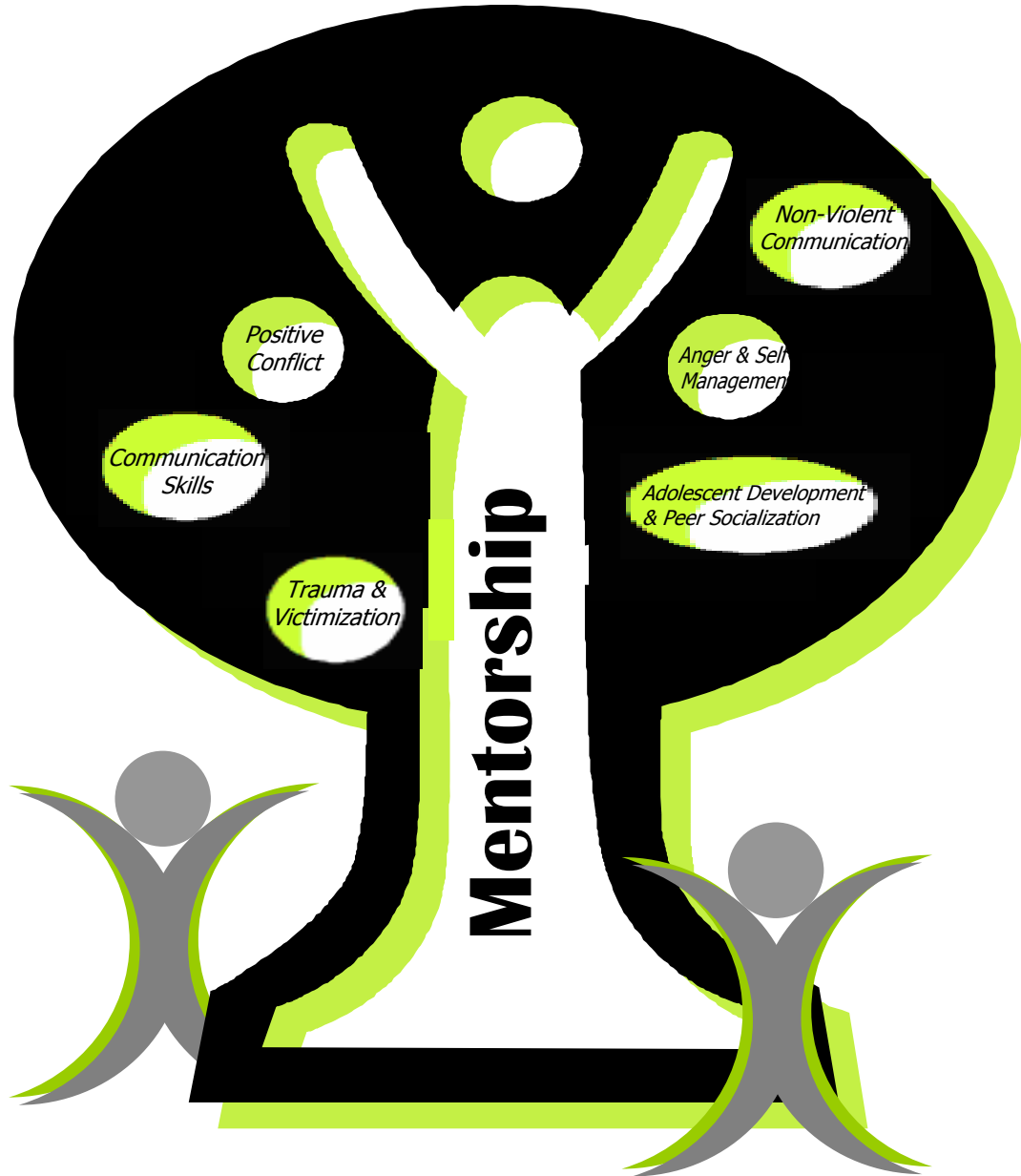


Big Brothers Big Sisters
Abbotsford Mission Ridge Meadows
Mentor Learning Series

5



Trauma, Shame and Victimization

Written by Meredith Egan

In this module, learners will understand more about trauma, recovery and resiliency. This will help us support one another after we have been hurt by events in our lives that may be traumatic.



Big Brothers Big Sisters
Abbotsford • Mission • Ridge Meadows

Table of Contents

	Page
Trauma and Victimization.....	2
Biological Effects	2
Immediate.....	2
Possible Long Term Effects	3
Resiliency.....	4
Compassionate Accompaniment	5
In Conclusion: Self - Care.....	5
Individual Activities	6
Definitions	8
Final Reflections	9
Taking It Back: Working with Your Little	11
References and Further Resources.....	12
Books	12
Websites.....	12



Trauma and Victimization

Experiencing stress and trauma is unfortunately becoming a common human experience, even for children. Our understanding of trauma and our ability to support one another in ways that encourage resilience are being understood and encouraged more fully. Supporting one another can lead to increased human connection, healing and safety, especially when this support is combined with professional and educational assistance.

Trauma is defined as psychological or emotional injury caused by a deeply disturbing experience, and the effects from this wounding are often long-lasting. Trauma may be caused by a singular event in a person's life, or may be ongoing in nature. It may be caused by natural or human-caused disaster (including medical procedures), crime, illness, accidents, or systemic structural violence (like poverty, refugee situations, neglect or war), or witnessing any of these. The intensity of the fear and sense of betrayal experienced can affect a person's ability to recover. As well, the effect of trauma is often augmented when there are multiple causes.

Traumatic effect is often enhanced when people believe their safety or future is at risk during the experience, or following. Often, feelings of helplessness or terror accompany the experience. The person's ability to respond or cope may be overwhelmed, and this can lead to a sense of loss of control over their circumstances or their life. As well, a person's belief systems may be challenged by what is happening to them.

Biological Effects

Immediate

In the immediate moment when a person is experiencing events that they perceive to be life-threatening, their body reacts in typical ways to help ensure their survival. Some of these responses enhance our 'instinctual brain', leaving our 'thinking brain' with fewer resources (like oxygen and glucose). Our 'emotional brain' is also hyper-affected, as it tries to make sense of the intensity and emotion of what is happening. The changes our bodies experience are caused by changing hormone and brain chemicals, and are normal. Their effects, however, can be disorienting.

Typical responses to threat can include some of the following:

- ❖ an increase in heart rate
- ❖ an increase in respiratory rate (number of breaths per minute)
- ❖ an increase in metabolic rate, sometimes including shaking and/or sweating
- ❖ blood rushing to large muscles, often accompanied by great strength and energy, including a desire to move
- ❖ hyper-alertness of the senses, especially sight (to increase immediate information available)
- ❖ reduction in processes not needed for immediate survival, including immune system, digestion, reproduction and
- ❖ a change in perceptions of time (including its' linearity)



BBBS Mentor Learning Series - 2007

- ❖ dissociation from what is happening (a quiet calm detachment), or
- ❖ a 'freeze' response, when a person can not respond to what is happening around them

These responses help ensure your body's ability to focus on survival, including responding with what has commonly been referred to as a 'fight or flight' response. Whether or not the threat is real is not as important to a person as their perception of threat, and unfortunately people who experience repeated trauma are often affected more quickly and more forcefully by subsequent threats.

Later, once the immediate threat to a person's wellbeing is removed, people continue to be affected by the trauma, and the change in hormones and neuro-chemicals in their bodies. Often, they become very tired and listless, wanting to sleep for great stretches. Many avoid stimulation (or even social contact) as they recover; often their emotions are more 'flat'. They often can not perform complex tasks (especially ones that require focus and thinking). Sometimes their sense of safety or future is adversely affected.

If they are triggered again by remembering or an event, they can re-enter the initial 'trauma cycle'. They may experience sleeplessness, irritability, anxiety, problems concentrating or rationally thinking or they may exhibit a sensitive 'startle response'.

Sometimes, people discharge the energy that has been released into their body because of the trauma with restlessness, shaking or sweating. Sometimes, if we can't make sense of our body's responses to triggers that remind us of the traumatic events, we become angry or enraged. All of these responses are normal, and allowing ourselves (in safety) to experience and make sense of them can help reduce the longer-term effects of unresolved trauma. Receiving support from those around us can also be important.

Possible Long Term Effects

Longer term effects of unresolved trauma can include addictions, co-dependency, nightmares, flashbacks, hyper-arousal, or avoidance (among many other symptoms). As well, each of these symptoms can be affected by many other factors in a person's environment, including drugs, social relationships, nutrition, safety and security and the support (both formal and informal) they receive.

Some behaviours that may indicate unresolved trauma¹ are:

- ❖ substance abuse
- ❖ eating disorders
- ❖ self-mutilation
- ❖ depression
- ❖ anxiety
- ❖ anger and rage
- ❖ an inability to focus or concentrate
- ❖ photosensitivity (needing sunglasses, for example)
- ❖ anger and rage, including getting into fights

¹ Adapted from The Little Book of Trauma Healing, by Carolyn Yoder



BBBS Mentor Learning Series - 2007

- ❖ domestic and child abuse
- ❖ hurting animals
- ❖ gang activity
- ❖ high-risk behaviours, including criminal activity
- ❖ inability to trust
- ❖ apathy
- ❖ disinterest in social situations
- ❖ physiological illness, often resulting in high prescription drug use

This list is not exhaustive, and each of these symptoms can have multiple causes. It does demonstrate the complexity of the physiological responses to trauma, and the challenges and sensitivity required to properly diagnose and treat trauma.

As such, it is important that people who are in caring relationships with others who may have experienced trauma or victimization understand a little about what will help people recover.

Resiliency

Resiliency is a person's capacity to recover readily from a misfortune, and the term is often applied to people who recover quickly or well from trauma. Studies of those who have recovered tell us that some things are very important, both in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy, and in the way we support people longer-term.

In the immediate aftermath of trauma, victims need very specific support to heal. First, and foremost, they need to be in a safe place; it is especially important that they perceive safety from their surroundings. Safety is the best antidote to fear and a sense of foreboding. They need to be allowed to control what is important to them in the moment, and be relieved of all of the other decisions that may overwhelm them. Informal social supports are very important, and supporters must remember to be gentle, and allow the person the chance to do what they believe is best; often our bodies know how to recover better than anyone.

Some things that often help include:

- ❖ having someone listen to their story, and believe it (sometimes again and again)
- ❖ gently reminding them that their responses are normal
- ❖ providing information or education when asked for
- ❖ reassuring them of their future safety
- ❖ affirming that what happened to them was 'wrong', and that you believe them
- ❖ help answering some of their questions (truthfully), which may include
 - *Why me?*
 - *Why did this happen?*
 - *How can I be sure it won't happen again?*
 - *How well did I react, or cope?*
 - *What does this mean for my life? For the world I live in?*

Page 4



Big Brothers Big Sisters

Abbotsford • Mission • Ridge Meadows

BBBS Mentor Learning Series - 2007

- *Why am I affected in this way?*
- ❖ helping them regain a sense of control (even over small aspects of their life), by allowing them to make decisions about their life
- ❖ to have what was lost 'restored' (as much as possible)
- ❖ ongoing social support, both formal and informal
- ❖ receiving apology and/or restitution, either tangible or symbolic
- ❖ spending time in nature, especially with bare feet firmly planted on earth or at the beach
- ❖ garden, or even just spend time in a beautiful garden
- ❖ spending time with domestic animals
- ❖ spending time in or near water often rebalances our body's energy (either swimming, at a beach or in a bathtub)
- ❖ doing gentle regular exercise, like walking, swimming or yoga
- ❖ gentle massage

Compassionate Accompaniment

Our attitude and reactions to a person who has been harmed will affect their healing. Because traumatic experiences are common, our families, friends (including Littles) and even casual acquaintances can be helped if we model attitudes and characteristics that will foster healing. Gentleness, kindness, empathy and respect are all important characteristics to bring to our relationships and daily encounters. Their stories should be treated with utmost confidentiality. It is an honour and privilege to walk alongside these people as they recover; their stories are ones of courage and inspiration.

It is very important that everyone who may be suffering from unresolved trauma be treated with great respect, and that the person accompanying them adopts an attitude of 'belief', especially as they share their story and reactions to the event that affected them. It is helpful to avoid judgmental responses that imply blame or judgment about how the person reacted. Try to notice elements of resilience or resourcefulness in what the person tells you, and affirm those elements. Empathize with them about their experience, but resist the urge to shift the focus from them to you or your story. Encourage other family and friends in their efforts to offer support. Provide educational material or resource information as it is requested, both to the person who has been hurt, and their other supporters. Understand that as you share your support in a non-judgmental and caring way, you are modeling these supportive behaviours to others. Be reassuring, and empowering.

In Conclusion: Self - Care

Trauma and victimization are unfortunately quite common in our daily lives. As well, healing from these events can be painful and lengthy experiences, requiring great support and care from those around us. Sometimes frustration and impatience can mar our perspective, and it is important that as caring friends, we also take very good care of ourselves.

Hearing about frightening or painful experiences can affect us (called secondary, or vicarious trauma). When it does, our needs are very similar to the needs of people we are hoping to help; it is our obligation



BBBS Mentor Learning Series - 2007

to care for and about ourselves, notice what helps us feel better and take the time and energy to meet those (very valid) needs. Setting boundaries can be important, as well, ensuring we take time for our own friendships and healthy practices (exercise, spiritual practices, eating well, social support from others for example), and not immersing ourselves solely in caring about and for others. Take time for you, and treat yourself with the gentleness, respect and support you deserve.

Individual Activities

Here are some individual activities that can help support you as you work in this area:

❖ **Immune Button Boosting:**

Tapping on your thymus gently and repetitively has been shown to help balance and stimulate the immune system. Locate your thymus by placing two fingers horizontally below your throat (the notch at the base of your neck). Below these two fingers, midline, is the area over your thymus. With two fingers, tap (not too gently) the area around there for 15 or 30 seconds a few times a day.

❖ **Cross Crawlers:**

This activity helps to balance energy between the left and right side of the brain. Stand with your feet comfortably apart (about shoulder distance). Lift your left knee, and touch it with your right wrist. Lower your knee, and raise your right knee, touching it with your left wrist. Repeat 10 times. This is fun if it is done to music!

❖ **Cranial Cradle:**

Cradling your hands on front and back on your brain helps to balance and stimulate energy flow between the three primary areas of your brain. With your right hand behind your head at the top of your neck, and your left hand on your forehead, close your eyes. Notice your breathing and slow it down. Think about a pleasant memory for several minutes while you cradle your head (or shorter if that is comfortable). Repeat every day, or twice a day.

❖ **Breath Meditation:**

Sit up very straight, with your feet comfortably in front of you, flat on the floor. Put your hands in your lap, gently. Close your eyes and focus your attention on the area just below your left nostril. Breathe in and out slowly three times. You may find your thoughts wandering; just release the thoughts and return to focus on your breath. Then focus on the area below your right nostril for three breaths. Finally focus on both nostrils for three breaths. Once you are comfortable doing this for nine breaths, repeat the exercise 3 times for a total of 27 breaths.

Breathing meditations help to reset our nervous system, calm down brain activity and may help us get in touch with our core being.

❖ **Make Art!**

“The world is full of suffering, and full also of the overcoming of it.”

Helen Keller



BBBS Mentor Learning Series - 2007



Spend some solitary time creating art while focusing on either an inspiring quote (like the one suggested above) or an idea that has been important for you. Remember that the importance is in the creating, not necessarily in the product. Art ideas include:

- painting and drawing,
- playing with sidewalk chalk
- colouring with crayons, pen, pastels or coloured pencils,
- collage with old pictures or magazines,
- sand mosaic art (like in a Zen garden),
- write some poetry or a story
- take photographs
- build a mosaic with broken or chipped dishes, beads or even candy!
- carve in wood, or soft stone
- sculpt with playdoh, plasticine or mud
- needlecraft, like embroidery, quilting or couching beads



BBBS Mentor Learning Series - 2007

Definitions

trauma   (trô'mə, trou'-) [Pronunciation Key](#)

1. Severe bodily injury, as from a gunshot wound or a motor vehicle accident.
2. Psychological or emotional injury caused by a deeply disturbing experience.

trauma. (n.d.). *The American Heritage® Science Dictionary*. Retrieved June 01, 2007, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/trauma>

shame   (shām) [Pronunciation Key](#)



n.

1.
 - a. A painful emotion caused by a strong sense of guilt, embarrassment, unworthiness, or disgrace.
 - b. Capacity for such a feeling: *Have you no shame?*
2. One that brings dishonor, disgrace, or condemnation.
3. A condition of disgrace or dishonor; ignominy.
4. A great disappointment.

tr.v. **shamed, sham·ing, shames**

1. To cause to feel shame; put to shame.
2. To bring dishonor or disgrace on.
3. To disgrace by surpassing.
4. To force by making ashamed: *He was shamed into making an apology.*

shame. (n.d.). *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Retrieved June 01, 2007, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/shame>

re·sil·ient   (rĭ-zĭl'yənt) [Pronunciation Key](#)

adj.

1. Marked by the ability to recover readily, as from misfortune.
2. Capable of returning to an original shape or position, as after having been compressed. See Synonyms at [flexible](#).

resilient. (n.d.). *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Retrieved June 01, 2007, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/resilient>



Final Reflections

1. Who would I call if I was affected by a tragic event? Why? What is it about that person's mannerisms that would be helpful?

2. What helps me when I am affected by events that challenge my sense of safety or well-being?

3. What barriers prevent me from supporting people when they are healing?

4. Thinking about a time when you or a loved one was hurt, reflect on the following questions (Try to focus on expressing your experiences, not on those of a loved one):

- What did I need?
- What tangible support was offered? Did it help me?
- What did I learn?
- What inspired me?



BBBS Mentor Learning Series - 2007

5. What have I learned from a harmful event I experienced?



Taking It Back: Working with Your Little

Specific ideas to incorporate this module in your work with your Little:

Any of the activities from the "Individual Activities" page can be used between Bigs and Littles, to foster and encourage healthy activities, and teach tools to Littles that can be useful when they find themselves alone.

Also: Consider fostering conversation during a light exercise activity, like a nature walk, or playing with animals. Cultivating a garden can be a great, healing activity for children (Radishes grow quickly for those who are less patient!).

Go on a Gratitude Walk; take turns on a walk finding and sharing about all the things you are grateful for.



References and Further Resources

Books

Trauma and Victimization

Herman, Judith Lewis. Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Morris, Ruth & Bradley, Ruth. Transcending Trauma. Embrun, ON: Winding Trail Press, 2005.

Yoder, Carolyn. The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community Security is Threatened. Pennsylvania: Good books, 2005.

Derksen, Wilma. Confronting the Horror: The Aftermath of Violence. Canada: Amity Publishers, 2002. Subtitled The Victim's Journey Through the 15 Elements of Serious Crime,

Gilligan, James. Preventing Violence (Prospects for Tomorrow). New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001.

Gilligan, James. Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic. UK : Vintage Publishing, 1997.

Peter Levine, Ann Frederick. Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: the Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences: North Atlantic Books, 1997

A Novel for Young Adults and Adults: Touching Spirit Bear, by Ben Mikaelson

Websites

General information:

<http://www.trauma-pages.com/trauma.php>

Strategies for Trauma and Resiliency (STAR):

<http://www.emu.edu/ctp/star/about.html>

Trauma Recovery tips for Children

<http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/main.aspx?dbName=DocumentViewer&DocumentID=38020>

More Tips

http://www.kidspace.org/healingMagazine/NEWH Healing/healing_ss06_6.htm

Resiliency Project

<http://www.ncvc.org/resilience/Here to Help BC>

