

## TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS



# Supporting Traumatized Loved Ones

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[www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org)

WENDT CENTER  
FOR LOSS AND HEALING



# Agenda



- Introduction
- Reactions to stress
- Post-traumatic stress
- Trauma, trauma stories
- What is your role?
- Managing emotions and calming down
- Assisting those with PTS
- Resources



# Presenter



Heather Powers is a licensed clinical social worker and a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner working in the District of Columbia for 20 years with low income youth, adults, and families. She received her clinical social work training at the University of Chicago.

Heather has been working with trauma survivors as a clinician since 2004 with a focus on intimate partner violence and those with complex trauma due to multiple difficulties in their early years. Her experience includes working for the Department of Veterans Affairs on an emergency psychiatric ward in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Since 2013 she has been working at the Wendt Center for Loss and Healing as an Adult and Child Therapist.



# What is Stress?



- Bodily or mental tension resulting from factors that tend to alter an existent equilibrium (Websters)
- Ranges from normal life stress to PTS
- Symptoms of stress- muscle tension, heart rate, digestive system, focus- increased or lost
- Eustress vs Distress



# Reactions to Extreme Stress



- Initial reactions to traumatic stress
- Fight/Flight/Freeze
  - **Save your life brain vs. House builder brain**
  - **Where do you think trauma memories are stored?**  
Save your life brain is looking for things that resemble that old danger, pumps adrenaline, and can be convinced that you are in danger and take your verbal centers & your build a house brain offline
  - **Dissociation- normal to Multiple Personalities**



# Acute Stress Disorder



- Duration is 3 days to 1 month
- Symptoms
  - Numbing; detachment (dazed); dissociative amnesia; nightmares; flashbacks; avoidance of any stimulation that reminds them of the event.



# Key Trauma Concept



- **Traumatized reactions are reactions of extremes**
  - remembering too much, not remembering at all
  - Seeing threats everywhere, not being able to identify threats
  - Having extreme feelings/thoughts/reactions, having a lack of feelings/thoughts/reactions
  - Bouncing back and forth between too much and too little



# When is it PTS?



## What is the stressor?

Exposure to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, as follows:

- Direct exposure.
- Witnessing, in person.
- Repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s), usually in the course of professional duties (commonly called Secondary Traumatic Stress)





# Signs and Symptoms of PTS



## **Intrusion**

- Intrusive memories
- Traumatic nightmares
- Flashbacks

## **Avoidance of Reminders**

- Trauma-related thoughts or feelings
- Trauma-related external reminders (e.g., people, places, conversations, activities, objects, or situations)
  - Examples: event in a shopping market (avoiding malls) or while in truck, carrying a group (avoiding buses)



# Signs and Symptoms of PTS



## Negative thoughts and feelings

- blocking out part of the memory
- Persistent (and often distorted) negative thoughts about oneself or the world (e.g., "I am bad," "The world is completely dangerous.")
- Persistent distorted blame of self or others
- Persistent negative emotions (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt or shame)
- Lack of interest in activities that were important before
- Feeling disconnected from others/isolated
- Unable to feel 'good'



## Consequences of symptoms



- Irritable or aggressive behavior
- Self-destructive or reckless behavior
- Hypervigilance
- Exaggerated startle response
- Problems in concentration
- Sleep issues
- Eating issues
- Difficulties with waiting/crowds/being alone



# Self-Blame



- Why didn't I....
- If I had just...
- If I hadn't....
- Those with PTS often embrace this because it returns a sense of control. If I could have prevented it, I can prevent the next attack, therefore, violence isn't random.



# Trauma Stories



- Stories are told all kinds of ways: in a jumble, as a sacred moment, as a toss away, etc.
- People do not define words the same way. Don't be afraid to ask 'how are you defining that word?' (ie, assault, healing, forgiveness, drunk)
- Buzz words are not always well received. PTS, flashbacks, etc.
- Use their words to refer to their trauma when you need to



# Trauma Working Definition



- Trauma is experiencing too much, too fast, too soon in such a way that one's normal ability to cope is overwhelmed, leaving one feeling:
  - **POWERLESS**
  - **OUT OF CONTROL**
  - **DISCONNECTED:** from one's self, family, community, beliefs about the world, time, and/or space

Influenced by Peter Levine & Mary Jo Barrett



# You Cannot Do It All



- Know your role
- Encourage connections to multiple people they trust: friends and/or family (remember, families are not always trustworthy)
- Connect them to resources: hotlines, therapists, VA and Vet Center groups, community organizations, clergy



# Managing Emotions



- Proven most helpful activities
  - Yoga- Body awareness & breathing
  - Mindfulness- body awareness & breathing
  - Singing in Choir- connection to others & rhythm & right brain
- Additional
  - Eye contact
  - Breathing- take longer exhales than inhales
  - Attention to feet/extremities





# Calming Down



- Get the frontal lobe/house builder brain back online
- BREATH
- Eye Contact
- Give individual control in any and every small way possible
- Stay calm but engaged (mirror neurons)



# Talking About It



- Survivors often have a very hard time talking to non-survivors
- Verbal centers are skewed, story may be jumbled, confused, hard to explain
- Retelling may retraumatize individuals
- Can get stuck in the retelling
- When talking remember use their words



# Assisting Those with PTS



Those who have PTS are in some way **stuck** in the past and unable to be in the present.

Assist them in moving from fixity into flow

Assist in re-establishing

**Power**

**Control**

**Connection**



# PTS Prevention



The response that a person receives from the people surrounding them after a traumatic event is neurologically, emotionally, and psychologically more powerful than the event itself.



# About TAPS



TAPS honors our fallen Service Members by ensuring that the loved ones they may leave behind are not forgotten.

*Together, we can help each other heal.*

[www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org)  
800-959-TAPS



# Resources



## The Wendt Center for Loss and Healing

- Mission: To help children, youth and adults rebuild their emotional lives after loss, illness, violence and trauma.
- Nationally recognized for expertise in grief, trauma and mental health
- Provides specialized counseling services for veterans, military and their families.

[www.wendtcenter.org](http://www.wendtcenter.org)

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