



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

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Coping in a Communal Living Environment

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and
Renee, Lead Shelter Advocate

MARISSA: Hello, and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop podcast, intended for survivors of domestic and sexual violence as a time to learn and grow in order to move beyond their trauma. Each session will feature instruction on a healing topic, and this week our topic is Coping In Communal Living Environments. We are your hosts: my name is Marissa, and I am the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center.

RENEE: My name is Renee, and my pronouns are they/them/theirs. I'm the Lead Shelter Advocate and have been at TWC for about six years, working in various capacities in our Shelter and Transitional Living program. My role primarily serves as co-supervising our Shelter Advocates and coordinating trainings, scheduling, and other day-to-day conversations. I also support the shelter by answering our 24-hour Hotline and providing direct service to our shelter clients.

MARISSA: So, in starting this conversation, we thought it would be crucially important to discuss housing instability and homelessness. Now more than ever, many individuals are experiencing some type of housing instability or loss of housing due to COVID-19 and changes to our economy as a result. Many families lost their main source of income, childcare, or even the loss of loved ones that assisted with housing support during this time.

We also know that domestic violence is also impacted housing instability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have been stuck with their abusers during the lockdown period, and may have since attempted to flee or have been kicked out by their abuser. Our emergency shelter and the confidential 24-hour hotline have remained open around the clock to provide a critical lifeline for those without a place to turn.

Due to all of this instability, people are living in different living situations than they were before and are struggling to find ways to establish some sense of normalcy. So, re-establishing that sense of normalcy is key in any new living situation, regardless of the circumstances, right? We will be sharing some tips and tricks that we've seen to be effective for those living in different living environments and that are trying to adjust to this change.

RENEE: We also just wanted to go over some quick reminders. Each communal living setting—whether it's a shelter, transitional living, dorms, or even living with family members—is going to be different, and we understand that we can't speak to every single dynamic that may take place in your housing journey.

This podcast is going to provide some possible tools that can aid in reducing the stress of your living environment. That being said, we are unable to account for each situation, house rules, guidelines, or boundaries. You know your situation best, and if any of our suggestions do not fall in line with your housings, policies, rules, or just doesn't feel right: don't try them. If it is safe to do so, talk to your housing coordinator, manager or any other staff that are available, or family members about safe options to cope. Contact a local advocate as well to discuss strategies that fit into your own situation. It's important that you know that you deserve to feel supported and safe in your living environment.

MARISSA: Absolutely true. Let's get started with the conversation on settling in. It can feel really intimidating to move into a communal living environment, whether it's your first time or if you've had prior experience in these types of settings. It's an unfamiliar environment, you're meeting new people and ultimately you are carrying out your daily tasks, essentially existing in public at all times. And if you're a parent, you're also parenting in public which can be a difficult thing to do. On top of that, coping with all of this change while also in crisis, and needing to plan for next steps for yourself or family, it can be a lot; if you're in a situation like this, give yourself some credit. You are doing a lot, and you're doing your best to make it through.

At The Women's Center, our motto here is Safety, Shelter, Support. We immediately provide crisis intervention, help determine a plan for safety, and ensure that all basic needs are met when somebody first walks into our doors seeking shelter. We know that often, victim-survivors need so much more than just a safe place to stay, and that they also need to work through some of the harmful effects of their situation—whether it be domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, or child abuse. We do work hard to make sure that we are providing any and all resources and supports needed to assist them.

Regardless of your situation, if you are going through some of these things, and there isn't a safe person to talk to about all of this in your space, there are hotlines for support. Again, we run a 24-hour hotline, and we can be a resource if you are here locally, or

anyone listening outside of the Greater Milwaukee area, there are also local resources and some national resources as well. So, you can ask someone to talk to you through this time while you're settling in.

RENEE: With that being said, we wanted to go over house rules versus family rules. So one thing that can be really difficult when you're settling into a different housing environment, like shelters, group homes, or even when you're staying with family or friends homes, is that they may have pre-established rules that differ from your own. Each living environment is different and may not be the right fit for you at the time, but if it is the safest option at the time, finding ways to so follow the set rules but still have the autonomy for yourself and your children is important.

So, it's important to know that you are doing the best that you can with what you have to work with, and try not to be too hard on yourself if it takes time to adapt. An example of this is parenting in public. It can be really tricky if you're used to having your own household and not operating in a group home setting or in a shelter setting, and then your children are acting out and you feel pressure to act a certain way. It can be really difficult, but knowing that you made a good step for your family in providing shelter for them and safety when you needed it the most, is really important. There's tons of support, whether that's in specific programs that you're in online, those hotlines that we had mentioned before; it's really important to reach out if you are feeling like you need extra support. So, meeting with staff or family members to discuss certain accommodations, and compromise if possible. They are there to support you, so they will help you with those transitions as it can be difficult.

MARISSA: I know those supports are also there as you start the process in goal setting, and when you're just starting out, it is more than okay to start small and identify some short-term goals that are attainable and achievable. A good goal to set about goals, right, is by setting one goal a day—whether that's enrolling the children in a nearby school, calling one landlord about an application, filling out one resume, or even starting the conversation on your situation and just getting the ball rolling with processing—that is a goal, and if that's something you achieve, that is a huge, huge step.

So as you start to get into that routine of these small, sustainable goals, when you feel more comfortable, we can start setting some long-term goals to ensure some of that future stability. Something that I really like to talk about is the acronym “SMART” goals, and that stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound. We will include a resource on SMART goals and some templates for you to maybe start some of your own.

So an example of this is in six months, we have X amount of money saved. (Now, of course, insert X with the amount of money that you would like to have saved in that six month period.) That's quite specific, you're able to measure it, once you have that

amount of money, you know you've achieved that goal. It feels attainable for you, it's relevant to the things you need, and it's time-bound as it's within those six months.

Another example is in one year, you have enough money for a down payment on a car: it's specific. Once you have that car, you know that you've achieved that goal, so it's measurable. It's something attainable, it's relevant to your needs, and we've got that one-year time frame in there.

And then it's also important to do monthly check ins to sort of identify what you've done to work towards those goals, and what you might still need to do to accomplish them. And it is more than okay to reassess goals and reframe them. It's something we all do all the time, it's completely normal, and you haven't failed by, you know, reframing that goal. We don't always have control over every single circumstance that may affect us in achieving our goals. You know, we can't control loss of childcare, being laid off of work, apartments not being available for your budget, systemic barriers, other things like that. So yes, all of this is to say, you know, our goals can be fluid, but once we start identifying them, we have that framework to work towards what we need for the future.

RENEE: [Affirms] Keeping in mind, you know, what we're all going through right now, I think that this is a transition time for a lot of people. So reassessing goals, coming back to them at different points, and maybe changing those goals all together, you know, this is this is a time to look at it as a positive, that we are setting new goals for ourselves and for our families and for the future. So, don't think of it as "I have so many things to do and so many things to accomplish," think of it as that you have the time to accomplish these things and the supportive systems around you to help you reach these goals.

Another really important aspect that we wanted to cover is schedules. So when your housing situation changes, it can be really easy to fall into a pattern of unsustainable habits and lose that sense of time. So for example, if your kids switch from online [school] to in-person, or vice versa, you may have had a specific routine before. And then that shifts, and then your days are wide open again, or if you switch employment, it's easy to fall into a sense of not having a schedule or routine. And for a little while, that's okay. But to move forward with those goals, it's important to set a schedule.

Take the time to honor the change. You know, if your housing situation changed, that if you're going from independent living to living with a family member, that's a huge shift, especially if you have children with you. Take time to honor those feelings, remembering to keep pushing forward.

It's important when this happens to reflect on the situation, and see what kind of schedule and routine you can create to give yourself and your family a sense of normalcy. It can start super small as setting times to eat meals and setting an alarm for waking up in the morning, and having a consistent bedtime. Even if you're not sure what each day is going to bring, setting that "I'm going to wake up every day at this time, and me and my kids are going to go to bed at this time," that sets the framework so that the

rest of your day can fall into place. It can also look like allowing for extra downtime to recharge and take care of your emotional needs, trying not to overload your schedule with filling out applications every single day and doing all of these things and trying to get it all done. Because that's not sustainable for a regular routine and schedule, and by creating a routine, when you're in a different living environment, you're creating stability for yourself and your family.

Surviving abuse means that you survive somebody else trying to take power away from you. Creating routines is an easy way to gain back some sense of control and normalcy and making decisions, and to feel empowered by your choices. It's okay if you don't know where to start, and you may not have had the option to wake up at the same time every day, or you might not have been allowed to make your own routine and schedule. It may be daunting at first, but reaching out to resources and getting support from that is important; that's your first step in healing, and making that schedule and making these choices for yourself and your family.

You may be in a living environment that doesn't always allow for all of the routines and schedules that you're used to, but finding ways to incorporate old routines or establish new ones lead to more positive outcomes when you gain independent living. Work with the program to brainstorm ways to get your needs met within the limitations to the policies in the program.

So for example, if you're used to having Family Movie Night, and you're used to watching movies till 10pm, but bedtime is at 8:30. You could talk to the staff to see if there's any way that that could be an exception, or if you could have that time earlier in the day so that you can compromise for that and still have the autonomy.

MARISSA: When living in a different housing environment, it is crucially important, especially important, to make time for that self-care. It's okay if it looks different from what you would normally do while in your own independent living, but utilizing the resources that you do have access to is key. This might look like things such as journaling, creating art, or reading books and articles that are available to you. This might look like participating in house meetings and groups to connect with others and break out from the past isolation that you may have experienced. This might also look like taking a walk to get some fresh air and practice and grounding. For more specific examples of these things on we do have past podcasts on grounding, emotional safety planning, coping and self-care, we will also be releasing a winter-specific self-care episode coming up in December.

And even with all of this, it is okay if you don't know where to start, or you're not sure what works for you. I want to provide the reminder that self-care doesn't have to be this lavish, luxurious thing, and it's important to consider things like drinking water, getting out of bed, having a good cry as self-care, those things are crucially important to how we function. It's okay to try different things out even if you don't think it'll work. For

example, for me, I never thought I was an embroidery person. Now I totally am because I wanted to give it a try; I was skeptical, but I found out that it worked for me and that it's fun, so it's okay to try some things out. If you're really feeling like it's not gonna work, of course, you have the choice to not try it as well. But it's also important to talk to somebody—whether it's a housemate, an advocate, or manager—because they may have some more helpful ideas too that you may not have thought of.

RENEE: I think with self-care, too, it's not just a one size fits all; each situation is going to be different. And something that worked for you before may not, you know, bring you the same joy or help you relax as much as it did before. Finding that thing that helps you stay in the moment and stay grounded, is important to look for.

So along that vein, even though you may feel that you are at one of the lowest points, it is so important to recognize that the strength that it took you to leave the abuse and seek shelter was tremendous. I think when you're coming out of an abusive situation, it's really easy to look at all the negative things, but trying to focus on the strength that you do have and being proud of yourself and how strong you were. By doing this, you have started to undo the cycle of abuse. You're also recognizing your own need for safety and support. Also, if you have kids, you made it a point to show your children that they deserve to be in a safe environment.

While your time in communal living is temporary, you have acquired tools that will help you in the future. It is not a failure if you need to return to a shelter or communal housing multiple times; you have learned about the resources that can help you and how to advocate for your needs. Even after your time within a program has ended, many programs (like us) will offer continued support to help you with your goals. You don't have to do this alone.

MARISSA: [Affirms] I think that is one of the biggest points to highlight here: you do not have to do this alone, and this too shall pass. You are picking up so many important skills, you are breaking that cycle, you are recognizing your needs and acting on them, and that is such an important thing and that is a huge positive.

So with that, thank you so much for joining us to learn more about Coping in Communal Living Environments. Our next session will be about Boundaries Within A Family Dynamic, with our Director of Advocacy and Support, Krystal.

The Women's Center welcomes and serves survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses, recognizing that their unique experience informs the perspective of each person.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience, please call our 24-hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about the Women's Center at www.twcwaukesha.org. Thank you and be well.