



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

Season 2 Episode 11: December 9, 2020

Healing at the Holidays

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and
Maria, Volunteer Coordinator

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. This week, our topic is Healing at the Holidays, a bonus episode that we're very excited to bring to you today. We are your hosts: my name is Marissa, and I am the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here at The Women's Center.

MARIA: My name is Maria, and I'm the Volunteer Coordinator here at The Women's Center. I actually started back in January of 2020, so it's almost been a year and I've got to say, what a year it's been! My position doesn't usually interact with our clients, I'm definitely more with volunteers and donors. I'll just give you all a brief overview so that you can understand kind of what I do here at The Women's Center.

So, prior to COVID, my days were filled with managing volunteer groups and individual volunteers, and that was like, calling, interviewing, and placing volunteers in specific positions. And, and then also helping with some donation sorting and organizing our in-kind donations, which are physical gifts. And then now post-COVID, I am really working on some virtual volunteer opportunities, and if you're interested in those, just feel free to check out our website, we have them posted there under our Volunteer page. I'm also in charge of the holiday programming.

MARISSA: Yeah, the holiday programming has been a lot of fun with the food boxes and gifts. We've had really great responses from our clients, and it's always, you know, a more magical time of year. Not getting too cliché with it, but it's a magical time. [Maria affirms.]

MARISSA: With this, we want to start by talking about coping with the holidays. We know that it can be a difficult time for survivors, regardless of where they're at in their healing journey. Survivors might be reminded of what they thought the holidays are going to look like, who they were going to spend them with, or might even remember past holidays with partners or family members that have hurt them in the past. The holidays might bring about anniversary dates of trauma or other significant events that may have occurred around the holidays.

And particularly this year too, many people—I don't think it would be a stretch to say all of us—are especially feeling a loss of normalcy this holiday season given the effects of COVID-19 on, really, life as we know it, with many survivors still stuck in an unsafe situation with an abuser due to the pandemic.

Grieving and mourning can also take the forefront here, and while we're all in different places in our healing journey, a few core things can help survivors navigate through the holidays a little bit easier.

So with that, today, we will be discussing maintaining routines, honoring boundaries, creating new traditions, safety planning, as well as self-care and grounding techniques. You might notice a lot of these topics have their own podcast episode, if you've been listening to our series the entire time, we will name some of those specifically. But again, feel free to browse through a website and go back through the series if you would like more information on these topics.

MARIA: So maintaining routines are really just helping with structure and predictability that can help us feel safe and a time that may be filled with chaos and possible triggers. So, something that can help is creating a routine for yourself that you can follow throughout the week, or many weeks. So this is especially important, kind of when looking at a day of an event or celebration if you have that time to be able to prepare. That's including looking at possible exit times if you might feel the need to leave due to safety concerns, and we'll discuss more about safety plans like this later on in the podcast.

And then, also trying to retain a sense of normalcy is important, but try not to be hard on yourself if you are struggling to keep up with your normal routines. For example, you may have a full skincare routine that you do every day, but may forget when you're feeling especially stressed, and that's okay! Be gentle with yourself.

MARISSA: Absolutely true, you can probably tell that I wrote that one about the skincare routine. That is something that falls off my plate when things get a little tough. And that's okay! You know, routines are important when they're serving us, but if there's too much going on, it's okay to let some things drop just for the time being just so you can get through those tougher times. And then whenever you want to pick those things back up, they will still be there. It's important to remember those things.

And crucial to maintaining that sort of routine is establishing boundaries that allow you to carry out your tasks without interruption, and put the focus on you when you need it. If you are new to boundaries, no worries; we can explore some things to think about when you're just starting out. We also have a couple of episodes about boundaries, both in season one and season two of this podcast if you'd like to learn more. And as always, if you would like some help practicing some of these skills, connect to your local hotline to meet with an advocate either in person over the phone, or whatever virtual options they might be offering.

So firstly, with maintaining boundaries, is naming your limits. So this involves looking into yourself and figuring out what fills you up or brings you joy, and conversely, what drains you or makes you perhaps feel exhausted. And you might also want to think about who fills you up and drains you during this time, what kind of people fulfill those roles in your life. Something important to think about, and I'll revisit this a little later too, when you allow yourself to say no to things—naming those limits, putting them in place—you find that you might actually be able to say yes to yourself and the things that you need to do for yourself.

So something else to think about too, is tuning into your feelings, watching out for some of that discomfort or resentment. Something I look out for in myself and encourage others to look out for is things that just make you feel a little uneasy in your stomach or just a little bit of that discomfort. Sometimes that physical feeling can cue us into what's going on emotionally for us. And we can ask ourselves what is causing this or what might be bothering me right now.

It's also important to be direct. When you are trying out these boundaries. We want to make sure others know what your boundaries are, so they can respect them. And that involves using assertive communication and using those I-statements to so folks know that this is what you are wanting to do. It helps people hear your boundaries easier.

It's also important to give yourself permission, and that's what I meant earlier by allowing yourself to say no to things so that you can say yes to yourself later on. You can allow yourself to take up the same space and boundaries that others do; setting boundaries is a way to show yourself respect to honor what you need, and it is not selfish at all. It might feel a little uncomfortable at first, it might feel selfish, but I promise you it is not. You need to do what you need for yourself and practice some of that self-awareness to hone in on your feelings and honor them. Again, it might not feel comfortable at first, but it certainly is a practice. And by practicing the self-awareness, try to make self-care a priority too, and recognize the importance of you and your feelings. Remember that giving time to yourself allows you to be more present for others in your life. You might have heard me say either once or perhaps a million times, you can't pour from an empty cup, and it's really important to make sure your needs are met if you do want to be present for others, if you do want to hold space for folks or be of service in any way.

And lastly, it's important to seek support to finding others who respect your boundaries, maybe some folks that have some boundaries that they're trying to work on in practice, and you can ultimately work together to hold each other accountable to those things do. And again, if you would like help practicing those skills, advocates are available to help you practice boundaries, too. It's one of my favorite things to talk about with clients, and, you know, we can really help with practicing those.

MARIA: Kind of on a lighter note is creating new traditions this holiday season. Especially with COVID-19, we're not always able to hang out with our family or friends, or celebrate the holidays as we traditionally would have. So no matter where you're at, you can begin to identify new traditions that you want to take with you moving forward. This can be a path toward self-discovery or back to the core of who you are, and the big question to ask is, is there something that you've always wanted to try? So then, go out and try it if you feel comfortable doing it.

Many people are feeling the need to create new traditions this year, so maybe those new traditions can go forward into upcoming years, and then you can also recreate what you want the holidays to look for you and your family while moving forward. So trying a new recipe, volunteering at a local organization whose mission statement you believe in, beginning a holiday scrapbook to mark memories each year, or going for a walk or drive to look at the lights [are all examples]. So something my family and I did (because they're in my bubble, I live pretty close to them) we actually did some cookie decorating this past weekend, and we discovered that none of us are very good at it. But we had a ball doing it, we laughed so hard that we cried, mainly at my cookie decorating! But it was fun, and it was great to try something new.

MARISSA: That sounds so fantastic. That sounds like quite a lot of fun.

MARIA: Yes. My sister is an artist and actually, one of her friends thought that one of my cookies was true art and made a clay ornament based off of the cookie that I decorated.

MARISSA: That is fantastic. What a way to have that cookie live on as a bit of a tradition!

MARIA: I'm so honored. Honestly love that tribute to my cookie.

MARISSA: That is so amazing. Going back into the safety planning piece of that, kind of like we were alluding to earlier, considering your safety and wellbeing during the holidays is crucial. Whether you are needing to travel during this time, if you are spending [the holidays] with an abusive partner or family member, we want to make sure that you are feeling safe and secure to get through this holiday season.

Once again, as a bit of a refresher, a safety plan is a personalized practical plan that helps you stay safe. It's individualized based on where you're at in the relationship and/or your healing journey, and again, this can encompass a physical safety plan, an emotional safety plan, perhaps a safety plan while traveling too, and we are going to go into those more specifically. Maria will be explaining physical and emotional safety plans.

MARIA: Yes, so physical safety plans are really having numbers on speed dial for your local hotline (if you're in the Waukesha area, the TWC 24-hour hotline), the local police, perhaps a close family or friend. Also think about a safe word or phrase and share it with a close friend or family member, so that they know when you say that word that you either need help getting out of situation or that you're at a point where the next step needs to follow.

Keep your phone and some money on you at all times, if possible, and try to remember to keep your phone charged: that's something that personally I forget quite often. Engage your support system: so cue family and friends into concerns on your safety, if it's safe as well, and then have a way out if need be, in case you need to leave the environment you're spending the holidays in, and quickly think of escape routes or exit routes that you can take. And if you have the chance to practice them, it's also great if you can practice. Like, if your exit route is down a fire escape, maybe opening that window and seeing how comfortable you feel on that fire escape, and just practicing it sometimes helps make it easier.

Emotional safety planning is seeking out supportive people, connecting with them, and these are people who make you feel heard, safe, and also believe you. They also will create a safe space for you. It can also be you creating a safe space, it can be in your physical environment. So that can be blankets, plants, I personally really like to have books all around me: just things that bring you comfort. It can also be a safe space mentally. So, if you really like to meditate, it's where you can go to and deep breathe and feel a sense of calm, and then also remind yourself of your value, create a mantra. It usually starts with "I am," so like, "I am kind. I am here." Things like that remind you that you are worthy. And then remember to be kind to yourself. So take care, take time to recharge and practice your own self-care.

MARISSA: So, safety planning while traveling: again, the holidays may bring travel to other cities or states to visit family members or friends. I know folks are, you know, still

possibly traveling during this year, so here are a few general tips to keep in mind if you are traveling.

So it's going to be very important to give your itinerary or travel plans to a safe person to alert them of essentially what your plan is what you're going to be doing while you're traveling. So this will look like where you'll be staying, any relevant contact information, a mode of travel. For instance, if you are driving and you intend to get to your location in roughly four hours, you may be planning a check-in with that friend or family member at that four hour mark. So they either know that you've gotten there safe, or if they haven't heard from you, they can execute another part of the plan, whether that's trying to give you a call, calling a local police department, whatever you deem is necessary and safe for you. Try to keep copies of important documents with you or with a trusted person as well. So this will look like a driver's license, a passport, perhaps a visa, things like that. Just in case you misplace them, or an abuser tries to take them, you're not stranded anywhere.

And again, like Maria mentioned, it's helpful to have some extra money on hand, if you can. This might end up being your cab fare, a night at a hotel if you need, or even some extra food, things like that. And research some of the available resources in the area that you're going to; so if there is a local domestic violence agency or shelter nearby, the local police department, things like that so you know that you've got all of your bases covered if you need some extra safety or support.

MARIA: Self-care is crucial to cope with stressors during the holidays and can be defined as any activity we do to take care of our overall wellbeing to fill ourselves back up. This is covered extensively in our last podcast, Wintertime Self-Care, and we encourage you to check it out if you haven't.

MARISSA: On a similar note is grounding. You may have heard us talk about this before. Grounding is a technique or skill that a person can use to help bring them back to the present moment, or to keep themselves in the present moment. It reorients you to the here and now, so you are aware of your body and your surroundings. There are two different kinds of grounding styles or techniques. There are sensory awareness practices, so this directs your focus on a specific sensory aspect of the body or your environment, and there's also cognitive awareness exercises, which reorient oneself through the time and space through thinking. So that's reminding yourself of your name, what day it is, where you are, things like that. We will include a couple of different exercises on our website alongside this podcast if you are looking for extra tips, ways to practice. And later on, Maria's going to explain sort of the brainy, cognitive side of all of this, and then I'll walk you through what an emergency grounding kit can look like, which is one of my favorite things on this planet.

MARIA: Yeah! So why does it work? How does it work? So we know that grounding techniques can be helpful for us to return from overwhelming feelings, and can help regain focus from an intensely emotional state, but how does it work? So grounding uses simple senses or information to get our “thinking cap” turned back on and tuned in. So this relaxes our “lizard brain”, which is our limbic system or amygdala, and helps us turn off intense emotions, such as the fight, flight, or freeze reactions.

MARISSA: Yeah, and we know that the fight, flight, or freeze can tend to come on when we are experiencing crisis or when we're experiencing a trigger, and grounding just helps us go right back into, you know, a grounded state, more peaceful state that allows us to really tap back into that cerebral cortex and think more clearly.

So this emergency grounding kit, again, is one of my favorite things. It's essentially a little self-care box. You might think about creating a grounding kit that you can take with you, that will be ready to help bring you back to the present if you're ever feeling unsteady or ungrounded in any sort of way. So again, this is a small kit with grounding and sensory tools to activate your senses. Some folks will carry it around in a little box, or have it in their space. I find it helpful to purchase you know, maybe like a little cosmetic bag. It can even be a Ziploc bag, whatever you have around you, you can carry some of these items to again, activate those five senses.

So starting with taste, you know, you might carry around a favorite tea or minty gum or a favorite candy just so if you need to experience a taste of something, you've got stuff with you.

To activate the sense of touch, you might bring with you a rock or a crystal. Some folks might have heard of “worry stones”, and they have little affirmations on the front. Those can be helpful as sort of a mantra and you know, something to physically touch. You might also carry around with you a stress ball or any sort of fidget, just to get the hands moving. Something pretty discreet, things that can help bring you back without drawing a whole lot of attention to the fact that you're grounding.

To activate that sense of smell, you might bring with you your favorite essential oil or lotion. Some of these things overlap too, you know, you can experience a sense of touch by putting lotion on your hands, or if you're bringing your favorite tea, you can both taste and smell that. And so a lot of these things can overlap, and I think that's really cool, kind of space-saving to think about it.

As far as activating the sense of sight, you might bring with you a picture of a pet, a friend, a place that you really like to visit. There's no shame in carrying around a picture of yourself to just, you know, see you. You know, maybe it's a picture you're feeling really good about, that works, too! And you can also bring with you some prompts that allow you to think of the space that you're currently in, the date and time, maybe some current events, things like that.

And to activate your hearing, you know, you might bring with you a list of songs that'll help boost your mood or bring you back, maybe a specific Spotify playlist. Maybe one of our TWC Spotify playlists, to throw in a little shameless plug there. But otherwise, you can also maybe write down a mantra that really resonates with you, one of those "I am" statements that you can verbally repeat to yourself and really live in that mantra.

So all of these things, you know, if there are things not on this list that you feel could be really helpful in a grounding kit, feel free to do them! They are very individualized and they're really fun to make too. Making these kits is an act of self-care in itself and can really help you in those moments when you're not feeling all great and you want to come back into that moment and feel grounded.

MARIA: Yeah, so some key points just to kind of remind yourself part of these mantras, and just part of grounding and just being prepared for the holidays are that you've already survived so much, so continue on your path, you're doing great. Normalize your feelings and reactions, so remember that healing is never linear, and let yourself feel the peaks and the valleys: it's all part of the normal healing journey. Maintain your routine as much as possible, but don't feel bad if you do forget to wash your face or do some of those routines that make you feel great but you're like, "I'm too stressed, I'm too exhausted, I can't do this right now," and that's totally fine! Also reinforce your boundaries, so knowing your limits, listening to your feelings and honoring them, and never be afraid to ask for help. You deserve to be checked in on and supported.

MARISSA: Absolutely true, and thank you again, Maria, for allowing me to feel good when I don't wash my face. That's a big deal! It really is a big deal. Sounds like I'm joking, but I'm not. It's one of those things that can just fall off, and that's okay and it's crucial to be gentle to yourself, right?

And another key takeaway I want you all to leave this podcast with is, you know, remember that wherever you are at in your healing, know that you deserve to feel safe. And that's feeling safe as kind of a minimum: you also deserve to feel supported and energized, and like a whole person. Those are things that you ultimately deserve.

MARIA: A huge thank you to all of our volunteers! We miss you dearly on site, and we haven't seen most of them since the beginning of the pandemic, so we are all really looking forward to when we can safely welcome you all back onsite. And then to all the volunteers who have volunteered virtually, by providing lots of encouragement to our staff and clients, who've also promoted our hotline or put together family activity kits, a huge thank you. Our clients and staff really appreciate them, I get stopped about every couple of weeks by a staff member saying, "Wow, I really appreciated that note from just a random community member, like it made my day." So huge. Thank you to everyone.

MARISSA: Yes, thank you so much. I'll provide that stop right now to you, Maria. Thank you, and thank you to all of the volunteers who have been such an immense support not only this year (especially this year), but just in general, and particularly this time of year as well. I can't tell you the amount of joy I've seen on clients' faces this time of year. It really means a lot, and thank you from the bottom of all of our hearts. And thank you, listeners, for joining us to learn more about Healing at the Holidays. This is the end of Season 2 of our podcast with the next season beginning on February 3rd of 2021.

The Women's Center welcomes and serves survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration status, 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.