



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

Season 3 Episode 8: May 19, 2021

Stigma of Disclosure: trauma, mental illness, and support

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and
Nouchee, Dual Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Advocate

Nouchee: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center Wednesday Workshop, a podcast that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members, and service providers alike. The Women's Center is based out of Waukesha, Wisconsin. We welcome and serve survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse, and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on a healing topic. Today, our topic is Stigma of Disclosure: Trauma, Mental Illness, and Support. We are your hosts, my name is Nouchee and I'm the Dual Domestic Abuse/Sexual Violence Advocate at The Women's Center.

Marissa: And my name is Marissa, I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center. We wanted to highlight May as Mental Health Awareness Month. The National Alliance on Mental illness, or NAMI, of Southeast Wisconsin, is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to provide help to those affected by mental illness. NAMI Southeast Wisconsin works to improve the understanding of mental health conditions, and share the hope of recovery by offering information, support, education, and advocacy services. According to NAMI, millions of Americans face the reality of living with a mental illness each year. It is important to break the stigma of living with a mental health diagnosis and ensure that nobody feels alone or without the support they need. Advocates of The Women's Center are not licensed therapists, but we can offer crisis intervention, emotional support, and coping skills for those who have survived abuse, as well as partner with our clients to find safe community resources that fully support their needs.

Nouchee: According to NAMI, a mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, and/or ability to relate to others in daily functions. Such as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life. Mental illnesses can affect persons of any age, race, religion, or income. Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character, or poor upbringing. Mental illnesses are treatable. Most people are diagnosed with a serious mental illness can experience relief from their symptoms by actively participating in an individual treatment plan. Recovery and symptom management is possible!

Marissa: To highlight some statistics, it's important to note that one in four American adults experience an episode of mental illness per year, and this is coming via NAMI. Individuals both diagnosed and undiagnosed with mental illness are those around us: our neighbors, our friends, our family, or coworkers. Mental illnesses account for more disability than any other illness, including cancer and heart disease, according to the Centers of Disease Control, or the CDC.

Nouchee: How are abuse and mental health connected? Also according to the CDC, survivors of intimate partner violence often experience mental health diagnoses, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Survivors of sexual violence also experience similar mental health symptoms or diagnoses. Via the CDC, "coping and completing everyday tasks after victimization can be challenging. Victims may have difficulty maintaining personal relationships, returning to work or school, and regaining a sense of normalcy."

Comorbidity means that mental health diagnoses and trauma can be common to exist together for an individual. Trauma may cause the development of a mental illness like PTSD, depression, anxiety, and more. Another way that abuse and mental health are connected is that abusers may utilize a victim's mental illness to exert power and control. An abuser may use the victim/survivor's mental illness or addiction to discredit them if they try to exit the relationship, isolate them from family and friends, and/or to gaslight or psychologically abuse them. It's not uncommon for a survivor with a mental illness to hear from their abusers that nobody will believe them if they disclose about the abuse, or that the abuser has a responsibility to control them due to their mental illness, such as that they won't survive or become worse without the abuser's help. An abuser may also use a mental illness or addiction to make the victim/survivor dependent on them by withholding substances or not refilling medication.

Marissa: Moving forward, it's important to talk about what stigmas are placed on victim/survivors and those living with a mental illness. There are so many myths and misconceptions that I think are important to break. First of all, there's a myth that

abusers are abusive because they have a mental illness. This is false. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, abusive behavior in an intimate partner relationship and mental illness are two separate entities.

Another myth that's important to break is that mental illness is not as bad as physical illness, and that emotional abuse is not as bad as physical or sexual abuse. This is also false. We know that all experiences with mental illness and/or abuse are valid, and it's important to acknowledge this. It's on us as allies and supports to educate ourselves and others with these stigmas in hopes of ultimately ending them and ensuring that victim/survivors and those living with a mental health diagnosis can feel safe and validated.

For victim/survivors and those living with a mental health diagnosis, they may experience silencing and invalidating, as well as isolation and a lack of supports in their lives. They may hear things like "this isn't real" or "this didn't happen." This could come from the abuser as mentioned before, or from members of that "support system." This invalidates the intensity of the situation and gaslights the victim/survivor into believing that they misunderstood the situation due to their mental illness. They may also hear things like "why didn't you do [this or that or the other thing?]" As that last point foreshadows, it can be hard for a victim/survivor to be believed, and this impacts how they can safely exit their abusive relationship. Mental illnesses can also impact motivation and self-worth, and victim/survivors may feel like they have no choice but to remain in the relationship. Hearing these types of responses and stigmas can leave victim/survivors feeling like they can't reach out to anyone, that they won't be believed, and/or that they should blame themselves or feel shame for experiencing abuse or having a mental illness. This is not true, and you do deserve support.

Nouchee: As a survivor and as someone living with a mental health diagnosis or illness, you are not alone. Living with a mental illness does not make you any less of a person. You deserve to be respected and to have support. Experiencing abuse does not mean you deserve to be treated poorly. You deserve to have safe and healthy relationships free from violence. Remember that nothing justifies abuse. Regardless of if someone lives with a mental illness, no one deserves to have their health used against them. There's nothing that a person can do to make them deserving of abuse. Your feelings and your experiences are valid. You are not alone in your experience; reach out to your local domestic violence or sexual assault organization, as they may know of or host support or educational groups in your area. We are beginning to jumpstart our in-person Wednesday Workshop educational group, and our local partner, NAMI of Southeast Wisconsin, hosts virtual support groups. We will link this information on our website and we will discuss some more resources and support next.

Marissa: So with that, how can advocates or other supports help? They can help by building bridges, so connecting a victim/survivor to other supports and resources that can give them comprehensive and compassionate support. Support systems are essential to safety and wellness. People such as advocates, therapists, guidance counselors, trusted friends or family members, faith leaders, and so on are all great people to have in your corner when you need support. There are an abundance of national hotlines too that exist to be a 24-hour support in times of crisis. We will provide a list of these hotlines on our website as well.

Advocates and other supports help by providing education too, so helping a victim/survivor identify signs of abuse, identify coping tools, as well as helpful strategies to continue to feel safe and grounded. Safety plans are one of many tools that we have and they can be made for a variety of needs, such as physical safety in navigating abuse, safety plans for suicidal ideation and/or self-harm, and emotional safety for processing trauma and/or coping with symptoms of mental illness. One of the most important things to walk away from is, again, the fact that you are not alone, and you do deserve support. There's no shame in reaching out, you're not a burden for doing so, and there are individuals out there that do truly want to help.

Nouchee: Thank you for joining us to learn more about Stigma of Disclosure: Trauma, Mental Illness, & Support. Our next episode will be about Domestic Violence & Sexual Abuse in the LGBTQ+ Community.

The Women's Center focuses our work in partnering with clients to overcome barriers and gain a life free from violence. Our work is grounded in equity, upheld by inclusion, accountability, self-reflection, and continual growth.

We believe that it is important for survivors to feel seen and heard. We believe that Black Lives Matter because we cannot end violence without addressing the distinct injustices that Black and Indigenous People of Color face. We know that all forms of oppression are ultimately connected, and when we center individuals most impacted, we are also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we are not experts in anti-racism work, we aspire to be allies in this movement; we all have a responsibility to contribute to unlearning racism and intersecting forms of oppression that take place in our communities.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at www.twcwaukesha.org, and find the resources mentioned on this episode by clicking Resources, then Podcasts on our website. Thank you and be well.