



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

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Breaking the Trauma Bond

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

MARISSA: 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 Breaking the Trauma Bond. We are your hosts, my name is Marissa and I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center.

NOUCHEE: My name is Nouchee and I'm the Dual Domestic Abuse/Sexual Violence Advocate. Trauma bonding is a term developed by Patrick Carnes. He describes this as “the misuse of fear, excitement, sexual feelings and sexual physiology to entangle another person.” He also quotes “a strong emotional attachment between an abused person and his or her abuser, formed as a result of the cycle of violence.”

Trauma bonding is intense, unlike a normal bond we may create with family or friends. Trauma bonds can feel like an addiction, similar to gambling. We are sure that this next try—for example, on a slot machine or within a relationship—is going to be the one that changes everything for the better, despite the low chances of this occurring.

MARISSA: With trauma bonding, there is the tendency to rationalize the abuser's contradictory behavior. So for instance, you may notice the abuser's more tense or explosive behaviors versus their seemingly kinder, more honeymoon-esque behaviors, and sometimes they can feel like two different people. This only further strengthens the trauma bond, as we continue to hold out hope for that next good moment, or even just an uneventful and nonexplosive moment.

Hanging onto that hope is often a survival coping tool, especially when leaving feels more dangerous; we'll discuss this a little bit more in detail later.

If you've experienced a trauma bond, you may have also experienced isolation; your support people may not necessarily understand why you've continued to stay in an abusive relationship, not understanding these complex dynamics at play. We know that on average, it takes about eight attempts to end the relationship for good. Isolation may also enforce an “us against the world” mentality in the relationship, making you feel like your partner is the only support you have even though they're harmful to you.

NOUCHEE: Some effects of trauma bonds are the hormones that are released during this cycle of abuse, and this can have short and long term effects. During the tension and explosive phases, cortisol and adrenaline may be released, which are stress hormones involved in the fight, flight, or freeze response. During the honeymoon phase, dopamine may be released, which is the bonding or pleasure hormone, seeking comfort from an abuser. This can cause a hormonal roller coaster that can be addictive. “Rewards” in abusive relationships can be anything from feelings of normalcy and calm, displays of affection, or abuser’s [often false] remorse. These are given sporadically throughout the abuse cycle in a pattern known as intermittent reinforcement.

MARISSA: And so with this intermittent reinforcement, it ultimately strengthens the trauma bond. It may keep victim/survivors attached because they feel diminished, isolated, and even programmed to rely on the abuser for their sense of self-worth or comfort, even when they've been harmful. We know that abusive relationships can feel so intense, they often have those really high highs and those really low lows. And unfortunately, this is something that is often glorified in our culture—seen as passionate, a “whirlwind romance,” et cetera. It can become difficult to relate to others when we crave the intense emotional connection that an abuser chooses to give when convenient for them.

This is not a conscious decision that we make. This often happens gradually without us noticing until we feel like we're in too deep and unable to readily escape. You may have heard of something called the “boiling frog” fable. If a frog was placed in a boiling pot of water, it would jump out immediately, understanding that the pot was boiling. However, if a frog was placed in a warm pot of water that was brought up to a boil very slowly, it likely won't notice the danger until it's too late. And so with this trauma bonding sometimes we really don't see how far we're into it until it feels like we're in too deep.

NOUCHEE: Looking at our past and our future in terms of trauma, we know that when trauma happens in early life, it may cause numbing to many aspects of intimacy. So, individuals who've experienced trauma often respond positively to a dangerous person or situation, because it may feel normal. Traumatic experiences often result in a person emotionally shutting down, which may result in primitive instincts to cope to ensure survival in an abusive or unhealthy relationship.

We may also subconsciously focus on the positive attributes of the abuser. So justifying this person's actions or verbal abuse, rationalizing these things, becoming numb to it, ignoring the gaslighting, et cetera.

MARISSA: In this conversation about trauma bonds, you may be wondering if you've ever developed a trauma bond. There can be some common signs, one being that you know the person is deceptive and manipulative, yet you cannot let them go. You may feel like you give and give and give, but never receive anything in return. You may feel addicted to your partner. You may engage in self destructive behaviors. Or, you may feel less confident than you were before the relationship. If you've ever experienced these things, know that you're not alone, and we're going to explain a little bit more of the background behind some of these common thoughts.

NOUCHEE: So now we're going to go over some characteristics of a trauma bond relationship. First, there's deception and manipulation. This might bring up some thoughts of “well, they're acting very kind now... is the relationship really that bad?” and other thoughts such as these. Another characteristic is you giving and never receiving. So the relationship may feel very one-sided, or that you feel you have to defend your abuser's behaviors even when they constantly put you down. Abusers tend to prey most on “givers,” because givers often want to help others; abusers then convince them that they don't deserve support back, which is not true.

Another characteristic of a trauma bonded relationship is that addiction to the cycle of abuse. The constant emotional roller coaster makes you feel like you truly can't live without them. Abusers and our culture (think of love songs) reinforce and romanticize this, [things] such as “I can't live without you,” or “You're like the air that I breathe,” and more. There's also self-destructive behavior, so an abuser may make you feel like you are not worthy of safety or peace. There may also be self-sabotage, which becomes a reflex; you may feel the need to say these things to yourself so that others can't reject you. Another characteristic is lowering standards. An abuser has chipped away at your self-image and filled the space with toxic messages, that maybe you're not enough or that they've lowered their own standards to stay with you. Eventually, you may feel like you deserve to be treated poorly, or else you'll “end up alone.”

MARISSA: Knowing all of this, how can we start to break the trauma bond? Firstly, we can start with trying to challenge negative self-talk, and interrupting that negative self-talk with an attempt to reframe some of those statements. So for instance, if you're thinking, “How could I let this happen again?” you may want to interrupt that thought and say, “I've survived and I feel strong.” It can also help to be present in the present, so focusing on what is currently happening versus what might not be happening right now, as well as letting go of what could or will happen tomorrow or in the days leading forward. It's really important to take one day at a time, and release some of that all or nothing thinking, as well as making decisions that support your own self-care.

Remember that healing isn't linear, and to be kind to yourself and to talk to yourself in a compassionate manner. It's also important to recognize and experience your emotions. You're trying to break out of a trauma bond and you may still feel like you want to reach out to your abuser for reassurance. However, it may be healthier to write down those feelings instead or talk to a safer support. Remember that the only way out is through, so acknowledge how far you've come in your healing as well. Lastly, learn to grieve. Again, letting go of traumatic bonds is a really difficult thing to do, and it's important to honor that you may be losing something or someone that was once valuable to you. Know that you've done the hard work of realizing that that is unhealthy and unsustainable for you moving forward.

NOUCHEE: Another tip to breaking the trauma bond is to understand the “hook.” Identify what you're actually losing so you can begin to move towards grieving and saying goodbye. Think of the abuser's behaviors in the context of the cycle of violence. Is this objectively good, or just part of the honeymoon phase? Write a list of bottom line behaviors for yourself. For example, “I will not engage in conversations with someone that puts me down.” You may also safeguard your boundaries. Know that you can still be a giving person without having to constantly sacrifice your own needs—you can't pour from an empty cup. Start to rebuild your life: what do you want to accomplish in the future? Identify goals for yourself, like taking up a new hobby, changing careers, safe housing, et cetera. Lastly, rebuild healthy connections. Identify your go-to people for support, and reach out for professional help if needed.

MARISSA: And so all of this is to say that if you've experienced trauma bonds, you're not alone and there is a way to break those bonds and ultimately rebuild. Thank you so much for joining us to learn more about Breaking the Trauma Bond. Our next episode will be about Addressing the Should've, Could've, Would've.

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.