



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

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Addressing the Should've, Could've, Would've

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 Addressing the Should've, Could've, Would've. We are your hosts, my name is Marissa and I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center.

NOUCHEE: And my name is Nouchee and I'm the Dual Domestic Abuse Sexual Violence Advocate at The Women's Center. So when we're thinking about past trauma, it's normal to have feelings of wishing we could have changed the relationship, thinking that I should have seen this in that happen, I could have done this in that, or I could have said different things. But it's important when we're thinking about past trauma to acknowledge that we can't change the past and thinking about different ways we can heal and move forward, which we know is easier said than done.

MARISSA: And when we're thinking about that past trauma often we're looking at shame at the root. And there is a difference between healthy shame and unhealthy or toxic shame. Healthy shame involves feelings of accountability, it can help us move towards positive thinking and behaviors. For example, if we accidentally crossed someone else's boundaries, we'll apologize to them. This healthy shame has a focus. There's a desire to change our behavior, hold ourselves accountable for our actions, and aim to do better. This helps us stop and reflect and it can preserve trust and healthy relationships with others. On the other hand, unhealthy shame is a paralyzing assessment of oneself as a person, which comes through the lens of self-evaluation. Oftentimes, we may use the emotion of shame to describe ourselves in negative terms. For instance, I'm the worst because I did this, that or the other thing. And we may feel

like we don't deserve to take up space because we made a mistake. Oftentimes, this form of unhealthy shame can come from messages that we internalize from abusers. For instance, if they keep saying I'm worthless, maybe I am and things like that.

NOUCHEE: And with shame may come negative self-talk. And talking about internal shame as well, we may feel bad for not seeing through the abusers “act” or falling for it. We might feel that external shame from others around us as well. We might be questioned with, “Why don't you leave? Why didn't you tell me what was happening? Why didn't you get help? Why did you wear certain things or you shouldn't have been drinking.” We also live in a society that is more outraged by individuals who find themselves in relationships with abusive people rather than the fact that perpetrators abuse.

MARISSA: And so let's break this down just a little bit more, I want to look at the phrase “I should have left”. This is one of the most common sentiments that survivors express is immediately after that breakup. We know that women are 70 times more likely to be killed in weeks after leaving an abusive partner than any other time in the relationship. We know that there are some other barriers too that can keep folks from leaving abusive relationships like marriage, legal obligations, children, shared finances, those are often reasons people stay in abusive relationships as well. We also know that it can be hard to seek help, and that people reach out for help when they're ready, and it can be hard to feel ready.

NOUCHEE: And to address the statements or thoughts of, “I could have tried doing this. I could have said this or that.” we know that abusers abuse regardless of how much an individual police's their own behavior. Abusers choose when they resort to threats and violence. Even when we try all options to please an abuser, not only are we sacrificing our own needs, an abuser will still find a way that we come up short. And so it's normal to feel personally responsible for an abusers behavior. When we've gone through trauma. It's normal to feel personally responsible for an abusers behavior, especially when we're told time and time again, that it's our fault that they became angry. Talking about that internal shame as well, you might feel responsible for what happened because you didn't say no to a certain thing. But remember that consent is not the absence of a no. We also live in a society that has the “ride or die” mentality. So that puts pressure on the relationship to not give up and to forgive and forget. We may receive these messages from our culture, religious practices, maybe that thought that divorce is not okay, different family expectations, again, internally and externally.

MARISSA: A common thought might also be that, “I would have changed to this or I wished I would have changed this, that or the other.” And we know that many victims/survivors reflect on what they could have changed throughout the relationship or within the situation, as well as the outcomes that have appeared due to the abuse. We know that survivors carry this guilt, but it's important to understand that we can't predict the future, and that this is an unfair responsibility to put on our shoulders. Oftentimes, when we see that someone has not taken

accountability for harm, we sometimes may feel obligated to take on that accountability to try to find a sense of closure. And again, we want to reiterate that abuse is a choice, abusers choose to harm and we're not responsible for the actions of another person when they choose to harm us. And that that is for the abuser to carry on their own.

NOUCHEE: And when we carry that shame onto ourselves, we know that there can be long term effects. So shame without support or kindness can overwhelm us and over a long period of time, it can lead to things like depression and anxiety. Shame can also direct our behaviors. So again, that negative self-talk or perception of ourselves, we may put others needs ahead of our own, we might be embarrassed to express our needs and concerns, especially if that is something that we have been told was not okay to do, or was safe to do, and we might make ourselves smaller for the benefit of others.

MARISSA: So how do we start transforming shame? We want to spend a little bit of time talking about things that might be helpful in transforming that shame for you. Firstly, try listening to your inner dialogue and recognize when you slip into negative self-talk. So at this point, we're just observing it, but not necessarily reacting to it just yet, we'll get there later. It's important to just sort of keep our ear to the ground and listen to what our mind is almost automatically going to. It's also helpful to try to become compassionate with yourself, which we know is easier said than done. All of this is a process. But understand that if you can't be kind to yourself, how can we expect others to. In knowing that we all have flaws, we are all human, we are perfectly imperfect, and you're not alone in this. It's also important to try to mourn your wounds or losses because they do exist and we have to address them. And this requires us to identify and feel the pain associated with the shame and hurt that we feel. Oftentimes, the only way out is through. So taking the time to process this and ultimately forgive yourself too because we know it is so easy to beat yourself up with hindsight, trying to identify the things that you could have seen coming, should have seen something, would have done something about but knowing that you can only act from the awareness that you have at the given moment. You did what you had to do at the time with the information that you had and as you are healing as you are growing and transforming, you'll be gaining new information that can help you move forward in the future.

NOUCHEE: It's also important to remind yourself that the abuse was not your fault. So for individuals who have gone through abuse, it's common to convince yourself that the abuse was your fault to gain some sense of control over a situation that maybe we didn't have control over. Remember that each individual has control over their own actions and one individual choosing to be abusive is never your fault. Remind yourself that you did not deserve it. Nothing anyone ever does justifies abuse. Individuals in a relationship and/or family deserve to be respected at all times. And lastly, prioritizing and recognizing the importance of self-care. Self-care is a part of our healing journey and it's especially important to utilize and prioritize self-care during a time where we're thinking a lot about trauma or the past things that we have gone

through that has caused harm. So self-care looks different for everyone. That can be a spa day for some. That can be watching television. That could be watching funny YouTube videos. Whatever helps you feel better in that moment, we strongly encourage it.

MARISSA: Self-care also looks like practicing self-compassion. And again, self-compassion focuses on you the person versus the experience or the emotion. Self-compassion looks like treating yourself like you would a close friend or family member. Just to provide an example, if a loved one of yours came up to you and shared a situation that was the exact same as yours or very similar, we likely wouldn't tell them to just get over it that it was their fault that they should have done this or that. So why do we tell ourselves that? Understand that self-compassion encompasses three core elements, which is self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. And self-compassion is the practice of recognizing those self-criticizing statements, and replacing them with self-compassionate statements. So now we're moving into the part where we're trying to challenge some of those statements and replace them with ones that are more helpful to our healing. Even if it feels a little selfish, I want to assure you that it is not selfish at all, and that we deserve to hear from ourselves that we're worthy of love, of care, of support. And we can say this to ourselves, even if we don't believe it right now, because we might start to believe it later. Trying to make a point to tell yourself these self-compassionate statements, even when we don't believe them, can still be really transformative and we may surprise ourselves by ending up believing them after all.

NOUCHEE: And so we wanted to leave you all with some reminders. The important thing is that you're beginning your healing journey and starting to break away from the shame that you may have. Regardless of how long it took, or the damages it may have caused, expecting yourself to have known it will turn out the way it did, is unfair to yourself. We can't predict the future. Know that you gave what you had to the relationship. You sacrificed what you could. And others may have opinions about your situation and may question your actions or say that they would have done this or that, but remember, you were the one in the situation and you handled it the best you could. You are a survivor and lived through challenges that you should have never had to face. You can only control yourself in this present moment and by listening to this podcast, you are taking important steps towards healing.

MARISSA: Thank you so much for joining us to learn more about Addressing the Should've, Could've, Would've. Our next episode will be about Prioritizing Your Needs.

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. If you're in the greater Milwaukee area, we also host an in-person Wednesday Workshop on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of every month. Please call our hotline for more information on that. Thank you and be well.