



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript Season 4 Episode 4: November 2nd, 2021 Trauma and the Body

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and
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MARISSA: Hello and welcome to the Women's Center's 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 Trauma and the Body. We are your hosts. My name is Marissa and I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center.

SAM: And my name is Sam and I'm the Dual Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Advocate here at The Women's Center.

MARISSA: We want to start this topic off with a little bit of a disclaimer. We want folks to note that The Women's Center is not a mental health clinic, health care provider or alcohol and drug treatment center. And we do not provide diagnostic services or assessments. So with that in mind, we cannot make any official connection between physical and or mental conditions and trauma. This podcast is informational only and not meant to be used as a self-diagnostic tool. If at any time you have questions about physical and or mental conditions you may be experiencing, contact your medical provider.

SAM: So before we jump into trauma and the body, first we want to identify what trauma is; and trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event. And that is the definition given by the American Psychological Association. Trauma can occur after intense stressors, accidents, assaults, natural disasters, really after any event; and after those events shock and denial are typical, and long term reactions can also occur with those traumatic events. And we know that our bodies start trauma in different ways, which can manifest different for every individual. So the more impactful the person feels

the event is to their life, the bigger the traumatic experience. And sometimes those experiences aren't even things that are on our radar, but can still show up in how our body kind of processes that trauma. We also want to put in a note that PTSD and trauma are not interchangeable terms. Trauma can lead to PTSD, but not all traumatic events can develop into PTSD. A traumatic event is time based. Well PTSD is a longer term condition where one continues to have flashbacks and re-experiencing the traumatic event over and over. One resource that talks about trauma in the body is Bessel Vander Kolk book, *The Body Keeps the Score, brain, mind and body in the healing of trauma*. We know that our body holds trauma as a memory, there are different triggers that can bring about pieces of a traumatic memory, which can come about in a somatic way, which again looks different for each person. And through support you can learn more about possible inherited trauma or your own trauma and ways in which we can heal from it. And we do have that video linked on our website.

MARISSA: So when we experience trauma, our brain undergoes a certain activation and response there are a couple of survival responses that you may already be familiar with, that's going to be fight or flight. And we're also going to talk about freeze. So first I'm going to talk about what the body is doing and how the brain is trying to keep you safe. So within fight, your body may be trying to counteract the danger and this may look like increased heart rate or an adrenaline rush. In flight. Your body may go into alert mode when your brain perceives something as threatening. So this can look like tensed muscles as the body readies itself to flee if necessary. When we encounter freeze, our body tends to stop as the brain is trying to gauge how threatening the situation is, and what else may be going on around you. Now freeze can transition into fight or flight or you may continue to freeze due to experiencing fear. So your ability to think or concentrate is limited, your body may become immobile, you may begin to block out events as you come to realize that there's no way to escape or counter the situation. And freeze can be a pretty common response in the face of experiencing abuse. With all of these it's important to note that these processes are done without our rational thought. As our prefrontal cortex is overpowered by the limbic system due to survival instincts that help keep us alive and relatively safe. After trauma, our brains may remain in this activated state as a response to other stressful stimuli or even the memory of the past trauma. That is called hypervigilance.

SAM: And we know that when you experience trauma, some of there are some symptoms that can come into play. And again, these are just common symptoms. If you experience the symptoms, it does not necessarily mean that you have experienced trauma or that you have developed PTSD. So some of the physical or behavioral symptoms can look like nausea and dizziness, uncontrollable shaking, heart palpitations, so your heart racing, or fluttering. Some people describe it as you may have trouble breathing, there can be changes in appetite or sleep. So you're either eating too much or too little, you're sleeping too much or too little. And this can also look like withdrawing from your daily activities. So maybe you're calling into work more often, you're not hanging out with your friends, you're not going to your your book club that you go to every Wednesday. And trauma can also impact our mental and emotional state. So this can look like hypervigilance and fear, nightmares and flashbacks, lack of concentration, dissociation or just kind of feeling numb, irritability, depression, or even

grief and guilt. And again, these are not all encompassing. And just because you have these symptoms does not mean necessarily that you are experiencing traumatic symptoms.

MARISSA: Shifting gears a little bit control is something that is taken away from survivors of abuse. Abusers take away your control, much like how trauma can take control of our body. And in trying to face this trauma trying to understand it, we want to try to take back that control as a way to reclaim your mind and body. And it can also look like retraining your brain and being aware of your body. In terms of retraining your brain we may take back control by undergoing therapy. So that may look like therapy practices like EMDR, DBT, CBT, those are a lot of acronyms; Feel free to research some of those see what may work best for you if you are thinking about therapy. We can also start to retrain our brain as well by using grounding and coping skills so that can bring our mind and body back into the present moment. In terms of body awareness, we can start noticing physical sensations in times of stress and peace. So this may be constantly shifting as different stressors impact us differently. This may also look like identifying triggers and practicing an emotional safety plan. We have a different podcast episode on self care and emotional safety planning. And it may be helpful to check that out if you're looking to start an emotional safety plan. Another thing that can help with body awareness is naming what's going on - putting words to experiences. This can be challenging due to a fear of feeling or experiencing shame, as a result of your experiences, know that you're not alone with this one. The trauma you've experienced is not your fault, and when we can allow ourselves to feel what we're feeling, we're starting to become more aware and therefore we are taking that control back. We can acknowledge these feelings by naming them and then utilizing some of those skills and tools or maybe utilizing therapy to either enjoy the feeling, move on from the feeling or let it wash over.

SAM: So now we want to give you some tools that you can utilize to maybe regain your body back. Yoga can be a very helpful tool and kind of reclaiming our body, you get to decide how it moves, how far you're able to move it depending on the stretch, or position. And we will be going through some of those with you as well later in this podcast. Another one is body scanning, or body mapping. And again, we'll kind of go through that as well. But this is just to bring awareness to your body and to kind of help you put words or understanding to what you're feeling in different parts of your body. Dance or just expressive movement can also be helpful. And this can be used to express an experience or your feelings without words. And this can kind of be freeing to control your body as well as to work on physical health. Another option is meditation. And one part of meditation that we practice here at The Women's Center is mindfulness. And this is a type where you focus on being very aware of what you're sensing or feeling in that present moment and trying to tune everything else out. And this can go along with some of these other tools. Another tool that you can utilize is progressive muscle relaxation. This personally is one of my favorites. Progressive muscle relaxation is a method to relieve tension. This looks like as you breathe in you tense a group of muscles and then relax them as you exhale. And this one can be really helpful especially right before bed to kind of just relieve either just that daily stress, that daily tension or something that you're experiencing because of trauma. Another tool is processing and you can process

with yourself supports or professionals. Processing with yourself can look like journaling just can kind of be taught yourself while you're doing the dishes, it can be creating art. Really, whatever you need to kind of have that reflection time with you. You can also process with support. So that can be your friends, your family, your coworkers, something just kind of bouncing what you're feeling off of them. And you want to make sure that you're choosing individuals who are supportive, and that aren't going to minimize what you're experiencing. And lastly, you can process with professionals. So this can be your therapist, this can be your physician, this can be an advocate. And that's just kind of talking through what you've experienced. And these individuals are more prepared to kind of get into some of those nitty gritty spots of what you're experiencing, and help you better understand what's been going on, what has happened and how to move forward in that.

MARISSA: So let's start with a brief chair yoga flow or practice. So as always, with any sort of physical movement, you know, move yourself in ways that do not hurt you if you're experiencing pain or if you have any concerns. Check in with your physician to see what types of practices are best for you. I'm going to start us off with a seated Mountain Pose. So while you're seated, place both feet on the floor and at a comfortable distance apart, aligning your hips and shoulders. Place your hands on your legs or knees and lengthen your spine into an upright position. It can sometimes help to pretend that there's a string connected to your head and spine that is being gently lifted upwards. Focus on your breathing, letting go of anything not needed to hold the posture. And with this, we're going to move into something called the side stretch twist. And so from that seated mountain pose, you're going to widen the legs to either side of your chair and point your feet outwards. Keeping your back elongated. Place the palms of your hands on your knees. Focus on your breathing during this time. On your next exhale, pivot at your waist, placing your right elbow on your right leg. As you exhale, gently lift your left arm straight upwards. Point your head towards your left arm if able. Hold for a couple of breaths. On your next exhale. Bring your left arm down and pivot your waist in the opposite direction. Placing your left elbow on your left leg. As you inhale, gently lift your right arm straight upwards. Point your head towards your right arm if able and hold for a couple of breaths. From here, we're going to move back into that seated Mountain Pose. So feet both on the floor - sitting tall. Now we're going to move into the back bend arch. So from seated mountain pose, gently arch your back as if to squeeze your shoulder blades together. Bring your hands together in front of your chest, gripping your fingers with your left hand over your right. Gently pull your hands apart while arching your back, holding for a couple of breaths. And from here, we're going to go back into that seated Mountain Pose and before we move to our final pose, which is cat cow, one of my personal favorites. From seated Mountain Pose placed the palms of your hands on your knees. On your next exhale, lean forward, rounding your back and curving your upper spine like a cat. Hold for a single breath. On your next inhale, gently lengthen your spine and arch your back like a cow. Hold for a single breath. Alternate between cat and cow pose for several breaths. You may choose to alternate between cat and cow more quickly going into cat pose on your exhale, and cow pose on your inhale. And we're going to be including this flow as a link on our website underneath this podcast if this is something you want to practice independently.

SAM: and then afterwards, and again, this is optional. body mapping. body mapping is a sensory motor activity where you focus on physical sensations and feelings in the body and depict them on paper through artistic means. So I like to pair these two first to scan my body to see what I'm feeling and then map it out on paper. And again, you don't have to be artistic at all. In order to do body mapping. Anybody can do this process. As we go through this process. I just want you to be kind to yourself. Be gentle with yourself, especially as you go into the body mapping. The body mapping can cause a lot of feelings of inferiority or you know, kind of put ourselves into the mindset that you know, we're not good at drawing, we're not good at art. And again, you don't have to. Infants do this. 90 year olds do this. so, no matter where you are in your process in your lifetime, you can do this. And you don't have to have any expectations as to what this looks like. So first, we are going to go through a body scan meditation. And again, you can look this up. There's tons of videos depending on how long you want this meditation to be. I have found one minute ones, I have found hour ones - it really depends on what you need in that moment. So as we go into our body scan, find a comfortable position in which to sit, you may sit down, you can lie down on the ground, but just make sure that you remain awake and aware as long as you're comfortable. If you're comfortable doing so, allow your eyes to gently close. Start by tuning into the posture of your body. It is helpful to keep the spine straight as straight as possible, and keeping your spine energized while relaxing the muscles around your skeleton. You can use breath to aid in this process as you breathe in, breathe energy and awareness into your spine, reaching the spine gently upward. As you exhale, let go. Allow the shoulders to drop. Let there be some slack in your jaw and soften your belly. We'll start the body scan by tuning into the top of your head or the crown. Simply bring awareness to the top of your head tuning into whatever is present for you. Can you feel the skin, can you feel your hair, the temperature of the air around you. There's no right or wrong feeling, just tune into whatever is physically present for you in this moment. You can drop down into your forehead and your eyebrows. Again tuning into whatever is present for you. You may notice the temperature of the air around you some slight scrunching or some relaxation, whatever is present, just simply be with that feeling. Then we move down into your eyes and your cheeks. Even with your eyes closed, you may notice some movement. Your cheeks, are they tense, are they relaxed? Now we're going to continue down to the tip of your nose and your upper lip. Here, you can feel the body breathing gently and naturally, you may notice the air on its way in and coming out just a little bit warmer than the cold air you're breathing in. We then move into our mouth looking at the lips, the jaw, your tongue. Notice how the tongue is resting. Is it at the top of your mouth? Is it relaxed? Is it to one side or the other? Is there any tension or slack in your jaw? Just again, being with your body as in this present moment. Then we'll drop down into your neck and throat noticing any tension or movement of the body with the breath. Remember, there's nothing you should be experiencing there's no right or wrong answer. Just tuning into the direct physical experience. Let go of the judgments and thoughts and return to the actual physical body. You can move out to the tops of the shoulders and into your shoulder blades. Perhaps noticing any movement as you're breathing or sensation of the clothes on your body. If you're lying down, you can notice the floor against your shoulder blades or as you're sitting does your chair touch your shoulders in any way. Dropping down into the upper arms and elbows again, just tune into whatever is directly present in your experience. Continue down into the forearms and wrists, perhaps

noticing any points of contact. Maybe your arms are resting in your lap or on the arms of your chair or on a blanket or the floor. And just notice how that feels. And moving into the hands go over the palms, the fingers, and the back of the hand. Notice any points of contact where your hands may be touching each other resting in your lap or touching something else. You may notice that the temperature of the air feels different than the back of your hand than it does your palm. Also the position of your hand - be aware of how that feels if you open or close your hand. Come back into the chest and rest here for a moment tuning into the body as it breathes. You may notice a rising and falling the expansion and contraction, the natural movement of the body breathing. As you drop down into the abdomen in stomach again, you may notice the sensations of the body breathing. Rest your awareness with the body and just stick with whatever sensations arise. Drop down into the hips, the pelvis and your butt. You can feel the point of contact where your body meets the chair or cushion or floor. Again, taking a moment to feel the sensations. Next, move on to your knees and thighs, noticing any points of contact any tensions, any relaxations, how the clothes feel on your body, how the floor or your chair feels anything else present in your direct experience. We then drop into your calves, your shins and your ankles, seeing what's present for you. Is there any aches or pains is there some jittery or anxious feelings in your legs, whatever is present just be. Finally move into the feet going over the heel, the arch the ball of the foot, the toes and the top of the foot, tuning into the points of contact and recognizing how different parts of your feet may feel. Take a moment here at the end to tune into your whole body together from head to toe, you may be able to feel the breath energy as it moves through your body, you can get a sense of the entire outline or posture of the body as it rests.

So now that we've gone through a body scan, now we can go through body mapping. And again, this can look different for each person. If you are a visual learner, I would recommend looking up some images of what body mapping can look like. So you can either have a print out version, gingerbread cookie, or just a general outline of a human figure. You can also draw one, again, being gentle with yourself as to what it looks like it doesn't have to be perfect. And then going through kind of again, from your head to your feet. What was brought up during that body scan? Does it feel like a color, is there a word that you can put to it? Is there a similar feeling in your shoulders as there is in your lower back? These are kinds of things that you can dictate or even map out, draw, paint, whatever, whatever method you'd like to use. Using this body scan, and the body mapping. This can be something that you can use on a regular basis to kind of see how your body changes from one day to the next. Or maybe in a time of relaxation and time of tension. This can be kind of a nice reflective tool like a journal. To see kind of how your body has changed throughout a part of time.

We'd like to leave you with a few thoughts. Remember, you get to try different types of healing different forms of healing, whether that be something more physical like yoga or meditation, or it can be something more verbal like processing with yourself with support to professionals. You can heal from your trauma. It does not matter the severity of your trauma. And remember that whatever trauma happened to you, that it was not your fault. Also remind yourself that you deserve to heal from this trauma and that you deserve to love yourself.

MARISSA: Thank you so much for joining us to learn more about Trauma and the Body. Our next episode will be about Traumaversaries.

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's 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're also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we're 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 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 second and fourth Wednesday's of every month. That is by pre-registration, so please call the hotline for more information. Thank you so much for listening and be well.