



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

June 2022: Healing in the Queer Community

Presented by Marissa, Advocacy Specialist, with special guest Ayden, Outreach & Education Specialist at Dane County RCC: Sexual Violence Resource Center

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 Healing in the Queer Community.

I am your host, Marissa, Advocacy Specialist with The Women's Center. Later on in this episode I will be joined by a special guest, Ayden, from Dane County RCC: Sexual Violence Resource Center. Ayden is a queer and trans educator and activist and works as the RCC's Outreach and Education Specialist; he is deeply invested in fostering safer communities and empowering youth voices.

Last year during Pride Month, we covered dynamics that specifically impact LGBTQ+ survivors of domestic and sexual violence. You can find this episode and its resources on our website. This year, we wanted to take this topic a step further and consider what comes after abuse: healing.

Before we dive into this topic, we must understand that healing is never a one-size-fits-all concept, and will look different for each and every survivor. As we discussed in that first Pride podcast, there are specific challenges and barriers faced by the community, especially for survivors of interpersonal violence (DV, SA, human trafficking, hate crimes, etc.). Additionally, the resources that cisgender heterosexual survivors feel safe using may not be the same resources that the queer community feels safe using, and this can be for a myriad of reasons, again discussed in our other Pride episode.

So, what does healing in the queer community look like? Let's consult a tool we've used in the past, called the Healing Flame. I will be referring to the components of the Healing Flame as 'steps,' but remember that healing is not linear and that you can experience these steps at any part of your healing journey.

By listening to this podcast, you may have already completed the first step of naming the abuse, or you may be trying to find words to explain what happened that made you seek out additional resources. Abuse is never your fault, and it is never okay for anyone to use your identity against you to hurt you. By being queer you have not signed your rights away to live a life free from violence and hate, no matter what anyone says.

Moving outward, the next step is finding safety. This can be physically or emotionally, individually or relationally, safety within your community, and safety to be your authentic self. Safety can look like a list of phone numbers or a structured plan to follow when you're feeling unsafe. Safety can look like finally being able to wear gender-affirming clothes or go by a gender-affirming name or pronouns.

To combine this step and the next (finding resources), safety can also look like breaking out of isolation and finding your people, finding community. It can be hard in a smaller community if there are not many LGBTQ+ people in your town, especially if there are community members present that have harmed you, but you still are deserving of support. Your people can also be an online community, like Trevor Spaces through the Trevor Project or CUAV (Community United Against Violence), or even through finding positive representations of queerness in the media.

Locally to Wisconsin, I am thrilled to talk with Ayden about the RCC's Queer & Trans Survivor Group. It is a confidential space for LGBTQ+ survivors to gather, build community, and navigate the effects of sexual violence together. This group is open to survivors across Wisconsin via Zoom, is facilitated by queer and/or trans RCC staff, and is currently looking for participants for its second cohort. Let's hear from Ayden about this program!

[music interlude]

AYDEN: I think the first cohort of this Queer and Trans Survivor Support Group that we put together went better than anyone could have actually imagined that it would go. I think when we were putting it together, we were thinking about this as something that our community needs, and like something that we at least see a need for as queer and trans folk, as the facilitators, there were four of us at the beginning of it. We knew it was needed, but we didn't know how many people would actually be interested or would take that step to reach out. But we've had a, you know, like a kind of rotating group of people. That's like 25 individuals, and it's a super multi-generational group, which is really, really cool. So we have folks really ranging from, like, 20 years old, all the way up to, I think, our oldest member is 72. So we're really pulling from a lot of different experiences and walks of life, which I think is really, really unique to be in a space like that in community that is stretching across so many groups and experiences, which is really cool. [Marissa affirms.]

We have, as any first run goes, we've like seen where those difficulties are, like where those technical pieces are that we didn't necessarily anticipate, like having such a group with so many folks who are not, as you know, tech-literate, as you know, the college

students that most of us are used to serving, at least for myself and one of my other coworkers who work specifically with college students. So we're trying to figure out how to put together Zoom manuals to make sure that everyone knows how to get on and feel comfortable with the camera and mic, and all the different things.

But we have really regular membership; folks would jump in, and they since it was on Zoom, they had the option to you know, use the chat to engage or use their voice to engage, or just kind of hang out and listen. But we found that as this was an eight month cohort, as we kind of kept rolling and building that trust, folks would really start bringing their own experiences and voices, and what has worked for them and their healing process, to the conversation. It's just been, it's just been amazing. I think this last year of this job is like my favorite project that I've worked on.

MARISSA: Oh, yeah, this sounds incredible. [Ayden affirms.] And it's going to be so exciting, I bet, to see how this next one goes, you know, with all that you've drawn from the first one and you know, working out some of those technical things. So with this group, is it something that's more kind of, like freeform, like whatever folks are interested day-of-group in, is that what's discussed? Is there more of a format is it kind of, somewhere in between, or neither of those things?

AYDEN: It's kind of in between. So we set it up where it's fairly structured, in that we rotate between more like, you know, that traditional support group where we're just kind of talking and processing and having, like, you know, prompted conversations or whatever's coming up that day. But then we rotate into what we call like our psychoeducational meetings, where we're doing some more tangible skill-building, we're giving a little bit of background information, doing some myth-busting, like all of that education piece, which is my personal job and passion and like, what I feel like I can really bring to this space as someone who's not a mental health provider and I'm not an advocate in my role at the RCC.

So in these meetings we kind of tackle the subject for the next two months, which we laid out at the beginning of the very first few sessions. We talked about, like, you know, what are the topics that feel important to y'all? We had some ideas that may be where we would go with it, but it certainly shifted throughout. People agreed that they wanted to talk about coping skills, they wanted to talk about healthy relationships, they wanted to talk about boundaries, and then we kind of had a free section as well, when we weren't really sure where we wanted to go with it yet.

So you know, coping skills was the first thing that we hit, so we did our very first educational meeting. It's not like quite a lecture, but we did kind of a teaching session on different types of coping skills, what a coping skills help us do, and then at that next meeting the following month, because we only meet once a month, people were able to dig in, like, what are some of the things from the last meeting that we started to incorporate? How did it work? Are there things that weren't mentioned that really worked for us, that we might want to share with the group, and just kind of let the conversation roll from there.

So it's a little it's a little bit of both where it's structured, but we still have a lot of room to bring what is on the mind of the day. When we did our boundaries piece as well, it was a conversation that so many folks were coming to us and saying, "This feels so important. This feels like a conversation that I have never got to have, or my therapist has brought it up but it's never really felt tangible and never felt it apply to my life. But now, I've sat here for an hour, and I feel like I'm getting part of it for the first time." So we asked folks, you know, should we focus on boundaries for another month, and folks really wanted to keep digging in on boundaries and how we can understand both our own boundaries and our partner's boundaries, and our friends boundaries, and how we have those conversations in ways that make sure that we're honoring everyone's needs. So yeah, it's been really responsive to the needs of the group as we keep going, but we think that education piece offers something a little bit different than maybe most support groups would.

MARISSA: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I think there is, you know, there's a real neat intersection with the support and the education piece. That's actually pretty similar to how we operate our one group right now, and we're hoping, you know, at some point to incorporate more—we just have a bit of like a general support and education group that is topic-based. So, we found that folks were more interested in talking through these things a little bit more, having more of a space to discuss and kind of, to your point, apply what we talked about, things that they may have come into the space, knowing and even sharing ideas, sharing, asking for advice, sharing resources, like, "Hey, I'm navigating this situation with my child/with my partner/with my ex, has anyone navigated something similar?" And then there will be, you know, an abundance of information shared. And it's like, we can put the power and control wheel on the screen till the end of the day, but we are never going to get those like specific, you know, pieces of information that are coming from survivors. So there's so much power in sharing that information. And it's really cool that your group is kind of based on that part in particular.

AYDEN: Yeah, I love that. Those moments where we're able to, like, open up the conversation, with your group, and like mine, every other group, at least, it's so cool to be able to engage in those conversations in the ways that our community has always done it, right? It's like coming to each other with this problem, or coming to each other for advice, or support, or resources, or whatever it is, like that's, that's the way that our community has supported ourselves and each other for millennia. [Marissa affirms.] And to be able to, like, not necessarily enrich, but be able to just lend more resources, lend, you know, whatever little pieces of expertise in this area that myself and my co-facilitators can have to lay just even just a little bit of a foundation for that, I think is so special. There's no supplement for just like a strong, grounded, rooted community and supporting one another.

MARISSA: Right, and that's fundamental in any community, but particularly in the queer and trans community as well. Sometimes in mainstream society and culture, you know, we can feel like we're on an island, kind of isolated, and so having that space that does emphasize community so much, like, it helps anyone, but particularly for that community, that's huge.

AYDEN: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. It's so special to be able to just have at least part of my job where I'm just with my community. Most of my days, I'm rolling around to middle schools and high schools, and Lord knows that it's like, so much fun to do so, but to be able to sit down one Tuesday a month, and just kind of like, be present is, is really, really, it's such a gift. I love it.

MARISSA: That's amazing. And so this is something that's open to survivors throughout Wisconsin, right?

AYDEN: Yeah, because it's a virtual group, we've really had the opportunity to open it up to the entire state of Wisconsin. And maybe if there's someone who's not in Wisconsin who found it somehow, I'm sure they'd be welcome to come as well. Yeah, so as the RCC, we primarily service Dane County, so that is certainly our priority and where we kind of ground ourselves, but since it's virtual, if folks have the link, they can come and join us. It's just the second Tuesday of every month from 6-7 o'clock [PM Central]. So that's a pretty short group, it's pretty minimal commitment in that it's not like every week or every other week, but it just allows us a little bit of a kind of touch base, right? To be able to come in for an hour a month, maybe grab, or gain a few skills, be in community for a few hours, particularly for some of our folks who live in more rural areas where they're not able to get access to community in the ways that some of us who live in places like Madison and Milwaukee are able to. It's really cool to be able to do that.

MARISSA: Yeah, I think that rural outreach is huge, because I know [when I had been] living in Dane County for a time, a lot of folks only think of Madison, and so everything is super concentrated right there. But that's not all that makes up Dane County, similar to Waukesha County. We think of the metropolitan area, which more often than not, also includes Milwaukee, as opposed to the entirety of Waukesha County where resources can be few and far between. Yet we're the only service provider in Waukesha County that's doing this kind of stuff.

Yeah, it's having that outreach and having that space to have community is just, oh, it's just so important! We, I know I could go on for ages about this, right? [Ayden affirms.] Yeah, that's, that's awesome. Thank you so much, Ayden, for speaking to that, and that's awesome. Are there ways that folks have been able to have like a bit of anonymity or confidentiality surrounding their experience that at least has come up in like the first cohort?

AYDEN: Yeah, so one of the ways we're able to do it, like with the advent of Zoom is that folks can put whatever name they'd like, they can keep their camera off, they can, you know, put a picture of a wave rather than themselves if they so wish, right? So we're able to protect folks' identity a little bit in that way.

One thing I didn't mention that is kind of cool about the group as well, being in Zoom, is that it makes it really easy for us to be able to pull away into breakout groups if folks are feeling triggered, or they need some additional space. So we always make sure that,

there are three facilitators at this point, but we always make sure that there are at least two facilitators in the room. So if folks need a little bit of a breakout room, some space to process, get support, chat through whatever's going on, whatever we're thinking about in the moment, that is always something that's available to anyone in the space.

So it's one of the many, you know, positive pieces of kind of the tech that came out of the pandemic. [Marissa affirms.] Those spaces that offer a little bit more safety in ways that couldn't really happen if we were all just, you know, sitting in a room together. Like there are, every now and again, we find those advantages in, you know, some of the ways that we're doing it now, versus the way we did it then or maybe we'll do it again in the future.

But for now, the Zoom support group works for us, and we're really happy with the way that you know, it can offer a little bit of flexibility that we wouldn't necessarily have in-person just sitting at RCC office.

MARISSA: I think that's super cool. I'm just like, when I first heard about this group, I just was so interested in this idea, how it came about, how it's been running, and so I really appreciate you taking the time to talk about it.

AYDEN: Yeah, of course. I'm always happy to brag about this program. [Marissa affirms.] It's my favorite part of my job. It's, it's amazing.

[music interlude]

MARISSA: We know that healing doesn't take away the pain, it can't prevent others from continuing to cause harm (such as deadnaming or misgendering, DV/SA, systemic violence, etc.), but healing can be that safe space that you create or find to navigate through life and pursue joy.

Healing is learning to love yourself, which can feel like a tall order when navigating trauma and a culture that is often unfriendly to this community. You may have internalized some of that unfriendliness and shamed yourself with it—be gentle with this realization, as more shame is not the antidote to shame. We go with what we know, and now that we know this, we have the capacity to learn more to then go with.

Finding that joy is an act of self-love, and redefining the type of love that you feel you deserve after abuse. As we continue to reference the Healing Flame, we also know that in healing we can learn new things about ourselves that we may not have had access to in the past. There is a harmful myth out there that tends to circulate about queer survivors in that being abused by someone of a similar gender can make you gay or trans, or that queerness is a symptom of experiencing trauma, but that's just not true.

What can be true, however, is that you may have more safety to explore your identity after abuse, to unlearn those harmful messages you may have internalized about your queerness, to begin expressing to yourself and perhaps to others who you've always been. This too is not a one-size-fits-all journey, and it can be a lot easier to navigate this

with your supports. You don't have to have all the answers, and it's okay to express this to your supports as a boundary, understanding that they want to see you feel happier and freer than you were when you were experiencing the abuse. Past, present, and future you never deserved the abuse, and it's okay to grieve that past and to accept where you are now, in order to nurture your own flame as you move towards the future.

Healing, like most parts of life, is messy, is full of ups-and-downs, and again, is often easier when you're not alone. We will be linking the interest form to the Queer Survivor Support Group on our website, and you can also call the RCC's HelpLine at 608.251.7273 to get more information about that group.

The Wednesday Workshop Podcast will soon become a part of The Women's Center's Violence Prevention Initiative, CONVO, or Creating Opportunities for Non-Violent Outcomes. CONVO is currently on Instagram, and you can find us at [@convo twc](#).

Stay tuned to our website for future episodes, and feel free to take a look at our past episodes too. 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 second and fourth Wednesdays of every month. That is by pre-registration only, so please call the Hotline and ask to speak with me for more information.

Thank you so much for listening, and be well.