

Group Application: Trauma Awareness: Connecting Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the neuroscience of trauma's effects on the brain
- Recognize physical and emotional responses to trauma
- Learn practical self-regulation techniques
- Develop awareness of treatment approaches

Recommendation:

- Add a co-facilitator for this session

Materials Needed:

- Brain diagram handouts
- Body mapping templates
- Colored markers
- Grounding exercise guides
- Resource lists

Part 1: Opening Activity - "Safe Space Circle" (10 minutes)

Purpose: Build trust, establish psychological safety, and introduce the concept of feeling safe/unsafe in our bodies

Instructions:

1. Have participants sit in a circle
2. Give each participant a sheet of paper and markers
3. Ask them to draw or write about a place where they feel completely safe and peaceful
4. Have volunteers share their safe places and explain why they chose them
5. Facilitate brief discussion about what makes spaces feel safe vs. unsafe

Discussion prompts:

- What physical sensations do you notice when you're in your safe place?
- How does your breathing change when you think about your safe place?
- What helps you feel safe in this group?

Part 2: What is Trauma? (10 minutes)

Key Points:

- Trauma is an overwhelming experience that exceeds our ability to cope in the moment
- It's not just about what happened, but how our body and mind processes it
- Everyone's response to difficult experiences is different
- It's totally normal to have intense feelings sometimes
- Trauma can be a single event or ongoing situations

Setup:

- Arrange chairs in a semi-circle if possible
- Have brain diagram handouts ready
- Prepare whiteboard/flipchart

Interactive Element: Have participants use hand signals (thumbs up/middle/down) to indicate their comfort level while discussing different topics. Remind them they can step out if needed.

Introduction Script: "Today we're going to talk about something that affects many people - trauma. Remember, you can take care of yourself during this discussion by stepping out, taking breaks, or just listening without participating."

Step-by-Step Facilitation:

1. Opening Discussion (2 minutes)
 - Ask: "What comes to mind when you hear the word 'trauma'?"
 - Write responses on board without judgment
 - Validate all contributions
2. Define Trauma (3 minutes)
 - Share definition: "Trauma is when stressful events leave lasting imprints on our brain and body. Trauma can affect anyone at any age"
 - Emphasize: "These effects can continue long after the event"
 - Key point: "Everyone's experience is different and valid"
3. Brain Science, The Three Brain Regions Affected (5 minutes)
 - Distribute brain cards
 - Think of your brain like a streaming service:
 - "Prefrontal Cortex is like the brain's boss, your play/pause controls. Helps you think clearly and make decisions."
 1. The prefrontal cortex controls our decision-making, impulse control, emotional regulation. When we experience trauma, this part of our brain becomes less active. You "controls get glitchy" and the boss gets overwhelmed.
 - "Amygdala is like the alarm system for our brain. Your volume control, warns you of danger and triggers strong emotions."
 1. When we experience trauma, the amygdala releases excessive stress hormones and can continually become overactive after trauma. Your volume control gets stuck on high, the alarm is too loud.
 - "Hippocampus is like a playlist for memories, the memory center."
 1. When we experience trauma, this part of our brain shrinks, making it harder to remember things. It also can make it more difficult to tell the difference between the past and the present. Your playlist gets scrambled and the memories get messy.

Transition: "Now that we understand what happens in our brain, let's explore how this affects our body..."

Part 3 - How Does Trauma Affect My Body? (15 minutes)

Trauma can make it hard to trust others, can make us always on high alert, and can make us feel helpless. Trauma can make our heart rates change, cause our muscles to get tense, can change our breathing patterns, our energy levels, can change the amount or our ability to sleep, and mess with our digestion. Trauma can resurface through flashbacks, pictures, sounds, smells, or words. Trauma makes us detached from what our body is feeling, so sometimes people that have experienced trauma participate in risky or unsafe behavior to feel something. Have you ever seen someone do that before?

Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are the most basic types of our bodies response to stress and trauma.

Fight – When your body feels that you're in danger, and that you can fight against the threat. When you're in "fight mode" you might feel very angry, have a tight jaw, or want to punch or kick something or someone.

Flight – When your body feels that you're in danger, but automatically knows that you can't beat the danger by fighting it and needs to "get away". When you're in "flight mode" you might feel anxious, trapped, or restless.

Freeze - When your body feels that you're in danger, but you get stuck. "When you're in "freeze mode" you might physically feel stuck or heavy.

Fawn - When your body feels that you're in danger, but knows that fight, flight, or freeze don't work. When you're in "fawn mode", you might be trying to make someone else happy, someone who might feel dangerous to you.

Setup:

- Prepare body outline handouts
- Set out colored markers

- Have stress ball or fidget toys available

Step-by-Step Facilitation:

1. Mind-Body Connection (3 minutes) Script: "Our brain and body are constantly talking to each other. When we feel unsafe..."
 - Demonstrate with simple example:
 - "Think of jumping at a loud noise"
 - "Notice how your body reacts automatically"
2. Body Mapping Activity (7 minutes) Instructions to give participants:
 - "Take a body outline sheet"
 - "Use red for areas of tension/stress"
 - "Use blue for calm/relaxed areas"
 - "Use yellow for areas that change a lot"
3. Group Discussion (5 minutes) Prompts:
 - "What patterns do you notice?"
 - "Where do most people feel stress?"
 - "What helps these areas feel better?"

Safety Note: Watch for signs of dissociation or distress

Part 4: Paths to Healing (10 minutes)

Setup:

- Have grounding tools ready
- Set up calm corner with water/tissues

If you or someone you know has experienced trauma, the effects don't have to last forever. There are many strategies to deal with trauma. Trauma is not the same thing as PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder). You can recover, and connecting with a positive safe person can help. Optional: [Video](#) of Trevor Noah talking about dealing with trauma (from beginning to 1:10)

Present these four approaches:

1. Body-based: "Like doing yoga, deep breathing, meditating, going to the gym or exercising, stretching, praying, showering"
2. Mind-based: "Like understanding our thoughts, building emotional awareness, processing our memories, writing things down, praying (works here too)"
3. Social: "Like connecting with safe people, creating support systems. Find safe people, spend time with them, talk about it."
4. Professional Support: Therapy and/or medication when needed

Closing Exercise: "Coming Home to Your Body" (5-7 minutes)

Facilitator Introduction Script: "We're going to end our session with a gentle grounding practice. This is something you can use anytime you feel overwhelmed or disconnected. You can do this sitting in your chair or standing - whatever feels most comfortable. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, you can open your eyes or stop the exercise."

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Getting Settled (1 minute)
 - "Find a comfortable position in your chair"
 - "Place both feet flat on the floor"
 - "Rest your hands in your lap or on your thighs"
 - "Gently close your eyes if that feels okay, or look softly at a spot on the floor"

- "Take two natural breaths just to settle in"
- 2. Body Awareness (1-2 minutes)
 - "Notice the points of contact between your body and the chair"
 - "Feel your feet connecting to the floor"
 - "Notice the weight of your hands"
 - "Without changing anything, just become aware of these sensations"
- 3. Breath Focus (1-2 minutes)
 - "Bring your attention to your breathing"
 - "Place one hand on your belly if you'd like"
 - "Notice the natural movement of breath"
 - "Feel your belly rise and fall"
 - "No need to change your breathing, just notice it"
- 4. Sensory Grounding (1-2 minutes)
 - "While keeping your awareness of your breath, notice:"
 - "Three things you can hear... (pause)"
 - "Two things you can feel... (pause)"
 - "One thing you can smell... (pause)"
- 5. Gentle Movement (30 seconds)
 - "Wiggle your fingers and toes"
 - "Roll your shoulders gently"
 - "Move your head from side to side if that feels comfortable"
- 6. Closing (30 seconds)
 - "Take one more deep breath"
 - "When you're ready, open your eyes"
 - "Take a moment to notice how you feel"

Facilitator Notes:

- Monitor student reactions
 - Disconnection/zoning out
 - Increased agitation
 - Physical distress
 - Emotional overwhelm
- Have support resources ready
- Allow stepping out if needed
- Maintain calm presence
- Follow up as needed

Additional resources to have available:

- Crisis support numbers
- Educational materials about trauma
- Information about therapy options

Remember: Present information with sensitivity and emphasis on hope and healing. Create a safe space for questions and reactions while maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Resources:

[The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel Van Der Kolk](#)
[It Didn't Start with You by Mark Wolynn](#)

Brain Science: Trauma's Impact on your Brain

Prefrontal Cortex

The brain's boss, the thinking part of our brain. The prefrontal cortex controls our decision-making, impulse control, and emotional regulation. When we experience trauma, this part of our brain becomes less active.

Hippocampus

The filing cabinet for memories, the "memory center".

When we experience trauma, this part of our brain shrinks, making it harder to remember things. It also can make it more difficult to tell the difference between the past and the present.

Amygdala

The alarm system for our brain. When we experience trauma, the amygdala releases excessive stress hormones and can continually become overactive after trauma.

