



Innovations in Counseling (Part 12 Session 6)

Understanding the Embodied Experience and Recovery Strategies for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

Webinar Follow-up Question and Answer Session With Joy Kelly Phifer, PhD, NCC, ACS, LCMHC, EFT, CCTP and Shelley Coleman, PhD, NCC, ALPS

Question from L. Phillips:

Do you find it useful to explore the narcissistic abuse cycle with clients when addressing the topic in session?

Answer from Presenter:

Yes! Providing psychoeducation to clients about the narcissistic abuse cycle allows the client to step outside of blaming themselves for the abuse, externalizing it as the problem of the abuser and the overarching cycle they've experienced. Psychoeducation is typically more helpful once the client has been seen, heard and validated and should be framed as a means of helping the client understand their experience, not solely as a means to prompt them into leaving immediately, as the decision to leave is often a process.

Question from A. Vosburg:

What could be the initial steps to help a victim to get the help they need?

Answer from Presenter:

Offering genuine support and a safe place and a safe person to talk to that shows up with non-judgement and understanding is especially helpful. If a victim feels judged and shamed by someone or something, they are likely to refrain from seeking help. Referral to victim advocacy services in one's local community, which may also include counseling services, may also be helpful.

Question from A. Perry:

I don't have EMDR training but want to learn more. What is a good first step?

Answer from Presenter:

Seek information from the EMDR International Association at <https://www.emdria.org/>

Question from Anonymous:

Could you elaborate on what the functional freeze looks like?

Answer from Presenter:

Freeze is a function of the autonomic nervous system that kind of acts like an emergency brake. If someone is in a situation that is threatening, the sympathetic nervous system will attempt to “fight” or “flight” the danger. If that isn’t possible, the emergency brake is engaged and begins to immobilize the system to survive the overwhelm. An example in nature is when a gazelle feigns death to avoid being eaten by its predator. In humans, “freeze” may be depression, low energy, numbing, or dissociation. In severe cases, it can manifest in preparation for death or suicidal ideation. In the case of long term exposure to threat, like living with an abusive partner, a person may be experiencing the biological impact of “freeze”, but because they also have to manage children, a job, social situations, household tasks, etc., the person moves into a survival state of “overriding” the body’s attempts to shut down. This is often referred to as “functional freeze”. It is a way to cope, but it also impairs someone from things like: being able to connect with self (loss of identity) and being able to truly rest, sleep well, etc. Overtime, this causes health problems like gut and digestive problems, autoimmune, blood pressure issues, among many other things. In short, functional freeze is something we all do from time to time to meet deadlines or accomplish goals, but for folks experiencing long-term exposure to threat it is a function of the nervous system that can help a person survive hard things while at the same time, keep the person feeling stuck or getting in the way of accessing resources needed to leave the abusive situation.

Question from H. Barney:

What resources would you recommend to learn more about somatic experiencing techniques?

Answer from Presenter:

Peter Levine’s books are the first step. I recommend “In an Unspoken Voice” for starters. Irene Lyon is another resource as she offers a plethora of free content on YouTube and has her own website with resources for purchase. Finally, SETI (somatic experiencing trauma institute) offers research, books, practitioners, and training. You can find SETI at traumahealing.org

I, Shelley Coleman, also have resources I am getting ready to launch on my own teaching platform called “Growth Minded Counselor Community”. If you are interested, please use this link to gain access when it is launched in the next few weeks:

<https://forms.gle/unT2ev52tgsSqP6n9>

Question from O. Celestin:

Are the self-love, purpose, and transformation scale and/or advocacy and psycho-education scale available in the public domain?

Answer from Presenter:

Dr. Joy Phifer’s dissertation is available online that outlines the Intimate Partner Violence Recovery Measure, that includes this subscale. The research has not been officially published yet, but plans are in place to publish soon! A link to Dr. Phifer’s dissertation can be found here:

https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Kelly_uncg_0154D_12690.pdf

Question from L. Otchy:

How can we help clients to express ways to love themselves when they find it difficult?

Answer from Presenter:

Starting with the basics of self-love could be helpful. For example, what does it look like to take care of yourself, mentally and physically (e.g., sleep hygiene, healthy nutrition, moving your body in ways that feel good, surrounding yourself with positive people)? Often, a lack of self-love stems from lack of self-worth and being made to feel inadequate (which often comes from a history of relationship trauma). Beginning to unpack negative self-worth, the reasons for it, and offering validation, psychoeducation, and a corrective experience for a client can be transformational.

Question from Anonymous:

Do you know of any resources for abusers who acknowledge they have a problem and want to change?

Answer from Presenter:

Similar to the person experiencing the violence, the perpetrator also embodies trauma that is being expressed through violence. If someone is aware of this and wants to heal, I would recommend working with a somatic experiencing practitioner or body informed practitioner to build capacity to renegotiate trauma in their own systems and practice their own healing so they do not continue to perpetrate what was done to them. IFS (internal family systems) is also a modality that could help an abusive person work with their internal world that was set up and likely groomed to become a perpetrator.

Question from K. Lynn-Tolson

How can we assist in helping families and clients when dissociation occurs due to the trauma experienced?

Answer from Presenter:

Dissociation is a survival response. It is a function of the autonomic nervous system. SE (Somatic Experiencing) calls this response “freeze” and IFS (Internal Family Systems) calls this a “part”. Trauma fragments a person. It is important to understand that dissociation was/is a way the person survived overwhelm when they were young and has been re-enacted in relationships. The goal is not to “get rid” of this function, but rather to befriend this function of the nervous system and offer resources to provide new options. This is the heart of the SE approach. Building capacity in the body to find rest and digest will orient the system to recognize safety. Overtime, this can mitigate the automatic movement into dissociation when the brain detects threat. I would recommend “In an Unspoken Voice” by Peter Levine and videos by Irene Lyon on YouTube and her website. I have resources I am getting ready to launch on my own teaching platform called “Growth Minded Counselor Community”. If you are interested, please use this link to gain access when it is launched in the next few weeks:

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