

Trauma and Group Work: Thoughts on Delicate Practice

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This article provides an overview of the field of trauma, specifically the growth in our collective awareness of trauma's effects on human lives. Weaving together elements of trauma theory with social group work, the author offers specific strategies for compassionate and reflective social work practice with traumatized populations. With a focus on strength and resilience, the article stresses the challenges and rewards of trauma work and makes a case for social workers remaining at the helm in this field.

Everyday when my radio pops on, announcing the arrival of morning in my Brooklyn apartment, I brace myself for bad news. Sound bites seep into the air: "*Suicide bomber kills 56*," "*Katrina survivors face more loss*," "*After the earthquake, Pakistan braces for winter*," "*A woman's body is found in a landfill in Queens*," "*A child is abducted from his bed . . .*"

These stories infiltrate my sleep, mix with my dreams, even, curiously, lull me back to sleep. When I finally wake, I wonder—actually I hope—that my mind somehow imagined these stories. For me, it is sometimes a challenge to recognize hope, goodness, and strength in a world that is divided, troubled, and increasingly violent. As social workers, we are charged to intervene in times of crisis, in the complicated aftermath of trauma. We are asked to understand, counsel, advocate for, support, educate, and find meaning in our clients' lives. It can be daunting to be effective and optimistic under these circumstances.

For me, to work genuinely in social work is to work everyday with pain, need, uncertainty, sadness, loss, and, yes, trauma. Yet, for me, and probably for many others, social work is *also* about the joy and the power of forging a human connection, of

having the opportunity to help restore balance in a time of crisis, of being face to face with the tenacity of the human spirit.

As Adrienne Rich (1984, p. 162) writes in her poem, "Diving into the Wreck,"

I came to explore the wreck.

The words are purposes.

The words are maps.

I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail.

We have all seen damage in the lives of our clients: the teenage girl who runs away to escape the blunt blows of her father's hand; the elderly woman consumed by memories of her murdered husband; the young man returning from war, permanently transformed. Thankfully, there are also many treasures in our work. What keeps me connected to social work are these many treasures. As awful as trauma can be, for the client, for the student, for the social worker, as many times as I shake my head in disbelief at the atrocities humans inflict on each other, I have just as many stories of people surviving abusive situations, thriving, and finding lost voices, jeopardized spirits, buried strengths.

As social workers we are deeply needed in times of personal, national, and world-

wide traumas. We face the effects of naturally caused crises such as Hurricane Katrina. We have weathered 9/11. The last three decades have sharpened our awareness of smaller scale, albeit no less devastating, human-caused abuses: rape, domestic violence, incest, and child abuse.

I have come to understand these events as existing on a continuum. There are naturally occurring crises affecting large communities. More troubling perhaps are the human-caused atrocities, again an almost unspeakable list: Darfur, September 11, Columbine. Always at risk for being invisible, hidden by secrecy, are the millions of everyday acts of violence, causing private, behind-closed-doors pain: rape, battery, and assault.

The traumatic events mentioned here are certainly distinct, but there are threads of universality in what victims feel, need, experience, and lose and in what we as social workers can and should do to help. These events yield common emotional, psychological, social, and even spiritual effects, and they have causes in common. They also involve common abuses of power, the callous preying on the vulnerable among us, and the stubborn disbelief by society. They share as well the common need for immediate, nonjudgmental, and skillful interventions and for victims to connect with others in similar circumstances.

Inevitably, trauma work has emotional and psychological consequences on the helpers. True to the parallel process, much of what our clients need in times of crises, we also need to allow ourselves. That is where careful and empathic supervision comes into play.

DEFINING TRAUMA

There are commonalities present in the spectrum of human traumas; there are also common pathways to healing, such as group work. In this article, I lay out a brief conceptual framework for both trauma and group work and discuss what makes group work a particularly effective method for helping trauma survivors.

Trauma can be understood in many ways; for example, as a “painful emotional or physical experience or shock,” “the aftermath of an experience of overwhelming danger,” or “a time of great danger and trouble” (Herman, 1997, p. 30).

Judith Herman (1997), the influential psychiatrist and author of *Trauma and Recovery*, notes the following:

At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, meaning (p. 33).

In the last few decades there has been tremendous growth in our understanding of violence against women, war crimes, child abuse, hate crimes, and other forms of trauma. In 1980, the American Psychological Association described traumatic events as those “outside the range of usual human experience” (Herman, 1997, p. 7). However, the more we learned about trauma, the more this definition proved inaccurate. Trauma is an almost ordinary occurrence in our lives and in the lives of our clients. We need to be prepared when it knocks at our door; we need to effectively prepare our students.

After learning that most of my professional work has been devoted to the care of survivors of rape, domestic violence, and child sexual abuse, many of my students have said to me, “I don’t know how you could do that! I don’t want to work with such sadness and pain!” I respond to these comments with empathy, validating that, of course working with sadness and pain is hard, but if we as social workers shield ourselves from human tragedy, from cases of rape, child abuse, or terrorist attacks, who will help?

Hearing that question so frequently has led me to wonder whether trauma is viewed by students, teachers, field instructors, and practitioners as something “out there” on the margins of human experience, rather

than at the forefront. Is there still secrecy and shame around these crimes? Yes! If so, then is trauma outside the normal and expected parameters of what we ask our clients, of what we are open and prepared to hear from them? Trauma, sadly, is everywhere on both a small and big scale. Asking the questions, feeling skilled and capable, not shying away, and taking care of ourselves too—this is what we all need to do. Group work can be an effective means of unveiling the isolation, secrecy, and shame associated with human-induced and naturally occurring traumas.

THE AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA

People who have survived traumatic events, particularly those events perpetrated by other people, have remarkably common emotional reactions. You may hear the following feelings, if you are listening carefully:

Fear: “I am scared that I will die.”

Loss: “Nothing will ever be the same.”

Anger: “I want revenge!” “I am full of hate!”

Confusion: “I don’t know what to do next.”

Isolation: “I just want to be alone . . . no one can understand.”

Anxiety: “I have flashbacks to that day . . . I can never forget.”

Splintered trust: “No one will be there for me. I feel betrayed.”

Self-blame: “What did I do wrong?”

Changed worldview: “The world is a scary and unsafe place.”

Arguably, above all else, trauma jeopardizes our ability to connect with others. The extent of psychological devastation depends, of course, on the trauma itself. A child who has known nothing but abuse is unlikely to grow up naturally trusting others. An adult rape victim with no prior trauma has a good chance of making positive connections again. In its sneaky and insidious way, trauma eats away at one’s ability to feel safe and connected and at peace in the world. A personal act of violence

makes one question, “Am I to blame?” The literature tells us that core experiences of trauma survivors are “disempowerment and disconnection from others.”

Social group work is a time-tested, powerful, and instrumental approach to helping people heal from trauma. What is fundamentally fractured—connection, trust, a sense of safety—is what we need to use to help heal. Groups can do this. One of the cardinal rules of good social work practice is especially important with the care of trauma survivors. Because trauma injures one’s ability to feel in control, carefully honoring a client’s right to self-determination is particularly needed in work with trauma survivors.

These are basic ways to help trauma survivors:

- Be emotionally ready to help.
- Be emotionally present in the helping moment.
- Assess immediate needs.
- Normalize clients’ feelings.
- Don’t judge.
- *Listen, listen, listen.*
- Provide information.
- Provide resources.
- Create safety in any way you can.
- Allow the story to be told and retold.
- Establish healthy boundaries.
- Help restore everyday functioning.
- Respect each individual client’s pace of healing.
- Encourage connections with others.
- Use supervision wisely.

SOCIAL GROUP WORK

Practiced since the profession’s early Settlement House days, group work generates power and unity from the coming together of people with similar experiences or who share a common goal.

Since the beginning of the anti-rape and battered women’s movements, group work has been used as an intervention strategy for survivors of these traumas. Since traumatic events call into question basic human relationships, such as the attachments of

family, friendship, love, and community, groups are particularly instrumental for trauma victims. Positive, supportive, informed responses from others can pave the way for recovery; nonsupportive, blaming, hostile responses from others, not surprisingly, have the opposite effect. Among other therapeutic functions, groups can help survivors tell their stories, reconnect with others, and learn to trust again.

Social group work is a method of bringing people together in a powerful process of giving and receiving help around a common problem or issue. Kurland and Salmon (1992), summarize the process of mutual aid this way:

The process of mutual aid, unique to group work practice, takes place when members draw upon their own experiences and deep felt needs to help their fellow members. They, in turn, will relive and relearn through their own offers of help and they will be the stronger for it (p. 12).

Mutual aid incorporates several important aspects: (1) discussing taboo areas, in which group members explore topics, such as authority or sex, that they perceive as forbidden in the outside world; trauma, especially that caused by human cruelty, is still a taboo topic cloaked in secrecy and shame; (2) the “all in the same boat” phenomenon, experienced when group members sense that they are not alone in their feelings; (3) developing a universal perspective, especially relevant with oppressed populations, which is likened to consciousness raising and involves replacing self-blame with a broader understanding of societal forces contributing to one’s circumstances; (4) mutual support, where members are encouraged to openly express their feelings and demonstrate genuine empathy for each other; and (5) mutual demand, where members pay attention to and are invested in the growth and accomplishments of individual members and the group as a whole (Shulman, 1999).

SKILLS FOR GROUP WORKERS

Group workers need to develop the following skills:

- Be clear about your purpose.
- Establish a caring, supportive, nonjudgmental group atmosphere.
- Make group rules, purpose, and expectations crystal clear.
- Welcome all voices and perspectives.
- Pay attention, always, to the group’s stages.
- Use yourself to model the elements of mutual aid: you set the tone.
- Encourage members to talk to each other, not just to you and the other facilitators.
- Work to always balance the needs/process of individuals in the group and the group as a whole.
- Don’t dominate . . . the real magic of group happens when you step back and let the process unfold.

Here are a few more skills to consider and practice:

- Create a safe space.
- Lend a vision.
- Demand work.
- Stay with the client’s feelings.
- Allow silence.
- Attend to both process and content elements.
- Pay attention to roles that emerge.
- Allow respectful confrontation.
- Encourage group mending.
- Take stock.

Dominique Steinberg (2002) explains that one particularly moving and powerful mutual aid process is the sharing of different “voices.” She describes this process as follows:

When peers exchange ideas, feelings, attitudes, and personal stories, in an attempt to help one another think things through, not only do they provide opportunities to identify those voices that have served them well in the past, but they create opportunities to learn new voices as well. The process requires a blend of art, skill, and hard work on the part of

everyone involved to make it happen; but when it does, new worlds open up, like magic (p. 35).

As an undergraduate student, one of my first social work assignments was to co-facilitate a group for battered women. This was an ongoing group held in a shelter on the outskirts of the southern town where I went to college. The group met in a little back room, with folding chairs, a smattering of children's toys, a dusty maroon couch, and the all-important coffee pot.

I was scared—maybe even more than some of the women. I was unsure of myself, questioning if I had anything, at all, to offer. I was unsure of the group's purpose, even though it had been explained to me many times in supervision and by the members themselves. I did not know yet of the potential present in a group of eight or nine or ten battered women, trying to find a path to a future free of violence, hinting at healthy possibilities. I didn't know then how the simple act of coming together to share life experiences and everyday feelings could actually be transformative for each woman, for the group as a whole, and even for me, the inexperienced social work student.

Week after week, pot of coffee after pot of coffee, we would meet. There would always be new members: women fleeing violence just that day, coming into the safety of the shelter, stung by the newness and uncertainty of their lives, as well as more seasoned members schooled in the norms of the group, wanting to help, sharing the day's victories. The themes of the work echoed similarly week after week: trust, safety,

fear, anger, self-esteem, bravery, shame, isolation.

Most of the women were living in the shelter and were in the early stages of gaining their freedom. But there was this one woman, Betty, who I soon learned had been coming to this group for years, even though her shelter time and violent relationships were well in her past. When a new group member asked her why she kept coming, she said she escaped the violence that marked much of her life, and if she could do that, she wanted to help other women find their way too. She felt this was her calling: to help others the way she had been helped years ago. She wanted the others to see that she had found a way to a better life and that they could too.

I never forgot Betty, this first group, or the lessons it taught me about the magic of group work. Most especially, I learned, and am reminded daily, that the connections we create and sustain as humans are our true treasures.

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