



The West Coast Trauma Project

2 Crucial Trauma Therapy Skills

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2 Crucial Skills for Trauma Therapists

Hey, I hope this finds you well!

Today I want to offer two crucial and important skills that will help you when you are in the beginning sessions with a trauma client.

Before I do, I want to share a quick story about passion and drive:

Passion and Drive.

Several years ago I was sitting in my room in Los Angeles, working on a novel. The phone rang and it happened to be a friend of mine whom I had worked with in San Francisco 3 years prior though hadn't heard from since. She told me that she was calling all of her friends to tell them that she had been living with AIDS for the past 9 years and hadn't told anyone, and now she was calling people to say good-bye.

I sat there stunned as I took in this information. I listened to the amazing strength in my friend's voice, and the unbelievable amount of courage she had as she was dealing with her rapidly declining health. That phone call simultaneously scared the hell out of me and inspired me.

When I hung up the phone I sat there in silence, in a daze, and just thought. I thought about my friend and her courage. I thought about my life and about the writing I'd been doing, which I loved, however I realized right then that there was something missing in my life and it had to do with finding my own courage and helping others.

This gets me going every morning.

Some years have passed between that moment and now. Though that experience is one of the reasons I began The West Coast Trauma Project. My goal with this site is to help other trauma therapists thrive-- through the information I offer in these emails, with the PDFs I provide (such as this!), with the podcast, and through creating community. This gets me going every morning. I hope you find it helpful.

Okay, let's get to it:

Two crucial and important trauma therapy skills

1. Determining the readiness of the client
2. Resourcing the client

Let's look at these one by one.

Determining the readiness of the client

Determining the readiness of the client means ascertaining whether the client is ready, willing, able and prepared to move forward with trauma therapy. We have to assess the client's level of readiness even when we're implementing what we might consider to be a non-trauma-related intervention.

For example, if you have a trauma client sitting with you and haven't yet determined her readiness, but proceed with what might be considered an otherwise benign intervention such as a simple relaxation exercise, this could still prove to be triggering. Why? Remember that trauma is held in the body. Individuals who have been traumatized are often trying to avoid (and sometimes desperately so) feeling and thinking about the body. This can often lead to substance use and abuse, numbing, and isolation. And individuals who have experienced interpersonal violence and sexual assault can even be triggered from silence and from relaxation itself, which may have described or defined the context in which they were assaulted and/or abused.

How to determine the readiness of your client:

1. Observe.

We can begin to ascertain our client's level of readiness by observing how they respond during our history-taking session. For example, how do they respond to questions about the traumatic event? Are they even able to speak about it, or bear you asking about it? These are signs that as a therapist we have to be watchful for and honor.

We can also observe how our client is reacting to certain topics? Are they shifting suddenly with the introduction of a certain subject, or as the conversation transitions from one point to the next? Are there pauses in breathing, deep exhalations, sudden foot movements, or nervous finger tappings? We can use these opportunities to share our observation, such as: "I noticed a shift there with your foot (or leg, or finger, or hand or head). What just happened?" And if this asking is too triggering, then perhaps simply inviting the client to "notice what is happening."

What this noticing accomplishes is that it allows your client to share in the importance of their body's movements and begin to pay attention to when such movements occur, what they might mean, and the degree to which they might be related to the trauma.

All of this is valuable information. And information we, as therapists, can learn from when we share our noticings with our client and invite them to notice as well.

2. Ask.

This might sound simple, and it is, but many therapists neglect this step for a variety of reasons (**see how to ask about childhood abuse**) including concern over re-traumatizing the client, experiencing vicarious traumatization, and waiting for the opportune time, among others. If done with respect, inquiring about the client's readiness will allow the client to see and experience that you can meet them where they are at, that you're not afraid to talk to them about their experience, that you can "handle it," that you care, and also that you want to offer help.

Resourcing

Resourcing your client means reinforcing your client's strengths so that they are prepared and feel empowered before they begin to engage in trauma therapy. This is necessary when working with individuals who have experienced trauma because often times clients can find themselves easily triggered and then become severely agitated, or otherwise symptomatic, which can indicate the client is not yet ready, and/or perhaps could benefit from further resourcing.

Alternatively, If the client has the resources--coping skills, strengths, memories etc--to manage these moments, the journey of trauma therapy can begin.

How to Resource a client who's been traumatized:

1. Raise the level of awareness.

This means helping to elevate your client's awareness of their different strengths, their emotional, physical, spiritual, somatic (body), social, intellectual, psychological strengths. Many individuals cope in different ways, have patterns of behavior which they use to help them manage certain symptoms (anxiety, depression, for example) and yet do not realize that these behaviors are strengths.

Coping mechanisms which are often considered unhealthy, for example, alcohol, are nevertheless ways of coping and taking care of oneself, which first and foremost have to be honored as attempts at managing one's unbearable symptoms. The necessary psychoeducation about healthy alternatives can come a bit later.

So how do we raise the level of awareness?

We have a discussion

We have a discussion with our client about their strengths. We invite them to write them down one by one; list the times they thrived, or felt empowered, the individuals who inspire them. We ask them to recall the most exciting and powerful moments in their lives and ask them to remember how their bodies felt, the related thoughts they had, what it felt like and ask them to be as specific and detailed as possible. And then we ask them to rest in that feeling of power and remember, and feel once again, what it felt like. These moments will be the memories we will be asking our clients to return to when they are feeling low or anxious or triggered.

This process of resourcing the client can in and of itself be eye-opening and empowering as it invites the client to recognize that they may already have been taking part in self-care and coping techniques, which very definitely can be viewed as a strength.

Okay, there you have it. Two integral skills to hone and utilize as you begin to work with your trauma clients.

Final Words:

If you've made it this far, thanks!

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3-Part Intro To Trauma Training Series

Also, **The Trauma Therapist Podcast** is coming! I'm psyched. I've already booked the 4th master trauma therapist interview! I'll keep you posted.

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