



Institute of Professional Psychologists

Sample Lesson - Tsunami-Sri Lanka

SAFETY and GROUNDING SKILLS

Safety

Many people struggle to find safety and trust in themselves following a traumatic incident due to their experiences of being unable to protect themselves from harm and the overwhelming nature of the event. They are left somewhat fragmented and unable to process and contain the strong emotions the trauma has induced (Refer to Diagram A). The person can be contained through an experience of safety as outlined in Diagram B.

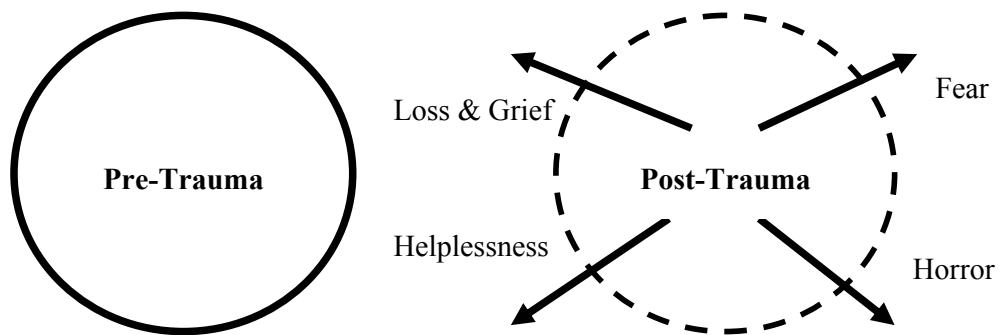


Diagram A: Inability To Contain Strong Emotions Due To Fragmentation

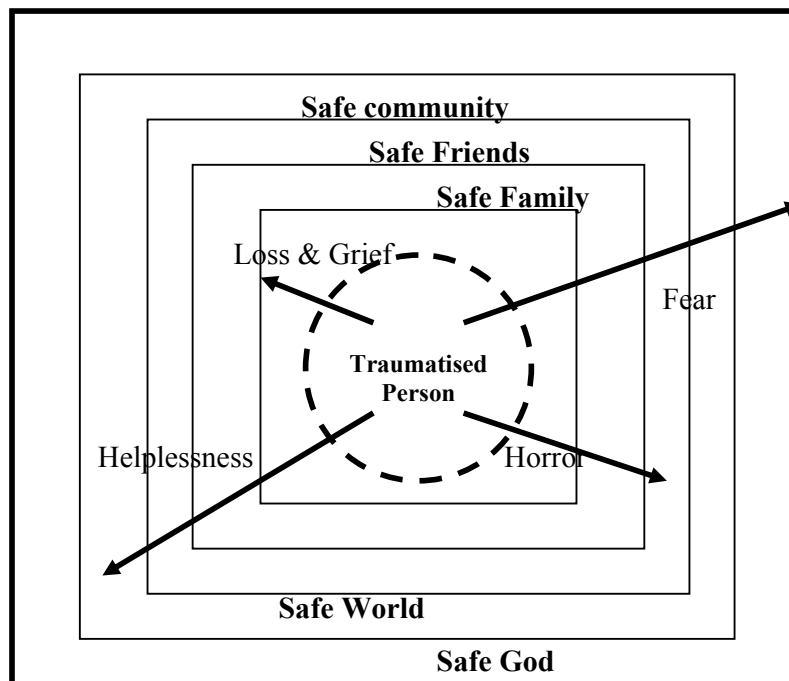


Diagram B: Walls Of Safety That Help Contain Trauma Response (Dawson, 2004)

Following an event such as Tsunami the picture may look more like Diagram C.

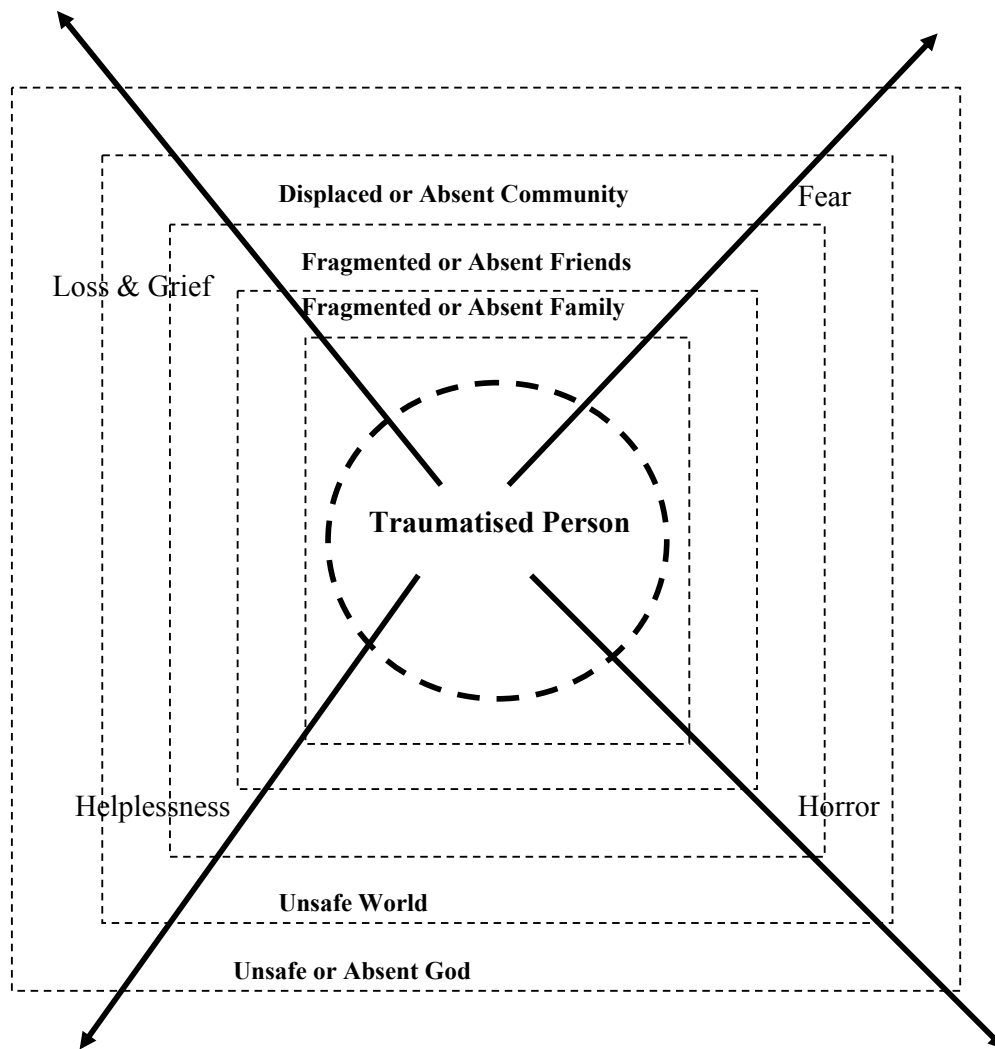


Diagram C: No safety to contain Trauma response

Strategies that Promote Safety:

Maintenance of spiritual practices and rituals.

Provision of shelter, food, water.

Keeping families and communities together.

Counselling. At initial meeting address issues of confidentiality and any questions they may have about your training etc. Safety is created in the relationship through a positive relational experience of integrity, trust, love and acceptance of the whole person in their brokenness. Practically these are best demonstrated through basic counselling skills such as empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence.

Empathy: “working with a client following a traumatic incident will be about trying to get a grasp of the impact on the client” (i.e. how did it feel to be this person before, during and after the traumatic experience).

Congruence: “It needs to be acknowledged that there are no easy answers to the clients questions or quick fixes for his distress ... no one else can truly understand what it felt like to experience that traumatic event”(i.e. being honest in our responses)

Unconditional positive regard: “is about accepting them as they are, accepting their feelings, their thoughts and their actions. It also involves supporting rather than trying to break through whatever defences they are employing to help them cope”.

Note: Supporting defences DOES NOT mean working with the person to maintain the defences – if a safe therapeutic relationship is in place then defences can eventually be explored and healthier coping strategies implemented as the need for defences gradually lessen. If defences are removed before adequate safety is established then the individual is left too exposed and vulnerable and in danger of being re-traumatised.

Alison Dunn (2001:106 Spiers ch4).

Control: During a trauma, the person has usually experienced helplessness and powerlessness, often damaging their perceived sense of control. It is important to try and restore their sense of being in control. Therefore, wherever possible promote a sense of control over the (a) **environment** e.g., point out exits, allow the client to determine a comfortable personal space from the helper, address any fears they may have about the present context they are in, (b) **session** e.g., educate the person about the aim and structure of the session, allow choice where possible within the session (c) provide routine and predictability where possible (d) **self** e.g., educate person regarding internal cues for distress and teach skills on how to contain their emotion to a safe level and ground themselves in the present.

Containment and Grounding Skills

It is important to be aware of your own internal cues and modulate personal physiological arousal levels to a safe level. Your body gives you clues to your level of distress. Rothchild (2000:111) outlines arousal states as follows:

Relaxed: primarily moderate activation of parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). Breathing is easy and deep, heart rate is slow, and skin tone is normal.

Slight Arousal: signs of low to moderate PNS activation combined with low-level sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activation. Breathing or heart rate may quicken while skin colour remains normal; skin may pale and moisten slightly without increases in respiration and pulse etc.

Moderate Hyperarousal: primarily signs of increased SNS arousal: rapid heart beat, rapid respiration, becoming pale etc

Severe Hyperarousal: primarily signs of very high SNS arousal: accelerated heart beat, accelerated respiration, pale skin tone, cold sweating etc.

Endangering Hyperarousal: signs of very high activation of both SNS and PNS, for example: pale (or reduced colour) skin (SNS) with slow heart rate (PNS); widely dilated pupils (SNS) with flushed colour (PNS); slow heart rate (PNS) with rapid breathing (SNS); very slow respiration (PNS) with fast heart rate (SNS) etc.

IMPORTANT: Regularly stop throughout the lectures and workshops and listen to your body. Focus your awareness on your breathing, heart rate, skin temperature etc. If you notice your body reaching beyond slight arousal levels then focus on your breathing and slow it down using deep breathing exercises and grounding yourself in the room through noticing the feel of the floor beneath you, objects around the room, smells etc.

Communicating Distress

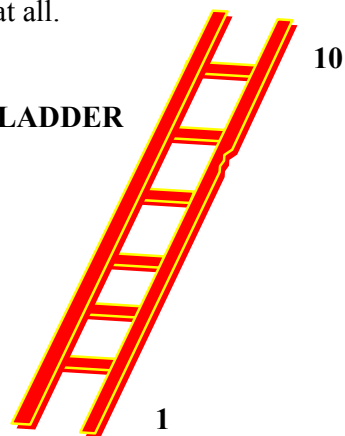
The subjective unit of distress scale (SUDS) is a method of communicating how much distress you are currently feeling. If you have a high SUDS score then this indicates that you need to stop working on trauma issues or sharing your trauma narrative and implement some relaxation, grounding, or containment skills (outlined throughout handbook).

SUDS Scale as outlined in Williams & Poijula, 2002)

- 0 I am completely relaxed, with no distress. I may be deep in sleep.
- 1 I am very relaxed. I may be awake but dozing off.
- 2 I am awake but feel no tension
- 3 I feel a little bit of tension; it keeps my attention from wandering.
- 4 I am feeling some mild distress, apprehension, fear, or anxiety, and body tension
- 5 My distress is somewhat unpleasant but I can still tolerate it.
- 6 I am feeling moderate distress and unpleasant feelings. I have some worry and apprehension.
- 7 My body tension now is substantial and unpleasant, though I can still tolerate it and think clearly.
- 8 I am feeling a great deal of distress with high levels of fear, anxiety, and worry. I can't tolerate this level of distress for very long.
- 9 The distress is so great that it is impacting my thinking. I just can't think straight.
- 10 I am in extreme distress. I am totally filled with panic and I have extreme tension throughout my body. This is the worst possible fear and anxiety I could ever imagine. It is so great that I just can't think at all.

DISTRESS LADDER

Ideally, when discussing traumatic material
SUDS score should never go over 7.



Grounding Exercises

- Name 5 things you can see, hear, feel - Must be real things
- Pick object or part of a person or self - Describe in detail
- Make fists with hands/squeeze gently to slowly increase pressure in muscles
- Make a noise
- Using hands rub or gently tap different body parts to feel where body begins & ends

Safe Place Imagery

Aim of this skill is to create a safe place in imagination – a place of rest. It is very effective anytime a person is feeling overwhelmed.

Step 1: *Image.* The counsellor and the client identify an image of a safe place that the client can easily evoke and that creates a personal feeling of calm and safety.

Step 2: *Emotions and Sensations.* The counsellor asks the client to focus on the image, feel the emotions and identify the locations of the pleasing physical sensations.

Step 3: *Enhancement.* The counsellor may use a gentle, calming voice tone to enhance the imagery and the sense of calm and safety. He or she should take care to convey safety and security for the client, who is asked to report when the emotions are present.

Step 4: *Cue Word.* The client is then asked to identify a single word that fits the picture (e.g. “relax”, “beach”, “mountain”, “trees”, “safe”, “calm”) and to rehearse it mentally as pleasant sensations and a sense of emotional security are noticed. The counsellor continues to offer gentle suggestions to help enhance the emotions and sensations even more.

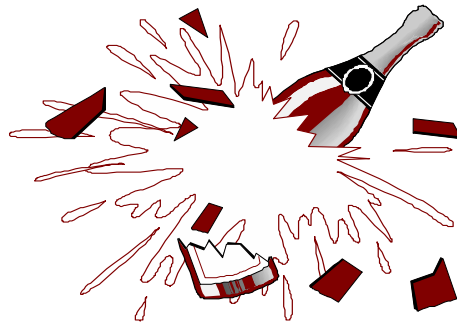
Step 5: *Self-cuing.* The client is then instructed to repeat the procedure on his or her own, bringing up the image and the cue word, and allowing themselves to feel positive feelings (both emotional and physical sensations). When the client has successfully repeated the exercise independently, the clinician points out how they can use it to relax during times of stress.

Step 6: *Cuing with disturbance.* The counsellor asks the client to bring their safe place to mind as vividly and clearly as possible. When the client has done this, the counsellor asks the client to bring up a minor annoyance and note the accompanying negative feelings. The counsellor then guides the client into recalling the safe place image until the negative feelings dissipate. The aim is to increase the client’s sense of control.

Step 7: *Self-cuing with disturbance.* The counsellor then asks the client to bring up the image of their safe place as vividly and clearly as possible. When they are ready, they are to bring to mind a disturbing thought once again and to follow the exercise, this time without the counsellor’s guidance, to its relaxing conclusion.



What happens when worry & stress build?



Feelings Dial

A feelings dial is used to gain control over intensity of feelings and with practice can “turn down” feelings. It is not meant to avoid or get rid of feelings, as feelings must eventually be processed for healing to occur.

- Imagine a volume dial (like on radio)
- It is like a “feelings dial”
- Has numbers 1 to 10; low to intense:
- Any time feelings too high, imagine dial
- Feelings can be controlled in this way
- Useful for feelings associated with flashbacks or ending therapy session

Exercise: Notice what the dial is made of. Notice if it is smooth or rough. Think of unpleasant feeling you sometimes feel. Notice if you are feeling it right now. What number on the dial reflects how weak or strong the feeling is now? What number is on the dial now? What is it like to be on that number? What would it be like to be at one or eight or somewhere in middle? What number would you like the dial to be on? Turn down the dial lower & lower until it goes down a number. Keep turning it lower & lower. Keep it nice & slow until you find your desired intensity. Repeat several times so that you can master this skill. Do easy breathing. Time your breathing so that each time you exhale, you turn dial a little lower.

Relaxation

A relaxed state is the opposite physiological state of a stressed state. In contrast to a stressed state a relaxed state will be marked by a decrease in the following: heart rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, skeletal muscle tension, metabolic rate, oxygen consumption and analytical thinking (Bourne, 2000).

Relaxation Skills:

Relaxation techniques can be used to reduce tension headaches, anxiety, muscle tightness, fear, and panic attacks. Used regularly relaxation techniques can also prevent the accumulative effect of stress on the body, manage chronic hyperventilation and help regulate intense emotions, reduce fatigue and sleeping problems.

Exercise: Deep Muscle Relaxation

Deep muscle relaxation is a method of promoting relaxation through the systematic tensing and relaxing of muscle groups in the body. It should be practiced twice a day for 20 minutes to gain the most benefit.

Instructions: Find a quiet place and make yourself as comfortable as possible.

Instructions as outlined by Bourne (2000: 81-82)

Tense each muscle group without straining for 7-10 seconds. Feel the build up of tension in each muscle group. When releasing the muscle, do it abruptly, relax and enjoy the sudden feeling of limpness. Stay relaxed for at least 15 – 20 seconds before moving on to next muscle group.

1. Take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
2. Clench your fists. Hold for 7 – 10 seconds. *Use these same time intervals for all other muscle groups.*
3. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and “making a muscle” with both arms. Hold ... and then relax.
4. Tighten your triceps – the muscles on the undersides of your upper arms – by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold ... and then relax.
5. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
6. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around the area of your eyes.
7. Tighten your jaw by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold ... and then relax. Let your lips part and allow your jaw to hang loose.
8. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head way back, as if you were going to touch your head to your back (be gentle with this muscle to avoid injury). Focus only on tensing the muscles in your neck. Hold ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tight, it's good to do the tense-relax cycle twice.
9. Take a few deep breaths and tune into the weight of your head sinking into whatever surface it is resting on.
10. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold ... and then relax.

11. Tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold the tension in your shoulder blades ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tense, you might repeat the tense-relax sequence twice.
12. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold for up to 10 seconds ... and then release slowly. Imagine any excess tension in your chest flowing away with the exhalation.
13. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold ... and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
14. Tighten your lower back by arching it up (you can omit this exercise if you have lower back pain). Hold ... and then relax.
15. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine the muscles in your hips going loose and limp.
16. Squeeze the muscles in your thighs all the way down to your knees. You will probably have to tighten your hips along with your thighs, since the thigh muscles attach at the pelvis. Hold ... and then relax. Feel your thigh muscles smoothing out and relaxing completely.
17. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold ... and then relax.
18. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold ... and then relax.
19. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.
20. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes.

Exercise: Deep Breathing

Instructions: Make yourself as comfortable as possible – place one hand on your abdomen. Inhale deeply so that you can feel your abdomen rise, pause for just a moment and then breathe out slowly through your mouth or nose. As you breathe out allow your body to go limp and floppy. Repeat the breathing pattern in a regular manner. Slowly breathing in for four seconds waiting briefly and then breathing out for four seconds in a regular pattern for 5 minutes.

Exercise: Light and Dark (Adapted from Dunn, 2001)

Instructions: Follow the deep breathing exercises above. Take a moment to imagine the tension in your body is thick dark smoke swirling around inside. As you slowly breathe out imagine the thick dark smoke becoming a light mist as it leaves your body. Slowly breathe in and imagine a pure white light filling your body with each breath bringing relaxation, calm, tranquillity and a deep inner peace.

Exercise: Dual Awareness

It is important to be safe in the knowledge that you are **in the present** observing an event that you experienced **in the past**.

Instructions: (From Rothchild, 2000)

Remember a mildly distressing event – something where you were slightly anxious or embarrassed. What did you notice in your body? What happens in your muscles? What happens in your gut? How does your breathing change? Does your heart rate increase or decrease? Do you become warmer or colder? Is there any change in temperature; is it uniform or variable in sectors of your body?

Then bring your awareness back into this room you are in now. Notice the colour of the walls, the texture of the floor (or rug). What is the temperature of the room? What do you smell here? Does your breathing change as your focus of awareness changes?

Now try to keep awareness of your present surroundings while you remember that slightly distressing event. Is it possible for you to maintain awareness of where you are physically as you remember that event?

End this exercise with your awareness focused on your current surroundings.

Externalise Feelings

Instructions: Draw an outline of yourself in the space below. On that drawing using different colours to represent different feelings (eg., red for anger, black for fear or despair, green for calm) colour in different parts of the body where you are aware of these feelings.