

The Unique Nature of LGI's Trauma Series

LGI courses are abundant with concepts and skills that professionals find valuable and relevant to their work and personal lives. The courses in the trauma series, have the potential to profoundly impact.

The subject of trauma is considered by many experts in the fields of social work, family education, psychology and neurobiology as one of the most significant areas professionals can benefit from exploring. A major reason for this is that research indicates trauma is more pervasive and has a greater impact on children, parents, families, communities and society than was previously understood. The ACEs research indicates that many of today's serious social and personal issues may be directly related to some kind of trauma.

The Exploration of Trauma Can Be Traumatizing

The discoveries about trauma can dramatically influence how people perceive, interact and respond to each other.

Because it is also fairly new, there may be limited cautionary care given during the process of exploring trauma with regard to considering how that exploration might be, in and of itself, traumatizing.

Consider the following analogy: When scientists first discovered ways to use x-rays to look inside the human body, they were unaware of the invisible dangers that existed when the levels of radiation were too high or the exposure was too frequent. For a few decades during the 20th century, doctors routinely x-rayed patients without providing any protective covering for themselves or being aware of the potential harmful impact frequent exposure to x-rays was probably having on patients. For a while x-rays were used after severe burns because there was a belief that the high levels of radiation might help the healing process. Shoe stores had

their own x-ray machines in which children were allowed to insert their feet in order to get a more accurate measurement of their bone structure so that shoes would fit more comfortably.

As useful as this new technology was, it was some time before users realized there were dangers inherent in the technology due to unintentional overexposure of people to radiation.

Similarly, some enthusiastic presenters share details of their research and conclusions without considering how receiving the information might impact some of the people in the audience.

These presenters are correct that the information is revolutionary in scope and may have positive impact in increasing trauma awareness. However, showing graphic illustrations can have powerful, negative repercussions.

The intention may be to emphasize the power and enormous emotional devastation these experiences inflict on people, but at what cost to the audience? Sometimes receiving information has the power to traumatize or re-traumatize audience members.

Just as over-exposing people to x-rays was an unintentional misuse of technology, we can be hopeful that more attention will be paid by presenters to the potential for information to be traumatizing.

Built-In Design to Provide Safety

Statistics indicate that a percentage of the population, 25% or more, have had life experiences that would be considered traumatic. These experiences range, on a continuum:



Resolved

Dormant with later impact

Impact on daily life

Researchers suspect that a high percentage of people in social service professions are drawn to the work because of personal, often traumatic, life experiences. Therefore, the potential exists that much higher than 25% of people may have been trauma-impacted.

Because of the widespread and pervasive nature of trauma and the probability that a fairly high percentage of people taking these courses have some degree of trauma-related issues, the probability of participants being strongly impacted at a personal level is increased.

We need to be sensitive and provide a variety of mechanisms to ensure the maximum amount of safety exists throughout every process in which we invite participants to engage.

It is also important that participants be highly aware that others may experience the course at a more personal and intense level than one usually experiences a professional training.

This does not mean that participants will be deeply impacted at a personal level. We anticipate that professionals will find the information and processes enlightening and meaningful, however some may not experience epiphanies during the exploration of the subject of trauma.

Regardless of how deeply the information and process impacts each participant, we want to be clear that we hold the emotional safety of participants to be of utmost importance.

In order to ensure emotional safety as best we can a Safety Symbol will appear throughout the lesson notes and lesson videos as a reminder to always place your physical and emotional safety first while completing the course



We invite professionals to be self-caring and to find useful ways to process any strong or difficult reactions to any of the material we use.

Safety Plans

In her book *Restoring Sanctuary*, Dr. Sandra Bloom describes how to create safety plans for clients and themselves. LGI has based its use of safety plans and the following information and description on Dr. Bloom's seminal work.

We intentionally focus on safety first for our participants. Intentionally establishing and maintaining an emotionally safe environment is a priority and necessity if we are to effectively model what we encourage participants to apply in their personal and professional lives.

Since 2007, LGI has embraced the concept of inviting participants to create and use safety plans whenever information is shared or activities are offered that have the potential to trigger someone's past traumatic experience or create high levels of stress or anxiety. We encourage participants to use safety plans in and out of class.

We also invite participants to create safety plans at the beginning of any workshops in which materials presented have the potential to trigger a participant's past traumatic experience or create high levels of stress or anxiety.

Basic Definition of a Safety Plan

A safety plan is a predetermined list of ways a person can mentally or physically ensure they remain safe, especially if a topic, activity or environment is perceived as potentially dangerous or threatening.

Safety plans are lists of specific mental or physical actions that support both the permission and power for individuals to maintain their own safety.

Two Categories of Safety Plans: Internal and External

There are two basic categories of safety plans that offer participants a clear understanding of their options for creating and maintaining safety: internal and external safety plans.

Internal safety plans are plans that focus on what a person can do mentally to remain calm like choosing to focus on something else or applying a pre-selected mental mantra.

External safety plans are plans that focus on what a person can physically do to create safety. These are the outward behaviors that give a person a sense of power over overwhelming, frightening thoughts, feelings or sensations.

Potential to be Triggered

Those who have experienced significant trauma are vulnerable to being triggered, meaning suddenly reverting to the previously experienced sensations of being overwhelmed by fear, terror or extreme stress that were present when a trauma first occurred. Triggers are sensory in nature since trauma is stored as one or more sensory memories. When triggered, a person loses track of time, flashes back to the past and re-experiences the original sensations. The person may then react with one or more of the following:

- Cry out for help (van der Kolk) / Flock (Perry)
- Freeze
- Flee
- Fight
- Submit/Comply
- Capitulate (Perry)

A traumatic experience may be vicarious when hearing others' stories or witnessing others' injuries.

Inviting participants to create a predetermined safety plan that provides specific mental or physical actions provides each person with the permission and power to maintain safety.

Personal Safety Plan Suggestions

The following are suggestions participants might use as they create personal safety plans.

There is no universal safety plan. Each person needs to consider what contributes to feeling safe. Each person is encouraged to be aware of potential triggers in order to better determine the use of their safety plan.

Sample ways people can create an internal sense of safety:

- Mentally acknowledge your power to find ways to maintain your safety.
- Mentally list your options for protecting yourself if something scary or dangerous happens, if you feel triggered.
- Picture a safe and peaceful spot.
- Think about what you are saying to yourself and correct over-reactive, untrue thoughts.

Consider if you are reacting so strongly because of something that happened to you in the past. Change your thoughts to be more realistic. *"I can feel myself getting panicky or overwhelmed by what is being shared right now. I am feeling this way because I have a trauma history and can be triggered by things like this. It is completely understandable that I am reacting this way and I can take charge, interrupt the process and regain*

my sense of calm.”

- Breathe slowly and deeply, notice how your belly or stomach expands and contracts with each breath.
- Create a personal mantra or statement of assurance you can repeat mentally, verbally or in writing. *“I am not in danger. I am safe. I have the power to care for myself.”*
- Relax your body, one body part at a time.
- Pray for yourself or others.
- Zone out and decide not to pay attention.
- Note your physical sensations and remind yourself that sensations are not dangerous.
- Mentally focus on the fact that you are in the present and not in the past (i.e. intentionally feel your feet on the floor, hands on your lap, remind yourself of the date and exact time and that you are present and safe).

Sample ways people can create an external sense of safety:

- Note where exits are.
- Sit near a door.
- Sit in the room where you feel safest.
- Look around to note that other people seem safe.
- Refuse to speak.
- Be prepared to leave the room, decide a safe place to go (bathroom, outside the room or building, into another room that is vacant).
- Sit near someone you feel safe being close to, someone who might protect you or at least accepts the ways you promote safety for yourself.
- Tell someone you trust if you start to feel unsafe.
- Distract yourself by doodling, taking notes, studying things in the room, thinking about what you want to have for dinner, softly

tapping a pen on the back of your hand, softly drumming your fingers, rocking, sucking on a piece of candy.

- Drink cold water.
- Close your eyes for a few minutes.
- Leave the room.

There may be other ways participants can create their own personal safety plans.



When and How to Use Safety Plans

Sometimes participants can predict that a specific topic or activity might trigger them. For example, attending a workshop where types of violence will be discussed if a participant has multiple personal experiences with domestic violence. It may be necessary to attend this workshop to gain more information on the subject, despite past experiences. Knowing in advance there is potential to be triggered, an individual can pull out and refer to their safety plan, choosing one or more internal or external items that will promote a sense of safety.

Sometimes participants can be caught off-guard by new information, audio or visual demonstrations, or challenging activities that reveal previously unknown personal pain. When trainers have invited participants to create and use safety plans, if and when anything seems to compromise their sense of safety, it becomes more likely that participants will pull out their index cards and use one or more of the items they have listed there.

Creating Safety Plans

LGI has developed the following directions as a guide to creating personal safety plans that participants will be invited to use for themselves.

Participants may also find it helpful when interacting with their own clients

or groups.

1. Provide a basic definition of a safety plan
2. Provide rationale and potential benefits of creating and using safety plans
3. Provide specific suggestions
4. Describe when and how to use safety plans
5. Distribute index cards
6. Allot 5 minutes for individuals to write their safety plans
7. Strongly recommend individuals keep their card with their materials for class and to use whenever needed
8. Encourage individuals to be sensitive to and supportive of others

Student of Trauma

We encourage professionals to adopt an image and role of being a student of whatever subject they are studying. For example, a student of:

- Anger
- Discipline
- Relational Health
- Communication
- Trauma

We encourage each participant in this course to become a student of trauma and adopt the attitudes and attributes of students:

- High degrees of curiosity
- Receptivity to new information
- Willingness to learn and grow
- Willingness to make the world a laboratory for exploring the subject

Each participant in this training who allows themselves to embrace a student role can enhance the processes of:

- Becoming more aware
- Experiencing increased amounts of understanding and appreciation
- Applying new ICAPS into meaningful and practical responses

The world is a laboratory and students can experience a multitude of insights into the realities of trauma.