

Learning the skills to recover from trauma

Forty-second in a series

The *Trauma Recovery Program: Healing the Mind, Body and Spirit* is a faith-based response to adult survivors of childhood abuse and neglect. The program has been implemented in the Diocese of Kalamazoo, Mich., for three years and will soon be launched in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

“Trauma creates an obstacle to normal human development,” said Father Kenneth Schmidt, a licensed counselor and co-founder of the recovery program. Trauma survivors, he added, endured “emotionally impoverished childhoods” that leave them vulnerable to flashbacks, addictions, intense self-blame, overwhelming feelings, and difficulty maintaining healthy relationships.

But trauma recovery work, said Father Schmidt, is based in hope. He tells survivors: “It’s not your fault that you got hurt, and you are completely responsible for your recovery.” The good news is that survivors are never to blame for the abuse that happened to them, and they do have the power and choice to enter into recovery and strive for healthier, more balanced and satisfying lives.

Father Schmidt and Sharon Froom, a licensed psychologist and program co-founder, were recently at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles conducting a two-day training for mental health professionals and pastoral ministers in how to implement the recovery program in a parish setting.

The recovery model uses the core concepts and skills of the “Trauma Model” developed by Colin A. Ross, M.D. It consists of a 10-week confidential trauma recovery group that is psycho-educational in its approach. Trauma survivors learn practical skills and important concepts for managing their lives in the present.

Below are brief outlines of several of the core concepts and skills trauma survivors learn in a recovery group.

Grounding. Survivors are experts at keeping their bodies in the present while their thoughts and emotions are somewhere else. The Trauma Recovery Program teaches group members to utilize their five senses to keep their thoughts and emotions in the present, both in and out of the program.

Processing feelings. In the recovery model, trauma is defined as the inability to manage feelings safely. This is because trauma survivors often disconnect or become numb to their feelings. Others are overwhelmed by extreme feelings like shame, rage or depression. In the recovery group, participants identify situations that trigger feelings from the past, and slowly learn the skills to calm themselves in the present.

The goal, said Father Schmidt is “learning to feel your feelings while keeping yourself safe.”

Attachment ambivalence. Trauma survivors often feel ambivalent about relationships, because their childhoods were full of conflicting feelings — for example, feeling conflicted between loving one’s father, but hating his abusive behavior. The experience ultimately gets generalized to future relationships.

Children also are vulnerable to blaming themselves for the abuse in order to stay attached to a caregiver and try to have other basic needs met, said Froom.

In the recovery group, adult survivors learn how to recognize the conflicting feelings they have about relationships and how to interrupt self-blaming feelings. They practice managing the anxiety and discomfort they feel when trying to express emotions like anger

or sadness which they had to repress during childhood.

Cognitive distortions. Another component of the program is learning how to interrupt cognitive distortions — false ideas or beliefs trauma survivors hold about themselves or others. In a calm group setting, survivors begin to identify the cognitive distortions which limit their lives. “This is where group work can be profoundly helpful,” said Froom, “Because beliefs are entrenched, sometimes only peers can contradict false beliefs.” As survivors correct their cognitive distortions (for example, “I am a bad person”), the intensity of their feelings diminishes and addictive or other harmful behaviors become less extreme.

Calming body stress response. Trauma survivors tend to carry a lot of stress in their bodies, because they tend to react to negative triggers in the present as if the triggers are as threatening as the traumatic events of their childhoods. In the group survivors learn skills to interrupt their physical stress responses. Prayer, meditation, guided imagery and exercise are a few of the techniques known to be effective.

Grief. What comes up when adult survivors let go of self-blame is the grief of the safe, stable and caring childhoods they didn’t get to have, said Froom. “Grief comes late in the recovery process, because survivors’ minds have been organized to defend against feeling deep grief,” she said. Meaningful rituals can support a person to grieve their losses. One trauma survivor wrote a letter to themselves as a child acknowledging the loss. Another visited the graveside of their perpetrator.

“Abuse separates the survivor from their tribe,” said Froom of the isolation trauma survivors endure. A ritual can be created to bring the person back into their community. “They are welcomed back as the wise elder. They are valued for what they have been through.”

Froom acknowledges that recovery is a difficult process. “It’s a hard road what we’re asking of survivors,” she said.

However, participants who have gone through the 10-week recovery group report a greater capacity to live in the present, said Froom, and to have more balanced lives. Following the group, if new feelings of anxiety, anger or grief are triggered, survivors have tangible skills for processing their emotions. Most importantly, they have a renewed sense of hope in their own well-being and in their future.

The archdiocesan Office of Assistance Ministry will be starting a trauma recovery group in each of the five pastoral regions in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The groups will be facilitated by a licensed therapist and a pastoral person (either a clergy, religious or lay ecclesial minister).

Any adult who is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse will be eligible to participate, regardless of whether the abuse took place at home, neighborhood, school or parish. The groups will be free to participants. For more information on starting a trauma recovery group in a parish or participating in one, call Society of the Holy Child of Jesus Sister Sheila McNiff at (213) 637-7650.

This weekly series of feature stories, commentary and analysis is compiled and edited by an advisory group to the Media Relations Office of the Archdiocese, through which the articles are distributed.