

Spirit of Healing Group: Safety in Storytelling

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Abstract

Creating safety for women within the holistic model of self – emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual – is essential for healing and recovery from trauma. Building trust and providing safety gives women the permission to share their stories by using creative storytelling media without violating their boundaries. The process is about bringing awareness and empowerment to the self in all areas, and growing to a place of healing and recovery through the creative expression of painful and shame-based feelings. Creating safety provides the opportunity to begin the process of healing and recovery.

Healing and recovery for women who have suffered trauma happens in a group that provides a safe, creative format in which they can tell their stories without enduring further psychic trauma during disclosure process. The Laurel Centre clinical framework concept of reconnecting and moving on is based on creating and understanding physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual safety (The Laurel Centre, 2013). Creating safety begins as early as the pre-screening process. Building trust and intimacy, setting up boundaries, and teaching mindfulness is essential for safety within a group. The steps of safety, trust building and intimacy, overcoming old messages, and sharing feelings are part of the process that supports healing and recovery. That process occurs in other models of therapy and varies only in the techniques of the learning and teaching style preferences of the therapist. Trauma recovery is about the women, their own healing, and improving their lives as they decide what is manageable for them (Rothschild, 2010). Storytelling can include many art forms – painting, clay, drama, writing, dance, and music – which are used to generate safety (Ledgard, 2012). The use of storytelling in the healing process is an approach that promotes recovery from traumatic events in the women's lives when the group is a safe, intimate, and trustworthy place that creates a respectful healing journey (*Trauma-Informed Storytelling*).

Safety and Trust

The key to creating a safe environment and building trust is by developing awareness of self and others in relationships (Hodges & Myers, 2010). The group relationship is based on the pre-screening of participants to ensure safety of all, the understanding of safety within the women themselves, and other group members, as well as preparing for storytelling. Trust issues linger from years of trauma and even current relationships. Women bring numerous and complex issues to group sessions. The therapist requirement of safety is essential in order to create an atmosphere of trust in an environment that invites healing within the group (Pack, 2008).

In the pre-screening process, it is very important to interview and assess the participant for their safety and that of the group. The warning signs, which present themselves in this interview, are paramount in distinguishing the women who are not ready to attempt the healing process from those that are. An effective pre-screening process increases the chances of women's joining and successfully completing the group. With trust building already begun, women have a clearer understanding of their own barriers (Doylan, 1991). In the interview, women hear that they have a safe place to disclose some of their feelings that up to this point have never been safe to disclose. Working in a group setting helps women to find their voice that has been lost. This lost voice does not have to be verbal. This knowledge comes as quite a relief and imparts a sense of safety for them to try the group. The women attending must be at a place to reach out and endeavour to join a group that will, for them, begin a place to start to trust.

For many women, the years of trauma have left scars, fears, old messages, and scripts that say, "Do not trust anyone." Perhaps past relationships have added to these messages, reinforcing that it is not safe to trust anyone and that one is hurt in relationships (Leseho & Maxwell, 2010). When sharing in a group, these scripts run over and over in their minds and produce fear. These messages say, "Do not trust," "Do not share," and "It is not safe." This fear is very real and it is hard for the women to trust the process, themselves, and others in the group unless they can take a risk and say, "I am safe here." Hurnard (1985) uses "Much Afraid" and her journey to the high places to show healing (p. 17). She must leave her "Fearing" family to receive her healing and become what her "Chief Shepherd" had promised (Hurnard, p. 18). She began her journey scared, full of fear, and needing to learn to trust again, but she followed His lead and learned to trust in difficult situations even when she doubted. This story resonates with women who are on that same healing path and want to overcome fear, hurt, shame, and losses, in order to build trust and to be loved and accepted.

The women's process of rebuilding their identity and learning new messages is an ongoing process. One part of relearning new messages is to become aware of old messages running through their thoughts and replacing them. This relearning of old messages requires time and practice. The thoughts that are instilled in the mind are associated with the past and negative messages. These messages have a strong impact on their identity and, because of this, women who have survived trauma often have low self-esteem. In the group, reframing thoughts and trusting feelings are keys to learning new messages and redefining the self for women. This rebuilding in a safe environment is the beginning of healing and trust (Rothschild, 2011).

Women have learned early on that other people could violate their boundaries and they had no power to stop them. They were powerless and helpless then, and they continue to behave in that manner out of fear of being hurt as adults. Learning boundaries is good, as the boundaries help women to say no. They may be taking on too much responsibility for others or become dependent and take too much from others. They may never share their feelings or talk too much. Boundaries are about the ability to be able to keep some thoughts private but still share. Childhood trauma can cause women to be out of balance and be left with unsafe boundaries (Cloud & Townsend, 1992). In the group, women learn about boundaries and the ability to set limits. This begins with awareness and knowledge that they have a problem with boundaries (Rich & Copans, 2000). The women learn that they have the power to share their feelings and share only what they feel is safe for them.

In order to share, trust needs to be present. Erikson's building block for trust versus mistrust is one possible key to early childhood development stages for healthy trust relationship (Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughan, 2011). When safety is ensured, the participants are more willing to step out in group to share some hard feelings and know that they will be validated and honoured. It may be possible that it is the first time that some have ever been believed. The women start the process by learning how to be grounded in the present, take care of self, and trust the process. Their physical safety is ensured by trusting that their boundaries are not being violated by someone moving into their space. This sense of safety can be enhanced by wrapping a blanket around themselves, or have their grounding item in the form of something tactile or a creative image to focus on, which provides emotional, intellectual, and spiritual safety. They control how much or what they share. When women give themselves permission to share what they feel is safe for them, then women become their own authors, knowing that recovery can take place only within the context of group relationships (Herman, 1997). This process is modelled and reinforced in weekly group sessions. Through the maintenance of safety over many weeks and building trust, intimacy is slowly established. The women are beginning to rebuild their identity. They feel safe and comfortable to share, and are empowered.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is to be aware of one's feelings, body, and thoughts in the moment, in a non-judgemental way. To focus on what is happening in our body is part of mindfulness (Stahl & Goldstein, 2010). Music playing softly in the background and visualization of a safe place are all part of mindfulness. This sense of awareness includes the women's feelings, thoughts, fears, and sensations that are produced in the process, the ability to check within and be mindful of breathing, to stop and use a tool to keep focused, and to know that they are safe in the present – which grounds them.

Teaching mindfulness builds trust and safety within the group and the women themselves, because it teaches the women to refocus within themselves and reminds them that they are in a safe and trustworthy place. They are encouraged to use the safe place that they have created in a mindfulness exercise.

Storytelling

The weeks leading up to the storytelling are preparatory. Keeping women safe is essential as they process their inner thoughts, feelings, essence, and body (Lesaho & Maxwell). Women use their self-care wheel, relaxation techniques, and grounding to maintain a sense of security as they share their story in art form. Being mindful is creating an awareness of the whole of themselves and their feelings (Callahan Jones, 2012).

Painting

Storytelling by painting is less traumatic when it is put out on paper with no preconceived idea of what will be painted. No words are required; they just let their hands create the picture of whatever feelings come forth. The process is the experience, and the feelings are the beginning of healing. When provided with a safe place to be connected to the inner self with all the feelings, good or painful, painting becomes a healing process (*Trauma-Informed Storytelling*). Just knowing that there is support and understanding, instead of isolation and loneliness, is an enormous weight lifted off the women's shoulders. The women have stated that there is a freedom in just knowing "I am not alone." The women paint their stories and even when they do not share the same story, they share the painting experience and they are more often able to talk about the effects that it has left on their lives. Expressing their feelings through painting is an easier and less threatening way of storytelling.

Clay

Anger is not always a safe emotion to express. The use of clay to form an object associated with anger is enlightening for many, as anger was always scary for them. Anger takes many forms when modeled with clay, and the process is helpful for others as they see that anger can be expressed in a safe way. A two-sided coin shows anger as sad or mad and helps a woman to understand that she no longer is just mad, but actually was sad and flipped to the mad when she was sad because it was safer. The angry monster in red clay is less scary when it is set on a table outside the woman. Anger can lead to motivation, and motivation to discovery of self, and separating the issues of others from self to provide awareness and understanding. This can be one of the many insights into the healing journey. The women can see anger as an emotion that is not something to be denied, but an emotion that can be expressed in a safe way.

Journals

Journals are part of the storytelling process. Each week a picture is drawn, or words written in a journal to express feelings in a safe way. The validating of the women's feelings provides empowerment and permission to honour them. These journals help to debrief the thoughts, feelings, and questions. Journals can be used to see an area of success and awareness (Anderson & Hiersteiner). Journaling brings encouragement and can motivate the self to continue on the journey when feeling overwhelmed. The use of music and poetry in journaling keeps feeling in a place of safety when grounded. Journaling helps to celebrate the journey to healing in a safe way.

Drama

Drama storytelling can be anything from dance to role playing. Women can look at sadness, grief, and loss in this creative tool. There are many pantomimes wherein we have seen the sad faces of the actors. The women are asked, "What does sad look like?" "Act out sadness in any way that works for you." "Give yourself permission to be a sad clown, a sad puppy, or whatever you choose to use, and then draw that feeling." "Use sadness in dance or a non-verbal short skit." All avenues of drama express the sad feelings (Archibald, 2012). In the process of looking at feelings, shame is often present. Shame says, "I am bad," not "I did a bad thing." Separating who we are as opposed to what we do is about identifying with our shame, putting it into perspective, and accepting the losses and sadness that it has produced. Use of objects like hats – a ball cap, sombrero, flowers, veiled, or a pill box – with each portraying a different feeling, provides a safe way to try on a feeling. Wearing the hat and then discarding it provides an opportunity to take on a new view of it. In the reframing of the shame in this process, there is safety and permission to be creative and embrace the process of healing using storytelling drama.

Conclusion

The women in group are continuing to grow toward healing and freedom to express the inside feelings outwardly in a safe way. Using expressive art form material becomes very powerful and safe for the women's journey towards healing. Becoming aware of their feelings, how to express them, and where to put them, is all about safety. The women gain insight into their own process, no longer in isolation, but part of a group wherein permission is given to choose the healing path that works for them. They can move beyond fear to the process level (Pearson & Wilson). Healing and recovery becomes a safe personal journey that produces growth by building on safety within a relationship. Women can look into all aspects of their self, when they find and make sense of it all by telling their stories without being traumatized (Anderson & Hiersteiner). They receive healing and recovery from trauma in a way that gives them a sense of empowerment.

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About the Author

Barbara McNish returned to school at age 61. As of December 2013, she had applied to Brandon University's graduate program and completed one course. Barb is a women's counsellor, with 18 years of trauma experience related to domestic violence and emotional and sexual abuse. She is a fun-loving, laughing "gramma" of 10 who enjoys acting.