

Angels on A Leash Presentation – Oct 28, 2023

Agenda: describe what trauma is and what it does to people, what types of interventions help, practical tips with do's and don'ts, and Q & A

Some of you have been called to events involving homicide (or multiple) or suicide. These are traumatic events for anyone who is involved directly or as a witness. A trauma is a life event that poses a threat to a person's safety or is deeply disturbing. Many life events can be traumas, such as a natural disaster, rape or assault, divorce, death of a loved one, childhood hospitalization, battling a disease, car accident, and more. Interpersonal traumas such as assault or murders typically produce the most lasting effects such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). In PTSD, there is a mismatch between what's outside the body and what's going on inside the body. The story of the trauma is being told through cues.

How do people react in traumatic situations – what have you observed? Sadness, distress, disoriented, horrified, confused, angry, guilty, fearful, anxious, numb, frozen, nauseous, overwhelmed, helpless, shock, edgy, hasty decisions or indecisive, denial, trouble with simple tasks, reactive, grossed out, pained, blacked out, startled/jumpy.

Trauma specialist Judith Herman, "Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living."

What does trauma do to a person? At the brain level, trauma is disorganizing. A person's main functions: emotions, body functions, memory, thoughts become detached. For example, a person may freeze or lose memory of what happened. Their body may act as if there is an ongoing threat of danger. The brain makes connections using all sensory information, whether or not a person is conscious of it.

Example of woman living in WW2 London through Blitz (1940-41), Nazi bombing campaign, reacting to helicopter or plane overhead. *Where were you on 9/11/01 (vs 9/10)?* All sorts of cues will remind the person of the trauma and loss, including many from the environment (think of the 5 senses). The experience of being comforted by you and your dog together gives them a coping tool and a cue for the future – seeing a dog, thinking about the dog will help them relieve the stress and re-order them.

What do they need? Think of what helps you feel safe and secure, what were you doing, who were you with. It happens in relationships, when we're with people we trust. The traumatized person needs to regain sense of safety, empowerment, understanding, a sense of control, and predictability. These things are built through connections with others.

What have dogs taught us about providing care? They pick up our emotional state, they come near, they don't judge, they remain quiet, they bring gentle comfort

What Angels on a Leash intervention provides: an immediate coping tool so that their stress level can lessen: safety, positive connection, defuse the chaos, emotional support, presence of hope. Stress hormones decrease and pleasure hormones are released. All of these help in the moment and also in the long term with PTS.

→ Share story from p. 17 of Paws to Comfort by Jen Marr – responded to Sandy Hook school shooting, founder of “Inspiring Comfort LLC” in 2017

What to say or do – observe, active listening, show respect, acceptance, make connections, adapt, build hope, focus on here and now, be patient.

Present yourself: take a moment to pray or center yourself before entering situation, make eye contact, act confident/comfortable/calming even if feel awkward or uncomfortable, warm and open body language, focus on their needs not yours, validate what they are saying or feeling, silence your phone, think ahead of some phrases that resonate with you including making an introduction.

-specific phrases: We're here to support you / to care for you, I can see the pain in your eyes, Take all the time you need, This must be so hard, I can't imagine how this feels, I'm so sorry, Is there anything you want to say, Do you feel like talking about it, You're not alone, We are here and we care

-use all the senses – feel how soft his fur, the wetness of nose or tongue, smell, hear his breathing

-allow silence

-ask permission – this helps empower them, autonomy/control

-listen for needs – expressed or unexpressed

-be mouthpiece for the dog – wagging tail means he feels safe with you, he's sniffing you wants to get to know you, tilting his head – tell him more, he wants to be your friend

-breathing exercise – breathe in and out with each stroke of the dog, exhale longer than inhale with pause between, say a soothing word with them as they stroke the dog (calm, peace, comfort, quiet, soft), or place one hand on chest and other on belly while breathing – feel breath coming deep into abdomen

What not to say or do – don't judge, don't counsel or give advice (“You can't counsel a person whose house is on fire”, don't tell your own story, don't ask what happened, don't avoid the

person, you don't know how they feel, don't try to cheer them up, don't avoid saying the name of the deceased, don't try to fix the person or their problem, don't force words if there are none

Unhelpful words: Look on the bright side, At least..., They're in a better place, It could be worse, Time will heal you, Hang in there, This will make you stronger, It's for the best, It's God's will, Be brave

Care for yourself – secondary trauma can happen, process with another group member, trusted friend or counselor at HHH

How would you respond? Examples:

"I feel numb"

"I feel lost"

"Am I crazy for feeling this?"

"I should have..."

"It's all my fault"

"I don't believe it"

"I don't remember"

"I just saw her"

"I can't take it anymore"

Question and Answer???