Empowerment and Increased Resilience as an Antidote to Trauma

September 10, 2012
Lorraine Robinson, LSW, ACSW
www.reawakeningforwomen.org
What did the Dalai Lama say to the hot dog vendor in New York?
Make me ONE with everything!
Change must come from within!
Ka Hale Ho`āla Hou
No Nā Wāhine
The home of reawakening for women
Mission

Empowering women to successfully transition from prison to the community
Profile and Pathway

• Profile: Few protective factors, many risk factors
  – Poverty, family histories of incarceration, violence, substance abuse, low educational achievement, lack of access to community resources, typically from marginalized and disenfranchised families, groups, and/or communities

• Pathway
  – Unresolved trauma, often severe and early in life
  – Use of substances to self medicate
  – Addiction
  – Crime
  – Incarceration; becomes intergenerational
  – Number of incarcerated women has increased exponentially in recent decades
Program Model

• Simple but profound realization:

If we can help women manage overwhelm, we can enhance their odds for success
Stage-Based Change

- Adjustment
- Stabilization
- Destabilization / Derail
- Restabilization
  - Repeated progression of derail, restabilize
- Moving on
Change Model

STAGES of CHANGE

1. ADJUSTMENT
2. STABILIZATION
3. DESTABILIZATION
4. RESTABILIZATION
5. MOVING ON
Derail

- Crux of learning; teachable moment
- How the women deal with derail determines how well they restabilize
- Learn how to handle the next derail
- Successfully navigating derail helps them manage overwhelm
- Success in managing overwhelm increases resilience
DE-RAIL SELF ASSESSMENT TOOL

Optimal Functioning

CAUTION

DANGER

STRESS LEVEL

Adapted from Social Intelligence by Daniel Goleman
Response to Challenge/Overwhelm

- Women come at different levels of readiness in differing areas of their lives: blamer/victim to empowerment, resilience and accountability

- Goal in all we do: help the women move from blamer/victim to empowerment, accountability and resilience
What is Trauma

- External threat overwhelming a person’s coping resources
- Whether something is traumatic is unique to each person
- Destroys trust and undermines core sense of safety
Some Causes of Trauma

- Emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse in childhood
- Abandonment or neglect (especially of small children)
- Sexual assault
- Domestic violence
- Experiencing or witnessing violent crime
- Institutional abuse
- Cultural dislocation or sudden loss
- Chronic stressors like racism and poverty
- Invasive medical procedures
- Historical violence against a specific group, such as slavery, colonization or genocide
- Any situation where one person misuses power over another

• Interpersonal trauma is the most damaging kind of trauma
Responses to Trauma

• Major themes for trauma survivors are feeling devalued, powerless disconnected and out of control
• Internal and external factors can trigger a trauma response
• Responses are an attempt to regain power and control
Why Trauma Informed?

• From our experience, it appears that trauma is at the core of what brings women into the criminal justice system (practice based research)

• Failing to address and take this into account minimizes our ability to make a difference
Understanding Trauma

• Important to understand distinction between
  – Simple trauma (one incident)
  – Complex (multiple incidents)
  – Developmental (occurring repeatedly during a child’s developmental years)
Understanding Trauma

• PTSD is not an adequate diagnosis to describe and treat symptoms of developmental trauma

• Effort to add developmental trauma to DSM
  – Shows up as multiple symptoms
  – Depression, anxiety, borderline personality
Attachment Theory

• What is attachment?
  – How we connect with and relate to others
  – Neural pathways develop in infancy and organize our responses in how we relate to others
  – Our brains are “anticipation machines”
    • “What do I know from before that can help me now?”
    • Experience shapes our brains
Attachment Styles

• Attachment styles
  – Secure
  – Insecure
    – Avoidant
    – Ambivalent
  – Disorganized

• Best predictor of secure attachment is a coherent narrative

• Brains can be rewired
  – How we relate with clients can shape new attachment neural pathways (neuroplasticity)
  – Repetition creates/reinforces new neural pathways
Why Trauma Informed

• Many women in criminal justice system have suffered developmental trauma
  – Often have poor attachment; best predictor of someone becoming an offender is relational neglect
  – Interferes with formation of healthy neural pathways
  – As a result women have not learned self regulation, are easily aroused, difficult to self calm
  – Live with a feeling of dread or danger
  – Problems with trust and relationships
Why Trauma Informed

- Neural pathways for self regulation do not exist as a result of developmental trauma
- Trauma undermines self balance
- “Going from 0 to 100 in 60 seconds”
  - trauma makes you idle at 60 instead of 0
- Learning how to self regulate and self soothe are keys to becoming empowered and resilient
Self Balancing Tool
All Qualities have Positive and Negative Attributes
Balance is the Key!
Self Regulation / Self Balancing

• Using the Balancing Tool allows practice in self regulation; creating new neural pathways

• Learning happens through repetition; we learned what we know through repetition and it requires repetition for change to take root, creating change from within

• For providers, every time we need to repeat ourselves, it is an opportunity to reinforce new learnings
Neurobiology

• Top down and bottom up thinking
• Intentional meets unintentional and action or behavior is the result
• We cannot control bottom up but can work on top down which eventually influences bottom up thinking

– (from Dr. Daniel Siegel’s work on Mindfulness)
Trauma Informed Elements

• A clear understanding that:
  – Change is a process and not an event; a series of decisions that happen over time
  – Dysfunctional behavior patterns are really adaptations to untenable situations
Trauma Informed Elements

• All systems, approaches and interventions designed to enhance optimal functioning and self efficacy; I can do this!
• Importance of building trusting relationships; cannot be ignored!
• When asked, women site supportive staff as the single most important factor in their success
• We are responsive; we constantly learn and adapt based on what we learn from our work with the women
Trauma Informed Elements

• Offering choices from a menu of options
  – Community Service: giving back
  – Enrichment: expanding one’s world view
  – Life Skills Classes: required classes and electives with choices

• Acknowledging success
  – Over 12 hours of community service a month, stand and be recognized at resident meeting
  – 12 hours of enrichment a month earns a recreation day pass
  – Special certificate for exceeding minimum requirements for life skills classes
Trauma Informed Elements

• 2 way recognition
  – Staff chooses resident of the month
  – Residents choose staff of the month
  – Certificate states why they were selected

• Recognition at resident meeting for saving money
  – Over $5,000 saved receive a $15 gift card
  – over $10,000 a $25 gift card
Trauma Informed Elements

• Language is important; terminology intentionally is not value laden

• We do not pathologize women

• Use strength-based words and focus: empowerment, resilience, accountability, responsibility

• Changes are made with involvement by all

• Normalize women’s experience
  – We all derail, it’s normal, it happens
Trauma Informed Elements

• Flexibility and stability
  – The rules are clear, spelled out and the same for everyone; creating safety through consistency and predictability.
  – We answer questions and explain why we do things.
  – We work with each woman individually and collaboratively, recognizing that she is unique.
    • We help her focus on what is important to her.
    • Change plans using motivational interviewing, acknowledges and addresses ambivalence.
Progression through Circles

**Community**
I share and interact, find common interests, needs, and purpose with others in the community.

**Integrity**
I live an undivided life, speaking and acting honestly, holding myself to my highest principles.

**Perseverance**
I move forward steadily and persistently on my chosen path.

**Balance**
I keep things in perspective, staying calm and considering all sides.

**Courage**
I face difficulty and uncertainty without being overcome by worry or fear.

**Willingness**
I am ready and willing to do all I can to get where I want to go.

**Aloha**
I am here! I wait and learn with hope for the future.
Keeping in Mind

• Overwhelm is overwhelming in and of itself
  – Part of the definition of trauma “exceeds one’s ability to cope”
  – Overwhelm itself becomes an additional trigger, compounding other trigger(s)
  – Triggers can be anything and are everywhere

• Unresolved trauma is not integrated in the brain; stored in a fragmented way
  – Feels like it is real, now, in the moment
Keeping in Mind

• Self awareness is the beginning; step 1
  – Doing things differently creates new neuropathways over time; brain plasticity
  – Have to practice, using repetition; 90 days for actual brain change
  – Hard work; requires effort, stamina and perseverance
  – Reinforcement and positive support from staff and peers can make THE difference between success and failure
Change and Exploring Ambivalence

Exercise: Making a Change

• A way to explore the positive and negative consequences of changing and NOT changing
  – what do I gain if I change or don’t change?
  – what do I loose if I change or don’t change?

• Important to acknowledge and give attention to gains and losses for both changing and not changing
Trauma and Neurobiology

• We now know
  – We are wired to connect; emotions are contagious; (mirror neurons); we impact others in our interactions
  – The brain can be rewired; experience shapes the brain (repetition); neuroplasticity,
    • Substantiates that true healing can occur and true change is possible

• How we treat people matters
  – Being mindful about presence, attunement, resonance and trust, helps us tune in and join with others, assists in rewiring process
  – Principles of connectedness, creating an environment of safety to promote change
  – Can create new and positive attachment; healing process
Hui Alakai: Resident Leadership

• Using a Hawaiian cultural model of kuleana residents take “ownership” of their hale and contribute to policy decisions (magnet express lane)

• Serves to de-polarize the “us” and “them” mentality from institution and reinforces empowerment

• Built from “ground up” with input from residents; it’s a kakou thing!
About Resilience

- Resilience can be increased (or decreased)
- Study on resilience in older women (Wagnild and Young)
- Five themes emerged
  - Equanimity
  - Self reliance
  - Perseverance
  - Meaningfulness
  - Existential aloneness
Family Strengthening
Family Strengthening

- Family building designed to
  - Increase resident’s parenting skills and knowledge
  - Improve their ability to communicate effectively with children and family members
  - Improve their ability to access resources
  - Deepen their sense of connectedness and belonging to family and community
  - Interrupt the intergenerational cycle of trauma, addiction, crime and incarceration
Care of Self

• As providers, we are also susceptible to emotional contagion
• Need to care for ourselves so as to sustain our ability to do our jobs well
• Model self care for staff and clients, it must be genuine
• Staff report to a team member anytime they are below mid-yellow on derail self assessment tool
• Folder collages
• What are ways that staff care for themselves in your setting?
• What works for you personally?
The Bottom Line

• Criminal justice involved women are absolutely capable of becoming productive and contributing community members

• Positive and intentional relationships can contribute to healing

• A supportive and structured environment with emotional safety, clear expectations and an atmosphere of connectedness and hope contribute to positive outcomes, increasing resilience and contributing to safer communities for all

• Don’t forget to care for self! You are your own best tool!
Mahalo!

www.reawakeningforwomen.org

empowering women to successfully transition from prison to the community

Photos: Kristina Copeland & Faye Furutomo
Background artwork: Yvonne Lau
Art transparencies: Sarajo Frieden