

# How we work with trauma



**IMPORTANT NOTICE: This information sheet does not constitute medical advice or guidance. Its purpose is to give general information about how we work at Beira's Place and how we deliver our service to survivors. Beira's Place is not a medical service and cannot diagnose physical or mental health conditions.**

**If you have been hurt or injured and think you need immediate medical treatment, call 999, or call NHS 24 on 111 for physical or mental health advice.**

Beira's Place – Edinburgh Women's Sexual Assault Support Centre – is a single sex, women only service for survivors of all forms of sexual violence, sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation. Services are for women aged 16 and over and we provide support no matter when the sexual violence or abuse happened in women's lives. Our service is run by women for women. All services we provide are free and confidential.

Beira's Place delivers trauma informed, women centred support. This means that we understand the nature of trauma, the impact sexual violence trauma has on women's lives and the short and long term effects that women often live with throughout their lives.

We'd like to explain how we work, to help you decide whether we are the right service for you.

We use the term 'survivor' in our work because we recognise the strength of women who survive trauma.

## ● What is trauma?

We often use the word 'trauma' in everyday language to describe a stressful event. But the definition of trauma is not an event that was merely stressful, but that the person to whom the event occurs, experiences a psychological trauma that overwhelms that person's ability to cope and leaves the person fearing death or serious injury. The circumstances of interpersonal traumatic events commonly include abuse of power, betrayal of trust, entrapment, helplessness, pain, terror, confusion, and loss.

This might be because the events happen repeatedly, for example in cases of childhood sexual abuse or sexual exploitation. It may be because what has happened is so overwhelming that a single event can result in long-lasting trauma, such as cases of rape. Or a single event may trigger the memory of an old trauma and bring those memories to the surface, compounding the trauma the survivor experiences. But it's not only the 'event' that causes the trauma.

Dr Bessel van der Kolk writes, "Trauma is not the story of something that happened back then, it's the current imprint of the pain, horror, and fear living inside people".

*"Trauma is much more than a story of the past that explains why people are frightened, angry, or out of control. Trauma is re-experienced in the present, not as a story, but as profoundly disturbing physical sensations and emotions that may not consciously be associated with memories of past trauma. Terror, rage and helplessness are manifested as bodily reactions, like a pounding heart, nausea, gut wrenching sensations and characteristic body movements that signify collapse, rigidity, or rage... The challenge in recovering from trauma is to learn to tolerate feeling what you feel and knowing what you know without becoming overwhelmed. There are many ways to achieve this, but all involve establishing a sense of safety and the regulation of psychological arousal."*

Bessel van der Kolk

## ● How we work with trauma

At Beira's Place, we recognise that how the trauma is felt is defined by the experience of the survivor. We cannot simply state that rape is a traumatic event and everyone who experiences rape will respond in the same way. We understand that each trauma survivor will have a different reaction and response to their trauma and though there may be some patterns, each survivor will react in her own way.

Our work at Beira's Place is based on what is known as the "3 stage model" or the "Herman Model" based on the work of Dr Judith Lewis Herman and outlined in her ground-breaking book **'Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence, from domestic abuse to political terror' (1992)**. It's a widely practised method of working with trauma survivors and support workers at Beira's Place have worked with this method for many years. The reason it works so well is that it is simple, flexible, and allows us to respond to the individual, and by always referring back to Stage One at every support session, we can ensure that the survivor is safe before moving forward with the next part of the process.

**The model is best described in the following way:**

### **Stage One: Safety and Symptom Stabilisation**

It's often believed that if someone can talk about their experience, they are beginning to heal. However, before getting to the talking stage, making sure the survivor is physically and psychologically safe is perhaps the most crucial stage of the process.

**Stage One** helps to ensure that the survivor is safe from others but is also safe within herself. 'Symptom Stabilisation' is a way of checking that some of the symptoms the survivor identifies as happening within her can be worked upon before moving on to Stage Two. For example, if the survivor is anxious, panicky, maybe experiencing panic attacks, feeling that she is having a heart attack, she is probably not in a good place to start talking about her experiences which could easily worsen these feelings.

We know that women sometimes use different coping strategies to help with the physical and mental health issues that are a result of their trauma, and we will also work with women on how we can manage those alongside her support. For example, if the woman uses alcohol to numb the pain she feels, we will work on a way for her to have her support sessions when she is not intoxicated. This might mean having her support sessions at a certain time of the day or being more flexible with her appointments. We will always work with the woman to make sure she gets a service that feels safe for her.

**We will never ask a woman to completely stop taking any drugs or alcohol that she may be addicted to or dependent upon before she begins her support with us. We will work with her to be sure that she gets her support when she is in a safe place within herself. We have support workers at Beira's Place who have many years of experience working with women who have substance misuse issues and who are aware of the trauma that women who use substances as a way of coping with their trauma have experienced.**

Similarly, we will work with women who have poor mental health and try to ensure that we are as flexible as possible as we know that women with poor mental health may find it difficult to talk, attend appointments, travel on public transport, or just get out of bed in the morning. We know that, as a result of their trauma, survivors often cope by organising their whole lives

around managing their fear and pain so that they can avoid intrusive images or thoughts that can make them feel unsafe. This is the reason we focus our work on ensuring safety before we move forward with support. Our service is woman centred and we will do everything we can to ensure that all women get the service they need.

### **Stage Two: Remembrance and Mourning**

**Stage Two** is the part of the support process that involves the 'narrative' or the 'story' of what has happened to the woman. In her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman says of this stage,

*"The choice to confront the horrors of the past lies with the survivor. The therapist plays the role of witness and ally, in whose presence the survivor can speak the unspeakable."*<sup>2</sup>

Many women feel that they cannot speak about the trauma they have experienced and when they come to Beira's Place, they will not be expected to give us the details of their abuse. The details are not important unless it's important to the woman to speak about them. The most important thing for the support is how the woman is coping with the trauma she is living with day to day. We know that sexual violence trauma has a long-term impact on women's lives and women often live with intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, self-blame, shame, guilt, fear, and low self-esteem.

We know that a woman's responses to trauma (alcohol, drugs, obsessive compulsive behaviour such as washing and bathing, dissociating, avoidance, 'tuning out') can help her survive in the short term but in the long term some of these survival responses can themselves become a problem. They can result in restrictions on women's lives and in the case of alcohol and drugs, they can have a very adverse effect on a woman's health and wellbeing.

Having a space that is focused on the needs of the woman, gives her the chance to take control of how she feels and explore it, and regain her power over it. Many women who come for support feel that they will never have power, but it can be taken back with the space and support that women have told us they need.

At this stage we also offer support group programmes that allow women to come together to support each other. Group support always follows one to one support as this is an important stage in the process. Group support is optional and some women feel that it's not for them.

### **Stage Three: Reconnection**

It's at this Reconnection stage that we offer women the chance to participate in group work that is slightly different from the support group programmes offered at Stage Two. The groups at this stage focus on wellbeing, feeling good and making connections. We have sessions on mindfulness, yoga, art, and creativity, all with a social element that can be enriching for women.

*"Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery."*

Judith Herman: *Trauma and Recovery*

<sup>1</sup>If a woman asks us to work with another service, for example her addiction worker, or psychologist, we will always ask her to sign a mandate to take this forward and ensure that she knows what we are doing every step of the way.

<sup>2</sup>"Trauma and Recovery; the aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror" (1992); p175

Sexual violence or abuse does not define a woman. Support can help women to take control of their lives and begin to live their lives to the full again. Women tell us that they never forget what has happened to them but where there was once self-blame, shame, and guilt, they begin to realise that there is no one to blame but the abuser, and the shame is his. Women do not 'ask for it' or invite abuse. Men can choose to abuse or not to abuse and the choice is theirs alone. Getting to this stage gives women the chance to reconnect with their own sense of self-worth and to realise the strength they have in living with, and coping with, extreme and often debilitating trauma.

Beira's Place offers women a 12-session block of support in the first instance. Support sessions are usually weekly but can be fortnightly if this is more suitable. Women who work shifts can arrange support sessions with their individual support worker to fit with those shift patterns. Some women don't need as many as 12 sessions, and some women need more; this can be discussed between the support worker and the woman. The support worker and her supervisor will review the sessions and may offer more if the worker and the woman feel that this is necessary.

## ● **For more information**

This is an outline of how we work. Of course, every woman is different and experiences her trauma differently. The work we do focuses on the needs of individual women so there is no 'one size fits all' approach. This is a framework we use; nothing is hard and fast.

It can be a big decision to share your experiences with a stranger, so if you would like to know more about our work, please get in touch with us and we will do our best to help.