

survive & thrive

Moving forward from interpersonal trauma

Week 4: Surviving the Surviving

In week 2, we looked at the range of emotional difficulties that survivors of abuse may face in the aftermath of their abusive experiences. When survivors are faced with experiences such as anxiety, panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares, low mood and self-blame you have to find some way of surviving these feelings. Without knowledge that these are normal reactions to abuse and not always knowing other ways of managing them it is not surprising that **survivors will do whatever works at the time to get by.**

However, some of the ways in which you managed these distressing emotions in the past may now causing difficulties in themselves. These can include:

- Self-injury (when you hurt yourself but don't intend to kill yourself such as cutting or burning yourself).
- Using more alcohol than is good for your health or relationships now.
- Using illegal drugs or prescribed drugs in ways other than they were intended.
- Eating too much or too little.
- Avoiding relationships, keeping yourself isolation or getting too involved in relationships too quickly, hoping that this will be the 'right partner/friend' for you.
- 'Switching off' technically known as dissociation.
- Avoiding situations that remind you of the abuse, which can restrict your life.
- Being overly concerned about cleanliness and/or order.

This week we will look at finding safer ways to cope. The first thing we have to do is understand the bad feeling which we are trying to cope with.

Recognising Difficult Feelings

In abusive situations, particularly if they lasted a long time or happened in childhood, bad feelings such as sadness, anger or rage were something to be avoided at all cost. You may not have had the skills, the energy and most importantly, the safety to deal with these feelings. Pushing these feelings away becomes the safest thing to do. This makes it more likely that you may have had to resort to some of these unsafe coping mechanisms in order to survive.

In addition, survivors of abuse and trauma often feel that their upsetting feelings are more easily triggered and can last a long time before going away. For example, if you have felt scared because of abuse and you hear a bang (perhaps a car door slamming), you become more frightened and jumpy than your friend standing next to you who has not experienced abuse. You may also find you are on edge for a long time afterwards.

Next week we will explain how this works, but on a day to day basis many survivors experience their emotions as being a roller coaster of highs and lows with not as much 'middle ground' than they would like.

When you have pushed feelings away for a long time, or have learned to use unsafe coping strategies to manage them (like getting drunk or avoiding situations), you can fear that you wouldn't be able to cope with the bad feeling if they began to come out. Survivors often say that they are scared that if they start crying they will never stop.

Another side effect of avoiding these unpleasant emotions is that often we avoid ALL emotion. This means that we avoid feeling sad and angry but we also don't get to feel joy and pleasure.

The aim of this section is not to give you other skills to help you to avoid emotion, but to give you skills to COPE in a helpful way with emotions. This can be scary and difficult, but it is worth it.

Another way to understand this is to look at what is called ‘the window of tolerance’ by writers such as Pat Ogden.

The ‘window of tolerance’ is the point on the emotional rollercoaster that you can still think and feel. When your emotions go too high (the top of the rollercoaster) we often feel overwhelmed and can feel the need to numb our feelings. Often we use alcohol, drugs or self-harm.

When we are at the bottom of the rollercoaster we feel switched off and blank. We might need to do something like take risks, take drugs or alcohol or self-harm to get rid of the numb feelings.

We want to try to smooth out these up and downs and keep you in the ‘window of tolerance’ for feelings. That is feeling that are neither too high and overwhelming or too low and numb.

Safe Coping Skills

Developing safe coping skills is one of the main aims of this course and these are key ways of staying ‘in the window of tolerance’. You will have already practiced a few of these techniques with the course leaders. Although many of these techniques can feel difficult, with practice they can be effective ways of managing your feelings more safely.

Safe coping skills are ways of helping you to feel better about yourself, improving your mood or helping you feel less scared which will work, but which don’t carry with them other risks in the long term. It may take you some time to work out your list of safe coping skills and you will certainly need to give yourself lots of chance to **prepare, practice and be patient**.

Safe coping skills are something we start to learn when we are children, if we are lucky enough to have caring adults around. For example, a child who has just fallen off their bike and bashed their knee is calmed and soothed by their parent/carer, by speaking gently and calmly and perhaps giving their knee a rub. In this situation the child learns that the world is OK again and that this bad feeling can be coped with. They also learn that other people are a great source of support.

For some children however, their distress is met with anger, ridicule or even more abuse and so asking the adult for help actually makes the feeling more difficult to control. This child isn't helped to learn safe ways of bringing their bad feelings under control. They also learn not to ask others for help when they feel upset.

Sometimes, the experience of abuse can overwhelm our previously learned coping skills and we need to practice them again.

Some Safe Coping Suggestions:

- **Practice the exercises that you have practised in this course.**
- **Listen to music** that you know makes you feel different.
- **Talk to a (safe) friend**, family member, or partner.
- **Go for a walk.** Exercise can release chemicals in your brain that makes you feel calmer. If you are fit; run, dance or ride a bike.
- **Take a shower.**
- **Dig the garden/pull out weeds/plant flowers.**
- **Breathe slowly** through your nose. Imagine you are breathing so slowly that you would not make a nearby candle flame flicker.
- **Cuddle something comforting**, such as a teddy or a blanket.
- **Put on a comedy/ favourite TV programme.**
- **Grounding.** This is a technique of focussing all your senses and energy on a current task. We will look at this in more detail at another course session on 'switching on'.
- **Mindfulness** This is the skill of being able to observe and accepting about your emotions without letting it swamp you. A useful way of thinking about this is to image the emotion as a wave, a mindful approach would be not to fight the wave but to 'surf' it.
- **Write/draw/ get creative** in whatever way you feel comfortable.
- **Express your feelings.**
- **Try distraction.** Get involved in another task such as making a meal. doing a crossword, repapering the spare room, going to the shops.
- **Express your anger (safely)**
 - Rip up an old magazine/phone book
 - Throw ice cubes at a brick wall or in your shower cubicle
 - Punch pillows/scream into pillows
- **Find a self-help group/ support group.**
- **Be kind to yourself.**

Remember the golden rule of the 3 P's. If you usually self-harm twice a week and can reduce it to once a week, this is success. Congratulate yourself. Get yourself a treat. Keep a diary to track your progress and learn about what makes it harder and easier.

It is important to remember that the goal is not to take away difficult feelings but to make them less scary. You should start to feel in control of how you express your emotions not overwhelmed by them and fearful of what they could lead to.

Surviving the Surviving: Self-Harm or Self-Injury

One strategy that some survivors use which can help to keep their emotions under control is self-harm, also known as self-injury. This often takes the form of cutting or burning yourself. It might also involve scratching yourself or using damaging chemicals, swallowing things or scrubbing the skin. The exact reasons and methods are often unique to the individual but they usually have the same aim which is to find a way of coping with the psychological aftermath of the abuse you have survived. This is why we call it 'surviving the surviving'.

Why Self-Harm?

There are lots of reasons to self-harm. For example, self-harm might give temporary distraction, the physical pain might be more tolerable than the emotional pain or it might help to reconnect you with the present. This can be very effective in the short term. However, in the medium or long term, it can at times make us feel out of control, leaves distressing scars and stops us finding other ways of coping with these feelings.

If you self-harm and have no concerns about it, then you do not need to read this section. But it is important to stress the **importance of safe self-harm**. This includes

- Using clean things to cut with
- Cleaning and dressing wounds
- Getting help for wounds that are not healing
- Try not to self-harm under the influence of alcohol or drugs as this increases the risk of more serious injury or even death.

However, if you feel you would like to stop or reduce your self-harm, try some of the things in the safe coping list. You may need quite a lot of support from others to make these changes. Think about who you can rely on to support you. You can also try to

- **Keep a diary.** This is a useful tip for a whole range of difficulties. Use the diary to keep a note of triggers to self-harm, how you were feeling before you harmed. Were you anxious? Were you self-criticising? Record what you tried and how that made you feel. There is a diary form at the end of this section. You can make photocopies of this and fill it in whenever you self-harm.
- **Do something less harmful.** For example, some survivors find putting an ice cube against their skin can be a helpful step.

Surviving the Surviving: Alcohol

Another way of managing the horrible feelings that sometimes follow abuse is through drinking alcohol. Again it may make sense as it can help block out your feelings and can make things feel better for a while. But if you are using a lot of alcohol, it can have a seriously negative effect on your life, your health, your relationships and your ability to keep yourself safe. If you answer yes to 2 or more of the below questions, you should ask for advice

- Have you ever felt the need to cut down your drinking?
- Have you ever felt annoyed by someone criticising your drinking?
- Have you ever felt guilty about your drinking?
- Have you ever felt the need to drink to steady yourself in the morning?

If you decide to cut down your alcohol you can try to use some of the safe coping skills when you feel like drinking. You could also

- Start to keep a diary of your drinking; when, where and how much. Be as honest with yourself as possible
- You can also try to drink lower alcohol alternatives
- Have non-alcoholic drinks between drinks.
- Drink more slowly. Take small sips.
- Plan to have several alcohol free days per week.
- Set yourself a limit when you drink.

But you may need some additional specialist support to control your drinking if you feel it is a problem. You could also

- Talk to your GP/support worker/Community Psychiatric Nurse about a referral to a local specialist agency
- Ask the course leaders for additional information.

Surviving the Surviving: Drugs

Another way of coping with difficult feelings is to use drugs, either prescribed (but using them in a different way from the way they are prescribed) or illegal. Again, this makes sense at the time but can leave you physically, socially, financially and psychologically worse off in the long term. Again, the advice about safer coping skills is important and you should talk to your supporter if you need more advice or support about your drug use. You can also

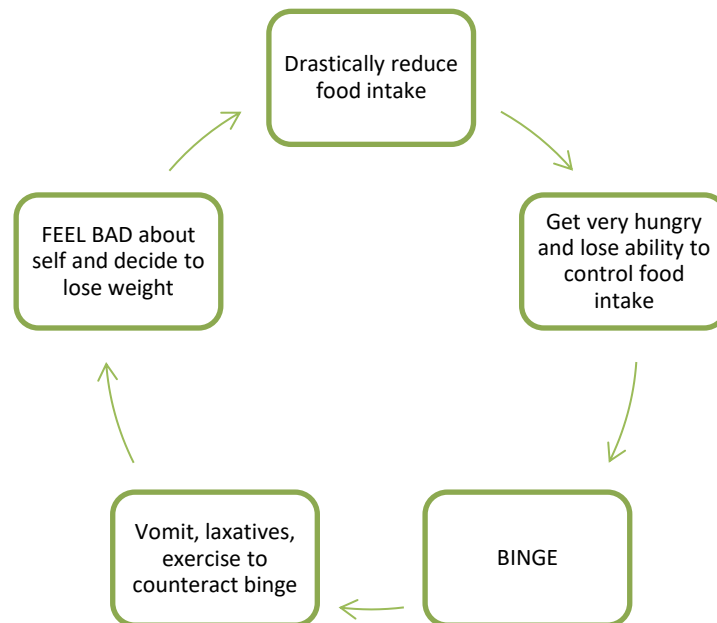
- Talk to your GP about making a referral to a local agency
- Talk to your psychiatrist/CPN (if you have one) about a referral to local services

Surviving the Surviving: Eating Problems

When faced with apparently uncontrollable feelings another area some survivors try to control is their eating. Some may try to control their food intake, perhaps feeling under pressure to be thin or to feel in control generally. Others eat a lot, possibly unconsciously trying to 'hide themselves', or to ease their emotions. But you may have your own unique reasons for struggling with food.

Eating problems or disorders can take a number of forms. Some may try to drastically control their food intake and sometimes exercise to excess and become increasingly unwell as their weight falls. This is an anorexic pattern and usually requires expert advice and support as it can be very dangerous. If you feel this is a problem talk to someone you find supportive, or the course leaders and perhaps your GP or another worker about an appropriate referral as soon as you can

Another more common pattern of eating is when we restrict the amount we eat over a period of time. Our bodies usually will then take over with overwhelming messages to eat and often this will result in a 'binge'. At times, this will be followed by vomiting, laxative use or exercise and an increased attempt to control our food. This may start a vicious cycle that can be very hard to break.



You can start to break into this cycle by using the safe coping skills we have covered before when you feel bad. You can also

- **Try to regain the habit of eating little and often.** This reduces the urge to binge and can be very helpful.
- **Keep a diary of what you are eating.** Look for patterns. Is there something you could change? For example, do you often ‘binge’ in the evening when you are on your own? Could you arrange to phone someone or use others of the safe coping strategies.
- **Focus on your strengths and find ways to improve your self-image.** Notice if you are criticising yourself and wonder if you are expecting too much of yourself.
- **Try the strategies we will go over in future sections on managing mood and anxiety.**

Again, this may need additional professional support to overcome. Talk to someone you find supportive perhaps your GP or other worker to explain your difficulties.

Surviving the Surviving: Relationship Problems

As we try to survive the aftermath of abuse, relationships in all areas of our lives can suffer. You may feel that you have been so badly let down in the past that you can't bring yourself to trust anyone again. Or you might be so used to being hurt that you have given up thinking about looking after yourself.

Relationships are really complicated and if you feel you have problems with dealing with other people, you might want to ask for a referral to an agency that could offer to look at this in more depth. But at this stage it can be helpful to think about the kinds of patterns you might be in.

- Are you assertive and happy to ask for things for yourself or are you frightened of asking for things in case you upset people?
- Are you able to communicate freely with your friends/family/partner or do you bottle up your feeling and either 'explode' at times or get hurt when your friend/partner doesn't realise what you are feeling?
- If you are concerned that your relationships might be unsafe or abusive, or that you might be behaving in an unsafe or abusive way to someone else (or tend to do that), please see the handout on relationship warning signs

Effective communication will help, we will cover this in detail in week 10. Try to keep coming along.

There is space to record your practice in this area in the key points handout.