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# BUILDING RESILIENCE

A Workbook for Men

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Editor's note

This publication is not intended as a substitute for the advice of behavioral health care professionals.

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## Session 1: Welcome and Introduction to the Subject of Trauma

### ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Welcome to *Building Resilience: A Workbook for Men*. This program is designed to help you begin to recover from the often-traumatic effects of violence, abuse, and other adverse experiences you may have had. An adverse experience is anything that can hurt a person emotionally, psychologically, or physically while growing up or as an adult. One of the first steps to healing and building resilience is to acknowledge the traumatic experiences in our lives and the effects they have had on us and others in our lives.

Trauma can be experienced in many ways. A lot of men have been hurt mentally, emotionally, and/or physically, either as a child or as an adult. Many men who are in the armed forces experience significant psychological difficulties as a result of their exposure to combat. Men often witness violence, and some perpetrate violence on others.

Trauma can also affect us in many ways. It affects the inner self: our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values. Because of society's messages about what it means to "be a man," some men may experience shame because they were unable to protect themselves or others from traumatic events as children or adults. For men who have experienced trauma, they often begin to believe that the world is a dangerous place where they can survive only by feeling powerful and in control. This makes it very hard for some men to trust and seek help.

Trauma also affects the outer self: our behavior and relationships. Many men who have experienced trauma struggle in their relationships with family members, friends, and sexual partners. They may have difficulty maintaining deep and meaningful relationships. They may isolate themselves, struggle with maintaining boundaries, or act out sexually.

A major part of the healing process is becoming congruent. This means having your inner self (your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values) connected to, and consistent with, your outer self (your behavior and relationships). For example, does your face reflect how you are feeling inside? Do you act in ways that are consistent with how you are really feeling inside?

In this program, you'll learn more about trauma and how widespread it is in men's lives. You'll become aware of the strengths you already have and increase the skills and resilience you need for healing. You'll learn activities and techniques that can help you feel more grounded, secure, and empowered.

This workbook contains information and activities related to the sessions of this program, places for you to make notes or drawings about your experiences in the group, and recommended Between-Sessions Activities.

Your group will meet for six sessions and cover a variety of topics related to trauma. It will provide a safe place to explore your thoughts and feelings, and to hear those of other men; you may find that many of your experiences and reactions are similar to others in the group. The stories and wisdom you bring to the group will be valuable. This is a place to be heard, to share your voice, and to be supported by other men.

If you have suffered trauma or other adverse experiences as a child or have experienced or are currently experiencing them as an adult, it's important you realize there is hope. Many men are recovering from their traumatic experiences and enjoying deep and satisfying lives and relationships. The healing journey from just surviving to resilience can be challenging, but it can be made easier with support from the men in this group and other people in your life. Personal growth, recovery, and healing are a lifelong journey. If we give ourselves the opportunity to heal and grow, we can learn how to live happier lives in healthier relationships.

## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma occurs when a threatening event overwhelms a person's normal coping skills. In other words, trauma is any stressor that occurs in a sudden and forceful way and is experienced as overwhelming. Men who have experienced traumatic events such as violence and other adverse experiences describe a lack of trust in others, feeling out of control, anxiety, fear, and feeling like they need to always be on the lookout for danger. Some men can identify these feelings easily and others cannot. They may begin to think feeling these emotions means they are somehow defective and "less manly." It's important for us to realize that these feelings are not abnormal. They are normal reactions to abnormal situations.

For some men, trauma is not a onetime event but is a threat that builds over time. Moderate, short-lived stress responses in the body can promote growth. However, ongoing stress can become toxic to our health. Toxic stress is a strong, unrelieved experience that can impact healthy development, particu-

larly in a child. Some of you may have experienced significant and ongoing stress without caring adults to help you. Some of you may have experienced unrelenting stress caused by extreme poverty, neglect, or abuse. Some of you may have experienced unrelenting stress through experiences of war, gang violence, or other violent situations. Some of you may still be experiencing very stressful events. Unrelenting stress can weaken us and have long-term consequences in terms of our behavior and our physical and mental health.

It can be helpful to look at statistics to give us an idea of how often traumatic events occur in the lives of men and boys:

- More than one in nine children in the United States is exposed to family violence annually.
- Almost half of children who witness family violence also experience maltreatment.
- In homes where there is violence, more than one in every three incidents results in a physical injury to a family member, including children.
- Boys who witness family violence have a higher rate of perpetrating similar violence as adults; approximately 50 percent will perpetrate such abuse.
- Children exposed to family violence commonly endure other adverse childhood experiences, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and neglect.
- Within the United States specifically, approximately 16 percent of men and 25–27 percent of women report having experienced childhood sexual abuse; those who experienced sexual abuse also had higher rates of childhood physical abuse, maltreatment, and neglect.
- Gang-related offenses committed with firearms account for at least 95 percent of crime in gang-controlled areas. It is estimated that there are almost eight hundred thousand gang members in the United States. Ninety percent of all gang members are male.
- On average, twenty-four people per minute are victims of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in the United States. Over the course of a year, that equals more than twelve million men and women.
- More than one thousand studies indicate that ongoing exposure to television violence during childhood increases aggressive and antisocial behavior, particularly in boys. This exposure has been shown to be more powerful than exposure to media displaying other types of content.

Similar results have been found with boys' consumption of violent images on the Internet and through video games.

- Media images often show relational violence as attractive or normalized. Viewing such media is related to male young adults' perpetration of physical violence against a romantic partner.
- Male veterans who have recently experienced sexual and physical abuse are more likely to commit suicide.
- It is estimated that between eighteen and twenty-two veterans commit suicide per day in the United States.
- Male adults in Philadelphia were more likely than female adults to report emotional abuse during childhood (36.4 percent compared with 30.9 percent). Males also were more likely to report physical abuse during childhood, compared with females (40.2 percent versus 31.2 percent). However, females reported sexual abuse at twice the rate of males (20.3 percent compared with 10.5 percent). Males and females were similarly likely to report physical and emotional neglect.
- Men who are abused as children are 50 percent more likely to continue the cycle of violence as adults.
- Gay men and lesbians have consistently been the third most frequent targets of hate violence over the past decade.
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects approximately 7–8 percent of the general U.S. population but between 14–16 percent of deployed military personnel.

As you can see, men and boys are frequently exposed to traumatic events. Some men use alcohol and other drugs—and addictive behaviors such as compulsive sex, overeating, overworking, and gambling—to help ease the effects of trauma. Men who abuse substances are more likely to have been victims of childhood physical and sexual abuse than are men who do not. In addition, men who struggle with alcohol and other drugs are more likely to abuse others.

Another effect of trauma is PTSD. Some symptoms of PTSD are remembering the traumatic experience in vivid detail, avoiding reminders of the traumatic experience, feeling very anxious, feeling angry, always looking out for danger, not feeling safe, and being jumpy or easily startled. These symptoms may prevent a man from engaging in deep and meaningful relationships and may cause trouble at work or in families.



No two people experience trauma in the same way. Many things influence how a man responds to a traumatic event: his age, history with other trauma, family interactions, support systems, and so on. We know that what is a traumatic event for one person may not be traumatic for another. Sometimes trauma has occurred but may not be recognized.

Men who have experienced trauma often ask these questions:

- Why did this happen to me and why can't I just deal with it?
- Why am I struggling with these experiences more than other men who have been through the same thing (for example, veterans)?
- Why do I always seem to do things wrong?
- Why can't I just fix things and move on?
- Why does it seem like I hurt those who love me?
- Why is getting along with others so hard?
- What can I do now?

Some men may experience deep shame as they realize that some of the things they have done in an attempt to deal with these traumatic events, to feel more powerful and in control, were wrong and deeply hurt others. These actions, though sometimes understandable, can deeply affect how these men feel about themselves and how they recover.

It often feels good to know there is a name for what you are experiencing, to know you aren't alone, and to know there are people who understand and can help. Understanding trauma, and the fact that we each respond to it differently, will help us be more supportive and nonjudgmental toward one another. Part of the process in healing from trauma, like recovering from addiction, is developing connection and support with others.

Together, you'll learn and teach one another new ways of responding. In this program, you'll learn how trauma may have affected your life and ways you can go from just surviving to thriving and becoming resilient. You'll also learn to use some tools to calm and ground yourself. These tools may help you as you go through the process of learning to cope with the effects of trauma and other adverse experiences.

You'll explore how personal growth, recovery, and healing will be a lifelong journey. The trauma you've experienced may always be with you at some level. But if you take the risk of learning about trauma and give yourself the opportunity to explore the process of healing, you can learn ways to live a happier and healthier life.



FIVE SENSES CARD

5 things



4 things



3 things



2 things



1 thing



*Healing Trauma*  
Stephanie S. Covington, PhD

From *Healing Trauma: Strategies for Abused Women* by Stephanie S. Covington  
(Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2011; rev. 2016 as *Healing Trauma: A Brief Intervention for Women*).

**REFLECTION**

This is a place where you can write or draw about your experience in the group. Maybe you'd like to write about what was most meaningful for you in session 1.

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**BETWEEN-SESSIONS ACTIVITY**

Take time between now and the next session to practice the Five Senses grounding technique at least once per day. Be ready to share about your experience with this in the next session.

## Session 2: Exploring Trauma

In the first session, you got to know a little about your facilitator(s) and your fellow group members. You discussed the definition of trauma, PTSD, Big “T” and little “t” traumas, and the effects that trauma can have on a person’s physical, mental, and emotional health. You also may have gained some insight into trauma’s impact on the inner self (thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values) and the outer self (behavior and relationships).

In this session, you hear more information about trauma. Your group explores how the messages men receive when they are young can impact their ability to deal with trauma in a healthy way. In a man’s attempt to manage the effects of trauma, he may strive to feel more powerful and in control. This can result in him acting in ways that may be hurtful, even abusive, toward others.

### TRAUMA TAKES MANY FORMS

Trauma can take many forms, including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; painful or frightening medical procedures; serious injuries and illnesses; assault, mugging, or robbery; witnessing violence or murder; automobile accidents; abandonment (especially for small children); immigration; natural disasters; the loss of a loved one; kidnapping; war, torture, or acts of terrorism; and more.

Men who have experienced traumatic events may have feelings of intense fear, helplessness, and anxiety, but they often describe these feelings as frustration, anger, and restlessness. However you experience these feelings, it’s important that you recognize these are normal reactions to abnormal events.

Stress is common to all of our lives. But there is also stress that becomes toxic to our bodies. Stress is the body’s alarm system that tells us we need to pay attention—that something is not okay. But if this alarm goes off too often or for too long, it wears down our bodies. Chronic stress can lead to behaviors that aren’t good for us or others and can damage our physical health.

**GENDER EXPECTATIONS**

Trauma is often a very difficult thing for men to talk about. The very word seems to imply weakness and femininity to some men. It may be easier if you look at the root of the word. The word *trauma* comes from the Greek word *traumat*, meaning *wound*. So a traumatic event can be viewed as something that has caused a wound to the body, the mind, or the emotions. Even after knowing this, some men may struggle with accepting the idea of trauma and its impact, so it may be helpful to know why this is.

Your facilitator explained that *sexual* differences are physical or biological, while *gender* is the experience of being raised as a female or male and the different messages that girls and boys receive about their roles in life.

Gender expectations begin when we are infants. They are defined by our society, culture, religion, family, peers, and so on. Because of our gender, we are expected to act and be certain ways. Gender expectations influence the ways we act and the choices we make throughout our lives. Take time to think about these questions:

1. How are boys and girls often treated differently as children?

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2. Social messages come from family, teachers, movies, music, and video games. What are the social messages that boys get? How are boys supposed to act?

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3. What are the social messages that girls get? How are girls supposed to act?

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