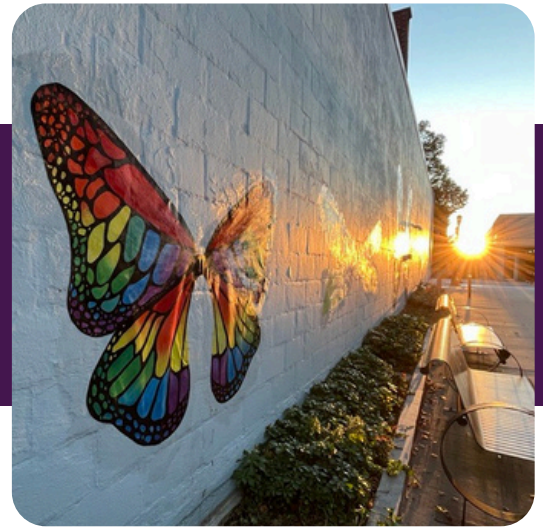


Survivor Storytellers

Trauma-Informed Storytelling



Understanding how trauma impacts you as a storyteller and your audience as listeners can help you craft a story that meets your goals for sharing.*

What does it mean to be trauma-informed?

Being trauma-informed means that we do our best to avoid things that we anticipate will be highly upsetting to people in a way that triggers a physiological response in their bodies. It doesn't mean that others will never be offended, triggered, or upset.

- *We may not be able to anticipate some trauma triggers.* A smell, a song, or a sound that is comforting or pleasant to one person might be closely associated with a traumatic memory for another person.
- *Some triggers are unavoidable.* Someone sneezing very loudly might trigger a person who associates loud vocal sounds with abuse, for example. While this is unavoidable, it doesn't mean we shouldn't be understanding and offer some reassurance when it happens.
- *The topics of domestic abuse, violence, and sex trafficking are inherently triggering for many folks, even those without lived experience.* We can still talk about it in ways that aim to avoid triggers where possible, using non-sensationalized language.

Trauma triggers activate a physiological response in the body.

A trigger is not "being offended." It is when hearing, seeing, or reading about something activates the body's responses to trauma. It is not rational, and it is not thought-out. It is an unconscious response in the body. Trauma activates our fight - flight - freeze responses. When we experience one traumatic incident, our nervous system activates and prepares us to fight. If we cannot fight, the nervous system shuts down into a freeze response. Our nervous system is set up for us to live in the lower end of the curve shown on the next page. In the mid-range, we may experience moments of distress that push us into feeling the fight/flight impulses, but in the right environment, and with the right support, we can reset, adjust, resolve, and work through the distress to return to the lower level.

When we experience significant trauma without enough support or if we experience repeated traumas over a period of time ("complex trauma"), these nervous system responses may become embedded and harder to unlearn. Like a well-worn path that is impossible to miss.

*Adapted from: Sabra Boyd and Chris Ash. *Survivor Storytelling Workbook: For advocates with lived experience working in the many movements to end violence.* National Survivor Network - Cast (2023). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

POLYVAGAL CHART

The nervous system with a neuroception of threat:

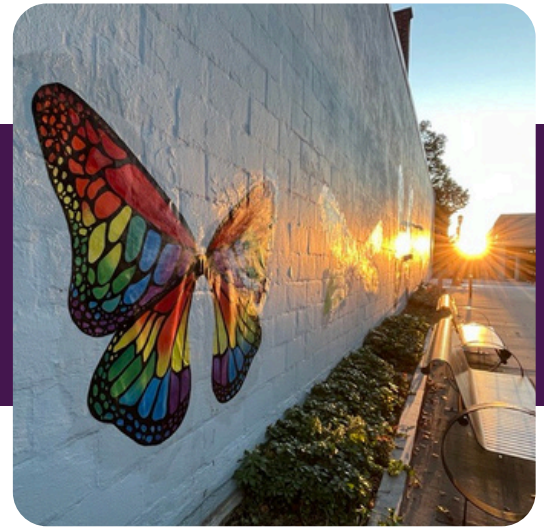


The nervous system with a neuroception of safety:



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We learn best and remember more when we are in the “window of tolerance.”

Looking at the chart, this might be the upper level of the green space and the lower level of the yellow space. This is part of why memories of past traumas might feel confusing, out of order, or missing details. Fight or flee push us into the space where we are dysregulated and lacking energy needed to process information.

When telling your story, you will be better able to stay focused on what you intended to say when you are in your window of tolerance.

When people get triggered while sharing their story, their thoughts may feel jumbled or distant — like they are talking about someone else, rather than themselves. Survivor storytellers may share details they never meant to share, or may answer questions they didn’t want to answer. You and your audience will be safer if you process your experiences well before trying to share them publicly.

For the Storyteller:

For the Audience:

Fight/Flee

- Hyperarousal, stress, anxiety
- Heart rate, breathing, blood pressure increase
- Body wants to fight or flee

Fight/Flee

- Want to rescue rather than respect autonomy
- Rush to “solve” it all at once
- All-or-nothing thinking
- Overwhelm & giving up

Window of Tolerance

- Grounded, sense of safety
- Clearer communication
- Alert (not anxious); Calm (without shutting down)

Window of Tolerance

- Learning/retention increased
- Able to hold complexity, think through meaningful solutions
- Able to process & understand

Freeze

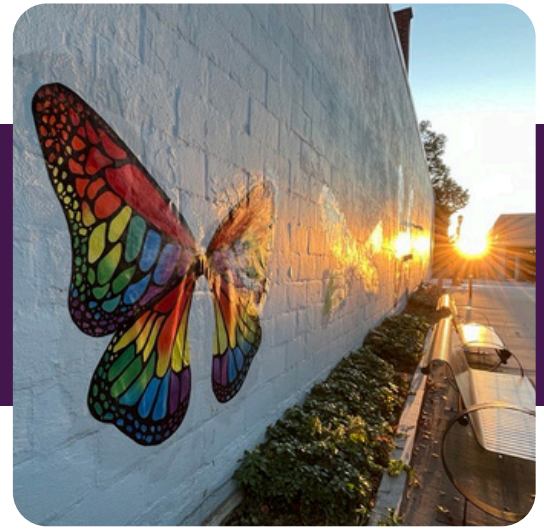
- Hypoarousal
- Dissociated, numb, “zoned out”
- Absolute survival

Freeze

- Dissociation, numb, “zoned out”
- Unable to focus or retain info
- Less interest in learning more

Survivor Storytellers

Trauma-Informed Storytelling



Do I need a content warning?

Why consider a content warning?

Unexpected trauma stories can be harder on emotional regulation than ones we know are coming. Content warnings can give someone a heads-up so they can prepare or choose their level of participation. Content warnings still need to be followed by a trauma-informed approach to storytelling.

What is a helpful content warning?

Content warnings need to be specific. The purpose is to give someone an idea of what to expect ahead so that they can plan for their own self-care.

	Ineffective content warning	Effective content warning
Content warnings are not meant to “titillate” or create suspense.	"Watch out! There are triggers ahead!"	“The next section of our presentation may contain content that some attendees may find triggering, such as...”
Content warnings need to be specific	"Content warning" “Content warning for violence”	“Content warning: Racism, policy brutality” “Content warning: Description of violence assault”
But not so specific they need their own content warning	“Content warning for the time my relative [abuse details] to my little sister and went to jail where [abuse details.]	“Content warning: Child sexual abuse, family incarceration, and prison rape.”