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Trauma Sensitivity for Energy Workers

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Rachel, a longstanding client, called me distraught after a recent session with an energy practitioner and bodyworker. After hearing news reports of child sexual abuse at a nearby school, Rachel scheduled a session with this practitioner due to feeling anxious and angry, as she recalled her own childhood sexual abuse. Although Rachel had worked with me and another therapist on issues related to the abuse, she had never shared her history with the energy practitioner. During the session, Rachel began to cry and the energy practitioner paused to ask her what was happening. As Rachel answered, the practitioner asked her pointed questions, and Rachel found herself sharing more of her past than she had planned to. The practitioner was kind and compassionate, but became overwhelmed with emotion herself. She asked Rachel if she could hug her and they sat holding each other for the rest of the session.

Far from feeling comforted, Rachel found herself feeling bad about 'bringing down' the energy practitioner. She felt responsible for derailing the session and potentially 'ruining' the practitioner's sessions for the rest of the day. At the same time, she felt upset with herself for not saying no when asked questions, or to the hug. She had not felt like telling her full story or being touched in such an intimate way, but in the face of the practitioner's emotions

and good intentions she did not feel she could say no. Unsurprisingly, in the subsequent days Rachel experienced an old intestinal issue that she had long ago recognized as tied to self-blame and repression of her emotions — both feelings she had internalized in relation to her abuse as a child.

Through years of working with sexual trauma survivors I have heard many such stories of well-meaning energy practitioners, bodyworkers, personal development coaches, yoga teachers, meditation instructors and even therapists inadvertently triggering trauma survivors. The last decade has seen a growing awareness of the impact of trauma on the mind and body, and as a result, more individuals are seeking help. In the wake of #MeToo, the number of women seeking healing for sexual trauma has increased dramatically, with organizations like Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) reporting large increases in the number of incoming calls from such individuals in both 2017 and 2018.¹

Fortunately, there is now more information available on trauma sensitivity and how to incorporate it into client practice. Energy practitioners must make it a priority to become familiar with trauma sensitive guidelines, as working with the subtle body is tremendously helpful for trauma survivors, especially those with a history of sexual abuse and assault.



Energy work focuses on the intersection between mind and body, impacting both without focusing heavily on one or the other. Trauma survivors often struggle with physical modalities, experiencing them as invasive. At the same time, some clients feel talk-based therapy can only take them so far, providing awareness of the trauma impact without liberating the trauma from their body. Energy work is often a valuable 'middle ground' modality, encompassing both mind and body in an effective yet non-invasive fashion.

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Here are a few basic facts about trauma sensitivity that energy practitioners can incorporate into their practice:

Ask trauma history as part of intake. Let clients know you will not press for details unless they wish to share them, but that this knowledge may help you help them. Recognize not everyone will be willing to share this information and others may not be aware of past trauma; therefore, observe trauma-

sensitivity guidelines with all clients, regardless of reported history.

Create a safe and client-driven process. Tell clients their feelings of safety are your highest priority and you want them to communicate if, at any time, they are experiencing discomfort. Set a collaborative rather than 'expert' tone, by inviting them to participate in decisions on how each session will proceed.

Offer environment options. Recognize the environment of your practice space. Various levels of lighting, scents, music or sounds and even placement of the treatment table may be experienced as relaxing for one client but triggering for another. Ask what the client prefers and let them know they can change their mind at any time.

Inform. Offer as much information as possible about your process, both as part of your intake procedure and at the start of each session. Ask if they would like you to continue to narrate as you work or stay silent. If silent, check in periodically.

Ask. And ask again. If your modality involves touch, ask at the start of each session for consent and check in periodically. If moving to a new part of the body, ask if this is okay. Provide choices on activates such as closing their eyes or sitting vs. lying down. At the same time, constantly asking questions during the session can feel burdensome to a client, so ask as much as possible up front, and just offer 'check in' moments throughout.

Understand what it means to be a story-holder. Although energy work is not talk therapy, oftentimes it triggers a narrative release. If this happens, strive to maintain a compassionate, safe and professional container for whatever a client wishes to tell you; refrain from asking questions except to clarify symptoms relevant to your work and allow the client to decide what to share. Thank them for sharing, return to your modality and gently communicate what you can offer to help steer the session back to the work you do. You might say something like 'Thank you for sharing that experience with me. I



think today I can best help you by. . .does this sound like something you would like to try?’

Do not pressure releases. Some modalities revolve around stimulating emotional, energetic or physical release. While these can be a valuable part of healing, it is particularly important they are not forced on trauma survivors. If you utilize a process designed to stimulate release, be flexible and be prepared to shift gears. Disregard any instructions that mandate a protocol or process must be completed once started (or avoid utilizing such processes with trauma survivors.) Check in throughout to ask your client if they wish to continue. Reassure them that a session is never a ‘failure’ — that the work can always be continued and/or adapted in another way better suited to them on different day. Again, strike a collaborative tone, emphasizing you will discover together what works best for the client.

Learn about disassociation and adapt your work. Trauma survivors might disassociate from their body or environment in any number of ways and it is important to understand the variations and how you might need to adjust your work. For example, in my chakra-based work, I often find that sexual trauma survivors are more comfortable working in the upper chakras, particularly the third eye, and so frequently prefer guided imagery or visualization. However, working solely in this way can actually lead a client into a disassociated state, where the imagery and visuals are not connecting to their body, becoming solely imaginative. To counter this, I begin each session with a root chakra activation and continually invite clients to notice where they are feeling a particular emotion in their body. With some clients I will temporarily forgo visual work and help them

develop a kinesthetic relationship to their chakras, and through that, their body.

Solicit post-session feedback, particularly after a first session. You might do this through an email or message 1-2 days after a session, or at the start of the next one. A simple ‘just checking in on how you are feeling and if you have any questions or feedback’ can open the door to new ways of working and may spur a new client who is considering not returning, due to some discomfort or hesitation to communicate with you. Again this helps set a collaborative tone, inviting the client to share in decisions regarding how future sessions should proceed.

Know your limits. Be on the lookout for compassion fatigue, burnout and second-hand traumatization, all particularly prevalent amongst caretakers of trauma survivors. Consider setting limits on the number of trauma clients you work on at any given time (allowing of course for the fact that you may not always know). Have a list of trauma-sensitive practitioners handy for referring clients in cases where you have reached a limit on how you can help.

Take care of yourself. Self-care is key for any practitioner. As they say on every airplane, put your own oxygen mask on first! Make sure you have the support you need, including other practitioners with whom you can confidentially share when you need to.

More resources are becoming available on how to work in a trauma-informed way. The Breathe Network offers periodic online trauma sensitivity training, particularly for those working with sexual trauma survivors. The Justice Resource Center Trauma Center also offers trauma training for caretakers of all types.

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Trauma informed variations on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training, the most popular form of mindfulness taught in professional health organizations, are now offered regularly. While none of these organizations focus specifically on energy work, all the principles taught can be easily adapted.

Trust in your natural empathy and connection with your clients. Energy practitioners and workers are naturally intuitive, so follow up on any feeling of hesitation or anxiety you sense. Incorporating recent research on how trauma impacts the energy body is still a relatively new field and developing new trauma-informed energetic practices is something we can all participate in, helping to meet the growing need for trauma-informed care. €



Learn more about author Lisa Erickson
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