

TRAUMA AND THRIVING: COUNSELORS' GUIDE TO SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCES

University of Texas at San Antonio

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Introduction of CAST Speakers



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OBJECTIVES

1

Introduction to Sex Trafficking and Counselors Against Sex Trafficking

2

Survivors' mental health experiences, including post-traumatic growth

3

Implications and Strategies



Introduction to Sex Trafficking



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Sex Trafficking

The legal definition of the term sex trafficking is **the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.**

Any minor under the age of 18 **CAN NOT** consent to commercial sex and is considered a victim of sex trafficking regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion is used.

(Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-386, 114 Stat. 1464-1548, 2000, p. 1470)



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Sex Trafficking

6.3 million people are estimated to be trapped in forced sexual exploitation globally on any given day.

Texas contains around 25% of all trafficked persons in the United States at any given time.

The US is listed among the top three countries of origin of victims along with Mexico and Honduras.

The age of onset has been reported as young as under the age of 8, with most individuals around 15–17 years of age when trafficking began.

1 in 6 runaways reported are probable victims of sex trafficking.

(Bedbible, 2022; International Labour Organization,, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2022; Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106–386, 114 Stat. 1464–1548, 2000, p. 1470)



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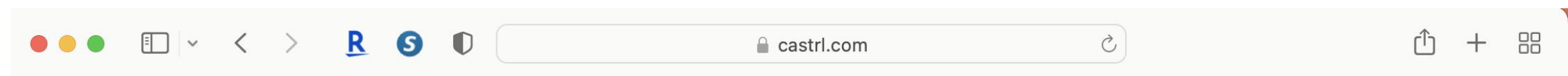
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Counselors Against Sex Trafficking

Research Lab

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COUNSELORS AGAINST SEX TRAFFICKING RESEARCH LAB

We focus on developing research towards improving the identification, intervention, and advocacy to reduce sex trafficking in the United States.

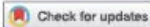


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A Review of Child Sex Trafficking Instruments

Devon E. Romero^a, Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker^a, Nancy E. Castellon^a, and Julie Strentzsch^b

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ABSTRACT

Child sex trafficking (CST) has continued to exist in plain sight and often goes unidentified or misidentified in mental health settings. Often generalized as human trafficking, official statistics of children who fall victim of sex trafficking remains unknown and understudied. With social platforms becoming more available to youth, children are increasingly vulnerable to CST and are unaware of their exposure to victimization. Counselors working with children and adolescents are in a unique position to prevent and disrupt CST if detected in the counseling relationship, but the lack of CST assessment tools hinders an accurate assessment of CST. Therefore, the authors reviewed existing published screening or identification tools for CST available and applicable for mental health and school settings. At the completion of an expansive search of tools, the authors excluded results that did not meet the strict criteria. This paper reviews the four remaining instruments and presents information on their scope, reliability, validity, strengths, limitations, and source. The authors also discuss considerations for each instrument in clinical practice, providing a resource for counselors seeking a CST assessment tool that best fits their population and setting.

KEYWORDS

Child sex-trafficking;
commercial sexual
exploitation; screening tool

Child and adolescent sex trafficking (CST) is an epidemic taking away freedoms and livelihoods from youth in the United States, and beyond. Sex trafficking is a subtype of human trafficking and it is described by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (V-TVPA) of 2000 (Pub. L. No. 106–386) as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” In 2017, the International Labor Organization estimated 4.8 million victims in sex trafficking worldwide, with one of four being children (International Labour Organization, 2017). The exact prevalence in the United States is unknown. Yet, law enforcement estimates help us gain a better understanding by reporting that over 85% of initiated criminal human trafficking cases involved sex trafficking, with 51% of these cases involving only children (U.S. Department of State, 2019). These global and national statistics strongly suggest that children and adolescents are significantly at risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking.

A need exists for counselors working with at-risk children (e.g., low socio-economic status, clients with substance use in the family, and a history of homelessness and trauma) to act as first responders in the identification and treatment of CST (Thompson & Haley, 2018). Sex trafficking is highly correlated with different forms of substance use (Cole, Sprang,

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



A Content Analysis of Sex Trafficking Instruments

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Abstract

This content analysis examined assessments available for the screening of sex trafficking to provide professional counselors further insight into the features of sex trafficking and how to best identify and measure this phenomenon. The authors reviewed 12 articles that included a complete or partial use of 13 instruments and completed a content analysis using Krippendorff’s procedures. The final analysis resulted in five overarching categories: (a) commercial sexual exploitation, (b) risk factors, (c) forms of abuse, (d) mental and physical health assessment, and (e) unstable living conditions and caregiving. The authors also provide psychometric information for each available sex trafficking instrument. Discussion, implications for clinical practice, and recommendations for future research are provided.

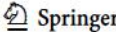
Keywords Content analysis · Counselors · Sex trafficking · Commercial sexual exploitation · Instrument

Sex trafficking (ST) is one of the most misunderstood and damaging forms of human trafficking. The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (V-TVPA) of 2000 (V-TVPA, 2000) described ST as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (§ 103). Examples of ST include prostitution and the production of pornography that may occur in brothels, strip clubs, and in illicit massage businesses (Polaris Project, 2020). Yet, estimates of ST prevalence are often unreliable. Many people experience coercion, engage in multiple illegal behaviors, and/or view ST as a viable means to meet daily needs (e.g., food and shelter; Lutnik, 2016). Fear of personal or legal repercussions therefore obfuscate true rates of ST. Albeit conservative, the International Labour Organization (2017) estimated in 2016 a total of 40.3 million victims

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Original Research

Development of Child Sex Trafficking Counseling Competencies in the United States: A Delphi Study


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Devon E. Romero¹, and Jordan Elliott¹

Abstract

Child sex trafficking (CST), the unlawful recruitment of a child or minor to engage in commercial sexual exploitation through force, fraud, or coercion, is a growing epidemic worldwide. Sex trafficking can have devastating consequences for children, including long-lasting physical and psychological trauma. Counselors working in clinical and school settings have first-hand access to a number of at-risk populations due to the nature of their work. Yet, counselors in the United States report lack of training on CST as a limitation to their ability to identify and effectively work with CST victims. Limited training derives from the absence of competency standards to guide counselors working with CST victims. To address this critical gap, this research study utilized expert consensus to develop an initial list of CST competencies for counselors working in the United States. A heterogeneous sample of 19-CST experts participated in a four-round Delphi process. The expert panel reached a consensus on 128 CST competency statements organized into five domains: (a) *intervention strategies and the helping relationship*, (b) *trauma and sex*

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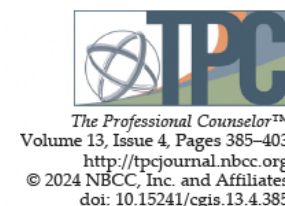


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“A Learning Curve”: Counselors’ Experiences Working With Sex Trafficking

Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker, Devon E. Romero, Katherine E. McVay, Emily Satel, Kendra Smith



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In this transcendental phenomenological study, we interviewed 10 counselors who have clinical experience working with sex trafficking survivors. Through in-depth individual interviews, participants discussed their lived experiences providing counseling to this population. Our analysis revealed four primary themes: (a) counselor knowledge: “learning curve,” (b) counselor skills: “creating a safe space to dive into work,” (c) counselor attitudes: “being able to listen to the client’s story,” and (d) counselor action: “more than just a counselor.” The findings indicated that counselors working with sex trafficking survivors needed to understand and address the different aspects of trauma. Our findings also demonstrate that working with sex trafficking survivors requires additional competencies such as recognizing the signs of sex trafficking, vulnerable populations, and the processes by which traffickers force people into sex trafficking. We discuss these findings in more detail and identify implications for counselor training and practice.

Keywords: sex trafficking survivors, counseling, phenomenological, trauma, competencies

Sex trafficking of any individual is a significant concern globally. In 2000, the United States government enacted the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, which defined sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” or “when the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (§ 103). Although the United States’s efforts fully meet the minimum standards established by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 to eliminate severe forms of trafficking, the Department of Justice initiated a total of 210 federal human trafficking prosecutions in 2020, of which 195 involved predominantly sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2021). As stated in the *Trafficking in Persons Report* (U.S. Department of State, 2021), all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories have reported all forms of human trafficking over the past 5 years. With an estimated 4.8 million people victimized by sex trafficking (International Labour Organization, 2017), it is important to understand how counselors identify, provide services to, and advocate on behalf of sex trafficking survivors within the counseling setting.

Sex Trafficking and Mental Health

As a form of human trafficking, sex trafficking exposes individuals to torture; kidnapping; and severe psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Physical health consequences of sex trafficking include general health complications (e.g., malnutrition), reproductive health consequences (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies), substance abuse, and physical injuries (Grosso et al., 2018; Lutnik, 2016; Muftić & Finn, 2013). Psychological abuses are numerous and can include intimidation, threats against loved ones, lies, deception, blackmail, isolation, and forced dependency (Thompson & Haley, 2018).

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Child Sex Trafficking and Professional School Counselor Preparedness in Texas

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Abstract

Professional school counselors in Texas responded to a questionnaire about training received and their needs concerning preparedness to identify and work with youth exposed to child sex trafficking (CST). The study utilized a convergent parallel mixed methods design. Quantitative results indicated many participants did not find that their graduate degree program prepared them to work with CST and less than half felt their school and/or district provided adequate training opportunities. In addition, thematic analysis revealed two themes characterizing Texas school counselors’ needs to identify and work with CST: (a) *concerning preparedness: “so much going on”* and (b) *“specific training”: a comprehensive review of CST*. This article concludes with implications and recommendations for practice and future research.

Keywords: child sex trafficking, school counselor, training, school counselor preparedness, at-risk youth

No child is immune to child sex trafficking (CST), regardless of the child’s race, age, socioeconomic status, or location, and every child involved in this form of exploitation is a victim (U. S. Department of State, 2022). CST, defined by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (Pub. L. No. 106-386, § 103) as any commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion on a person who has not attained 18 years of age, continues to rise in all countries including the United States. The 2022 trafficking profile for the United States listed the United States among the top three countries of origin of victims along with Mexico and Honduras (U. S. Department of State, 2022). In 2021, the Polaris-operated National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 11,278 victims and survivors involved in sex trafficking through phone, webchats, web forms, text, and email reports, a

majority of whom were minors when first entering trafficking (Polaris, 2021). Relevant to the current study, as one of the largest hubs for sex trafficking, Texas has been found to contain around 25% of all trafficked persons in the United States at any given time (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2016). In 2016, it was estimated that approximately 79,000 minor and youth victims of sex trafficking were in Texas (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2016). Although some statistics exist from federally reported cases (U. S. Department of State, 2022) and human trafficking hotlines (Polaris, 2021), it is estimated that less than 1% of survivors of trafficking cases across the world are ever identified (Bedbible Research Center, 2023).

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Coming Soon:

Interiano-Shiverdecker et al. (in-press). Unveiling the multidimensional impact of sex trafficking: Insights from survivors. *Trauma and resilience counseling*.



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Current Research Efforts



Training Program

- Developing sex trafficking counseling competency
- Developing intellectual humility, quiet ego, and emotional intelligence
- Counselor advocacy identity development
- Challenging the perceived misconceptions of sex trafficking



Self-care practices of counselors working with sex trafficking survivors



Relational Healing: Survivors of Sex Trafficking and Their Experiences of Connection, Disconnection, and Growth



Social determinants of health in the lives of sex trafficking survivors in the United States



Post traumatic growth in the lives of sex trafficking survivors in the United States



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Impact of Sex Trafficking



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Multidimensional Impact of Sex Trafficking

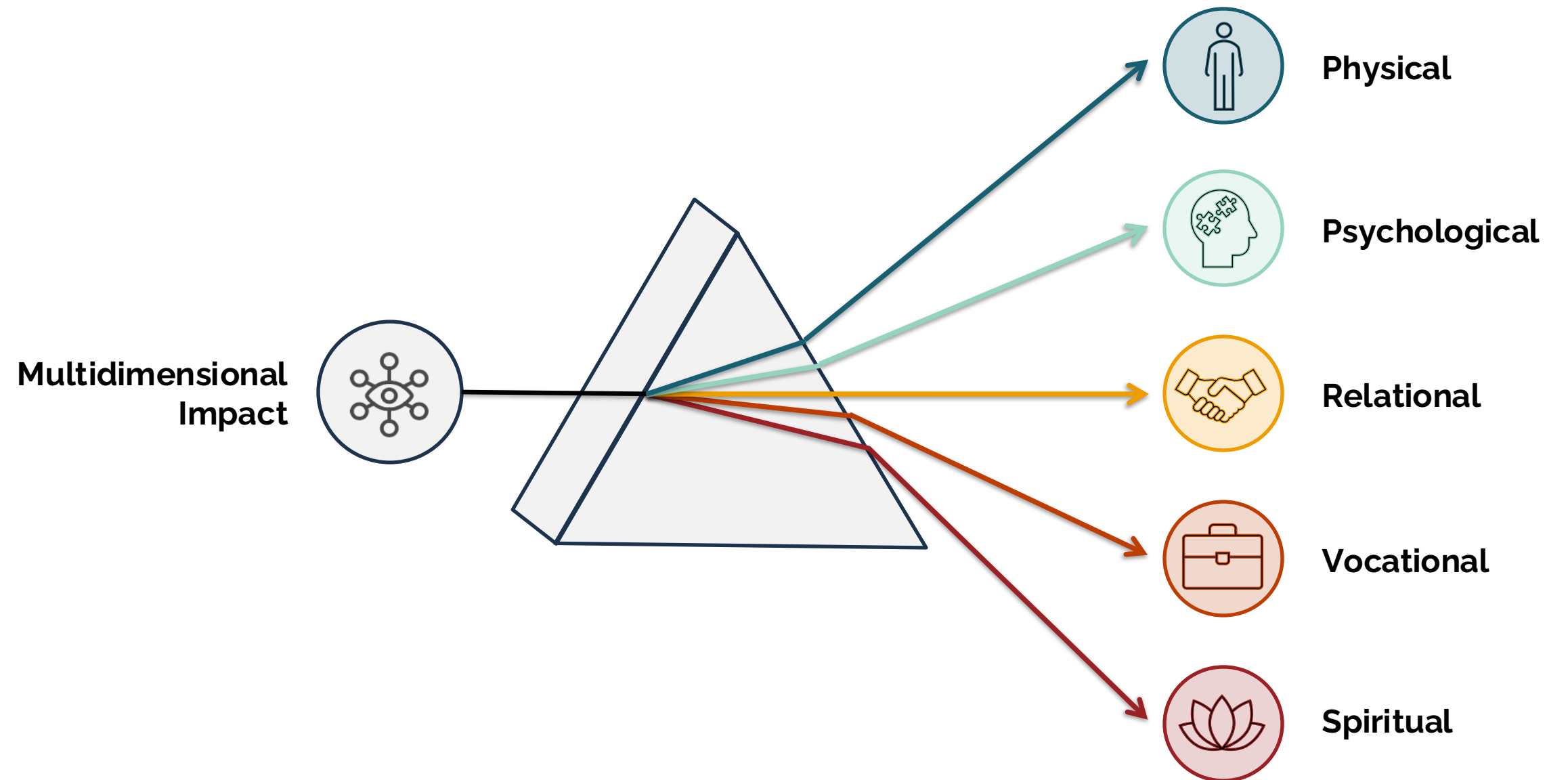
“Widespread”

“With a lot of layers to everything.”

“Something that impacts your life forever.”

“It's affected everything like there's no part of my life that is not affected by this.” – Annabel

“Emotional, it's physical, it's spiritual, it's mental, it's sexual.” – Mia



Physical: “Forever Impact”

*“My body is still healing yes; the mind is healed
but my body is still healing”* – Monica

“My body has definitely kept the score.”
– Annabel

Pre-existing Conditions made worse by ST

- Polycystic ovarian syndrome (Betty)
- Multiple sclerosis and irritable bowel syndrome (Monica)
- Ehler’s Danlos syndrome (Annabel)
- High blood pressure (Gretchen)

Direct medical and health consequences of ST

- HPV (Betty)
- Seizures and light sensitivity (Annabel)
- Unplanned pregnancy and forced abortion (Mia)
- Excessive weight gain (Betty)
- Struggles with cystic acne (Gretchen)



Vocational: “You Know What People Need? Money.”

“Um, you know, especially if someone's been doing this for a long time, years, so they don't have any experience doing anything else...They don't have anything that they can put on a resume” - Jennifer

An important piece of creating financial stability for survivors was developing new educational possibilities, new sources of income, and entrepreneurship



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Relational: “Nobody Seems Safe”

"Teasing out the identity of the perpetrator versus the victim and helping them know that those are two separate things I think that's where it starts is just um helping them divorce their identity."

-Annabel

"I do one of two things- either I fully trust and probably shouldn't or I don't trust at all." - Mia



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Spiritual: "A Hundred Times Worse"

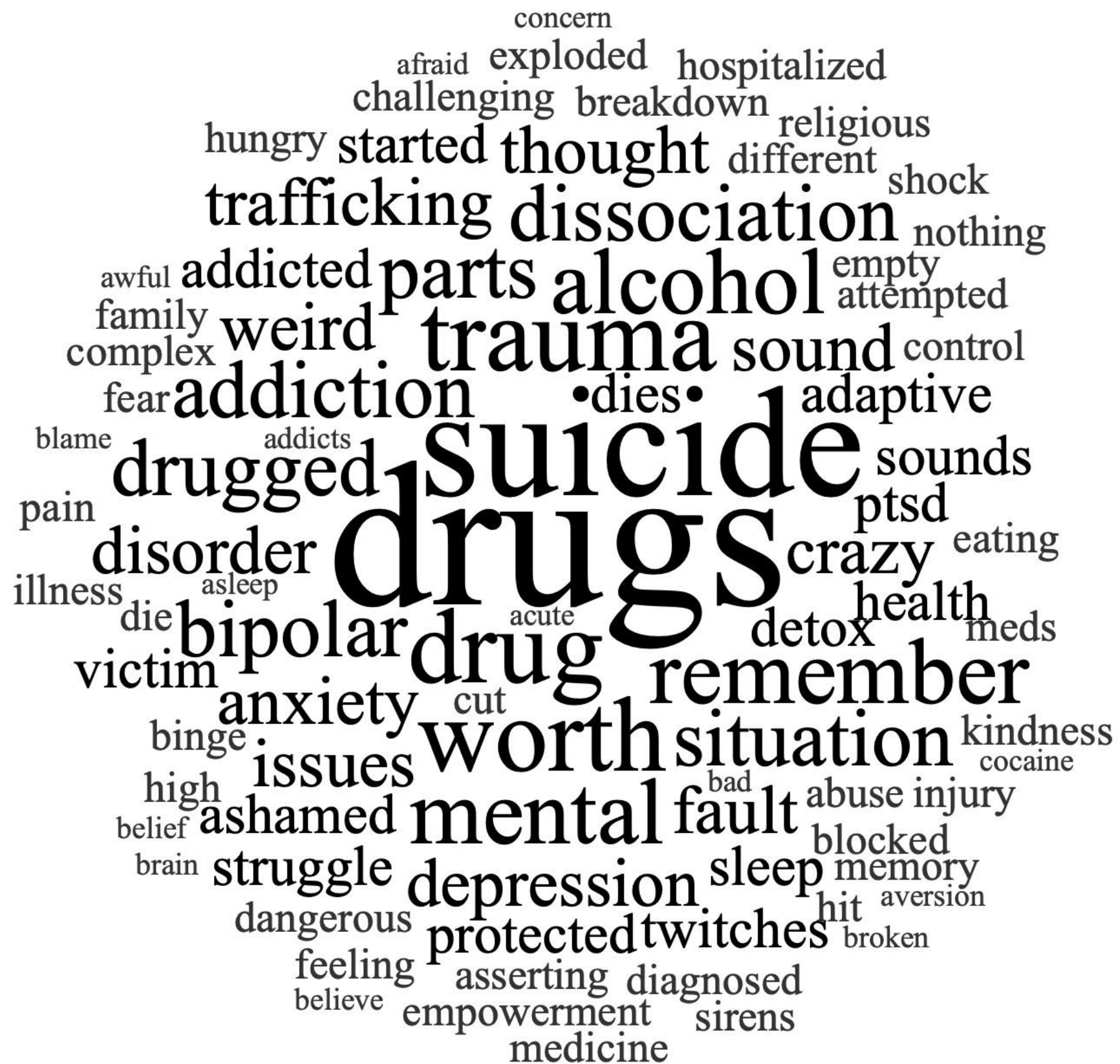
"A hundred times worse than what they did emotionally, physically, sexually ... [Today] I am still a strong Christian but untangling the mess that they created by telling me that [sex trafficking was] why I was born." - Mia

"Uh, I was actually very angry with the Lord ... at some point in life, I feel like I had a divine intervention which brought back my faith ... But it's been a long road, ...and so it was that moment ... where [the Lord] stepped in and said 'all right, I got you.'" - Cassie



Psychological: “A Very Negative Mindset”

"I had to learn how to control my exterior while being in complete chaos on the inside...someone's dying literally in front of me and I'm just having to be stoic and calm"



Post Traumatic Growth

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as the positive psychological transformation that occurs following the struggle with traumatic or highly challenging life circumstances (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 3).

Spiritual development

- Spiritual and existential experiences of people in matters that pertain to religious beliefs, spiritual practices, and existential or philosophical questions

Personal strength

- Enhanced self-dependence, an amplified sense of fortitude and assurance, and a shift in self-perception from being a 'victim' to a 'survivor'

Close relationships

- Positive changes in relationships such as becoming more compassionate, more willing to accept help from others, more willing to express emotions, more conscious about spending time with friends and family and feeling a greater connection with others

New possibilities

- Individuals' identification of new possibilities for one's life or of the possibility of taking a new and different path in life, including developing new interests, activities, or careers

Greater appreciation of life

- A sense of deeper appreciation by individuals for all the things that life has to offer, which often may have been taken for granted previously

Spiritual Development – “Getting My Faith Back”

Attributing God to One’s Healing

- *God didn't give me this passion and this learned knowledge for nothing, so I don't intend to waste it. (Crystal)*

Follower of a Religion Now

- *I started going back to church again... listening to sermons... pouring into God and like getting my faith back (Gretchen)*

Considering Oneself as Spiritual Now

- *I absolutely decided like I'm not Christian. For a long time, I considered myself an atheist, I don't believe in anything, but over time I um have really connected with my spiritual self in terms of I would consider myself a Pagan now (Betty)*

Neither Religious nor Spiritual Now

- *So the spirituality piece for me that I'm trying to do right now is just to try to find positive things in every day (Niki)*



Personal Strengths – *“I’m a Survivor and a Warrior”*

"When you're going through healing and you're finding your identity it's releasing all that, it's fully taking down that mask and being authentic...I work in that mindset that I'm a survivor and a warrior first...And I can do whatever is thrown at me because I've already been through the pits of hell, I've already risen from the ashes, nothing can surprise me, and nothing can change, then I can keep being the warrior that I am."

- Monica

"When I started the journey to healing it was I want healing at any cost...I don't want to stay here so however long it takes and whatever I have to do to get there, I'm going to...I'm not going to give them the satisfaction of simply being a survivor. Like for me, being a survivor was never enough. "

- Mia



Greater Appreciation for Life – “*Couldn't Ask for a Better Life*”

“it [sex] was reinforced that that's my purpose. My sole reason for existence. And so, I just, I don't know that hindsight kind of made me feel really, really stupid ... [Today] I'm allowed to have a voice, I'm allowed to take up space, I'm allowed to breathe.”
- Annabel

"I couldn't, I couldn't ask for a better life... I have joy, which is like that inner contentment, that peace, that know that surpasses all understanding."
- Crystal



New Possibilities –

“I Just Want to Get Out There and Do My Part “

Entrepreneurial Mindset

- *I'm trying to start a nonprofit to to bridge that gap between emergency and residential program so that's that's my passion (Crystal)*

To Educate and Train Other Professionals

- *That's actually why I got in the field, is because I was like there's so many crappy ones we need some like good one, so that somebody can have a good first experience, even if it's one person (Annabel)*
- *So I am a nurse now. I'm a nurse educator... one of my main goals is to integrate sex trafficking education for our nursing staff (Betty)*

To Empower Other Survivors

- *Love the work that I do, I love helping other people I don't care how I'm helping them, what capacity, as long as I'm helping I am happy (Cassie)*



Close Relationships – *“Okay With Being Alone”*

“I think that I’ve grown a lot like I used to shut a lot of people out, I was super angry all the time, like with my mom with people and, like wouldn't really talk to anyone at first, when I just had so much anger and rage in me.”

- Gretchen

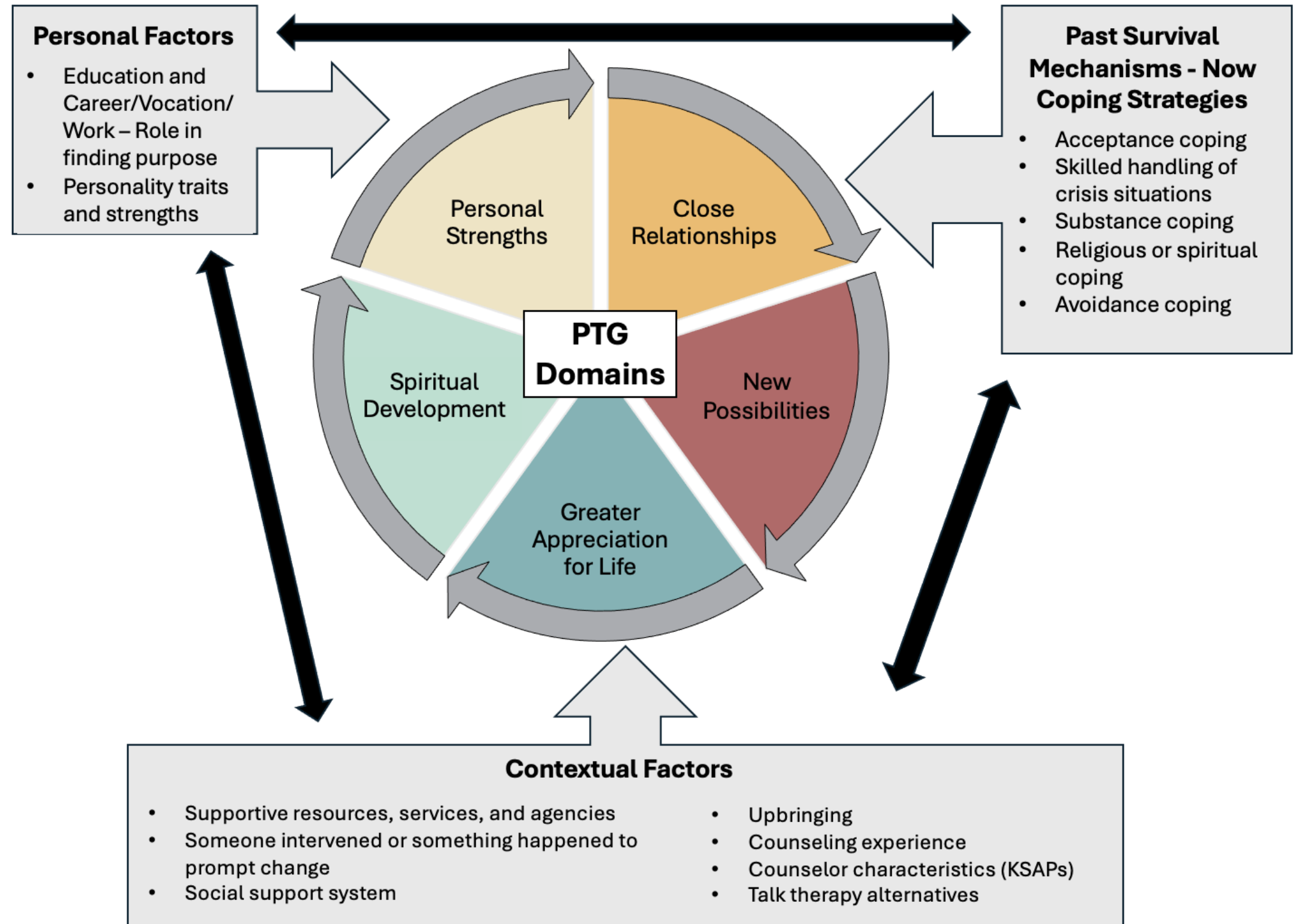
“It took me a long time to really be okay with it, but I am finally at a point now where like I am truly like I ha- I am okay with being alone.”

- Betty



Factors that Facilitated Survivors' Post Traumatic Growth

Model Showing the Domains of PTG and the Factors That Promote Them



Implications for Counselors

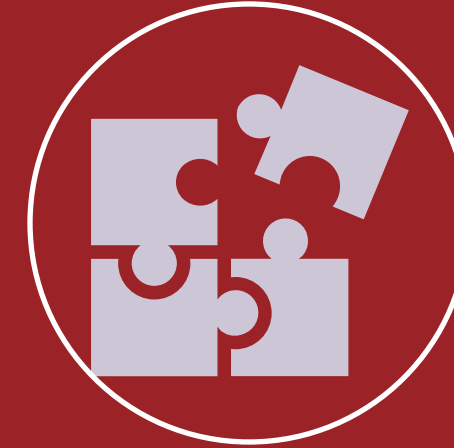


Trauma-informed care

- Manage symptoms
- Regain a sense of safety and control
- Rebuilding self-esteem
- Reclaiming a sense of agency



Safe and validating therapeutic environment



Address survivors' physical, vocational, relational, and spiritual difficulties that affect client's mental health.



Comments and Questions



Thank you!

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