

Working in Artistic Partnerships with Survivors of Trauma

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Starting a Partnership from Within

As with every partnership, we first look within ourselves to connect with our internal perspectives, ideas, and hopes. Working partnerships require both practical and emotional frameworks in which to grow together. As you begin to build artistic partnerships with veterans who suffer from post-traumatic reactions, take the opportunity to ask yourself questions such as:

- ◆ Why am I interested in working with and helping veterans?
- ◆ How does my artistic voice and energy currently function in my life?
 - Therapeutically?
 - Explorative?
 - Motivated by political/social change values?
 - Performance oriented?
 - Community building?
 - Oriented toward internal space vs. external space?
 - Verbal vs. nonverbal forms?
- ◆ What are my assumptions about military service? Veterans? War? Combat trauma?
- ◆ What do I hope to gain from this partnership?
- ◆ How much of my time and emotional energy do I have to commit to this partnership?
- ◆ How do I know when my emotional boundaries are being challenged in my artistic process?
- ◆ Do I have a trauma history of my own that I fear will be triggered by working with other survivors of trauma?
- ◆ Do I see myself as a healer? Do I see this artistic partnership as one focused on healing? exploration? identity development? performance? Etc?
- ◆ What am I fearful of in terms of this partnership?

Bringing/Bridging Worlds Together

Keep in mind that veteran's and active-duty soldiers who you collaborate with in artistic worlds, may be concurrently navigating a variety of internal and external worlds as well:

- ◆ Internal stress, pain, confusion, moral injury, sadness, loss, longing, memories related to military culture, combat, relationships with other soldiers, death, betrayal, etc.

- ◆ Finding meaning, purpose, and community
- ◆ The process of readjusting to civilian life: relationships with spouse or partner, children, coworkers, family, and friends
- ◆ The healthcare and VA systems: finding trust in providers and therapists, treatments and medications that relieve suffering, frustrations related to treatment and benefits
- ◆ The social and political discourse of the war they have *personal* experience with, and public sentiments about them as “veteran” or “soldier”
- ◆ Life-course issues related to expectations related to issues such as age, gender, culture, employment, and family roles

Taking the time when *starting* work with a veteran or active-duty service member to gain clarity on which of these worlds are especially challenging or enriching to the veteran may be helpful to you both. **Consider how your artistic partnership might address some of these other worlds directly.**

Trust

A very common reaction to trauma is to withdraw both emotionally and physically from relationships and the world as a means of protecting oneself and others from the complex struggles that trauma causes. Safety and trust are often damaged, and a veteran may be extremely reluctant to trust others, even those who are explicating trying to offer support and help. Some approaches that can build trust are:

- ◆ **Listen first.** Listening honors another’s voice and power more than anything else.
- ◆ **Be clear what your expectations are** of the veteran as it relates to the artistic work and the partnership.
- ◆ **Follow through** with your side of the partnership regarding time commitments, artistic parameters, opportunities to process experiences, etc.
- ◆ **Be explicit with your emotional boundaries.** Set ground rules and roles.
- ◆ **Take time to reassure the veteran** that the artistic space is a safe space, and check-in regularly to ensure that it does in fact feel safe to them.

Why is it important for artists who work with trauma survivors to know about traumatic stress?

Helps in choosing activities and artistic explorations appropriately

Trauma therapy work led by mental health professionals is usually focused, at least in part, on exposing the veteran to the physical, cognitive, sensory, and emotional details of the traumatic event(s) as a means of systematically decreasing the physical and emotional arousal brought on by remembrance. This is done in safe, controlled environments and involves a degree of emotional outpouring. **Your artistic partnership may not be the place for this sort of work. Consider your own training, boundaries, and goals when choosing activities.**

See “Flood Control” in the Resource Documents for skills to help manage emotionally intense experiences in yourself and those you’re partnering with.

Increases your ability to support a *post-traumatic growth* process

Trauma survivors are living in an ongoing process of healing and recovery. Approaching survivors with genuine respect, concern, and knowledge about their process increases the likelihood that you can:

- Answer some of their questions about what they may be experiencing
- Help them to be aware of possible struggles and symptoms that may require additional assistance
- Reduce their perception of helpers'/collaborators insensitivity
- Give them a positive experience that will increase their chances of reaching out to others and their community in the future

Understanding how artistic voice interacts with survivor voice

Trauma and stress from military service often creates a bottled-up sense of needing to share one’s story, while simultaneously feeling ill equipped and too emotionally raw to tell that story. Understanding the struggles and symptoms of post-traumatic stress can help you activate your artistic methods in partnership with the veteran. Your partnership can assist the veteran in developing new ways to amplify their voice, breaking through the bonds on avoidance, frustration, and hyper-arousal.

Decreases chance of doing harm

It is important to keep in mind that pressing someone into discussion of a traumatic event soon after exposure may have a detrimental effect on some traumatized individuals. While some trauma survivors prefer to discuss the traumatic experience; overriding a reluctant individual's need for **distance**, to **avoid reminders** of the trauma, and to **dissociate**, particularly in situations where bereavement is involved, may be increase their distress. **People have their own pace for processing trauma, and it is important for helpers and artistic partners to let survivors know that they should listen to and honor their own inner pace.** Considering your own expectations, assumptions and bias’s is important. Given the common injuries already made to trust, be careful to avoid abandonment of the veteran. This can be avoided through explicitly defining boundaries of the artistic partnership, and listening to the veteran’s verbal and non-verbal cues.

Increases Self-Care

Another reason why it is important to know about traumatic stress is so you can apply this knowledge to yourself. While many individuals who work with trauma survivors experience an enhanced sense of meaning, self-esteem, respect for the strength of others, and connection with humanity; for some individuals, working with trauma survivors, under certain conditions, may have negative effects. Those who work with survivors may begin to show signs of stress ranging from difficulty sleeping to symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and heightened reactivity.

Compassion stress, or burnout is a *natural outcome* of knowing about trauma experienced by another person, rather than a pathological process. It can be of sudden onset, and an artist or supporter may feel: helplessness, confusion, isolation, and irritability. Other behaviors to watch for in your own life if you are working with trauma narratives very closely are:

- ◆ Becoming judgmental of others
- ◆ Tuning out
- ◆ Having a reduced sense of connection with loved ones and colleagues
- ◆ Becoming cynical or angry and losing hope or a sense of meaning
- ◆ Developing rescue fantasies, becoming over-involved, taking on others problems
- ◆ Developing very rigid, strict boundaries
- ◆ Feeling heightened protectiveness as a result of a decreased sense of the safety of loved ones
- ◆ Avoiding social contact
- ◆ Avoiding work contact

Make sure to increase your efforts of self-care and lifestyle balance if you find yourself experiencing any of these signs of burnout and stress. Individuals who work with trauma survivors over time may experience negative effects during times of heavier workloads and heightened personal stress.

However, a large majority of individuals who work with trauma survivors indicate that it has brought great meaning into their lives, increased their sense of purpose and strength, and heightened their sense of connection with others. Often these individuals took breaks, sought assistance or mentoring, or increased self-care when they began to see signs of negative effects. These counselors and supporters were able to resume their work and/or feel decreased stress and an overall gratitude for their work.

Consider ways that you can activate mutual support of other artists or friends who are also working with trauma survivors.