

Balancing the Storytelling Process

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When people have been through intense experiences like life in the war zone, their physical stress systems sometimes stay in "tactical awareness" and "survival mode" long after they've returned to safety. Things they hear, see, say, or think about might trigger an adrenaline overload ("flooding") and cause intense fear, anger, or emotional pain, or lead them to see or hear things that happened in the war zone as if they were happening now. None of these things are signs of mental illness. They're all normal reactions, with physical roots.

People who experience these effects may or may not have access to people who can help them understand the physical "engine" underneath their post-combat experiences and teach them skills that can help them regulate their stress systems and bring their reactions back into balance. So when you're listening to their stories, you can help keep the experience safe by:

- Learning about flooding (see the handout called "Flood Control"), including being able to identify the signs of flooding
- Watching out for signs of flooding and other kinds of distress
- If you see these signs, asking questions that will remind them of their strengths and resources and/or bring them back to the "here and now"
- Using the techniques described in the "Flood Control" handout under "To Handle Flooding in Others"

Many artists are keenly tuned in to the feelings and reactions of others, so you'll probably notice if and when the veterans you're working with are starting to get "triggered" by the things they're saying, or by a question you might have asked. This doesn't mean that the negative emotions people are feeling are "bad" or dangerous. There's a difference between feeling negative emotions and being triggered. It will be part of your responsibility to learn and respect that difference.

It's also important not to say anything that will give veterans the impression that you don't want to hear their stories. But if you notice that they're triggered or flooding, and ask questions that subtly redirect the story to a place where they can feel strong and grounded, the whole experience will be safer and more meaningful.

Here are some examples of questions that remind people of their resources:

- When did you first realize you'd survived?
- Where did you get your strength in that situation?
- What was it about the people you were with there with that helped you stay strong?
- What were your best days like in the war zone?

Or questions that pull them back to the "here and now," like:

- Now that you're home, and sitting here in this room telling me your story, what would you like to tell that person who was there in the war zone that day?
- So what's it like when you think about the fact that you're home, looking back on those experiences?
- Now that you're home, what are some of the things you do to honor the people you lost over there?
- What are some of the sources of strength you've found back here at home?

If you're working in a group setting and there are counselors present, and the veteran you're working with gets flooded or "stuck" in flooding, it's important to get the counselor to help you and the veteran get back to a more balanced and peaceful place.