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Focusing Oriented Therapy and Trauma – a brief outline

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Abstract:

The workshop presented by Jan and Nancy at the International outlined a model for integrating the body into trauma treatment with the use of Focusing Oriented Therapy (F.O.T.).

The following is a brief outline of the areas discussed:

1 Key concepts

1.1 **What is Trauma?**

Trauma is an experience that is both overwhelming and inescapable.

1.2 **Types of Trauma**

- Type 1: Short term, unexpected, single time
- Type 2: Sustained, repeated and prolonged stressors
More likely to be of intentional human design
Multiple, chronic, anticipated traumas

1.3 **Indicators of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

- Re-experiencing,
- Avoidance,
- Hyper-arousal

1.4 **Neurobiological Responses**

- Sympathetic nervous system arousal
- Dysregulation of copied system
- Abnormalities in sleep physiology
- Neuroendocrine disturbance

1.5 Impact of Memory

- Traumatic memory not processed as normal memory
- Continuum of dissociation
- Constructing the narrative: telling the story of the trauma

1.6 Disruptions in Self Regulation

- Somatic complaints
- Inability to regulate affective states
- Self soothing/ self destructive behaviours

2 F.O.T. as an approach to treating trauma

2.1 The disruption in self-regulation.

A major impact of trauma noted in research and clinical practice is the disruption in self-regulation. Examples include addictions, self-injurious behaviours such as cutting, burning, re-enactments of the abuse, difficulties in pacing and dissociation. Incorporating the body into repairing these disruptions has been found to be a necessary step in producing sustained change. Specific F.O.T. interventions are implemented to assist with these disruptions in self-regulation.

The Healing Journey: The work of major theorists in the field of trauma emphasizes the importance of secure attachment and development of competence (Dr. Bessel van der Kolk). The healing journey is about what comes between the client and her/his capacity to regulate these areas of life.

2.2 The Felt Sense Experience Model

Winhall and Falls have developed a model of Felt Sense Experience, which emphasizes four components: thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and memories. In trauma these aspects are often dissociated. Through working with these aspects we help clients integrate experience and develop emotional competence.

2.2.1 Focusing Oriented Therapy Strategies

For Developing Emotional Competence:

Getting the right amount of closeness and distance

Working with the Critic Spectrum

Tracking the Felt Sense

Clearing Space

Finding Good Energy

Relational Felt Sense

Focusing Attitude

Implementation of F.O.T. strategies with a trauma population: We introduced Dr. Judith Herman's work on the three stages of healing from trauma and discussed the use of specific strategies in specific stages of the client's healing process.

2.2.2 Medication

as an important component in healing: We discussed Dr. Tony Cohn's work in prescribing medication and using F.O.T. to aid the client's adjustment to the treatment.

How F.O.T. can be used as a complete psychotherapy or integrated into other models:

Winhall and Falls use F.O.T. as their main theoretical model. Examples of how to integrate it

into other modalities were described. F.O.T is particularly compatible with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Feminist Therapy, Psychodynamic Therapy, Gestalt Therapy and Addiction Counselling.

2.2.3 A word of warning

We discussed how powerful F.O.T. is in working with trauma. Focusing facilitates a deep connection with the body. Because trauma survivors have lived their lives quite disconnected from their bodies, they often become overwhelmed and flood with memories during the therapy process. It is important that therapists have a good knowledge base in the field of trauma and adequate supervision before implementing F.O.T. strategies.

A transcript of a case using F.O.T. was role played by the presenters.

A bibliography of trauma related books and articles was distributed.

3 Bio

Jan Winhall and Nancy Falls are co-directors of The Focusing Centre for Training in Toronto. The Centre provides training for psychotherapists in Focusing Oriented Therapy as well as courses for the general public. Both Jan and Nancy are certified Focusing Co-ordinators with the Focusing Institute and are professional psychotherapists.

Jan Winhall provides training, consultation and supervision to psychotherapists. Jan has a private practice where she does individual and couple work. She specializes in working with adults who have experienced trauma in childhood. She has developed a tool called the Focusing Dialogue, which she teaches to couples to help them facilitate change and deepen intimacy.

Nancy Falls is a psychotherapist, consultant and trainer in private practice. She has a diverse clinical practice with an emphasis in working with individuals who have experienced trauma. Nancy also provides assessments for adolescents who have committed sexual offences.