

## **Responding to Traumarchy: a mutual empowerment model for Family Violence and Sexual Assault workers**

In the context of response work to gender based crimes (specifically Family Violence and Sexual Assault) there is a strong body of evidence that validates survivor story telling as a means to give agency to a victim-survivor's voice. While the voice of the storyteller is critical, less importance is placed on the impact of story-telling on the listener. This workshop explores the role of Family Violence and Sexual Assault workers as perpetually being professional listeners, witnessing stories of violence and trauma.

### **Workers as 'passive listeners' to trauma**

- Active listening is a skill taught in most people helping professions
- Referring to rephrasing, clarifying, validating, (micro-counselling skills)
- Deeper dynamics of trauma are not consciously addressed through this process
- For many reasons workers can experience vicarious trauma – trauma response as a result of witnessing/hearing someone else's trauma
- This can be a 'felt' sense of 'holding' the story/person/situation/trauma/risk.

### **Parallel dynamic for gender based violence in a patriarchal society**

- The foundational principle of this model acknowledges that the dynamics of family violence and sexual assault are power and coercive control, at the centre of which is an 'annihilation of self'.
- Dynamics of power & coercive control – Duluth Model – individual experience.
- At the centre is power and control, I propose that what sits behind that – is an 'annihilation of self'. 'Self' being autonomous
- Drivers of FV & SA are gender inequality

### **Traumarchy: idea that patriarchy causes trauma by it's nature**

- The individual experience of gender-based inequality and abuse of power is mirrored and reinforced by systems of patriarchy and institutional violence, which some theorists have termed 'traumarchy'
- Power imbalance occurring at a systems and widespread level mirrors impact of trauma that occurs on an interpersonal level

### **Dynamics of Trauma**

- Caused by perceived and 'felt' sense of powerlessness, threat and danger
- Therefore 'passive listeners' can feel a similar powerlessness (of witnessing) to their tellers they are listening to. Both on an individual level and at a systems level.

### **Mutual Empowerment Response**

- **Two step:** Individual & structural/systems
- Both processes must be consciously undertaken to awaken in the listener a sense of their own agency, therefore mitigating the possibility of traumatisation through a felt sense of powerlessness
- **Responsive validation** (action orientation for the worker) (validation of experience for teller)
- Mutual empowerment occurs through the process of reflective validation as an action of trauma recovery for the storyteller and an act of agency for the listener.
- Role of validation in beginning recovery in FV/SA trauma
- Reflects/begins rebuilding 'self' in response to 'annihilation of self'
- Self allows for agency, power, decisions, autonomy

### **Micro Actions of Systemic Activism**

- Micro actions of systemic activism are conscious actions the worker takes to advance a larger systems response to disrupt the causes of gender based violence and trauma, while taking practical steps, where possible, to change the individual circumstances of the storyteller.
- Intentional actions taken to address powerlessness in face of the 'overwhelm' of a 'system'.
- Micro – can be small, direct or in-direct to the experience related to the Teller. Ie, lobbying for family court reform or social justice for refugees
- Essential – conscious, intentioned and 'felt' as an 'active response' to feeling powerless.
- Works with the psychological experiences of what creates trauma.
- Worker to identify they operate in context of a much broader, more powerful system of 'activism' than their 'micro' action in isolation.
- Having a 'felt' and conscious sense of being part of something bigger to address the trauma is key in preventing feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness.
- Recent evaluations of projects (PIP, Survivor Advocates Recovery) have also demonstrated the importance of connection to wider system.

### **Workshop activity – felt sense of two-step process**

- Participants will be lead through a 'telling' and 'listening' exercise to enable a felt sense of the model in action on a small scale.
- A reflective discussion on the experience as it relates to the proposed model.