



Staying Safe – Rise Writing Group Trauma Guidelines

What is trauma?

Trauma is an experience that makes a person feel that her life is threatened—or a loved one’s life is in danger—and overwhelms a person’s ability to cope. It’s normal in traumatic moments to freeze or feel unable to respond, to feel that you are apart from your own body, or to react with overwhelming fear, anger, or even violence.

People can be traumatized by things like earthquakes or 9/11. But research shows that the most devastating trauma occurs when people who are supposed to love us and keep us safe do us harm. Things like physical or sexual abuse or domestic violence, especially when they occur in close relationships, can shake people’s sense of trust and make it hard for people to trust anyone. Trauma can also hurt how people feel about themselves, even though the abuse is not their fault.

How does this connect to our group?

In Rise writing groups, parents often write stories that connect to traumatic experiences in their lives. In applications, many writers here described traumatic experiences, including the trauma of having a child placed in foster care. In Rise writing groups, we also may read stories that mention a traumatic experience. Or, while we’re talking and sharing with one another, you may hear someone talk openly about something traumatic.

At times, reading, hearing, writing, or talking about traumatic experiences can affect your feelings and your body. You may feel taken by surprise by your reactions. If you don’t immediately recognize the connection between the writing and listening that you’re doing, and the signs in your body and mind that you’re feeling, you can become overwhelmed. It’s important that we all have tools for recognizing signs of distress and coping with them. We can all work together to make sure that this group feels safe.

Tools for Coping

Staying safe around trauma is a little like staying safe around a fire in a fireplace. If you are standing too close to the fire, you may feel afraid that you will get burned—especially if it feels like another person is throwing more and more wood or even gasoline at the fire.

It’s important that we have two things to keep us safe in our group:

- A sure feeling that the staff and all the other parents will stop if we find a way to let them know that they are throwing too much wood on the fire for our comfort;

- A sure feeling inside that we each have the power to step back from the fire.

Let's read some of the signs that there is "too much wood on the fire" or that we're "standing too close" to the fire. And let's talk about how we all stay safe together. The most important thing is that no one feels that she has to cope with a raging fire all by herself.

Signs of Stress Related to Trauma

Trauma can affect us in so many ways, including how we respond to our children. There are some reactions to trauma that are pretty common:

- Avoidance – trying to avoid reminders of a trauma, like not going to a certain block, not seeing certain people, or not talking about it.
- "Hypervigilance" – staying "on alert" all of the time to try to stay safe.
- Overreacting – reacting with anger, sadness, worry, or fear that is out of proportion to the situation.
- Under-reacting – "just sitting there" emotionally or physically despite danger.
- Changes in eating or sleeping – too much or too little are both warning signs.
- Numbness – feeling like you're not connected to yourself or not really there.
- "Losing time" – not being sure how you got from one place to another, or what happened to minutes or hours.
- Nightmares or bad memories that seem to push into your mind.

What can help?

- Respect the privacy and confidentiality of group members.
- Give positive, supportive feedback to other writers.
- Learn about signs of trauma so you are not taken by surprise
- Pay attention – watch yourself for signs that you're starting to get "too close to the fire" or "the fire is getting too hot."
- Go slow – people have their own pace for thinking about and coping with trauma. It is important to listen to your own inner pace.
- Be brave – let staff or the group know if you begin feeling uncomfortable. We can work together to figure out how you can "step back from the fire" or how the group can "stop throwing wood on the fire."
- Set limits – an editor's job is to ask questions. You can circle or cross out questions that you don't feel comfortable answering, to signal that you saw the question and don't want to answer it for now.
- Remind yourself that the experiences we might be writing or talking about happened in the past. You're not stuck close to that fire anymore.
- Plan a positive end to every group that helps us "close" what we "opened" here and leave it here.

A Sense of Safety

Caring relationships and a safe, supportive environment help to protect against traumatic stress. Together, we can make a group that feels safe and protective.

The writing process also can help. Reflecting on what we've been through, sharing with others who have been through similar experiences, and writing about our strengths and achievements can help us feel positive and capable of taking charge of our lives.