

Disclosing Trauma: Research and Implications

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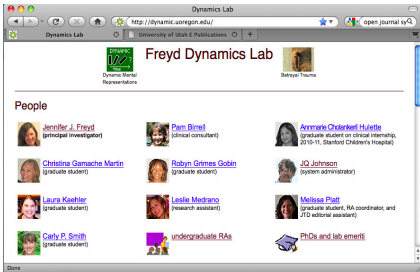
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Disclosing Trauma

- Disclosure and impact of trauma are deeply interwoven issues
 - All the more so for interpersonal traumas with high degrees of betrayal, stigma, and secrecy
 - “Unspeakable”
- Today: 5 propositions presented

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.
Muriel Rukeyser

Students and Collaborators



- **Primary Collaborators on Disclosure Research**
- Kathy Becker-Blease
- Lisa Cromer
- Anne DePrince
- Bridget Klest
- Melissa Foynes
- Shin Shin Tang

Disclosure and impact of trauma: Five Propositions

- 1) Without disclosure of trauma healing and prevention are hampered
- 2) Non-disclosure of trauma (particularly betrayal trauma) is common.
- 3) Disclosure process is both internal and external
- 4) Disclosure can lead to positive or negative outcomes relative to non-disclosure, depending on social response
- 5) Asking and *not asking* for trauma disclosure thus has profound ethical, educational, and clinical implications

Proposition 1: Without disclosure healing and prevention are hampered

- Disclosure can facilitate receipt of emotional, legal, or financial aid
- Without disclosure, resources hard to provide, healing difficult to promote, future trauma difficult to prevent
- Silence is part of the problem at both individual and societal levels; interpersonal violence breeds in secrecy

Proposition 2: Non-disclosure of trauma (particularly betrayal trauma) is common

- Although disclosure facilitates receipt of emotional, legal, or financial aid, delayed disclosure and non-disclosure of trauma (particularly betrayal trauma) is common.
- Trauma is not easily discussed: Forgotten, stigmatized, taboo
- It can also be truly risky to discuss trauma
 - Explicit risk: fear of negative reaction
 - Implicit risk: risking relationships (betrayal trauma theory)

Example of non-disclosure: Sexual Trauma

- Sexual abuse survivors typically wait a long time to disclose
 - Fewer than 1 in 4 survivors disclose immediately following abuse.
 - Typical time span of 8 to 15 years from abuse onset to disclosure.
 - For many (25-30%) survivors, participating in research is the first time they disclose to anyone

Often victims do not disclose the assault at all or disclose only after a delay. Sometimes victims retract a legitimate accusation.

- Most of those who experience child sexual assault do not disclose until adulthood and many never tell at all (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt, 1990).
- Studies have also revealed a pattern of recanting and redisclosure (Elliott & Briere, 1994; Sorenson & Snow, 1991).
- Non-disclosure, delayed disclosure, and retraction are particularly likely in cases in which the perpetrator is close to the victim (Lyon, 2007; Malloy, Lyon, & Quas, 2007; Foyne, Freyd, & DePrince, 2009).

Some Reasons for Non-Disclosure

- Explicit: Fear of negative response (see Tang, Freyd, & Wang, 2007)
 - Fear of disbelief
 - Fear of blame or reprisal
 - Fear of stigma
 - Fear of harming loved ones
- Implicit: Protect necessary relationships and social systems (betrayal trauma theory; Freyd, DePrince, & Gleaves, 2007; Foyne, Freyd, & DePrince, 2009)

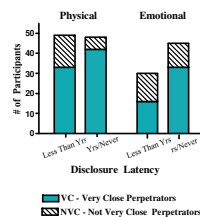
Betrayal Trauma Theory: Betrayal Blindness as a Survival Mechanism

- According to betrayal trauma theory, betrayal blindness occurs when awareness of mistreatment would threaten necessary (or apparently necessary) relationships
- Thus unawareness, forgetting, and non-disclosure are sometimes an adaptive response to betrayal
- By keeping silent the victim protects a relationship that is perceived to be necessary.



Betrayal Trauma and Disclosure

- Both betrayal and disclosure of betrayal threaten attachment (thus survival)
- Nondisclosure might operate as a coping mechanism, sustaining the attachment relationship
- Foyne, M.M., Freyd, J.J., & DePrince, A. (2009)
 - Close relationships → longer disclosure latency



Proposition 3: Disclosure process is both internal and external

- Disclosure can be internal (disclosure to self) and external (disclosure to others)
 - Dissociation involves lack of internal disclosure
 - Disclosure to self and others connected (shareability)

Shareability Theory

- Disclosure involves telling the self and/or telling others; these types of telling interact.
- Shareability theory (Freyd 1983, 1990, 1996) proposes that through the sharing of information (communication), internal knowledge is reorganized into more consciously available, categorical, and discrete forms of representation.
- Much childhood abuse and interpersonal violence happens without the opportunity for communication, thus memory for non-shared abuse experiences may be fundamentally different in memory (more implicit, more procedural, more continuous, less categorical)

Proposition 4: Disclosure can lead to positive or negative outcomes depending on social response.

- Negative responses can do damage
- Hypothesized U-shaped relationship
- Disclosure absent negative response may be helpful
- Disclosure process itself depends on social response
- Foynes & Freyd (under review a) observational study of response to disclosure in real time

Disbelieving and blaming the victim can compound the damage done by the trauma.

- Negative reactions to disclosure, particularly disbelieving and blaming the victim, can be particularly damaging to the well-being of victims of sexual assault (Ullman & Filipas, 2005).
- "In our society, the validity of reports of sexual violence is often questioned, and survivors are blamed for their sexual assaults. Furthermore, the consequences of these experiences are often trivialized or ignored by family, friends, police, legal officials, and sometimes even mental health professionals. Unfortunately, such social conditions further create stigma and shame for survivors, thereby compounding the destructiveness of their experiences." (Marx, 2005, p. 226).

U-Shaped Relationship Between Disclosure and Positive Outcome

- Disclosure can be an important and adaptive coping response
- However, if disclosure of a negative experience leads to negative feedback, non-disclosure actually predicts better outcomes (Lepore, 2000; Major, Cozzarelli, Sciacchitano & Cooper 1990; Ullman, 1996).

Disclosure can have positive outcome absent negative reactions

- Absent negative reactions from others it appears that disclosure is generally helpful
- Positive response to participating in research involving disclosing trauma (see: Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006, 2007)
- Pennebaker's Writing Paradigm (e.g. Pennebaker, 1997; Klest & Freyd, 2007)

Social Context Impacts Disclosure Process Itself

- Disclosure is not a single event but a process that is highly dependent upon the reactions of others.
- E.g.: DARVO and other negative reactions can lead to retraction and silence.
 - The perpetrator or offender may **Deny** the behavior, **Attack** the individual doing the confronting, and **Reverse** the roles of **Victim** and **Offender** such that the perpetrator assumes the victim role and turns the true victim into an alleged offender. (Freyd, 1997)

Investigating Response to Abuse

- Responses to disclosure predict outcome
- What is a helpful response to disclosure?
- We need to study disclosures & responses as they happen

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Foynes & Freyd (under review a) Disclosure-in-Action: Objectives

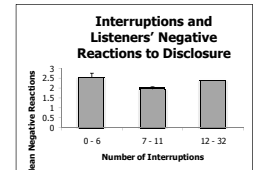
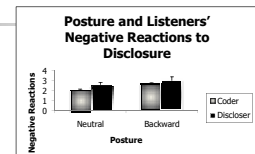
- *Evaluating Responses to the Disclosure of Stressful Life Experiences as it Occurs in Real Time.*
 - Capture the processes underlying disclosing life events for the first time as they occur
 - Examine types of verbal and nonverbal responses given by close others upon such disclosures
 - Investigate the influence of social support responses on later adjustment

Foynes & Freyd (under review a): Observing Disclosure in Real Time

- Participants brought in a friend (n=126)
- Completed series of pre- and post-questionnaires
- Randomly assigned to a “discloser” or “listener” condition
- 20-min disclosure interaction videotaped
- Coding scheme developed & evaluated
 - Ratings for posture, nonverbal and verbal interruptions, social responses/reactions to disclosure

Results: Observing Disclosure in Real Time

- History of high betrayal trauma was associated with having received (in the past) more negative responses to disclosure
- Leaning backward was associated with more negative responses to disclosure
- Moderate levels of interruption were associated with more supportive responses to disclosure.



Proposition 5: Asking and not asking has ethical, educational, and clinical implications

- Research on reactions to asking people about trauma
- Research on not believing disclosures
- Theoretical analysis of the costs of asking and *not asking* about abuse in research.
- Education experiment: Can we teach good listening skills?

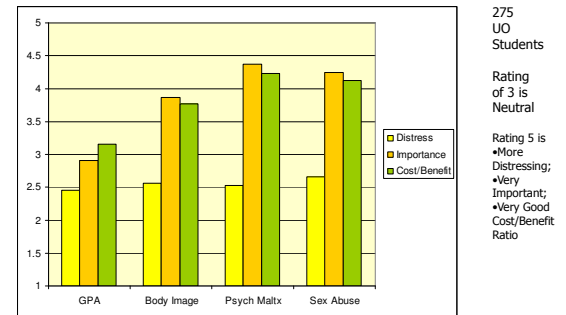
How Do Participants React to Trauma Questions in Research Context?

- E.g.: Research on reactions to the Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS, Goldberg & Freyd, 2006)
 - Questions about traumas including sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (both low and high betrayal traumas assessed)
 - Example high betrayal item: *You were made to have some form of sexual contact, such as touching or penetration, by someone with whom you were very close (such as a parent or lover).*

DePrince & Freyd (2004)

- DePrince & Freyd (2004) asked participants 3 questions about their experience after completing the BBTS
 - 6 samples used (college and community in Oregon and Denver) for a total of over 500 participants
- Participants indicated that on average
 1. Brief betrayal trauma survey (BBTS) questions are neutral (on distress) compared to day-to-day experiences.
 2. Research asking about stressful life events is important.
 3. Considering the costs and benefits, including such measures in research is good.

How Do Reactions to the BBTS Items Compare to the Reactions to Other Personal Questions? (Cromer, Freyd, Binder, DePrince, & Becker-Blease, 2006)



Potential Benefits of Asking about Trauma in Research (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006, 2007)

- Benefits to individuals
 - Assist those who have been traumatized
 - Provide information, resources, and support
- Benefits to science/humanity
 - Reduce costs related to outcomes of trauma
 - End stigma; Improve well-being
 - Prevent others from being traumatized
- This all depends on responding well, or at least not badly

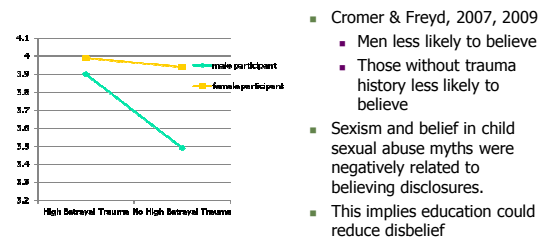
Costs to *not* asking about abuse

- There are risks in asking but there are also costs to *not* asking about abuse (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006, 2007)
- Survivors lose: a "don't ask, don't tell" policy reinforces feelings of shame.
- Science loses information.
 - When statistical models fail to include abuse, variance attributed to other predictors is inflated.
- Society loses information necessary for social services, public policy and therapy.
- Silence is part of the problem

Imperative to Respond Well to Disclosure

- Educate researchers, clinicians, all citizens in how to provide positive response
- Research nature of positive response to inform education
 - What causes disbelief?
 - What are other components of response to disclosure that are positive or negative?

Cromer & Freyd (2007, 2009) Factors Involved in Believing and Disbelieving Trauma Vignettes



Disclosure Research: What is a good response to disclosure?

- Disclosure can facilitate receipt of emotional, legal, or financial aid
- Responses to disclosure predict outcome
 - Disclosure is most beneficial when response is supportive
 - Negative feedback may cause harm
- *What is a good response?*

Education about Disclosure: Foynes & Freyd (under review b).

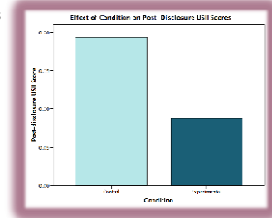
- *An Experimental Examination of the Impact of Psychoeducation on Responses to Disclosure of Stressful Life Experiences.*
 - Can we teach improved listening skills?
 - Do changes in empathic listening increase levels of perceived social support?
 - How do changes in empathic listening skills influence anxiety levels?

Foynes & Freyd (under review b): Disclosure Education Experiment

- Same general procedure as Foynes & Freyd (under review a)
- Additional measures:
 - Pre- and post-questionnaire assessing active listening skills
 - Empathic listening training
 - Coders used the same measure to rate listening skills based on taped interaction
- Can we teach people how to be better listeners?

Foynes & Freyd (under review b): Education Experiment Results

- The psycho educational materials were effective in enhancing supportive responses
 - Listeners in the experimental condition demonstrated significantly fewer unsupportive behaviors than listeners in the control condition
 - Listeners who started with high levels of unsupportive behaviors benefitted the most



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Summary

- Disclosure of trauma and psychology of trauma are deeply interwoven issues, especially for interpersonal traumas with high degrees of betrayal, stigma, and secrecy.
 - 1) without disclosure of trauma, healing and prevention are hampered;
 - 2) non-disclosure of trauma (particularly betrayal trauma) is common;
 - 3) the disclosure process is both internal and external;
 - 4) disclosure can lead to positive or negative outcomes relative to non-disclosure, depending on social response; and
 - 5) asking and *not asking* for trauma disclosure thus has profound ethical, educational, and clinical implications.

Future Directions

- Education about disclosure process and how to respond to disclosure is essential
- Research is critically needed
 - On psychology of disclosure and response
 - On identifying best responses
 - On how to teach those best responses
- We must continue to discover ways of making the unspeakable safely speakable, and thus promote healing and prevention.

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Thank you!

Full text of articles and additional resources on our website <http://dynamic.uoregon.edu>