
SESSION I

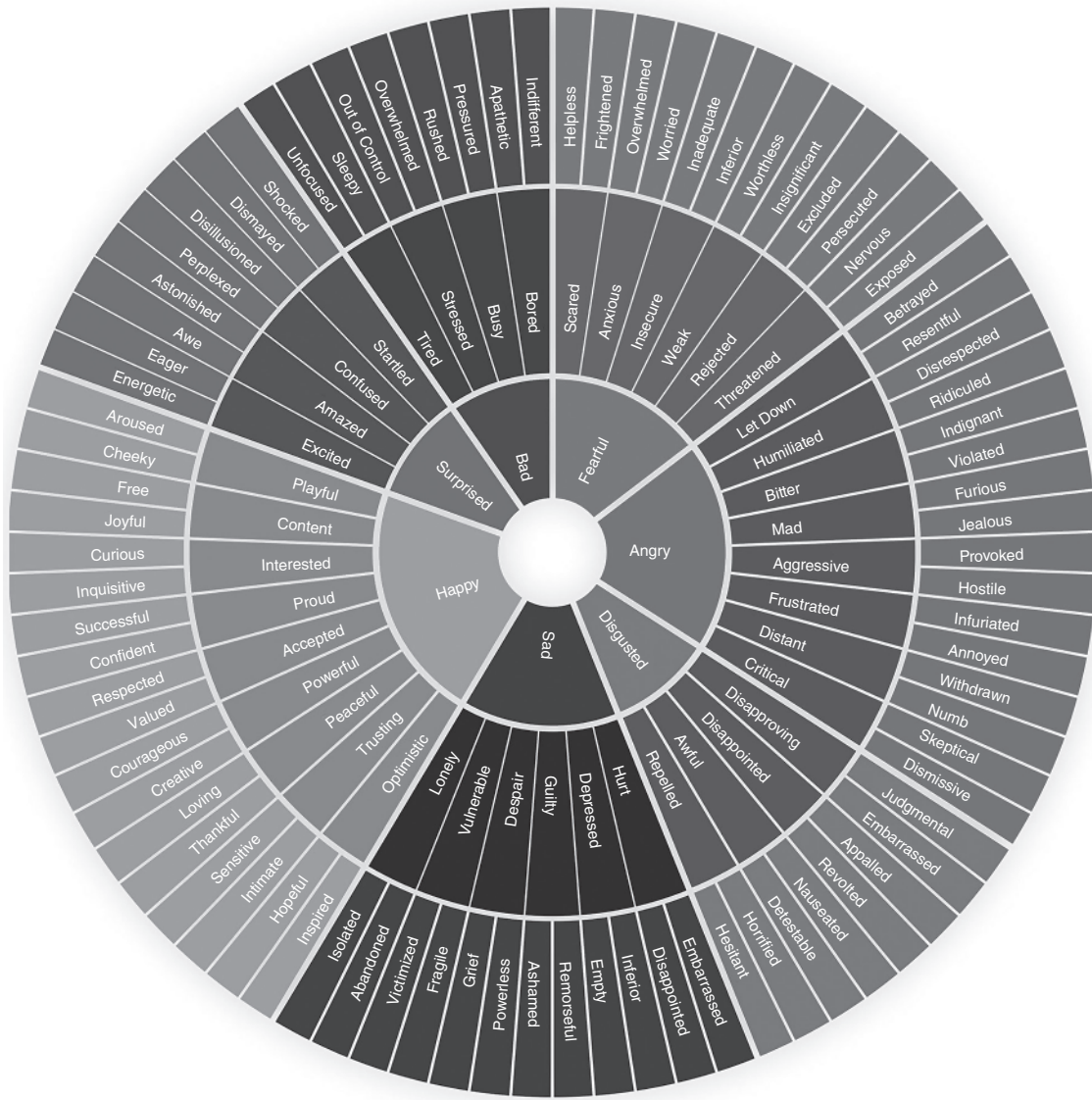
Grounding and Safety

Welcome! Congratulations on making the decision to work toward becoming the best woman you can be. This is your first meeting in the *Healing Women's Pain* program. This is an introduction to what you can expect throughout your participation in the meetings. There is discussion of the different goals of the program, and then you will have the opportunity to explore your own goals for your time in the program as well as some important questions. This session is meant to “set the stage” for the rest of the program.

The goals for this session are as follows:

- To begin to get to know one another and develop trust.
- To establish safety for participants and the group.
- To learn that we are more than the impacts of our trauma.
- To learn about triggers and some ways to cope when you feel triggered.

The Feelings Wheel



The Feelings Wheel retrieved from: <https://feelingswheel.com/>

Group Agreements

- **Safety:** It is critical that you feel safe in this group. It is often not easy for women to admit when they do not feel safe as they may (1) focus more on others than themselves and/or (2) struggle to admit they are infallible. We do not often talk about safety. You may be thinking that safety is about defending yourself or

protecting yourself from harm. But safety is also about feeling emotionally safe, feeling grounded, and feeling comfortable when sharing your thoughts and your problems with others. For this to happen, we all need to agree that there will be no emotional, verbal, or physical abuse here. This is an invitational process that will honor your investment. The motto will be: Safety first, last, and always.

- **Confidentiality:** No personal information revealed in this room is to be repeated outside the room. We need to know that we can trust one another, and there can be no trust if information about a group member is given to outsiders or if group members gossip about one another outside the group. There are two exceptions to this rule of confidentiality: (1) Your facilitators and therapists have an obligation to communicate with other members of your treatment teams as part of your ongoing care; and (2) they are required by law to break confidentiality when your safety or the safety of another person is at stake. You will be responsible for maintaining confidentiality among yourselves.
- **Participation:** You will have a chance to join in the discussion and the opportunity to share at your level of comfort, safety, and willingness without pressure or expectation. There will likely be challenging questions, talk about difficult topics, and the exploring of painful issues, you will be invited to participate by minimally communicating your level of comfort, safety, and willingness as you go, supporting each participant to reach slightly beyond where you are comfortable, safe, and willing in order to learn to grow and expand your resilience. We will respect each participant's responses and support each participant to develop the necessary and sufficient skills to benefit from the group.
- **Truthfulness:** Nobody will pressure you to tell anything about yourself that you don't want to talk about. When you do talk, tell the truth about where you've been and how you feel. You may be asked questions to better understand what you are saying or support you in telling your whole truth. You are invited to share from your perspective, taking ownership of that perspective through the use of "I" statements rather than saying "You" or "We." Some people may be uncomfortable sharing their experiences from their own perspective, and there will be enough support without judgment to allow them to do so.
- **Respect:** When you tell the truth about what you think, please do so in a way that respects others in the group. That means avoiding criticizing, judging, or talking down to anyone. If you think that someone is showing disrespect to someone else, please say so respectfully and invite them to explain their responses or behaviors. If you feel uncomfortable or angry at some point and do not want to participate, please share your current level of safety and pass on the current discussion until you are ready to invest further.

- **Curiosity:** There are no dumb questions or wrong answers, as long as you speak about what is true for you. Ask whatever is on your mind. Please respect one another's honest questions and opinions. Safety is first, last, and always.
- **Keeping Focused:** The focus is to talk about healing trauma, which may lead you into a wide variety of related discussions. If you think that things are getting off topic or if you think that the discussion is headed off on a tangent, speak up and help to refocus.
- **Attendance:** Your commitment to attending regularly helps to stabilize the group and creates an environment of mutual support. Being present regularly also improves your opportunities for growth and the ability to maximize the experience. If you must miss a group meeting, please let the group facilitator know well in advance of that meeting, and if possible, share with the participants of the group as well. If you end up missing too many meetings, it may affect your ability to stay in the group.
- **Timeliness:** Meetings will begin and end on time to keep the structure safe and predictable. If you are going to be late and can notify someone ahead of time, please do so as you are able. If you are late without informing us, I may also challenge you to explore your accountability and responsibility to yourself and the group. Being late is almost always a choice and an expression of how you are responding to your internal world. Starting and ending a group on time is essential for maintaining a safe space.
- **Commitment to Recovery (If Applicable):** Using mood-altering chemicals is often a response to a trauma being triggered, even if someone is unaware of it. We will not assign any meaning to using mood-altering chemicals, but we will want to ensure the safety of all the participants and the group as a whole. We will always want to explore alternative coping skills and responses, supporting each woman in their journey. As such, we ask that you commit to showing up to the group sober and free of any mind-altering chemicals and remaining so for the duration of each group. If you choose to use substances outside of a group, that is your choice. If it ever feels like it is a problem for you or something that you want to discuss further, we are here for you.

On Confidentiality.

1. What does confidentiality mean to you?

2. What happens when confidentiality is challenged or broken?

3. How does that feel?

Trust is essential to the group process, and there can be no trust if information about a group member is given to outsiders or if group members talk about one another outside the group. So, you need to make every attempt to ensure that what is said, revealed, or done in the group sessions remains confidential and safe.

4. What do you want to do, as a group, to maintain confidentiality? How do we want to ensure safety for the group?

Is there anything missing that you might want included? Are there any other questions or concerns about any of the group agreements?

Know that at any time, anyone in this group can make a new request, ask for revision, or ask for clarification to these group agreements, and we'll take the time to give everyone the opportunity to understand a commitment to any changes in our group agreements.

The Safety Dance: Triggers and Being Triggered

In the past week, how often did you feel afraid? You may think that women are not supposed to feel fear, but they do – more than they want to admit. In the past week, how often did you feel overwhelmed or stressed by something that you experienced a desire to become aggressive, to run away, or to shut down? For those who have experienced a traumatic event, protective feelings of intense anger, wanting to escape, being frozen, or being numb are common responses that are programmed into our nervous system so deeply, we may not even be aware of how we are acting.

The process just described refers to triggers and being triggered. A trigger is a stimulus that sets off a memory, often of a traumatic event or experience. A single environmental sign related to a trauma such as a noise, a sound, a smell, a physical sensation, or another person's presence can trigger a full fight, flight, or freeze response. Triggers set in motion deeply ingrained responses designed to alert us of a threat or danger that we need to defend or protect ourselves from. Where the sound of a car horn alerts of a potential hazard, triggers let us know there is something to pay attention to. Unfortunately for those who have experienced trauma, a current trigger often sets off a memory of an experience that then impacts them in the present. This often produces a feeling of life-threatening danger, being intensely overwhelmed or stressed, and needing to protect themselves in the moment. Your protective automatic responses when threatened are simple: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

Recognizing when you are triggered can be more challenging at first than you think. The main reason is that memories of trauma and your responses to them are so deeply programmed into your nervous system that you are often unaware you've been triggered and are responding to a past memory. Learning to identify triggers and your responses to these triggers is a fundamental part of healing your wounds.

When you learn to identify triggers as they happen, stay in the moment, and stay grounded and connected, you'll have a better chance to make intentional choices about how you want to respond rather than automatically resorting to defend, protect, and fight-flight-freeze-fawn. You'll be able to maintain your safety, experience all your feelings, and not bring your past into the present.

Redefining Trauma, Traumagenesis, and What Does Healing Look Like?

Throughout your investment in the group sessions, you will use the following definition of trauma: Trauma is anything that pushes a person past their ability to cope (Rhoton and Aubrey, 2019).

What does healing look like for women? What are the different ways that women can heal?

Throughout your time working through this program, you'll continue to refine and explore the concepts of trauma and healing. The goal of *Healing Women's Pain* is to provide you with a safe and nurturing place to explore and define these concepts and build a foundation to a healing journey.

Grounding and Safety Exercises

There are times when you may feel uncomfortable or anxious. This happens to all of us at various times, especially in unfamiliar settings and with new experiences. For those who embrace help with healing trauma, feeling anxious, depressed, disconnected, or uncomfortable may be a frequent experience. We often keep these feelings to ourselves and do not know how to relieve our discomfort. When that happens, we may turn to unsustainable ways of coping.

You may engage in thoughts and behaviors that, while seemingly mild, may prevent you from connecting with others or creating safety. You may be good at caring for others while neglecting yourself, so when these uncomfortable feelings come up and you are on your own, you are not sure what to do. You can use these techniques any time. People do not even have to know you are practicing them!

Being grounded means being able to stay in the present, without constantly focusing on the past or the future. It also means not having your emotions or thoughts run the show, including emotional memories and fears. These exercises can help you to detach from your inner emotional discomfort by becoming more aware of the physical world, which allows you to be present in the here and now. Up until now,

many of us may have dealt with excitement, anxiety, stress, and feeling uncomfortable by using chemicals, acting “in,” or acting “out.” These exercises will help you deal with difficult feelings so that they do not hijack your behavior and stop you from growing.

The Safety Check

This exercise involves taking stock of your current level of emotional, physical, and psychological safety and sharing that information with others. Since the motto is: Safety first, last, and always, this exercise will serve several purposes. First, it will allow you an opportunity to consider how safe you feel *in the moment*, and you can practice checking in with yourself to gain better self-awareness. Second, it will help you establish a sense of competence and security by identifying experiences *when and where* your safety is challenged. Third, it will help you learn to express your safety (or lack thereof) to others in a secure and contained environment. Thereby helping others around you appreciate and understand your responses and behaviors as they learn more about you and your safety.

1. Take a moment and consider your current level of safety (emotional, physical, *and* psychological).
2. On a scale of 1–10, rate your current level of safety in this moment (1 being completely unsafe, threatened, and in extreme danger; 10 being completely safe, secure, able to respond from your wisest and highest self).
3. There is no need to justify or qualify your rating unless you choose to. If someone during a group activity chooses to qualify their rating, there is no expectation for others to do the same
4. Make a mental note of your own rating and the ratings others may have shared with you during a group session.

Box Breathing

Another helpful exercise is learning to take paced or breaths over a count, inhaling, holding, exhaling, and pausing before taking your next breath. The following exercise is a powerful way to learn how to breathe more consciously. The way it works is breathing in for the count of four, holding that breath for the count of four, breathing out for the count of four, and resting for the count of four.

1. Take a couple of normal breaths. Inhale through your nose and exhale from your mouth.
2. Now, inhale deeply through your nose, over a count of four.
3. Hold your breath in, over a count of four
4. Exhale from your mouth, over a count of four.
5. Pause, over a count of four.
6. Do the entire cycle of breathing over a count of four, three more times.

Resourcing

In healing trauma, resourcing is a fundamental practice. Resourcing is like grounding, but slightly different. It is the ability to feel safe, to feel nurtured, and to feel connected within yourself. If trauma is an ocean full of storms and unpredictable weather, the ability to resource is an island that you can build any time where you can rest and gather your resilience to feel safe and secure.

The ability to resource comes naturally to some people, while for others it is difficult or nearly impossible. Usually, the more stress and trauma a person experiences, the more challenging it is for them to develop and maintain a calm and secure center to their lives. Resources come in many forms, both internal and external. An example of internal resourcing could be remembering a time and place where you felt totally safe, completely connected, and in your highest, wisest self. An example of an external resource could be an activity such as playing a musical instrument. Often people build diverse resources they engage in their everyday lives without realizing it. Intentionally developing both internal and external resources to manage feelings of stress, anxiety, or other intense emotions is critical to healing trauma.

In the space below, please list any resources you have that you can think of:

Internal:

External:

Understanding Trauma in Your Life and Learning Emotional Vocabulary

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. Think back to when you were a young child. Using the new definition of trauma and the feelings wheel, what is something that pushed you past your ability to cope, and how do you feel about it now?
2. Think back to when you were a teenager. Using the new definition of trauma and the feelings wheel, what is something that pushed you past your ability to cope, and how do you feel about it now?
3. Think about your life today. Using the new definition of trauma and the feelings wheel, what is something that is pushing you past your ability to cope, and how do you feel about it now?
4. Think about your life three years from today. Using the feelings wheel, how do you want to feel about your life at that time?

What Do You Want to Get out of This Program

Considering the new definition of trauma, you are here because you've experienced some type of abuse or trauma. Experiences with trauma have made you feel – and even act – in ways that have likely become unsustainable. You may see yourself as a victim, often feeling powerlessness, or you may be so focused on caring for others that you don't understand yourself or even notice yourself. These would be examples of “freeze” or “fawn” threat responses. Trauma may lead you to cope in other ways that are problematic and even dangerous. When activated, some people experience a “fight” response, which can include acting out violently.

Women are not immune to physical aggression even though this is more commonly talked about with men. You may find yourself lashing out verbally or even physically mistreating people you care about when you feel powerless or threatened. A large part of healing trauma is about taking responsibility for how you feel, how you act, and how you relate with others, particularly with yourself. This program will help you realize that although you cannot always control what happens to you, you do get to decide what kind of woman you become and how you want to heal from the wounds of your past. Will you own your story or will your story own you? That is the question.

Now, think about what you want to get out of doing this work.

The most important consideration in answering this question is to think about what *you* really want, not what your counselor, a family member, your partner, your employer, or anyone else wants. What is the work that you are here to do to become the woman you always knew you could be? “Better” is a great answer, but it will not be your only answer.

What do you want to get out of this program?

What can you do to help yourself get what you want?

What do you think you will need to get what you want?

Follow Up Exercise

Practice the Box Breathing exercise at least twice per day each day until the next session. Consider using any of the different resourcing options from your list above. Feel free to write any thoughts you have about the experience in the space below.