

# SESSION 4

## NOT YOUR FAULT

### Session Goals

In this session, group members will:

- Learn about the relationship between self-blame and MST
- Work to develop an appropriate sense of blame as it relates to their MST experiences

### Session Content

#### Setting the Agenda

- A. **Normalize that many survivors of sexual trauma believe that what happened was their fault when it wasn't.** They believe that their behavior either initiated the incident or that they deserved what happened. This is simply not true. It may be hard to believe at first, but sexual trauma is the responsibility of the offender(s) - not the responsibility of the survivor. It is never justifiable for anyone to abuse power or use violence to take advantage of someone else.
- B. **Review session objectives. The goal of this session is to explore why sexual trauma is not the survivor's fault.**

#### Opening Exercise (optional) - "Count the F's"

- A. **Set up.** Write on the board (or print) the following sentence exactly as is and in all caps.
- FINISHED FILES ARE THE RE-  
SULT OF YEARS OF SCIENTIF-  
IC STUDY COMBINED WITH THE  
EXPERIENCE OF MANY YEARS  
OF EXPERTS.
- B. **Review instructions.** Ask each group member to count all the *F*s in 30 seconds. Let each group give a response. The correct answer is seven. Most people miss the *F* in *of*. **The purpose of this exercise is to illustrate the importance of context.** Without another's perspective, someone might think there are only three *F*s. It is easy to miscount the number of *F*s in the given phrase because the *F*s in *of* are subtle. In life, there are times when we may get "stuck" in our thinking and have difficulty seeing a situation from a different perspective. This session is about looking at the details of what happened closely enough to determine whether self-blame is appropriate.

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### The (Self-)Blame Game

A. **Elicit reasons why survivors might blame themselves for MST.** Common reasons to highlight during the discussion are:

- **Assimilated thinking.** Assimilated thinking is altering incoming information so that it matches existing beliefs. For example, most people believe that the world is fair and just. This belief assumes that if something bad happens (such as MST), then the victim must've done something to deserve it. The fallacy with this belief is that bad things happen to good people all the time. When survivors hold onto assimilated beliefs, they are likely to blame themselves for what happened.
- **Hindsight bias.** Hindsight bias is the tendency for people to overestimate their ability to have predicted an outcome that couldn't have been predicted. It is the "I knew it all along" phenomenon. Survivors who believe that they could've prevented MST from happening will struggle with self-blame.
- **Conditioning.** Our personal history plays a role in how we react to stressful situations. Survivors may be more prone to blame themselves for the occurrence of MST if they experienced prior trauma or came from home environments where they were punished for speaking out when something went wrong.
- **Internalized messages.** Offenders may make accusations that their victims "deserved" what happened to exert control. Other people may also hold the opinion that survivors of sexual trauma are to blame. They may assume that victims must've done something to provoke the offender(s). This is known as victim-blaming. Survivors may, over time, come to believe these messages are true, especially if they come from reputable sources (e.g., family, friends, authoritative persons).
- **Repeated victimization.** It can become harder to believe that sexual trauma is not one's fault when it happens more than once. Revictimization still doesn't justify blaming the survivor. Remember the fault lies with the offenders and, in some cases, the environment that allows this to occur.

### Finding a Place for Blame

A. **Introduce activity. Note that self-blame neglects many things that survivors of sexual trauma have done to survive.** This exercise will help group members consider the evidence for and against any beliefs of self-blame. When completing the activity, the evidence should reflect facts. No judgments, beliefs, or feelings should be included in group members' responses.

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- B. Review each section individually.** For this section, (1) introduce the topic with the information provided, (2) allow time for a brief discussion and/or questions, and (3) give group members time to respond to all questions in that section. Let group members know beforehand that you will process this activity in the next exercise, entitled “A New Understanding of Blame.”
- **Blame vs. Responsibility.** The difference between blame and responsibility is one’s intention. Intention determines blame. If you plan to do someone harm and harm results, then you’re at fault. However, if you don’t mean to do harm and harm results, then blame is not appropriate. In the latter case, our actions contributed to the outcome but may not be the sole cause of the event. You may provide an example: “Let’s say you spill a glass of milk. You can knock the glass over because you didn’t see it (*responsible, but not blameworthy*), or you can knock the glass over to get revenge (*blameworthy*.” You may acknowledge that there might be ambiguous scenarios (such as the offender(s) were intoxicated or under the influence) in which survivors may question the offender(s)’ intentionality.
  - **Role of the offender.** Survivors often wonder “Why me? Why was I chosen?” It can be very dissatisfying to think that these answers may never be known. Offenders may target victims for several reasons.
    - » **Opportunity.** Sexual trauma is not a random event. Some offenders seek victims who they think are vulnerable or who can be manipulated. They then create or look for opportunities to commit a violent act.
    - » **Abuse of power.** Sexual trauma is more about power than sex. Offenders use their power to hurt others.
    - » **Manipulation.** Manipulation, coercion, force, and alcohol/drugs are more common weapons used in MST than guns or knives. Offenders may develop a trusting relationship with the victim first to exploit them later.
    - » **Lack of Consequences.** In the military environment, survivors may experience more adverse consequences than offenders, such as reprisal, being treated differently by their supervisors or peers, or being blamed for the incident.
  - **Natural responses during sexual trauma. Review two common responses to sexual trauma.** Be mindful that these two responses may not be relevant to all group members or their experiences.
    - » **Freezing.** When danger occurs, our natural instincts are to fight back, run away, or freeze. Fighting back may seem like the right response to servicemembers due to the nature of their training and jobs. However, in many cases, fighting back can make offender(s) more violent or make the situation worse. Survivors may also freeze if they do not say “no” to the offender’s advances or sexual behaviors. Running away may not be an option. Sometimes freezing is the best way to ensure survival, especially when a victim is caught off guard and doesn’t know what

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the offender(s) is going to do. Remind group members that this response is an automatic survival response outside our conscious awareness or control.

- » **Feeling arousal or pleasure.** In cases of sexual assault, some survivors may mistake their bodily responses as signs that they enjoyed what happened or weren't strong enough to stop it. It is important to understand that our body is less sophisticated than our mind at differentiating between experiences like sexual assault from consensual sexual activities. survivors may feel as though their bodies have betrayed them. Offenders might even say these bodily responses were signs that the survivor liked what was happening at the time. The body is hard-wired to respond to sexual stimulation with feelings of pleasure and arousal. This doesn't mean that survivors enjoyed what happened. Be aware that, although men who experience arousal, ejaculation, or an erection in response to male-on-male sexual trauma may question their sexuality, this doesn't suggest anything about their sexual orientation.
- **Importance of military context.** There are many reasons why people join the military. Maybe it is to honor a family legacy, to express patriotism, or to pursue opportunities for education or a better life. Sometimes it is an escape from a troubled home or past. No one joins because they want to be sexually victimized. When MST happens, there are aspects of the military environment that can make it hard to deal with the trauma and get help. Examples include:
  - » **Hostile work environment.** Survivors may continue to live and work with the offender(s) and friends of the offender(s). Consequently, there may be an increased risk and fear of future harm, retaliation, or victim-blaming by peers or chain of command. This creates a hostile work environment that compromises survivors' sense of safety, trust, and work performance.
  - » **Pressure to conform.** The military promotes deindividuation, which emphasizes the group over individualism. As a result, individuals may feel pressure not to do things that would make them deviate from the group (e.g., disclosing or reporting MST). MST may be kept secret to preserve unit cohesion and not stand out. There may also be pressure to preserve the military hierarchy or another servicemember's "career" if the offender(s) are of higher rank.
  - » **Military culture.** The military values physical strength and mental toughness. Servicemembers may assume sexual trauma is their fault because they couldn't stop the offender(s). This is especially true for individuals who adhere to masculine traditions (e.g., non-emotional, brave, physically strong, seeing oneself as a defender). Survivors may, thus, minimize or deny MST to avoid embarrassment, shame, or appearing "weak" to their peers.
  - » **Trained in lethal means.** Given the integral role the Armed Services play in maintaining national security, training servicemembers in use of lethal force is

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critical. While these skills are valuable in combat situations, they may enable offenders to be more violent when perpetrating MST and increase fears about violent retaliation.

### A New Understanding of Blame

**A. Ask group members to reflect and complete the sentence stems in reference to the previous activity “Finding a Place for Blame”:**

- *“What I learned in today’s group is ...” (seeking answers that reflect something group members have learned about the appropriateness of assuming blame for experiencing MST or who should be held responsible for what happened)*
- *“I did not have responsibility for ...” (seeking answers that reflect an understanding that group members are not 100% to blame for experiencing MST, even if it happened more than once)*
- *“Next time I start to blame myself, I will ...” (seeking answers that reflect actions that group members may take to reduce self-blame, such as “remembering that I am not responsible for what happened” or “read this handout.” Be creative!)*

**B. Invite group members to share what they have taken away from these exercises.** Keep in mind that, although group members may intellectually understand that it wasn’t their fault, they may not accept it on an emotional level. This will likely take more time.

### Closing Exercise – “Compassion for A Younger You” Exercise

**A. Set up.** None.

**B. Read the following script at a slow, steady pace.**

“Find a comfortable position. You may close your eyes or look at a neutral point on the floor. Next, take a few slow, deep breaths to begin (pause for 15 seconds).

Imagine you could go back in time and visit a younger you. Now, I want you to travel back to a time when you were feeling vulnerable or were in a lot of pain and needed to be comforted (pause). It doesn’t matter how far back you go. Just take a few moments to fully call up that image of you at this younger age (pause).

Now take a good look at this younger you (pause). Imagine what life is like for her (or him) right now, what is she (or he) going through (pause for 10-15 seconds)? Get a sense of the pain she (or he) must be feeling right now (pause for 10-15 seconds). Think about what you could give to your younger self that would provide her (or him)

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with comfort, love, and safety? What does she (or he) need to hear right now (pause)? Or maybe no words need to be said because you completely understand what this younger you is going through (pause). She (or he) can see that you are here, in this moment, and that you care (pause). Stay for awhile with this younger you, ready to do anything your younger self asks. Offer a hug. Say a word of kindness. Sit together in silence (pause for 10-15 seconds).

Take a few last moments with this younger you. Let her (or him) know you can return anytime you are needed (pause). Begin to bring your awareness back to your breathing, returning to the present moment (pause). Notice any sounds you can hear right now (pause). Notice anything you can feel (pause). As you return to the room, slowly open your eyes.”

### Homework (Optional)

- Re-read the “A New Understanding of Blame” worksheet two to three more times
- Practice the “Compassion for a Younger You” meditation once a day (found in Additional Resources section of patient workbook and Appendix B in manual)