

SESSION 8

SELF-ESTEEM

Session Goals

In this session, group members will:

- Discuss the relationship between the experience of MST and self-esteem
- Recognize the influence of self-criticism on self-esteem
- Learn new ways to boost self-esteem

Session Content

Setting the Agenda

- A. Introduce potential changes to self-esteem associated with experiencing MST.** Survivors may question their self-worth and integrity as a person. Self-worth may be undermined by self-criticism and self-blame. Survivors may fluctuate between feeling okay about themselves and feeling worthless.
- B. Review session objectives. The goals of this session are to understand the ways in which self-esteem has changed since the individual experienced MST and to learn self-compassionate techniques to enhance one's self-worth.**

Opening Exercise (optional) - "Pick a Number"

- A. Set up.** You will need blank sheets of paper and pencils/pens.
- B. Review instructions.** Ask group members to pick a number between one and five. Don't give any more direction than that. It doesn't matter which number they select or if someone else has already said the number. Next, have group members write down the number one and continue writing in numerical order until they reach the number they selected (e.g., four, three), each on a new line. For example, if someone picked four, they would write one to four on the sheet. Lastly, have group members write one positive quality about themselves next to each number. Positive qualities may include "I am trustworthy," "I am loyal," "I am a good cook," "I am handy," or "I am strong." Give group members a few minutes to write down their qualities.
- C. Have each group member share at least one of their positive qualities.** If someone can't come up with enough, you could have the group help him or her. But only allow this if there is time. This activity should not exceed 25-30 minutes.

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D. **Acknowledge any difficulty group members experienced trying to think of their positive qualities.** Many of us have no problem sharing our flaws and faults, but we struggle with telling others about what we do well. If it is helpful, ask group members to share what others (e.g., romantic partners, children, parents, co-workers) say they like about them.

Who Are You?

A. **Have group members write about who they perceive themselves as.** Encourage them to describe who they are, not who they want to be or believe they should be. Their self-descriptions may include things they like or don't like about themselves, strengths and weaknesses, and personal values. This should take two to three minutes.

B. **Next, ask group members where their self-image comes from. Potential discussion points:**

- ***Offenders may send messages to control their victims.*** Survivors may have received messages from the offender implying that the sexual trauma was their fault. The offender might also make statements that cause survivors to feel powerless, worthless, and damaged. These are attempts to exert control over their victims.
- ***Victim-blaming is common after sexual trauma.*** Victim-blaming is when others feel the victim of a crime or wrongful act is responsible for the actions of the offender. Survivors of sexual trauma may be accused of inviting the act because of what they wore, how they behaved, or how they responded during the incident.
- ***MST can diminish one's military identity.*** While some Veterans may feel a sense of pride for serving in the military, survivors of MST may feel ashamed. They may try to conceal this aspect of their history or identity. Or they may have been performing well in the military prior to MST exposure and find that performing after MST was very hard.
- ***The experience of MST may become one's identity.*** Identities are ever-changing and defined by our social roles and personal characteristics. When individuals overidentify with a particular identity (e.g., victim, survivor), they limit how they see the world. They focus only on those aspects of a situation that fit with their chosen identity and ignore any contradictory evidence. For example, someone who identifies as a "victim" may pay more attention to situations in which he or she has been hurt by others to the exclusion of times when others treated him or her with respect and love. Our identity informs our behaviors and beliefs, such that our resulting actions may lead to a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies. In the above example, it may be that the person is self-sabotaging relationships, which leads to being hurt by others.

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Thanking Your Inner Critic

- A. Discuss the connection between self-esteem, self-criticism, and MST.** Survivors of MST may find that they are more critical of themselves after the experience. Maybe they blame themselves for what happened or believe negative messages that the offender(s) or others told them. High self-criticism influences lower self-esteem. One way to boost self-esteem is to confront our inner critic directly and with kindness.
- B. Review instructions.** Have group members answer the question, “What is your inner critic trying to help you do?” This question is intended to increase awareness about the purpose of having an inner critic. We don’t want to get rid of our inner critic. It has valuable feedback and keeps us motivated. However, we don’t have to listen so intently to everything it says. Next, have group members practice showing appreciation to their inner critic by acknowledging its efforts to help us – not intentionally harm us.

Closing Exercise - A Letter of Compassion

Note: You may consider adding diaphragmatic breathing or a grounding activity after this exercise if group members are still emotionally activated.

- A. Set up.** You will need pens/pencils and pages 47-49 of the patient workbook.
- B. Read the following instructions.**
- “The purpose of the following exercise is to help you discover your compassionate inner voice. We are not trying to make the inner critic go away. We’re simply making space for the compassionate voice and training our minds to listen to that part of ourselves. Everyone has something about themselves that they don’t like. This may be especially true after you experience sexual trauma. There may be things about yourself that cause you to feel ashamed, insecure, or not ‘good enough.’ Take a few minutes to describe an issue that has made you feel bad about yourself since you experienced MST.”
- C. Allow two to three minutes for group members to write a brief description of the issue.**
- D. Next, continue reading the instructions.**
- “Now, think about a person who is unconditionally loving, accepting, kind, and compassionate toward you. This could be a real person, like a significant other, relative, or good friend; or it could be an imagined person. Imagine that this person can see all your strengths and weaknesses. He or she loves you exactly as you are, including your flaws. He or she knows your life story and is kind and forgiving toward you.
- You’re going to write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this person. With unlimited compassion, what would this person say to you about your issue (or ‘flaw’)?

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The point of this letter is not to tell you what you should or shouldn't do. In other words, it's not about giving advice. Instead, this letter is about receiving support. Think about what words of kindness this person could use to give you the emotional support and encouragement needed to help you do your best?

If you have trouble finding the words, that's okay - it may take some time. You might try thinking about what you would say to a dear friend struggling with the same issue as you."

- E. Allow 5-10 minutes to write the letters.** As group members finish, have them read the letters silently without editing, letting the words sink in.
- F. Process reactions to the exercise.** Group members are not expected to disclose the content of their letters. Processing should focus on how it felt to give themselves support (e.g., felt selfish, good, scary).
- G. Encourage them to re-read their letters at home when they need support.**

Homework (Optional)

- Reread the "Letter of Compassion" every day for a week.
- Do at least one nice thing for oneself (without contingencies) every day for a week.