

7.7 Story telling – mental health consequences

Objective:

To understand the common responses to trauma, including GBV.

Time:

45 minutes

Preparation:

Read the story below and adapt to the level of knowledge and understanding of the participants, and the local context and culture.

Facilitators instructions

- Tell the story and ask the participants to listen carefully and write down or think about how the woman thinks, feels, how her body physically reacts, how she acts and behaves because of the trauma.
- After telling the story, ask the participants to explain what reactions to trauma this woman had: what thoughts, behaviours, actions, physical sensations this woman has experienced.
- Review and provide further information about common reactions and responses to GBV.

Story of trauma

One morning she went down to the river. Some soldiers found her there. She was filling containers with water. After that day, everything changed.

At first she tried to flee, but she could not escape. The soldiers laughed when they caught her and threw her down in the dust of the riverbank.

Then she tried to fight them. Her **heart pumped in her chest**, her **face became warm**, her arms were stronger than ever before. But they were four big men and they were even more brutal when she tried to fight back – hitting, biting, kicking, scratching and screaming for help. Their laughter rang in her ears. The **smell of their bodies** scared her heart to **silence**.

Her **legs became as if dead**, her hands and arms too. Her face became pale and it was as though **she had lost all her spirit**. She **heard the sound** of the river and the breath of the soldiers. She **lost her sight** for a moment. It was as if she had left her body or was hiding in her heart, looking at the soldiers from a distance, watching them do bad things to her. She **saw it like a scene in a film**, she did not feel anything. It was as if the men were hurting a stranger, though she knew she was the person being hurt.

Some hours must have passed before two men from the village found the woman, wounded on the river bank. The sand was red with her blood and the woman **stared at them with glassy eyes, unable to utter a word**. Instead of helping her home, the men were so frightened that they ran off into the bush.

The woman felt extremely **weak**. She asked herself: “Am I already dead?” She noticed that blood covered her yellow dress, and that the dress was torn into pieces. She noticed the sound of the river and wondered whether she was in an unknown place. The river sounded hostile. Her **heart beat rapidly in her chest**. Would the soldiers come back? Her **body felt numb**. She

had no strength to move. Her arms and legs were like dead meat. Her body ached and yet there were no feelings left.

Some days pass after the women went home to her village...

The woman is alone. **Her husband asked her to leave. The elders said she should not come back.** The children were crying. She had to depart.

She wandered off into the forest, away from the river. Around her, the trees became dark and hostile. She **felt fragile**, weak, like the living dead. Her feet could barely carry her. They felt numb. Her hands were like the hands of a stranger. No smile in her heart, only darkness. Her body felt cold and silent, as if she was not living there anymore, or as if her soul was hiding far away in a corner of her shivering heart.

She **could not rest**. She **saw the soldiers** eyes, heard their laughter, their breathing and their words. Their smell filled her lungs. She was **sweating, crying in rage and despair**. She could not find shelter and scanned the green hillsides all the time for soldiers. All her dreams and wishes evaporated. Her **mind became invaded by worry** and she had difficult, strange thoughts about herself. Was she going mad? She felt **shame and rage and deep sorrow** at the same time.

After some days and weeks passed one day, she felt light at heart, and she went to the market. But there she saw some soldiers and, **as if lightning had struck her, she panicked and fled**. She felt it was all happening again, as if **a film were playing in her head**. Every time she saw a soldier, she felt the same, the **memories flooded back**, and she **lost control**. After a while she became afraid of almost all men. Her **reaction was to flee**. Some days later she hit a man who had walked up behind her. She felt trapped because the path was narrow and, before she knew it, she had hit him hard. The sound of his steps reminded her of the rapists. She could not think, only react.

She was **afraid and panicky** and suddenly lost all her energy. She felt very very tired. The strength in her arms and legs left her and she could not think clearly. She could not smile. She felt **sadness and confusion**. She was afraid of going mad.

Discuss the common reactions to GBV:

- Ask the participants to explain what reactions to trauma this woman had: what thoughts, behaviours, actions, physical sensations this woman has experienced.
- Review and provide further information about common reactions and responses to GBV.
 - Shame, guilt, self-blame, self-hate
 - Depression, sadness, grief
 - Anger
 - Denial and shock, sense of disbelief
 - Embarrassment and humiliation
 - Fear
 - Powerlessness, helplessness and hopelessness
 - Mood swings, emotional reactivity
 - Numbness and detachment
 - Feeling out of your body or off the ground
 - Obsessions and compulsions
 - Phobias
 - Low self-esteem and self-confidence
 - Suicidal thoughts, attempts or behaviors
 - Sleep disorders, trouble sleeping
 - Inability to think clearly
 - Flat affect
 - Tension, shaking
 - Social isolation or clinging to others
 - Changes in sexual activity
 - Difficulty trusting others

- Intrusive thoughts, images, flashbacks, nightmares
- Hypervigilance
- Avoidance
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Stigmatized by family, friends and/or the community
- Feeling misunderstood by family and friends
- Changes in eating behaviours, increased or decreased appetite
- Alcohol or drug abuse

There are also social effects of trauma and GBV.

Reactions to GBV from vary individual to individual and are influence by their culture. Additionally, the **words and phrases** survivors use to describe their reactions will vary across cultures and languages, and may differ between genders, ages and other identities. Also, survivors may interpret the same reactions differently. Providers should seek to understand how each survivor has been affected by the GBV they experienced, the words and phrases they use to describe their experience, and the interpretation (or meaning) they have given to these reactions. The physical reactions (e.g., changes in heart rate, breathing and digestion) tend to be the same for all people because human bodies are designed to try to protect themselves; however, the description and interpretation of physical reactions to trauma may differ across cultures.

Adapted from Health and Human Rights Info (HHRI) (2014) Mental health and gender-based violence Helping survivors of sexual violence in conflict – a training manual