



# Awareness of trauma

## for instructors of group activities involving touch

Many people in our community have had traumatic experiences in their past either as a child or as an adult or both. These experiences can have profound, lifelong impacts for the survivor.

Although it is not obvious when someone has a history of past trauma, we all need to be aware that ANYONE in the community could have experienced past trauma. This should be taken into account when planning and conducting group activities and classes.



### Traumatic experiences

Traumatic experiences can include:

- ▶ sexual abuse as a child
- ▶ a violent relationship
- ▶ witnessing a violent act
- ▶ bullying
- ▶ living through war
- ▶ sexual assault
- ▶ online abuse
- ▶ having a parent with an addiction
- ▶ long-term illness
- ▶ serious accident or injury
- ▶ torture
- ▶ growing up in a violent household etc.

*See over for a list of tips  
for creating safe classes.*



### Trauma and touch

It is common for people who have survived trauma to have difficulty with trust and physical touch. This can be particularly challenging when their trauma experience involved another person purposefully inflicting harm (for example child abuse, sexual assault, physical violence, torture etc).

The act of touch can trigger a reminder of past trauma experiences for some people. It can become overwhelming and cause flashbacks, panic attacks and other reactions.

Over time and in safe settings, most trauma survivors can heal from the emotional damage that has been done.



### Trauma and healing

Two important aspects of recovery for people who have experienced trauma involves having positive relationships with others and being involved in the community.

Negative and unsafe experiences and relationships can add to the damage already done to a trauma survivor.

It is the responsibility of group instructors / leaders to create and maintain a safe setting. In doing this, you will not only be contributing to a great opportunity for learning, fun and growth, you are also creating a place for some people to heal from past trauma experiences.

# Tips for a safe class

- ▶ Be aware that trauma is common and anyone in the group may have experienced trauma in their past. They may find trust and touch to be challenging.
- ▶ Consider gathering information in advance to inform you. For example, on your enrolment form, you may like to include a question similar to the following.

Please tick the box if you are anxious or uncomfortable about touch involved in the class. Please list anything that would help you feel more comfortable about this aspect of the class.

## Ensure that you keep this information confidential and secure.

- ▶ At the start of the class, acknowledge openly to everyone that some members may find some of the activities, and in particular touch, to be challenging, and that this is okay.
- ▶ Emphasise the importance of the group being safe for everyone and reinforce this message throughout the course.
- ▶ Outline group rules at the first class. Make it very clear which touch is okay in the class and which touch is not okay (for example where to place hands on your partner's body). State that unsafe touch, shaming, ridicule, bullying, sexism, harassment, racism and any form of prejudice will not be tolerated.
- ▶ Model respectful and appropriate behaviour yourself at all times to all group members. Take immediate action if you become aware of any group rules being broken. It is important that you do not side with, or protect, group members who break rules or disrespect others.
- ▶ Make it okay for members to have time-out during a class if they feel overwhelmed. Let them know how to do this.
  - *For example: "It's okay to say 'Excuse me, I need a break' to your activity partner, then sit and watch the lesson, or go outside for some fresh air, until you feel ready to return."*
- ▶ Let members know how they can make a complaint about inappropriate behaviours (how / who / when to tell).
- ▶ Invite members to speak to you privately at the end of a class if they have concerns or are experiencing difficulties. Your role is to listen and respond sensitively. Offer them a list of telephone support services they can call.

● *An example of an appropriate response might be: "I'm sorry that happened to you, I will remind the class to be more sensitive at the next lesson. Can I give you contact numbers of services so you can get some support?"*

- ▶ Take action to address any behaviours or situations that break group rules or make the class uncomfortable or unsafe for others. For more serious situations, assist the group member to access help, which may include medical or Police assistance. If you feel you need to debrief afterwards, you can call 1800RESPECT.

*It is a good idea to make it clear in your marketing (e.g. brochures and website) about the behaviours expected at classes and the consequences of breaking expected standards.*



*Learning, growth and fun is maximised when there is **RESPECT** and **SAFETY** for all.*



## Telephone Support

- ▶ 1800RESPECT 1800 737 732
- ▶ Lifeline Australia 13 11 14
- ▶ W.A. Mental Health Emergency Response Line 1300 555 788
- ▶ RuralLink mental health support for people living in rural W.A. 1800 552 002
- ▶ Beyond Blue 1300 224 636
- ▶ The Samaritans Help Line 135 247
- ▶ Women's Domestic Violence Helpline 9223 1188 1800 007 339
- ▶ Men's Domestic Violence Helpline 9223 1199 1800 000 599
- ▶ MensLine Australia 1300 789 978
- ▶ QLife support for people who identify as LGBT+ 1800 184 527
- ▶ Crisis Care (08) 9223 1111; 1800 199 008

## The **Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)**

is a free 24-hour emergency service providing medical and counselling services for people who have experienced a recent (within 14 days) sexual assault. Counselling for any sexual assault/abuse experienced recently or in the past is also available to people of all genders aged 13 years and above. Call SARC on **(08) 6458 1828** or Freecall **1800 199 888**.