

Presentation: Emotional hijacking

Correlates with p. 34 of the Participant workbook.

For this discussion, it might be helpful for participants to mentally sift through recent experiences and choose an event which prompted some challenging emotional response. They shouldn't choose a really overwhelming or traumatic event for this exercise. Instead, they should choose something that was difficult but manageable. Some key questions:

Concerning the triggering situation:

- What are the triggers for some of those difficult emotions?
- Are there certain situations that might trigger difficult emotions?
- Are there certain ways that people may treat you that set you off?
- Are there particular people/places that tend to invoke these emotions more than others?

Concerning your reactivity to the triggering situation:

- What are the signs that you notice when you're experiencing difficult emotions?
- What happens to your body? Think about different parts of your body: your face, eyes, mouth/teeth, chest, heartbeat, breathing, stomach. Are they tense, soft, unsettled, numb, hypersensitive, etc.?
- What's going on inside your mind? What are you thinking? Is there clarity, or is there a cloud? Does it affect your judgment and decision making? Are you able to mentally process things at the time?

Concerning how you respond after you are triggered:

- What sort of behaviours do you engage in when you experience difficult emotions?
- What do you notice about yourself when you are being triggered?
- What would other people notice about you?
- How do you interact with people?
- Do you have the impulse to do something that might be inappropriate or unhelpful?

Now present on the notion of brain development. We know that there are certain key ingredients for healthy brain development:

- Genetics.
- Positive experiences.
- Enriched environment.
- Rewarding and pleasurable interpersonal and social experiences.

Disruptions in these areas (such as abuse) may cause part of the brain to react to the environment in a different way.

By utilising the 'Emotional hijacking diagram', draw participants' attention to the following:

- Point out the amygdala—the emotional control tower of our brain that provides the survival response. Its role is to be alert for things that go wrong, and to perceive threats.
- It becomes enlarged and more sensitive the more it is activated through responding to threats.
- It prepares us for flight, fight, or freeze.
- When fired up, neural pathways tend to bypass the prefrontal cortex (or thinking part of the brain), because shorter connections creates a shorter reaction time.
- Ultimately, it creates a 'triggered' reaction—a response that is both fast and un-thinking.

Two key points need to be reinforced with this presentation:

- Despite having triggers, survivors can make healthy choices about their safety and survival.
- While referencing brain functioning may suggest triggers are 'hard-wired' (and thus create a sense of fatalism), counselling is one of the ways one can 're-wire' the brain by gradually exposing the individual to the distressing stimuli. Clients who are interested in this topic can explore articles on the topic of neuro-plasticity.

Finish the presentation with these general questions on managing difficult emotions:

- How can we take on new ways of managing difficult emotions?
- How can we distinguish between helpful and helpful strategies?

Facilitators should be mindful that strategies that are perceived as effective by one participant may be viewed as ineffective or as having harmful impact by others (e.g., substance use). Avoid directly challenging these responses, as all strategies are in essence coping mechanisms. It is okay to acknowledge that, although it may be effective in alleviating emotional distress, some coping mechanism have an undesirable outcome as well. Try not to actively discourage or stigmatise participants who report these types of strategies.