

Trauma's Effects on Intimate Relationships: A Couple's Conversation

This exercise is meant to be completed by both partners in the relationship, followed by talking through answers to the questions. Some couples find it helpful to have a third party present when they discuss their answers. Each partner should complete his/her section alone, and then make a plan for when and how to talk through their answers together. If both partners have survived past trauma, complete the exercise first with one partner answering Section 1, and then complete the exercise again at a later time with the other partner answering Section 1.

Section 1: (to be completed by the trauma survivor)

Check the boxes that have applied to you at some time in your life:

	Childhood abuse from a family member
	Childhood abuse from a non-family member
	Abuse in adulthood from a family member
	Abuse in adulthood from a non-family member
	Spiritual abuse
	Natural disaster
	Racial discrimination/harassment
	Combat trauma
	Major accident
	Victim of violent crime
	Sexual harassment
	Death of a loved one
	Neglect
	Witnessed a traumatizing event
	Other _____

Not all the events listed above will necessarily cause traumatization. Place a star next to any of the events that currently affect your life in negative ways.

Check any of the following that currently apply to you **at least some of the time**:

	I can get overwhelmed by my own emotions.
	I can get overwhelmed by other people's emotions.
	I withdraw when I feel afraid, ashamed or overwhelmed.
	I seem to believe the worst about myself.
	I have trouble trusting other people.
	I wonder if other people are out to get me or take advantage of me.
	I panic about things other people wouldn't worry about.
	I avoid reminders of things in my past.
	I can assume the worst about other people.
	I wonder if I am worthy to be loved and cared for.
	I am waiting for bad things to happen.
	My partner and I struggle in the area of sexual intimacy.
	I say harsh things when I feel overwhelmed.
	I withdraw from or push my partner away when I feel afraid or ashamed.
	A negative memory intrudes my thoughts, and it's hard to get rid of it.
	I feel suddenly afraid or ashamed when I'm with my partner.
	An interaction with my partner can remind me of a negative event from my past.
	I have difficulty enjoying spending time with my partner.
	I get irritable or angry, and I'm not sure why.
	I get startled easily and have trouble calming my body.
	I have trouble concentrating when I'm talking with my partner.
	I feel unsafe with my partner even when I don't have a logical reason.
	I feel disconnected from my own life or body.
	I struggle with aspects of my faith and/or whether God loves me.

Now place a star next to three to five of the above statements that seem to hinder your life the most.

In preparing to talk with your partner about the statements you checked above, keep the following in mind:

- You do not have to share details of your history or your current experiences. Share only what you feel ready to reveal. As connection grows, you may be able to share more.
- It may be helpful to write down summaries of your traumatic experiences so that you can read them aloud to your partner.
- For each statement you starred above, it may be helpful to write a short explanation giving the following information:
 - How often is this statement true?
 - What has helped you come back to a state of calm?
 - What has made it worse for you?
 - What do you think your partner could do to support you?
 - What do you want to pray for God to do in your relationship?

What activities give you the sense that you are connected to your partner in a healthy way?

What situations give you the sense that you might not be connected to your partner? *(Make sure to use 'I' statements to describe your experiences in order to avoid accusatory language.)*

What is one goal you'd like to set for your partnership?

Section 2: (to be completed by the partner of the trauma survivor)

Check any of the following that currently apply to you **at least some of the time**:

	I struggle to understand my partner's emotions.
	I notice my partner withdrawing from me, and I don't know why.
	I wonder if I'm doing things that make life harder for my partner.
	I have trouble communicating support toward my partner when s/he is struggling.
	I feel as if I can't meet my partner's desires or expectations.
	I don't know when my partner has been triggered by past trauma.
	My partner seems frustrated with me, and I don't know why.
	I notice my partner blaming or criticizing him/herself.
	I don't know about things that happened to my partner before we met.
	I sense that my partner and I are disconnected, and I don't know how to help.
	I'm not sure how to encourage my partner when s/he feels overwhelmed.
	If my partner does something that hurts me, I struggle to be able to talk about it with him/her.
	I'm uncertain how to engage in spiritual practices with my partner (such as prayer, Bible reading and fellowship with others).
	I feel uncertain about how I should care for my partner because I'm also hurting.
	My partner and I struggle in the area of sexual intimacy.

Now place a star next to three to five of the above statements that seem the most difficult for you.

For each statement you starred above, it may be helpful to write a short explanation giving the following information:

- How often is this statement true?
- What has helped you gain understanding about what your partner is experiencing?
- What has made it more difficult for you?
- What do you think your partner could do to support you?
- What do you want to pray for God to do in your relationship?

What questions do you have about how your partner experiences the negative effects of traumatization? What do you wish you understood better?

What activities give you the sense that you are connected to your partner in a healthy way?

What situations give you the sense that you might not be connected to your partner? *(Make sure to use 'I' statements to describe your experiences in order to avoid accusatory language.)*

What is one goal you'd like to set for your partnership?

Keep in mind that sometimes these conversations are best had with a trauma-competent counselor, mentor or pastor. Couples need encouragement and education about how to engage compassionately with one another, and we are wise to seek outside perspectives.

Important things for the couple to consider:

For the trauma survivor: You may believe you need to have further conversations with your partner in order to improve the relationship, but it can be difficult to know how much to share and when it will be appropriate to share. You will need to sense that you are prepared to speak about vulnerable topics. You also need to be prepared to hear from your partner. Sometimes what a partner shares could be triggering. A good gauge for readiness is for you to complete Section 1 of this activity and pay attention to how you are responding to the questions. Notice any bodily responses (such as increased heart rate, muscle tension and agitation), emotional responses (such as dread, overwhelm or feeling shut down or numb), and thoughts that seem to bring about fear, shame or anger. If these things happen, it may be wise for you to talk individually with a counselor before sharing with your spouse.

For the partner of a trauma survivor: you may not be ready to receive your spouse's story and struggles, and you may not be ready to share your experiences of your partnership. If you experience anger, feelings of betrayal, or resentment while completing Section 2, you should consider talking individually with a counselor before sharing with your spouse.

Finally, couples should pay attention to their own emotions, bodies and thoughts during a conversation with each other. At any point that a person senses s/he is experiencing high emotion or feeling 'shut down,' it's wise to take a break and revisit the conversation at a later time. When partners begin to make assumptions about each other's motives and feelings, conversations can quickly turn toward unhealthy forms of relating. If these things happen, it may be an indication that you should enlist the help of a counselor in your conversation.