



Conducting “Seeking Safety” Peer-Led Program with Individuals Who Experience Human Trafficking and Substance Use Disorder

Some individuals who experience human trafficking have substance use, trauma, and mental health issues associated with their trafficking experience.¹ Although there are a variety of services available to meet the substance use and mental health needs of individuals who experience trafficking, many survivors experience barriers to accessing these services (e.g., lack of insurance, citizenship).² Peer support programs can help address this gap,^{3,4} because they are usually free, easily accessible, and considered a supplemental part of a recovery system of care.⁵ Peer support is a “process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experiences” (e.g., through support groups, one-on-one coaching).⁶ Extensive research shows that peer support groups can lead to positive outcomes for individuals with substance use disorders, but many peer support programs are not trauma-informed and it is unclear whether they are the best fit for individuals who experience trafficking.⁷ This brief is part of a series to explore using peer support groups with individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder. See “Related Resources” for more information.



Related Resources

- [Adapting Peer Support Models for Survivors at the Intersection of Trafficking and Substance Use](#)
- [Peer-Led Support Groups: Overview of the Empirical Research and Implications for Individuals Who Have Experienced Trafficking and Substance Use Disorder](#)
- [Peer Support Groups for Individuals Who Have Experienced Human Trafficking and Substance Use Disorder Exploratory Brief](#)

Our Approach



How to Build the Evidence Base⁸

Identification: Define the problem, identify needs or gaps, consult experts, brainstorm.

Exploration: Review literature; identify outcomes and impacts; synthesize findings and insights; explore possible solutions, usability issues, and barriers to implementation.

Building and Testing: Build program logic, evaluate framework tools, test concepts with users for feedback and feasibility, review for safety and ethics, refine solutions.

Evaluating and Publishing: Evaluate process and outcomes, publish results.

The National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center (NHTTAC) follows a four-step process for building the evidence base on a wide range of topics associated with human trafficking.⁸ Since 2018, NHTTAC has used the following process to build the evidence base on providing peer support to individuals who experience human trafficking and substance use disorder:

1. **Identification:** In 2018, fellows from Class 2 of the Human Trafficking Leadership Academy (HTLA)ⁱ recommended exploring how peer support groups could be used with individuals who experience both trafficking and substance use disorder (with an emphasis on 12-step models).
2. **Exploration:** Based on these recommendations, NHTTAC conducted a literature review on 12-step peer support models, which showed that 12-step models often are not trauma-informed. NHTTAC then partnered

ⁱ See <https://nhttac.acf.hhs.gov/survivor-involvement/human-trafficking-leadership-academy> for more information on HTLA and Coro.

with Survivor Alliance and an HTLA fellow to (1) co-author a second literature review comparing and contrasting alternative peer support group models, exploring client outcomes, and examining lessons learned; (2) conduct focus groups and interviews to explore survivor and service provider perspectives on using different types of peer support groups; (3) use information from the literature reviews, focus groups, and interviews to identify a model to pilot; and (4) publish a brief to share findings from the literature review and data collection (see [Peer Support Groups for Individuals Who Have Experienced Human Trafficking and Substance Use Disorder Exploratory Brief](#) for more information).

- 3. Building and Testing:** In 2020, NHTTAC initiated a collaboration with Thistle Farmsⁱⁱ and Treatment Innovationsⁱⁱⁱ to pilot a peer support program called Seeking Safety with individuals who experience human trafficking and/or substance use disorders. The purpose of this partnership is described in detail below.
- 4. Evaluating and Publishing:** After completing step 3, NHTTAC will explore options for evaluation and share findings with the field.

Seeking Safety

NHTTAC chose to pilot Seeking Safety with individuals who experience trafficking because Seeking Safety is an evidence-based and trauma-informed model designed to help people who experience addiction and/or trauma.⁹ Seeking Safety offers 25 topics in a group or one-on-one setting, but individuals can complete as few or as many topics as time allows.¹⁰ Seeking Safety is typically offered as a clinician-led model, but it has also been conducted by peers for more than 20 years.^{11, 12} Seeking Safety follows five key principles:¹⁰

1. “Safety as the overarching goal (helping clients attain safety in their relationships, thinking, behavior, and emotions).”
2. “Integrated treatment (working on both trauma and substance abuse at the same time).”
3. “A focus on ideals to counteract the loss of ideals in both trauma and substance abuse.”
4. “Four content areas: cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, case management.”
5. “Attention to clinician processes (clinicians’ emotional responses, self-care, etc.).”

Seeking Safety Topics

- Introduction/Case Management
- Safety
- PTSD: Taking Back Your Power
- When Substances Control You
- Honesty
- Asking for Help
- Setting Boundaries in Relationships
- Getting Others to Support Your Recovery
- Healthy Relationships
- Community Resources
- Compassion
- Creating Meaning
- Discovery
- Integrating the Split Self
- Recovery Thinking
- Taking Good Care of Yourself
- Commitment
- Respecting Your Time
- Coping with Triggers
- Self-Nurturing
- Healing from Anger
- Red and Green Flags
- Detaching from Emotional Pain (Grounding)
- Life Choices
- Termination

ⁱⁱ Thistle Farms is a survivor-led, nonprofit social enterprise that provides services and employment to women who have experienced human trafficking, prostitution, and addiction. See <https://thistlefarms.org> for more information.

ⁱⁱⁱ Treatment Innovations is a for-profit organization that developed Seeking Safety. It provides a range of services for implementing Seeking Safety, including consultation, resources, training, and research. See <https://www.treatment-innovations.org> for more information.

Planning and Building the Seeking Safety Pilot



Planning: NHTTAC and Treatment Innovations provided technical assistance to explore how Thistle Farms could use the peer-led Seeking Safety model for individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder.



Survivor Leaders: Two Thistle Farms staff members were trained and are working toward certification to facilitate Seeking Safety. Both staff members have lived and professional experience with human trafficking and substance use. One facilitator is also a graduate of NHTTAC’s HTLA Class 2 and has an advanced degree in social work.



Training: The staff member leaders took a 1-day Seeking Safety training. Treatment Innovations hosts this training to teach how to facilitate Seeking Safety, explore how to adapt the model to different populations, and share resources for implementing and assessing Seeking Safety.¹³



Certification and Piloting: The Thistle Farms staff members are working toward becoming certified in providing Seeking Safety. To do so, the staff members are piloting peer-led Seeking Safety sessions. They are recording several sessions^{iv} and sending the recordings to Treatment Innovations. Treatment Innovations reviews the recordings and provides feedback on facilitator strengths, fidelity to the Seeking Safety model, and recommendations for improvement. The Thistle Farms staff members will become certified in conducting Seeking Safety after this pilot and review period is complete.



Peer Review: NHTTAC and Treatment Innovations developed a peer review tool to assess whether the Seeking Safety curriculum addresses the needs of individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder. Two NHTTAC consultants conducted a peer review of the 1-day Seeking Safety training and training recordings submitted by Thistle Farms. Each peer reviewer has experienced human trafficking, substance use, and receiving and providing peer support. One peer reviewer is also an HTLA Class 2 fellow with experience implementing Seeking Safety.

Considerations to Inform Next Steps

The HHS Office on Trafficking in Persons and project collaborators will review the peer review feedback and determine next steps. For example:

- Determine whether there are any areas of the curriculum and/or training that should be adjusted for survivors of trafficking who are facilitating Seeking Safety. For example, is the curriculum written in language that is respectful of survivors of trafficking? Is the curriculum easy to use by a survivor of trafficking and culturally responsive?
- Determine whether there are any areas of the Seeking Safety curriculum that should be adjusted to better address the needs of individuals who experience both trafficking and substance use disorder. Additional materials that could be created and used in conjunction with the curriculum.
- Determine whether the staff members at Thistle Farms would benefit from additional training (e.g., record additional Seeking Safety sessions and submit to Treatment Innovations for review).
- Explore other options for facilitating peer-led Seeking Safety. Participants could take turns leading Seeking Safety sessions, rather than having one peer lead all Seeking Safety sessions. If a different process for facilitating peer-led Seeking Safety is attempted, explore whether it would benefit the organization to have a peer who is trained and certified in Seeking Safety provide coaching on delivering the model.
- Explore partnering with other organizations to conduct peer-led Seeking Safety with individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder.

^{iv} Prior to recording the sessions, Thistle Farms obtained permission to record from each Seeking Safety participant.

- Consider conducting a formative evaluation to assess whether the peer-led Seeking Safety program is practical and the best fit for individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder.¹⁴ Formative evaluations can also help an organization determine if its program is ready for a process or outcome evaluation, or whether improvements should be made before conducting an evaluation.¹⁵
- Continue documenting progress for piloting the peer-led Seeking Safety model.



Lessons Learned To Date

- Training and certifying two survivor leaders within a survivor-led service-providing organization to facilitate Seeking Safety makes the model more sustainable.
- Collaborating with experts in facilitating the Seeking Safety model⁹ helped inform the planning process.
- Planning the peer-led Seeking Safety project took more time than expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, survivor-led organizations are often frontline responders. It is difficult to meet planned milestones for delivering new services while balancing heavy caseloads, existing service delivery, new technology for remote service delivery, client crises, and self-care.

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