NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

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] 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 Base[8]

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 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office on Trafficking in Persons' National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center (OTIP's NHTTAC) follows a four-step process for building the evidence base on a wide range of topics associated with human trafficking.[8] Since 2018, OTIP's 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 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, OTIP's NHTTAC conducted a literature review on 12-step peer support models, which showed that 12-step models often are not trauma-informed. OTIP's NHTTAC then

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

partnered 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 the [Peer Support Groups for Individuals Who Have Experienced Human Trafficking and Substance Use Disorder Exploratory Brief](#) to share findings from the literature review and data collection.

3. **Building and Testing**: In 2020, OTIP's NHTTAC initiated a collaboration with a survivor-led organization 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, OTIP's NHTTAC will explore options for evaluation and share findings with the field.

Seeking Safety

OTIP's 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

Training and certification in Seeking Safety are not required for clinicians who want to implement the model. However, both can help ensure that facilitators deliver Seeking Safety as intended (i.e., maintain fidelity to the model) and are confident in implementing the model. Certification is required when conducting research studies on Seeking Safety.

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Planning and Building the Seeking Safety Pilot

Planning: OTIP's NHTTAC and Treatment Innovations[ii] provided technical assistance to explore how Thistle Farms[iii] could use the peer-led Seeking Safety model for individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder. Thistle Farms is a survivor-led organization that currently provides clinician-led Seeking Safety to individuals who have experienced trafficking.

Survivor Leaders: Two Thistle Farms staff members were trained and began 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 OTIP's NHTTAC's HTLA 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 (e.g., women, individuals with HIV/AIDS), and share resources for implementing and assessing Seeking Safety.[13]

Certification and Piloting: The Thistle Farms staff members piloted four peer-led Seeking Safety sessions. They recorded the sessions[iv] and sent the recordings to Treatment Innovations as part of the certification process. Treatment Innovations reviewed the recordings and provided detailed feedback on facilitator strengths and recommendations for improvement, with particular emphasis on fidelity to the Seeking Safety model. Thistle Farms ultimately decided not to complete the certification process, which was always optional, and instead prioritize adapting Seeking Safety to a peer-led model that meets the specific needs of individuals who have experienced trafficking. The Thistle Farms pilot concluded early due to limited staff capacity experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, but OTIP's NHTTAC will explore future opportunities for certification and adaptation.

Peer Review: OTIP's NHTTAC and Treatment Innovations developed a peer review tool to explore whether the Seeking Safety training and certification process is a good fit for individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder. OTIP's NHTTAC conducted peer reviews, including (1) the 1-day Seeking Safety training and (2) training recordings submitted by Thistle Farms to become certified in conducting Seeking Safety. Each peer reviewer has lived experience in human trafficking and substance use, and has received and provided peer support. One peer reviewer is an HTLA fellow with experience implementing Seeking Safety with individuals who have experienced trafficking and one reviewer is a licensed therapist specializing in trauma, domestic violence, human trafficking, and psychological safety.

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ii 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.
iii 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.
iv Before recording the sessions, Thistle Farms obtained permission to record from each Seeking Safety participant.

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Lessons Learned to Date

Planning

- *Prioritize relationship-building and collective leadership with all key partners while planning and implementing the Seeking Safety program*. Relationship-building can help establish trust, roles, responsiblities, and transparency as well as manage expectations about the pilot process and the integration of feedback. Due to scheduling limitations, staffing challenges, competing priorities, and time constraints, Thistle Farms and Treatment Innovations could not frequently meet during the planning process. This led to fewer opportunities to work through feedback from the certification process and completing the pilot process as scheduled. Shifting timelines to meet the needs of the training and technical assistance recipient is important for accommodating relationship-building.

- *Build extra time into the project plan to accommodate unexpected challenges and the responsibilties of survivor-led organizations*. Planning the peer-led Seeking Safety project took more time than expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Survivor-led organizations are often frontline responders. It is difficult to meet planned milestones for piloting new services while balancing heavy caseloads, existing service delivery, new technology for remote service delivery, client crises, and self-care. There were also challenges associated with high staff turnover and opening a new shelter, which limited staff capacity to participate in the planning and piloting process.

- *Consider collaborating with experts in facilitating the Seeking Safety model[9]*. OTIP's NHTTAC's collaboration with Treatment Innovations, Thistle Farms, and peer reviewers on Seeking Safety during the pilot helped inform the planning process.

- *Train multiple survivor leaders within a survivor-led service-providing organization to facilitate Seeking Safety*. Increased organizational and staffing capacity may help make the model more sustainable.

Training

- *Consider providing additional training to individuals with lived experience who are facilitating Seeking Safety.* Seeking Safety differs from other peer support models because of the focus on trauma-informed care and psychoeducation. During the certification process, Treatment Innovations provided recommendations on how to improve the facilitation of specific Seeking Safety modules. Peer support providers may need training on (1) providing effective trauma-informed care and psychoeducation, (2) managing potentially difficult group dynamics, and (3) implementing Seeking Safety as intended.

Piloting and Certification

- *Carefully consider which path to choose: Obtaining certification in facilitating Seeking Safety or focusing on making small changes to the model to better meet client needs.* Obtaining Seeking Safety certification requires facilitators to follow the program curriculum strictly. While not required,

certification can help formalize the program and ensure consistency in implementation across groups. However, it can be unrealistic for providers to strictly follow each component of a program model based on needs of program participants, and small adaptations are usually expected. Some adaptations may benefit the individuals going through the program, maximize outcomes, and increase buy-in and ownership among group facilitators.[16]

- *Consider including a trained clinician in the Seeking Safety certification process.* Trained clinicians may be able to help translate more technical information into layperson terms and provide support for implementing Treatment Innovations recommendations.

- *Gather feedback from program participants to learn along the way*. Including evaluation in the piloting process provides an opportunity to ask Seeking Safety participants to provide feedback on their experiences going through the program. Participant feedback can help continuously improve the facilitation of Seeking Safety, make data-informed decisions, and ensure participant needs are met.

Considerations to Inform Next Steps

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Trafficking in Persons and project collaborators reviewed the peer review feedback and discussed potential next steps. These included:

- Pilot a model where a trained trauma clinician and peer co-faciltate Seeking Safety sessions. Trained clinicians can help individuals who have not received training become peer support providers by delivering the required psychoeducation components of Seeking Safety and recognizing and responding to trauma reactions.

- Explore providing two complementary types of support to organizations implementing peer-led Seeking Safety. Working collaboratively with Treatment Innovations can help programs and peer facilitators learn to implement Seeking Safety. Working collaboratively with an expert to lead peer support programming with individuals who have experienced trafficking can help ensure the implementation of Seeking Safety is survivor- and trauma-informed, specifically for individuals who have experienced trafficking, and uses best practices in providing peer support.

- Research whether different levels and types of peer support training impact Seeking Safety outcomes. For example, do individuals who participate in Seeking Safety with facilitators who have not received Seeking Safety training experience the same outcomes as individuals with facilitators who received Seeking Safety training and/or became certified in Seeking Safety?

- Pilot other options for facilitating peer-led Seeking Safety, such as having participants 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 trained trauma clinician and a peer who is trained and certified in Seeking Safety provide coaching on delivering the model.

- Partner with other organizations to conduct peer-led Seeking Safety with individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder. Testing a peer-led Seeking Safety model with a greater number of people contributes to building the evidence base and helps shed light on the different ways peer support models may benefit individuals who have experienced trafficking.

- Conduct a formative evaluation to assess whether the peer-led Seeking Safety program is feasible and the best fit for individuals who experience trafficking and substance use disorder.[14] Formative evaluations can also help an organization determine whether its program is ready for a process or outcome evaluation or whether improvements should be made before an evaluation.[15]

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- Explore options for adjusting the curriculum to better meet the needs of individuals who have experienced trafficking and peers who are facilitating Seeking Safety. For example, is the curriculum accessible, relatable, and easy to use by individuals with lived experience? Is the curriculum responsive to and inclusive of participants with lived experience? Additional materials could be created and used in conjunction with the curriculum.

- Document progress for piloting the peer-led Seeking Safety model.

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