

# Understanding Trauma and Triggers & How to Support Others

St. Peter Lutheran Church  
Sunday, April 14, 2024

**Facilitated By:**

*Aimee Alcorn, MSW, LCSW, CCTP*

*Toni Herr, MSW Candidate*

Colorado Dream Foundation



# Who Are We – Facilitators



**Aimee Alcorn, MSW, LCSW, CCTP**

Senior Director of Emotional Wellness

- Third generation Coloradoan (my family immigrated from Southern Italy through Ellis Island, ventured west, and established a homestead outside of Boulder).
- Master of Social Work (MSW) degree from Colorado State University
- Bachelor of Arts degree from University of Northern Colorado.
- Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in Colorado
- Certified Clinical Trauma Professional (CCTP)
- Nearly twenty years of experience working with youth and young adults in education, hospital, and community settings.
- Special passion for working with neurodivergent individuals and humans experiencing and healing from trauma.
- Love being with my family and my dog Luna outdoors

# Who Are We - Facilitators

- Native Coloradan
- Currently earning a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree from Baylor University
- Bachelor of Arts degree from Belmont University
- Grew up attending St. John's Lutheran Church (MCLS)
- Attended Arapahoe High School, graduating in 2015
- Beginning to study Animal Assisted Therapy
- Passion for working with children and families and individuals healing from trauma.
- Love spending time outside with my dog Kota and hanging out with my family.



**Toni Herr, MSW Candidate (Baylor University)**

Systems Advocacy Intern

Communications and Social Media

# Who Are We – Colorado Dream Foundation

- Non-profit in Denver supporting youth and families since 1988
- **After School Program** - Work alongside youth and families to and through college, providing wrap around support in the areas of academic development, emotional wellness, college & career exploration, and systems advocacy
- **Therapeutic Services** - Our goal is to provide affordable and accessible, holistic mental health services to historically under-resourced communities to aid healing and promote long-term and sustainable growth. We do this through individual and small-group therapy sessions for clients ages four through adulthood. Our dedication lies in assisting everyone who seeks our support to go from surviving to thriving. We prioritize utilizing best practice methodologies to tailor our approach to each client's individual needs.



# Agenda

- What is Trauma
- Types of Trauma
- Information and insights about primary and secondary trauma, how we can identify when someone may be experiencing a traumatic event or its after-effects, and how to support each other in working through the harm to arrive at healing and thriving.

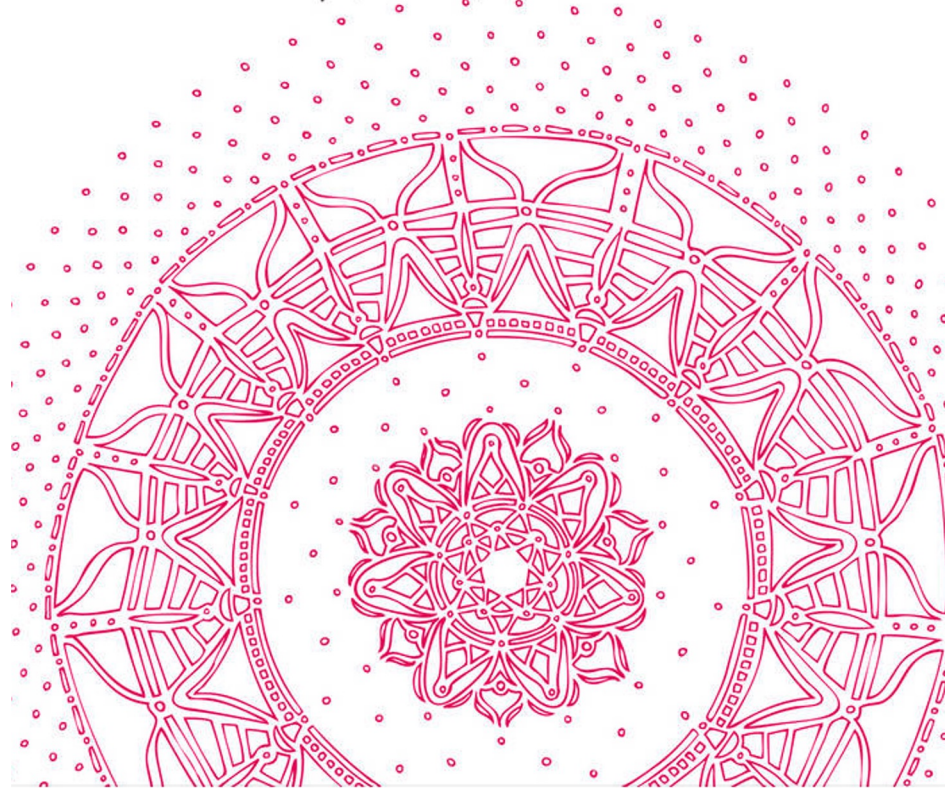


# Brave & Safe Space



- We maintain a brave and safe space for all community members
- We lean into curiosity - this is a means of valuing the collective creativity, knowledge, and wisdom in the space
- We turn to wonder - this allows us to hold space for all voices and experiences
- We acknowledge the power of our words and commit to using this power wisely

Mantras in Love  
by Beautiful Chorus



# What is Trauma (by definition)

Trauma occurs when a person experiences an intense event that threatens or causes harm to his or her emotional and physical well-being





# Is this Trauma?

Your primary caregiver growing up, was distant and would always tell you to “suck it up” if you were emotional.

*You were in a car accident?*

As a kid, you jumped into a pool and you couldn't touch the bottom. A lifeguard had to rescue you.

*You and your family had to evacuate your house during the floods in 2013*

You witnessed a deadly assault

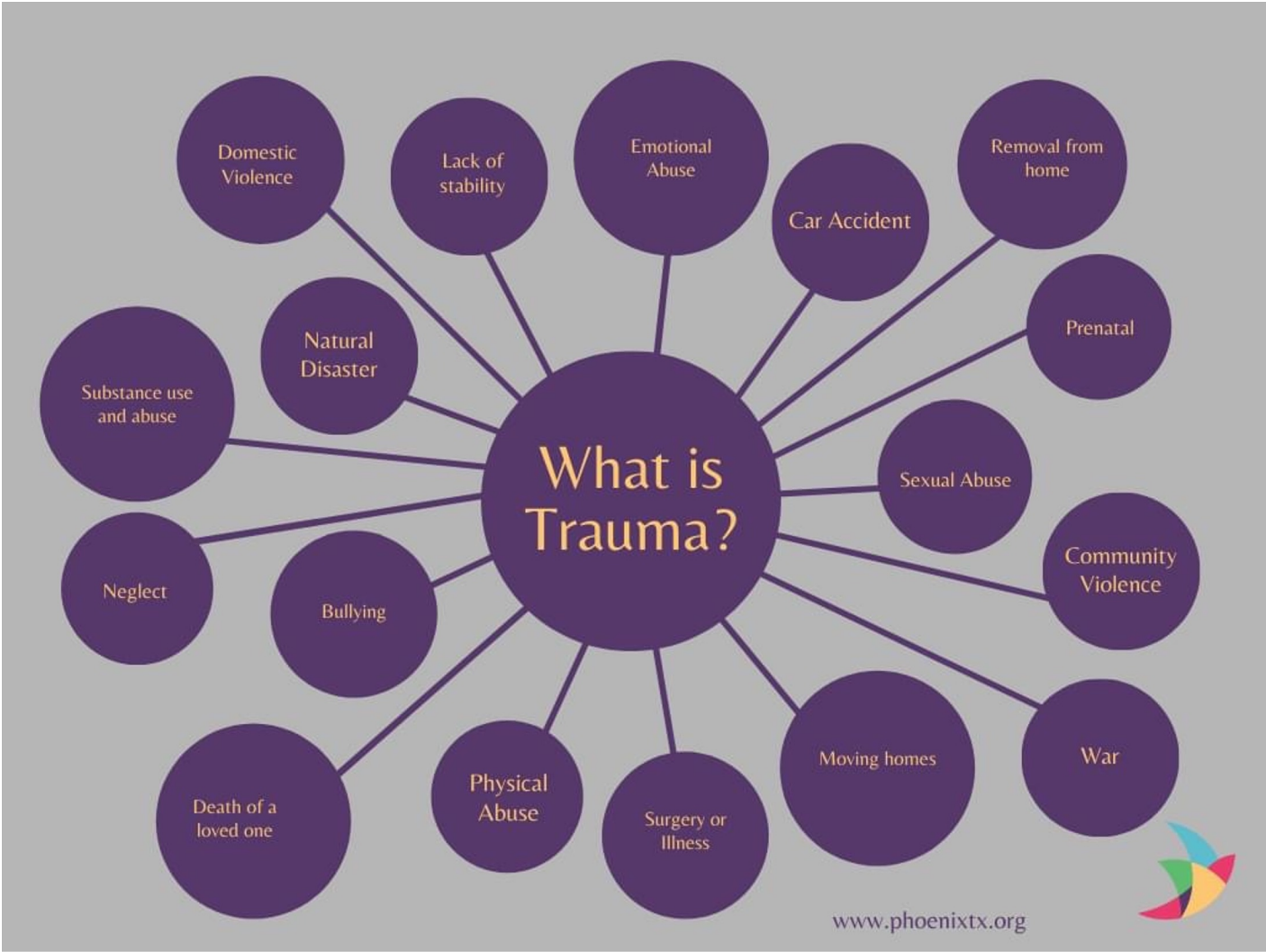
*You were deployed to a war-torn country during your time in the Army*

You moved to a new city every year when you were little

*Your friend died by suicide.*

You grew up in a home where food was limited and you didn't always know where or when your next meal was coming from

Someone close to you experienced a medical emergency in front of you



# Three Types of Trauma

- **Primary** - The traumatic event directly happened to you.
  - You were in a car accident.
- **Vicarious** - This is when you heard or witnessed the trauma.
  - Screaming. Gunshots. A child witnessing domestic violence. Witness someone getting hit by a car
- **Secondary** - Most common for those in helping fields
  - Therapist hearing traumatic stories. Emergency room doctor or nurse. Medical professionals during the pandemic
    - \*\*This often times can lead to compassion fatigue

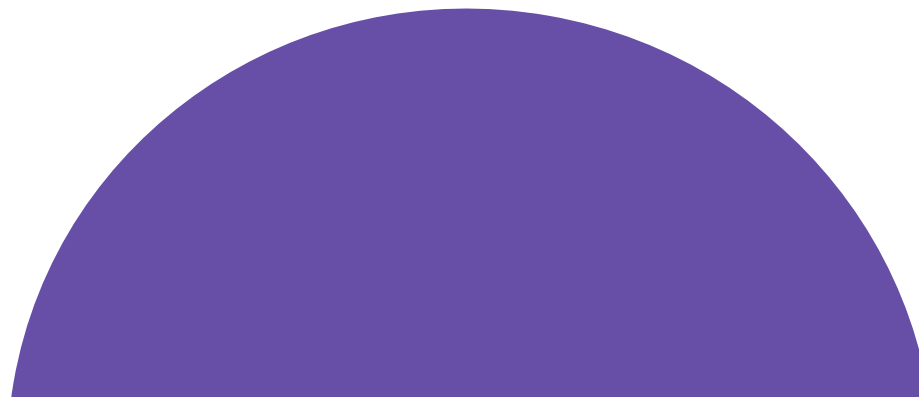


# Levels of Trauma

**Level 1** - one time experience

**Level 2** - one type of experience that keeps happening

**Level 3** - constant experiences that are happening to you that you cannot stop



# What is a Trigger

- A trigger is something that reminds you of the traumatic event or experience.
- It might make you feel helpless, panicked, unsafe, and overwhelmed with emotion.
- You might feel the same things that you felt at the time of the trauma, as though you were reliving the event.
- The mind perceives triggers as a threat and causes a reaction

# TYPES OF TRIGGERS

- Anniversaries of significant dates
- Something on the TV that reminds you of the event
- Relationship issues or family conflict
- A physical felt sense
- An emotion
- The news
- A location
- Sounds or smells that trigger the memory
- A memory
- Relationships ending
- A time of day
- Meetings or socialising
- Events at work
- Anything where you feel overwhelmed
- Health care
- Being isolated
- Feeling judged or ridiculed
- Financial issues

# WHAT CAN TRIGGER YOUR TRAUMA?

## SOUNDS

Hearing certain sounds or music associated with your trauma or feelings can take you back



## PEOPLE

Seeing someone who is related to the trauma or who has a certain trait physically can trigger you



## THOUGHTS

Certain thoughts or memories can make your brain bring you back to a trauma, often unwillingly



## SMELLS

Our human smell is strongly tied to our memories. As a result, certain scents can trigger a trauma



## PLACES

The place where the trauma took place can be a strong trigger, as well as similar places



## MEDIA

A news report, a particular movie or a tv series can show a scene that is similar to your trauma



## FEELINGS

Sometimes a feeling or emotion can trigger your trauma like a sad feeling or being in pain

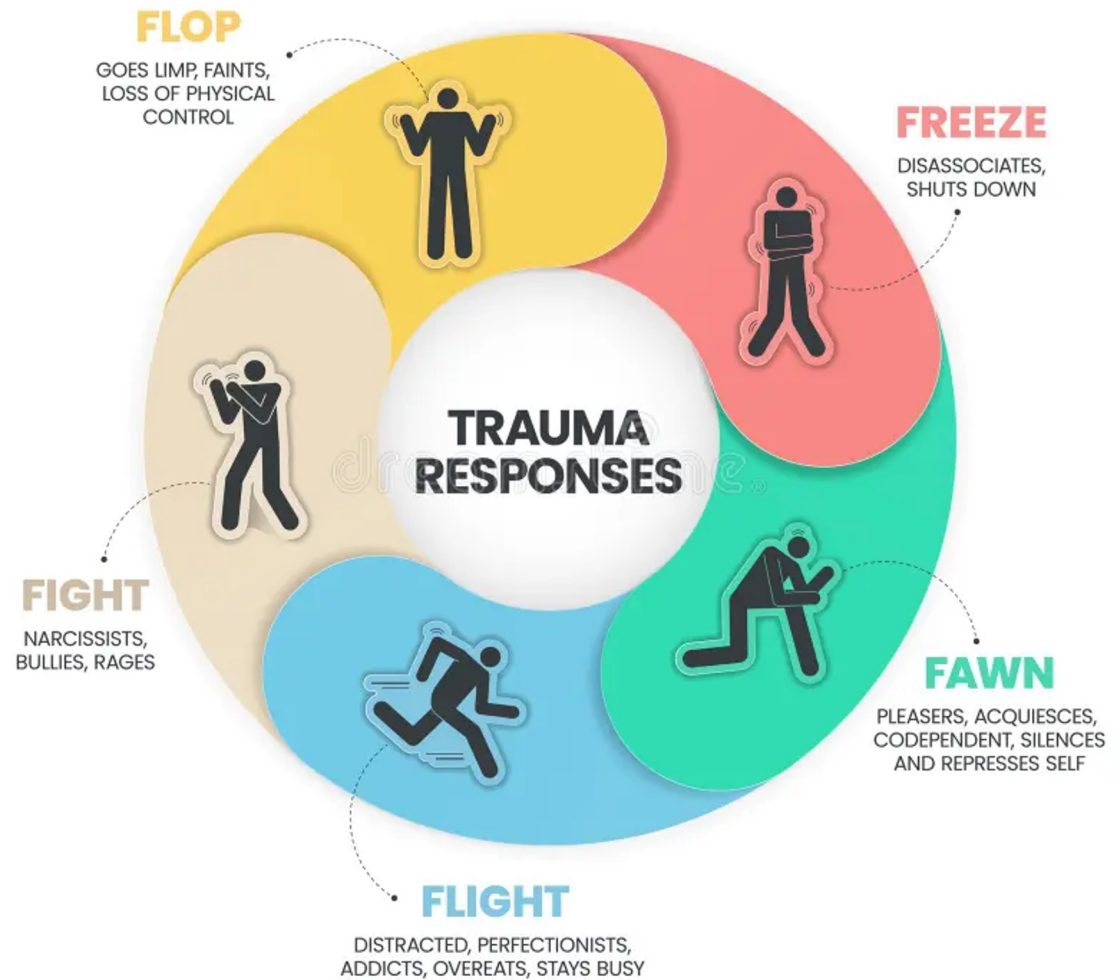
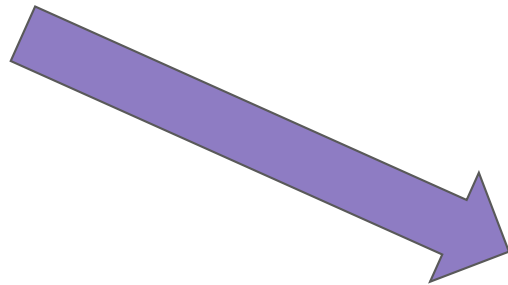


## SITUATIONS

If you find yourself in a situation that is similar to or reminds you of your trauma it can be a trigger



When triggered, our brain will go into “Fight, Flight, Fawn, Freeze, or Flop”



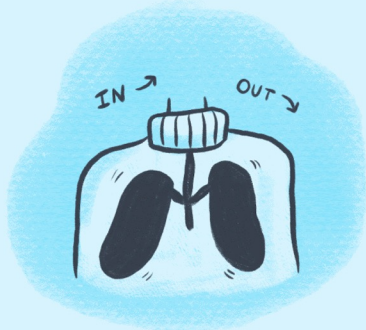


# Post Traumatic Growth and Healing

Growth and healing is possible, regardless of the trauma - some types and levels take more intentionality and work than others.

- Psycho Therapy
- Exposure Therapy
- Neurofeedback
- Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing (EMDR)
- Ketamine Assisted Psychotherapy
- Psilocybin Therapy (research is growing in this area)

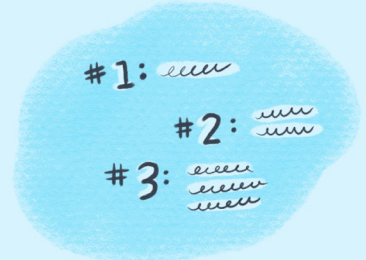
# How to Cope with Triggers



Practice relaxation techniques



Become aware of your triggers



Anticipate and plan a coping strategy for triggers



Call someone if you're feeling triggered



Keep a journal



Exercise regularly

# What can you do, if you have experienced trauma

- Most importantly, DO NOT blame yourself for having the feelings you do - there is NOTHING wrong with you.
- Share with those closest to you that you are having a hard time
- Seek professional support
  - A trained therapist can support you through processing the event(s), engage in exposure and/or other strategies to rewire the connections that your brain has to certain triggers and the traumatic experience(s)
- Know that healing and growth takes time and the journey IS NOT linear

# What can you do to support someone you love

- We focus a lot on creating a space within your community to have *Healing Centered Engagement*
- It is culturally grounded and views healing as the restoration of identity
  - Collective experience and is shaped by shared identity
  - Healing centered engagement is the result of building a healthy identity, and a sense of belonging

# What can you do to support someone you love

Healing centered engagement is asset driven and focuses well-being we want, rather than symptoms we want to suppress.

- More holistic approach to fostering well-being.
- Focusing on how to restore, foster and sustain well-being. holistic restoration of human well-being.

Shift from: “what is wrong with you?” to “what is right within you”?

*“Being vulnerable is being safe and seen at the same time”*



# Discussion



5

FIVE THINGS  
YOU CAN  
SEE

4

FOUR THINGS  
YOU CAN  
HEAR

3

THREE THINGS  
YOU CAN  
FEEL

2

TWO THINGS  
YOU CAN  
SMELL

1

ONE THING  
YOU CAN  
TASTE



# Contact Information



**COLORADO**  
Behavioral Health  
Administration

**988 SUICIDE & CRISIS  
LIFELINE**

*If you're in Colorado, but have an out-of state area code  
Call or Text:*  
**1-844-493-8255 or text TALK to 38255**



**COLORADO  
CRISIS SERVICES**



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<https://www.coloradodream.org/emotional-wellness>