

INSTRUCTOR MANUAL

Module 5: Tips for Professional Therapists Serving Identity Theft Clients

Time Required

1 hour

Purpose

The purpose of this module is to introduce participants with limited trauma experience to strategies that may be helpful in serving Identity Theft clients

Lessons

Introduction to Trauma (5 minutes)

Physical and Emotional Safety Strategies (10 minutes)

Self-Regulation Strategies (15 minutes)

Social Support Strategies (10 minutes)

Processing the Trauma (20 minutes)

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- List key components of working with clients experiencing traumatic reactions.
- Use handouts for psycho-education of traumatized clients that may supplement therapy.

Participant Handouts

Handout for New Identity Theft Victims
Positive and Negative Support Handout

Equipment and Materials

Powerpoint Set-Up
Mental Health Issues in Identity Theft – Module 5: Tips for Professional Therapists Serving Identity Theft Clients

Preparation for the Instructor

Thoroughly review the curriculum. Based on the time the module begins, write the time you should be a various sections in the left-hand margin.

☞ Show Visual 5-1.

Introduce the Module

Paraphrase:

The previous modules were designed to help non-clinicians support Identity Theft victims appropriately, decide when the needs of the client are greater than the helper is able to provide, and refer to professional therapists.

This module is for therapists who would like to provide services to Identity Theft clients but may be limited in experience with trauma. The module is written on the assumption that the clinician has experience with both grief and depression since these are among the most common reasons people go to therapy. The limited scope of the module will address basic steps in trauma treatment and how they may relate specifically to victims of Identity Theft.

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Review the Learning Objectives for the module.

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- List key components of working with clients experiencing traumatic reactions.
- Use handouts for psycho-education of traumatized clients that may supplement therapy.

Lesson 1: Introduction to Trauma (5 minutes)

Paraphrase:

Emotional trauma generally refers to the negative reactions that one feels after an event beyond the realm of normal human experience has happened to them. Experiencing Identity Theft is not something that most human beings experience, and, as noted in earlier modules, it is particularly upsetting because of the complex journey toward finally getting it stopped and because some or all of the financial consequences may not be reversible.

Some people who are strongly resilient, have excellent family and other support, and who can adapt financially to the losses may not be significantly affected by Identity Theft.

However, many victims begin to experience a sense of helplessness and powerlessness as the consequences of the Identity Theft change their lives. Their sense of physical and

Mental Health Issues in Identity Theft – Module 5: Tips for Professional Therapists Serving Identity Theft Clients

emotional integrity is constantly challenged, and they realize that more similar instances loom into their future. This can feel like an overwhelming pervasiveness of fear. It becomes difficult NOT to think about it and worry about it. Thoughts about it seem to intrude into many life experiences, and all too often, new instances of Identity Theft keep happening. This is Identity Theft-related trauma reaction.

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Physical and Emotional Safety Strategies (10 minutes)

Paraphrase:

Physical Safety: As most therapists know, not much if anything can be accomplished in therapy as long as the client does not feel safe. This is the reason therapists often do not begin therapy with an abused child or adult until their living circumstances change and they can feel safe where they live.

This aspect creates a challenge in Identity Theft. Many ID Theft victims do not feel safe anywhere. They may sense that they are being watched by the thief because they usually do not know who he or she is. They live in a sense of vigilance that is reasonable.

Most people experiencing Identity Theft remain in their own homes, but it is suggested that the therapist discuss temporary living options with the client if they sense that their home is being watched. Ask where they do feel safe. Perhaps it is with their parents or certain friends they trust. They may want to explore staying with them temporarily until the thief is identified.

Emotional Safety: Through decades of research, it has been consistently shown that the relationship with the therapist is much more significant in positive outcomes than any specific therapeutic technique. It is possible that the therapist may become about the only person the client trusts. This sense of trust is the first step in trauma therapy.

Judith Herman, MD, author of the classic book *Trauma and Recovery*, believes that the single most common therapeutic error with trauma victims is avoidance of hearing the depths of the traumatic material. The second most common error is pushing for the traumatic material before a safe and secure therapeutic alliance has been formed (p. 172).

Following are strategies that will help build therapeutic trust.

- **Become educated** about Identity Theft. This curriculum is an excellent start. OVC's on-line Identity Theft Curriculum is highly recommended. Schedule appointments with law enforcement investigators, prosecutors, and their advocates who work with Identity Theft to better understand their perspectives and to introduce yourself.

- **Tell** the client about your background, including the fact that you have received specialized training in working with Identity Theft clients.
- **Tell** the client that you recognize that Identity Theft can be very complicated and very disturbing. Mention a few of the aspects you learned about in earlier modules of this curriculum.
- **Explain** to the client that you recognize that they do not know who to trust, and you would not be surprised if they don't trust even you until you have earned their trust. Therefore, you will not expect them to tell you everything about their experience until they are ready.
- **Tell** them that when they are ready, you invite them to share as much about what has happened to them as they think you need to know to be able to help them.
- **Tell** them that before going into the story of what has happened to them, you would like to get to know them just as people, and not as ID theft victims. Invite them to tell you about themselves, their family, their work etc. In other words, ask them what their life was like before they became victims of Identity Theft.
- **Ask** them what they believe to be their greatest strengths and sources of resiliency.

Handout: Clients will feel more secure if they know what to expect from therapy. Near the end for the first session, therapists may want to give them the **Handout for new Identity Theft Victims**, which will provide some general psycho-education. If clients are prepared for the symptoms of intrusion, avoidance, and physical and psychological arousal, they will be less frightened when they experience them.

It is also suggested that you explain the components of therapy and emphasize the two practical recommendations at the end of the handout. Remember that these clients tend to feel that they have lost control of their lives. The more the therapist can do to prepare them for what to expect, the more control they will regain.

Discussion: Ask participants if they have other ideas about how to make Identity Theft victims feel emotionally safe.

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Self-Regulation Strategies (15 minutes)

Paraphrase:

A common stressor for Identity Theft victims is to feel anxious about the future. They may find it difficult to sleep and lie in bed with tensed muscles. The following day, they may feel sleep-deprived and irritable, unable to concentrate. Many trauma clients benefit from learning how to relax both their bodies and their minds.

Point out that human beings have the ability to move their minds, or their focus of concentration, from one thing to another. An example is when they are watching television or a movie. Their mind moves almost entirely to the content of the television show or the movie and it may only return to their immediate surroundings, such as the chair and room that they are in, during a commercial or when the program ends. This tends to happen automatically, but human beings can also will it to happen.

Following are some strategies to move clients' focus of concentration to a place where both their mind and body can relax. One strategy builds upon another. Therapists may want to begin and end each session with by teaching the client one of the following strategies.

Activity: Invite participants to practice these techniques as they are described.

- **Deep Breathing:** Invite the client to slowly breathe in through the nose to the count of 4 and then slowly exhale through the mouth to the count of 8 until all the breath is out. A slight pause between 5 and 6 can be useful. As they do this 3 or 4 times, they are to think of nothing but the numbers they are counting. Ask them to close their eyes as they do the exercise and you can count out loud for them the first couple of times. When finished, ask them to be aware of how their body and mind feels now. Most will say that they feel more calm and relaxed.
- **Deep Breathing with Words:** This exercise is the same as the previous one, but rather than focusing the mind on numbers, they are to focus it on words. An example is (1) On the breath in, the words may be "In with Calm" and (2) On the breath out, the words may be "Out with Stress." In other words, they can envision that the calmness simply pushes the stress out of their bodies as they exhale.
- **Deep Breathing with Color and Temperature:** Ask participants to think of the person in their life with whom they feel the most comfortable and secure. This is a person with whom they can be totally honest and transparent (not wearing a psychological mask) without fear of judgment. As they think of this person, ask them to identify in their mind what color best represents this person. After giving a few seconds to identify the color, ask participants to imagine a circle full of this color above their heads and to give the circle a temperature that would be most comfortable to them. Tell the client that you are going to name body parts beginning with the scalp on top of the head and going all the way down to the tips of their toes and ask that as each section of the body is named, they are to imagine that this circle is slowly lowering itself down the body until their full body is engulfed in the comforting color at the perfect temperature. During the exercise, they are to breathe slowly and deeply, but all of their attention should be given to the circle moving through their body. If the mind wanders, just gently bring it back.
- **Collar Bone Breathing (Thought Field Therapy*)**
This technique is particularly helpful in relaxing the body and mind enough to be able to sleep. Ask participants to locate the soft spot of their throat, about where a man might

knot his tie. From that point, feel the notch in the top center of the collarbone and move a couple of inches to the right or left. Place two fingers of one hand on that spot but just below the collarbone, exerting a little pressure on the underneath side of the collarbone. With two fingers of the other hand, tap the soft spot on the hand that is on the collarbone between the little finger and ring finger but about an inch up into the hand. While doing this, breathe deeply as described about with about 5 taps for the breath in and about 10 taps for the breath out, stopping the breath briefly about half way out.

Next, bend the same two fingers on the collarbone in half, touching the knuckles under the collarbone and repeat the tapping and breathing as noted above.

Repeat the above, but on the opposite side of the collarbone, first using fingertips and then knuckles.

Next, switch hands but stay on the same side of the collarbone. The fingers that were on the collarbone will now do the tapping, and the hand previously tapping is now on the collarbone. Tap and breathe as described above, first using fingertips and then knuckles.

Finally move back to the original side of the collarbone and repeat.

By the time this exercise is finished, about 80% of people are very relaxed and sleepy. It can be used anytime the client is feeling stressed or is unable to sleep.

Discussion: Explain that it is common for victims to have forgotten about other strategies they used in the past to make them feel good. These should be remembered and tried again. Ask participants to name some of the things they do to relax and de-stress.

Look for strategies like going to the gym or yoga groups, working in the yard, prayer or other religious rituals or activities, going to concerts or museums, baking, artwork or other hobbies, sewing, reading, or enjoying pets.

☞ Show Visual 5-5

Social Support Strategies (10 minutes)

Paraphrase the Following;

Social support is key in restoring resilience. With two or people who can be counted on to listen more than they talk and to provide hope and encouragement, many people feel better in two or three months. However, social support is complicated in Identity Theft because victims are no longer sure who they can trust. It is tempting to totally withdraw from others, but doing so can prolong the suffering. Explain that, during this time, it is perfectly acceptable to withdraw from people they now suspect and people who tend to be judgmental, blame them for what happened, and generally drain them rather than energize them.

Handout: Participants are invited to use the handout, **Positive and Negative Support**, to write the names of people in their lives who energize them and who bring them down. Therapists can encourage clients to avoid the people on the negative side of the page as they go through their Identity Theft experience. Conversely, they are encouraged to spend some time each week with the people on the positive side of the page.

When using this handout, a **therapeutic discussion** may be held with the client about how the Identity Theft experience may have changed their worldview and whether such a worldview is rational. For example, a client may have decided that “I am in danger everywhere I go and with everyone I meet.” It may feel that way, but a more rational thought to replace it might be, “I do need to be cautious about all interactions that involve use of my identity documents now, but I do know that most of the people with whom I interact are good and safe people who are doing me no harm.

 Show Visual 5-6

Processing the Trauma (20 minutes)

Paraphrase the Following:

As the client becomes more comfortable with the therapist, specific components of the Identity Theft experience will be revealed. As described in previous modules, these often include both intrusive experiences, such as learning again and again that the identity has been compromised, being pursued in nightmares and flashbacks, and feeling vulnerable and helpless. Two particularly unhealthy reactions are (1) withdrawing into depression or (2) becoming so overly-active that there is no time left to think about the trauma.

Emotional Help: As more and more incidences of Identity Theft affect clients, the more likely they will experience what Dr. Jon Allen (Lewis, Kelly, & Allen, 2004) calls “90-10 Reactions.” This happens when 10 percent of the emotional response is directly related to what has just happened, and 90 percent is related to past experiences. In other words, it is the accumulated experience that tends to be pushing the client over the edge – or feeling that an incident is the “last straw.” It can be very helpful to help clients identify their emotional reactions in terms of this percentage spread and, therefore, realize that the newest incidence may not warrant as much distress as it seems to have caused.

If Identity Theft does produce an accumulative affect of the stress, the therapist must recognize and affirm this reality. However, the therapist and client can explore together how much any new incident is actually producing further financial damage. The therapist must always support the work of the Identity Theft attorney or agency that is diligently working on investigation of the case and encourage the client to complete all the paperwork requested. Doing so can give the client a much greater sense of control over the situation.

Positive affirmation on the part of the therapist is extremely crucial in these cases. Statements like, “You are doing the best you can do to resolve the situation,” and “It takes a lot of resilience

Mental Health Issues in Identity Theft – Module 5: Tips for Professional Therapists Serving Identity Theft Clients

to continue dealing with this and I am proud of you for hanging in there” are very helpful. *Therapists must avoid playing the role of investigator, which can feel like blaming the client. The therapist acknowledges, receives, and compassionately ‘bears witness to’ the trauma story, including the client’s emotional reactions. As the therapist tolerates and acknowledges the story, it becomes more bearable to the client.*

Discussion: How can you affirm and support your client when the questions, “Why?” or “Why me?” are asked?

Look for responses like, “It is an unanswerable question;” “It is hard to believe that life is fair and just when things like this happen, isn’t it?” “You have now experienced personally the reality that many unfair things can happen to good people.”

Biological Help:

Understanding the biology of stress and being able to describe it in common language to clients is extremely useful but beyond the scope of this module. Following is a simplified version.

The human brain has three basic parts: (1) the brain stem, or reptilian brain, causes basic life activity over which we exert little control, such as breathing, body temperature, and regulating many of our organs; (2) the limbic system, deep inside the brain, deals with feelings and emotions, and (3) the cerebral cortex, deals with thinking and reasoning.

When experiencing traumatic events, the limbic system takes over, compromising the work of the cerebral cortex. That explains why most traumatized people have difficulty concentrating and remembering. Sometimes, even reading becomes challenging or impossible.

When under stress, numerous chemicals and hormones, including adrenaline, are released into the brain. Most people are familiar with the “adrenaline rush.” Muscle tension increases. Heart rate increases. Breathing becomes faster. Sometimes the eye pupils dilate. With big doses of adrenaline, mental and sensory capacity increases, like an animal preparing to run or to fight. Similar changes happen inside the brain, particularly in the limbic system. As upsetting incidences occur time after time, the brain’s ability to return to normal becomes more challenged. This process explains why some people become depressed, some people become anxious and panicky, and some people do both.

In the extreme, stress-related damage can last a long time. Therefore, it is necessary to stop this on-going damage if at all possible. Antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications can help return the brain to its natural state and stop or decrease the cycle of re-damaging it. These medications are not doing something extra to the brain; they are simply helping it recover and return to the way it worked before the traumatizing experiences. Most of these medications have no or limited side-effects, but the client may need to try several before finding the best one, or combination of them, for him or her. Not everyone benefits from medication, but many do.

Therapists who work with traumatized people need to be prepared to refer to reliable psychiatrists with expertise in the traumatized brain to assist clients who are interested in trying medication to relieve their symptoms.

Activity: Finding a Survivor Mission

Paraphrase the following:

Most clients who have experienced Identity Theft will resolve their personal emotional issues with the support of the therapist as the concrete financial damage is restored. Some, however, may want to do more. They may find it meaningful to use their experience as the basis of social action within their community or beyond. Such engagement can provide an even greater source of personal power.

Discussion: If clients eventually feel a need to make something good happen from their experiences, what are some options you might suggest?

Look for responses like:

- Look for a crime victim organization that has a Speaker's Bureau and offer to tell your story.
- If aware of other victims of Identity Theft, join them in offering a Victim Impact Panel on the subject. Make the panel available to prison units that house those criminally convicted of Identity Theft. Local probation and parole offices may also order Identity Theft offenders to listen to the impact they have had on their victims.
- Let the therapist or attorney know that you would like to offer emotional peer support to new victims of Identity Theft.
- Talk to your legislators about stronger Identity Theft laws.

☞ Show Visual 5-7

Review Module Objectives and ask participants if they were met.

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- List key components of working with clients experiencing traumatic reactions.
- Use handouts for psycho-education of traumatized clients that may supplement therapy.

References:

Callahan, Roger. (2003). *ATFT certified thought field therapy algorithm level training*. Callahan Techniques Ltd.

Herman, Judith (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. New York: Basic Books

Lewis, L., Kelly, K, & Allen, J. (2004). *Restoring hope and trust: An illustrated guide to mastering trauma*. Baltimore: Sidran Institute Press.