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Understanding the Four Stages of Recovering from Sex Trafficking

1. From Victim/Outcast
2. to **Survivor**
3. to **Thriver**
4. to **Victor/Leader**

I want to address both advocates and victims to help them understand each other. As I look back on my anti-human trafficking work and on my own recovery, I realize that both victims and advocates may not quite understand how long it takes and also what it takes, to recover from sex trafficking.

Organizers: Understanding these four stages will give you an idea of what you need to consider before requesting a human trafficking (HT) victim-survivor-thriver-leader to speak and to tell his/her story at your event. Remember, even though telling their stories can be healing for victims, it can also re-traumatize them if the request is not handled with care. Reluctance to revisit traumatic events is normal. Empowering and encouraging them to tell their stories are key to setting them free. The more victims/survivors we encourage to break their silence, the more perpetrators will be sent running. **Telling their stories for the first time must be done with a qualified professional.** But even after they've reached advanced stages in recovery and can share their stories, they still may not be willing to go public. Follow their lead and don't pressure them. They must be given space to decipher what feels safe to them, regarding their anonymity. It is very important that if you intend to record or photograph the victim/survivor you need their full consent. They need to know if the media was invited and if the event is open to the public. Include them on any emails or notices that go out announcing the event.

They should be treated like any other professional speaker and offered a stipend to show respect for their time. They should be reimbursed for their expenses. Even though some may be willing to donate their time, and not charge for a speaking engagement, don't expect them to work for free. Let them make that decision. While being trafficked they worked for free and they didn't have the freedom to make decisions and use their own judgment. We must do the opposite of that. Respect their time and efforts. Answer all their questions and

allow them to voice their concerns and opinions. Value what they have to offer because revisiting their past is not easy. They do it as a service to others, to educate them so they can prevent this from happening to themselves and others. Allow them the time they need to prepare for the event and understand that they may change their minds, even at the last minute.

Victims/Survivors: This article may help you recognize your own victimization, the work you need to do to recover and also what you can look forward to at the end of the tunnel. If you think you may be a victim/survivor and/or if this article brings up topics you need clarification on, bring this article to your counselor/therapists. It can help get the necessary conversations started. Before you accept an invitation to tell your story at event, remember people will not always be able to empathize with what other people have endured. Not everyone will be able to empathize with you and your story. Empathy does not come naturally; it's acquired. If some can't empathize, don't take it personally. Human trafficking is a dark subject and hearing the stories evokes personal emotions in your listeners. When considering doing this, make sure you are strong enough to handle it if some cannot relate to your struggles. Make sure you have the support you need before, during and after your speech. Speaking out about your experience is only one way you can help fight human trafficking. If you don't want to tell your story to groups there are other ways you can offer your gifts to help fight human trafficking. You can give back by volunteering at human trafficking organizations, mentoring, advocating and/or help with clerical work and/or help organizing events, etc.

**Human trafficking is very complex.
It is never black and white.
These stages were written only as a guide.**

1) Victim/Outcast

First they are victims and then become outcasts. They were probably abused/and or neglected as children which made them easy prey and were recruited into sex trafficking. They may have never been abused but were recruited by trusting a boyfriend, husband or a potential employer. They are subjected to on-going trauma, which may include one, some or all of the following:

- physical, psychological and emotional abuse
- beatings
- degradation
- humiliation
- torture
- rapes
- gang rapes
- their healthcare needs are probably going unmet

These unaddressed traumas cause any victim to be fearful and to hang their heads in shame. They live in survival mode.

While being trafficked they navigate through life under the victim mindset. They have blinders on and they can't see that they're victims; all the while their trafficker is exploiting and abusing them. Their reality is distorted. They believe the empty promises given to them by their trafficker. They become dependent on their trafficker as their protector, providers and/or employer; all the while they're looking forward to a false, bright future. They find excuses for why their trafficker beats them and belittles them as a way to deny the abuse and to remain hopeful about their future. They become accustomed to managing their traffickers' moods and emotions to avoid beatings and/or retaliation. They don't see this as out of the ordinary and they justify their traffickers' bad behavior. They believe in their trafficker and they do everything their trafficker tells them to do. They cooperate with the trafficker when he/she isolates them from family and resources. They don't know how to stand up for themselves and many times they don't see the need to. They remain loyal to their trafficker. They have a disproportionate need for approval from their abusers because to them their approvals mean "they are safe for now". They believe their trafficker will protect them from the police and/or immigration. Traffickers threaten to call police or immigration if their victims don't comply with their demands or "keep them happy". Victims may acquire a criminal record as a result of trusting their trafficker and/or trying to keep him/her happy. They may become drug addicted and are supplied drugs by their trafficker (to keep them more controllable). They may have dropped out of school. They believe they don't fit in anywhere which sets them apart from society and they suffer from relational poverty. They have no sense of belonging.

To family and society they are a disgrace. Some are even trafficked by their own families. They are slut shamed and out cast. The strong stigma keeps them in their place. They are victimized by authority figures and come to believe there is no hope for them. They've come to know, all too well, the potential corruption and abuse of power that exists in every profession. This adds to their dependency on their trafficker and contributes to their relational poverty. They may come to view those with degrees and titles as better than them and more believable. They learn to trust no one except their trafficker. They live in the margins of society and their addiction becomes a coping mechanism.

They haven't yet considered escaping from their trafficking situation or their abusers nor have they considered asking for help because they believe that staying with their trafficker is the safest choice they have. They also have a drug habit they need to support.

2) Survivor

In this stage they've already asked for help because they believe there may be a chance to escape. They are beginning to doubt their trafficker's seemingly good intentions; that he/she is not concerned about their future and welfare. They are living in a safe place. They are no longer being victimized or traumatized. They may be experiencing withdrawals but are working on overcoming their addiction. They have a circle of supporters surrounding them but in their minds they are still just surviving because:

- they may be reluctant to fall asleep because of nightmares
- they relive the traumas over and over through flashbacks
- the intrusive and negative thoughts are overwhelming to them
- the shame, guilt and fear overwhelm them

- they don't quite understand their own thoughts and feelings
- they may feel like they are "living in hiding" and they won't allow themselves to "truly be seen"
- they have severe abandonment and trust issues that need to be addressed
- the built up anger is confusing to them
- they experience fleeting feelings of dignity and respect and they don't quite know what to make of it because they may never have felt dignified or respected before and/or they feel they don't deserve it
- their minds are spinning with questions about their lives and their mere existence

BUT now, at least they are looking for work or going to school, or both, and they're safe. They're getting their medical and legal needs addressed. They are learning life skills like how to budget money, balance a check book, cook and/or drive. Maybe they are perfecting their English. They may be continuing their education in school. They have thoughts of using drugs again to escape the flashbacks, to help them sleep or to just feel better. From time to time they're tempted to go back to their trafficker and "the life", to what's familiar, because they doubt their abilities to make it in society. They get counseling and start the process of getting acquainted with their counselor.

They have to feel safe with him/her before counseling will be beneficial. They may need to find another counselor and start the getting-acquainted- process all over again, several times, because they didn't "click" with the previous counselors. They have to "click" before it will be a fruitful relationship. Finding just the right counselor takes time. They may have to go through many counselors before progress can be made in therapy. Victims and survivors have a hard time recognizing a mutually satisfying relationship even after they've escaped "the life". They are still vulnerable to falling prey to someone who doesn't have their best interests in mind.

Also, it's a reality that some counselors:

- find it too difficult to resist the temptation and take advantage of their clients' naivety, vulnerabilities and disproportionate need for approval and they re- exploit them
- don't understand what sex trafficking victims need therapeutically and they unknowingly re-exploit them
- pass judgment on them

Finding just the right counselor is the hardest part of recovering from sex trafficking

3) Thriver

They found work, they're employed, they're tax payers and they're contributing members of society. They have their own place and are living more independently and out of survival mode. They look forward to a promising future. They're continuing their education

or they've graduated. They are now a subordinate at work. They are learning the dynamics of, and the difference between, professional and personal relationships. They know their traffickers' true, malicious intentions. They're determined to never go back to "the life" or their trafficker. Through counseling they're doing the difficult, inner work they need to do to understand:

- how they fell prey to traffickers
- what fears are holding them back in life and where they stem from
- their childhood traumas
- adult traumas
- what their children need from them; how to be a good parent
- the push and pull dynamics between them and their:

- ❖ trafficker
- ❖ boss
- ❖ co-workers
- ❖ family
- ❖ friends

- what it took for them to escape and survive trafficking
- why they survived
- that some consequences of their past are permanent.

They are facing their fears with the help of their counselor and they are processing their traumas. During this phase they are really learning a whole new way of communicating. They are learning a whole new language. Trauma escapes language and causes memory loss; so they need help in finding the words to express themselves so they can tell their stories and also so they can process their traumas. Finding the right words helps them turn the flashbacks (triggers of bad memories) into just memories that don't haunt them anymore, so they can move forward.

They are learning how to:

- label their emotions
- go within, listen to their gut feelings and that voice inside of them
- express themselves in a respectful way
- set boundaries without being too aggressive or too passive
- recognize and mend past, healthy relationships
- maintain healthy, present relationship
- develop new, healthy relationships
- recognize and let go of unhealthy relationships
- stand up for themselves and recognize when it's necessary

Victims of human trafficking carry an untold story inside them, that even they can't make sense of, or put into words. Articulating their complete stories occurs only in advanced stages of recovery.

4) Victor/Leader

The blinders are off and they've reached "the other side". They are leaders of their own lives. They've faced their fears, processed their traumas and came to understand and accept themselves and others. They know they've been victimized and they understand how they fell prey. They've acquired good communication skills and they know how to set boundaries. They are careful who they allow into their lives and they navigate through life with their eyes and ears open. They don't take people only at face value. They look beneath the surface of good and bad behavior, positive and negative labels, prestigious titles and degrees. They are no longer easy prey. Others have forgiven them for their wrongs and they've come to forgive themselves and others. They take responsibility for their past choices. The shame has been released and they walk with their heads held high. They're excited about life. They are embracing their survival and are grateful they survived everything they've been through. They want to pass what they've learned on to others. They want to make a difference in the lives of others.

They don't have to be leaders in anti human trafficking work to be viewed as leaders. They can be leaders such as mothers/fathers leading their children, or a lead position at work, or they can start their own business and/or be leaders in sales of a product or service.

They've discovered their potential and they know what their talents are. They know where their strengths and weaknesses lie and they feel comfortable in their own skin. They live boldly and with less fear. They face life's crises with discernment and by reaching out to their supporters and resources. They aren't afraid to ask for help when they know they need it. They don't take people only at face value. They understand that crises and hard times are only temporary just as much as good times are. They look at the big picture and they see hope in everything they set out to accomplish or overcome.

They may still have bad dreams but they wake up knowing they are safe. The bad memories that used to trigger them into becoming fearful again are now just memories that no longer haunt them. They know what they like and don't like and they have found the words to accurately express it.

The fear of public speaking (stage fright) subsides only with experience. During this stage they may have already had public speaking training and/or experience.

Keep in mind:

- We do not all fall prey to traffickers in the same way nor do we escape in the same way. All of our stories are unique.
- For many victims, experience with corrupt authority fosters mistrust of anyone who inquires about their trafficking situation.
- Some (in all stages of recovery) may have court cases pending and are not at liberty to talk about them and therefore cannot tell the whole story
- Some may have their legal issues and trigger/trauma issues addressed and can now tell the whole story and even change the way their story ends. 😊