Seeking Safety
Orientation Packet

Fridays

11-12:30pm

6B-111
Seeking Safety:

What: A treatment opportunity for Veterans with trauma symptoms and substance abuse

When: Each Friday, 11-12:30pm

Where? 6th Floor, 6B-111

For how long? 12-24 sessions

Group Leader: Charity Hammond, Ph.D. 713-791-1414 ext. 6699

Goal: To Help Veterans
- Create a sense of safety (safe people, places, and experiences)
- Learn to respect and value themselves
- Develop coping skills—instead of using substances—to escape pain
- Make the present and the future better than the past
- Heal from trauma and become substance free

Requirements:
- Difficulties with trauma symptoms AND a history of substance abuse or dependence
- Have a desire to improve one's quality of life

How do I sign up? Ask your psychiatrist or patient care coordinator for a referral.

Seeking Safety: Outline of Session Topics

- Safety
- Grounding
- Common Reactions to Trauma
- Substances
- Health Relationships
- Anger
- Compassion
- Creating Meaning
- Commitment
- Boundaries
- Coping with Triggers
- Honesty
About Seeking Safety Treatment (Orientation Session)

What is Seeking Safety Treatment?
This treatment is designed for people with a history of substance abuse and trauma. "Trauma" means the person has suffered a severe life event such as physical or sexual abuse, a car accident, natural disaster (hurricane), or combat. Many men and women who abuse substances have experienced a trauma sometime during their lifetime. Some people develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their trauma. You will learn more about this during your treatment.

Seeking safety addresses 12 topics. It is an "integrated treatment" program meaning that both trauma and substance abuse issues are worked on at the same time. This promotes the most successful recovery possible.

Why is it called Seeking Safety?
The #1 Goal of treatment is to help you become safe. Safety includes the ability to:
- Manage trauma symptoms (such as flashbacks, nightmares, and negative feelings).
- Cope with difficult situations without the use of substances.
- Take good care of yourself (getting regular medical exams, eating well).
- Finding safe people who can be supportive to you.
- Free yourself from domestic violence or other current abusive relationships.
- Prevent self-destruction (such as cutting, suicidal impulses, and unsafe sex).
- Find ways to feel good about yourself and enjoy life.

You may want to start thinking about what safety means to you.

Finding self-respect:
Many people with trauma symptoms and substance abuse, especially if these illnesses have gone on for a long time, find it hard to like themselves. You may feel you have lost yourself somewhere along the way. This treatment will help you understand yourself better, teach you to cope successfully with life, and promote self-respect.

What will be covered in the treatment?
Each topic focuses on a specific strategy to help you cope with trauma and substance abuse. Examples of topics are: Honesty, asking for help, setting boundaries in relationships, taking good care of yourself, compassion, recovery thinking, creating meaning, self-nurturing, respecting your time, and getting others to support your recovery.

The treatment involves changing three key factors in your life: How you behave, what you think, and the quality of your relationships. Because the focus is on thinking and actions, the treatment is called cognitive-behavioral.
What is the format of the sessions?
Each treatment session is structured to make the most of the time available. It involves four activities:

- **Check-in:** At the start of each session you will be asked to answer 2-3 questions: How are you feeling? What good coping have you done? Any substance use or other unsafe behavior? Some of these terms may be unfamiliar but they will become clear as treatment continues.
- **Handout:** You will receive a written sheet that summarizes the main points of the topic.
- **Discussion/Practice:** Most of each session will be spent discussing the session topic. For example, we will discuss how the topic relates to your life, and ways to apply the information being covered to current problems in your life.
- **Check-out:** At the end of each session, you will be asked to describe your views of the session. What was most helpful? Is there anything you did not like?

What if I miss a session?
If you miss a session don't stop coming! The goal is for you get the most out of treatment. Please try to be here for each session. **If you need to be absent, please call Charity Hammond, Ph.D. 713-791-1414 ext. 6699.**

Will I be terminated (kicked out of treatment) for using a substance?
No. The goal is to help you stay sober, however, Seeking Safety is designed to help you learn from mistakes and understand better what motivates the choices you make. You will not be terminated from treatment for using substances. You would only be prevented from returning to treatment if you present a serious danger to staff or other Veterans (for example: threatening behavior, selling drugs).

Will I get a chance to talk about my trauma?
Yes, but the aim will be to talk about the impact your trauma has on your current life. Our goal is to help you establish safety first and to learn new ways to cope with intense, negative emotions. Once you have mastered these skills, you can and should move on to talking in depth about the past. These guidelines are important to group members. Details about past traumas and substance abuse experiences can be too upsetting for other group members. You may want to consider individual therapy while attending the seeking safety treatment so you will have a place to talk about the past if you want or need to.

What if I don't like parts of the treatment?
The best thing to do is tell your therapist. Be honest about your feelings….it can help you get your needs met and also improve your treatment experience.

Who Developed the Treatment?
The treatment was developed by Lisa Najavits, Ph.D. She is an associate professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, an author of over 60 publications, and a recipient of many special awards. She is also director of the trauma research program in the alcohol and drug treatment center at McLean Hospital (Belmont, MA). You may also be interested to know that she has PTSD after crime victimization in 1987. If you have comments about this treatment, you can contact her program at www.seekingsafety.org.
Practical Information about Your Treatment:

Therapist's Name: Charity Hammond, Ph.D. 713-791-1414 ext. 6699

Schedule of sessions: Once weekly on Fridays from 11am-12:30pm for 12-24 weeks. Each session lasts 90 minutes.

Location of sessions: Houston V.A. Medical Center; 6th floor west end, room 6B-111.

If you cannot attend a session, please call and leave a message at: 713-791-1414 ext. 6699

Emergency Procedures:
It is very important to reach out for help in the event of an emergency!

What is an emergency? It is any situation in which you feel you are in serious danger of killing yourself or harming someone else. An emergency is also when your symptoms get so intense you need help getting them back under control.

What do I do in the event of an emergency?
- If it is during regular duty hours, you can report to the clerk in the 6B-100 waiting room. Tell them you are in a crisis and ask or a walk-in appointment to see a psychiatrist.
- If it is after hours or on weekends or holidays, go directly to the Houston V.A. Hospital emergency room. Explain that you are a patient in the Trauma Recovery Program and that you need help immediately. They will call the psychiatrist on call.

Other Important Situations in Which to call for help:
- You are at risk for drinking or using drugs call your AA/NA sponsor. If you do not have a sponsor or home 12-step group, call the Houston Area Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse at 713-942-4100. This agency can provide a list of local meetings you can attend. They also have trained counselors on staff who may be able to help you avoid relapse.
- You are at risk of self-harm and cannot get to the Houston V.A. safely:
  - Call the Veteran's Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
  - Call 911 (psychiatric crisis are just as serious as a heart attack)!
  - Call Crisis Hotline 713-526-8088
**How to get the most from this treatment:**

- It is possible to recover from both trauma symptoms and substance abuse. This treatment is designed to help you accomplish this goal. The treatment cannot work without you, therefore:

- **Notice your strengths:** Make an effort to identify your strengths, talents, and abilities. At each session you will be asked to give an example of something you did well (good coping) since the previous session. No one gets anywhere by putting themselves down.

- **Be honest:** Lies and secrecy often travel with trauma symptoms and substance abuse but honesty is the only path to recovery. In your treatment be honest about everything: Your substance use, your true feelings (both negative and positive), and your reactions to the therapist.

- **Safety above all else:** The highest priority is staying safe. In fact, for both trauma and substance abuse, there are several phases of healing. Right now you are in the first stage, establishing safety: getting off all substances, staying alive and not hurting yourself, locating a network of supportive people, and learning to cope with day-to-day problems.

- **Show up, no matter what:** Sometimes you may not want to come to treatment. You may have used a substance and feel ashamed. You may be so depressed that you don't want to get out of bed. Come to treatment anyway. Keep reaching out for the help that is available to you. You can talk about your mixed feelings in the session.

- **Stay focused on your own goals:** Do not compare yourself to other people. You are fighting your own battle. Whether others are doing better or worse does not matter.

- **Participate:** The more you put into something, the more you will get out of it. Listen, learn, speak up, read the materials, and try new coping skills being taught during each session. These efforts will pay off.

- **Free yourself from substance use:** Substances block your feelings and prevent emotional work needed to recover. While you may have mixed feelings about giving up substances (a natural reaction at first) keep talking about it in treatment and stay focused on freedom from all substances. You will feel more powerful, stronger, and better about yourself. Even if you cannot or do not want to give up substances, come to treatment anyway to get help with other problems in your life that you want to work on.

- **Know that you may feel worse before you feel better:** As you stop using substances, you will notice many changes. Some may be wonderful (increased energy). Others may be difficult (more depression, physical problems). Hang in there and these symptoms will go down little by little. "The only way out is through."
Seeking Safety Treatment Guidelines:

- The goal of this treatment is safety above all!
- I will try my very hardest to recover, including reading session materials and reaching out for all the help available to me.
- I am always welcome back, even if I relapse.
- The more I put into treatment, the more I will get out of it.
- In understand that I may feel worse before I feel better, but I should stick with the treatment no matter what.
- Everything said in treatment will be kept strictly confidential. I am aware, however, that there are certain legal conditions where the therapist is obligated to release records: 1. if I am in serious danger of harming myself or others, 2. if child or elder abuse becomes known, 3. if a court subpoenas the therapist's records.
- I will strive to be totally honest with the therapist about my substance use, my safety (including self-harm, suicidal impulses, and danger to others), and any negative reactions I have to treatment or the therapist.
- I will be on time for sessions and will leave a message when I need to cancel.
- If I arrive to a session intoxicated or high, I will not be allowed to participate. I will be escorted to a safe place until I can return home.
- Buying, selling, or using substances with another patient, or alone anywhere in or near this treatment office is a serious danger and may lead to my termination from this group.
- Urinalysis and/or breathalyzer testing will be conducted as part of this treatment. It will be conducted on a random basis (you will not be given any notice before being asked to give a specimen).
- I will not discuss details about trauma or substance abuse, to avoid upsetting other group members.
- I will strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect (no interrupting others, no physical contact between group members).
- Contact with group members outside of sessions is discouraged unless it is reviewed with the therapist in advanced to protect patients' boundaries.
- To help everyone feel safe, it is important that noting another patient says during a session is ever repeated to anyone outside of the group.

** The therapist, in turn, agrees to conduct the highest quality treatment possible, with respect and care, to help promote your recovery. The therapist will keep what is said in group confidential, but may discuss group members’ progress with their treatment teams. The therapist will report information about child abuse, elder abuse, and threats to oneself of others, as required by law.