

# MASS Educational Program

*Theories, Concepts, and Key Vocabulary*



**Week 5: Trauma**

**02/22/25**

“Working for one freedom requires working for the other. I use the word “freedom” intentionally here because I see Black ecofeminism not simply as a way of seeing, feeling, or being. Black ecofeminism is liberation politics meant to be mobilized. Audre Lorde provides an example of this thinking. Addressing women in her oft-quoted essay,

“The transformation of silence into language and action,” she warns against the dangers of female silence: “The machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak.

We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.”

- Jennifer C. James, excerpt from “*A Theory of the Bottom: Black Ecofeminism as Politics*”

# PTSD and Trauma - Anise

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (After Trauma Anxiety Reaction)

- a mental health condition that can develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event, develops when trauma isn't processed
- 2 different types, "simple PTSD" and "complex PTSD or c-PTSD)
- **Simple PTSD**
  - Occurring from a single incident
  - Examples: car accident, tornado, burglary, assault
- **CPTSD (Complex PTSD)**
  - Occurs from repeated incidents of trauma
  - Examples: domestic violence, ongoing child abuse, sustained traumatic events
- PTSD by any name is complex in nature, these distinctions can just help with knowing the specific support someone with CPTSD might need
- Both types share many causes, symptom profiles, and treatments

## Trauma

**Little "t" trauma:** less obvious traumas, that might not be considered life-threatening like chronic criticism, bullying, or losing a job.

**Big "T" Trauma:** major, often life-threatening events like a violent assault or a serious car crash.

Both cause emotional and psychological harm, with little "t" it tends to be accumulated while with big "t," the harm is more immediate. Just because you have trauma doesn't mean you have PTSD

## How It Manifests

- Trauma re-entering your mind even after the fact: nightmares, flashbacks
- Avoidance: numbing, feeling detached, avoiding any reminders of the trauma.
- Hypervigilance/sensitivity: being easily startled, sleeping problems, anger issues
- Lower functioning: problems with relationships, work, or other major areas of life.

## Harshness vs Compassion

**Harsh Talk:** Where you blame or beat yourself up

- Example: telling yourself you can't draw, you are untalented
  - This results in feeling bad, so you stop trying new things to avoid disappointment
- Harsh talk is easy and prevents change. Its simple to ignore something if 'I'm just bad at it'.
- After a traumatic experience, you can feel hopeless or weak and not strong enough to change, so blaming yourself and ignoring it hoping it'll go away seems like the easiest option.

**Compassionate Talk:** Being more understanding and loving

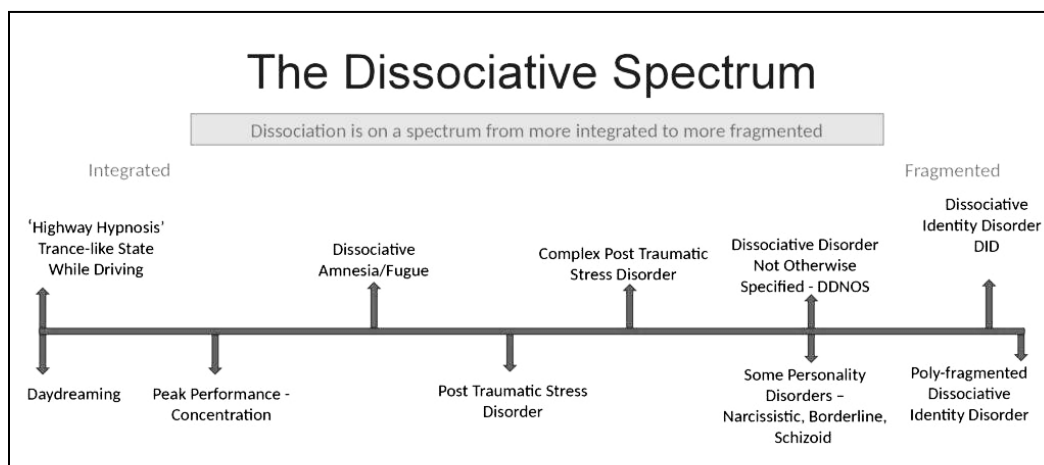
- Example: I'm still learning to draw and will get better with time
  - This results in feeling, better and more inspired to keep going
- Compassionate talk is difficult, it promotes change

## Real Life Application:

- You have to start reframing how you think and instead of saying you're hopeless or broken from your experience realize how strong and resilient you are to have made it out.
- Self-hatred is a cheap trick, an illusion of "taking responsibility" or "being truthful"
- Punishment does not change behavior in the long run, you can take responsibility without beating yourself up.

## Applying This to Broader Struggles

- This election (and ones before it) purposefully bombard the public with information, misinformation and legislation, to make us feel overwhelmed
  - This makes us feel as if anything we do is pointless
  - It's important to remember that it's rare that change happens immediately, but is something that takes time and planning.
  - It's important to even take a second to tune out and just focus on doing something because staring at our phones sitting in our safe corners mute as bottles we will still be no less afraid."



## Structural Dissociation and The Split Self

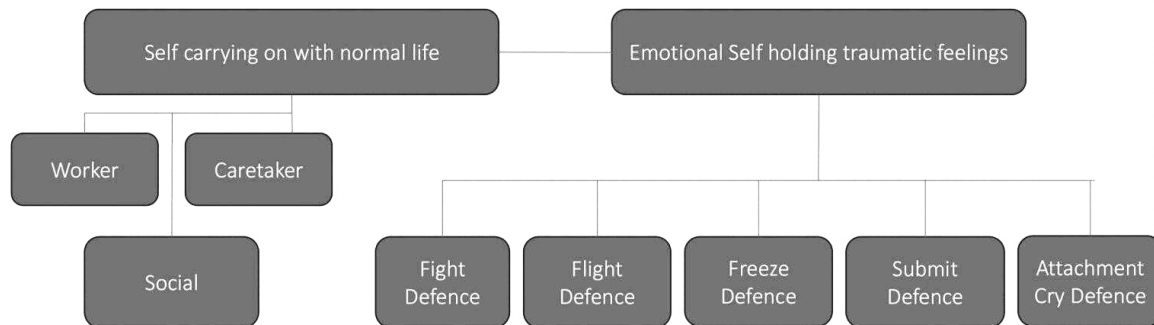
**Dissociation:** a mental process where a person is distracted from their own thoughts, feelings, and surrounding reality

**Normal Dissociation:** daydreaming, spacing out, 'autopilot'

**Complex Dissociation:** a strategy developed by your body to manage your environment and emotions with techniques like repression and detachment. A system of defenses that are structured to keep you as safe as possible from pain, fear, and abuse.

**The Split Self:** The different sides of yourself that come up when facing different life experiences. When the trauma happens your brain splits into two selves. **One self** that carries on with your life; working, being a

caretaker, being social, and interacting with people. Another self, is an **emotional self**, which holds the traumatic feelings, resulting in fight or flight defenses, freeze or submit, and attachment. These two can kind of replace each other, and spill over into one another if you're not taking care of this part of the brain.



### Real Life Manifestations:

- You could be working, totally fine, just locked in doing your work, then as soon as you go to the bathroom you break down crying.
- You can have an angry person or someone who feels more childish and helpless.
- You can have someone who's very strong, and yet has a lot of guards up.

When you split into those different versions of yourself it can be hard to remember what you're doing, why you were angry at that moment, or what the root feeling was.

### Boundaries and Relationships After Trauma

- It's easy to blame oneself (harsh talk) for not being the same person after a traumatic event.
- Feeling connected to people, being a 'good friend', and doing seemingly normal things can become impossible
- A comrade explained how this analysis of herself explained why she's felt so split off from relationships, recognizing that taking time to focus on oneself and set boundaries is a positive
- From an outside perspective, friends can have a hard time understanding what you are feeling, and it may just seem like you completely changed as a person randomly

## **Fear and Change**

- You can feel pressure to push yourself to be that person again, but that doesn't recognize how the experience has changed you
- It's important to not mourn who you were, but take the opportunity to rebuild and integrate those two sides in a healthy way with people who are healthier for you.
- Learn how to say Yes, how to say No
- Fear is just your brain putting up defenses in an attempt to stop you from changing.
- Fear-mongering in the media and information bombardment are telling you to stop change before it starts.
  - Follow the status quo, the government will always be more powerful than you, this group of people is better than this group of people, etc.

## **Mutual Aid from Trauma-Informed Perspective**

- Mutual Aid as a vessel for physically showing people they aren't alone
- Lack of a top-down structure allows for genuine relationships and for people to feel compassion from one another, instead of transactionary
- We don't know what's going on in other people's lives
  - Recent uptick in ICE raids and deportation fear mongering has most definitely resurfaced already existing trauma experienced by being an immigrant in America.
- Explicit invites to community meetings, repeated conversation, genuine interest in relationship building, and compassion to hear them and help them through their trauma.

## **Alienation and Detachment**

### **Detachment**

- feeling like a different person at work versus outside of work due to lack of connection to the product of labor; workplace alienation
- Trauma can create a detachment from anything that used to bring joy, now can feel meaningless
  - Struggling to feel happy or connected to activities, including creative work like art.
  - Feeling like art is made for profit or consumption rather than personal joy

- Before trauma, there was a personality built over the years – after trauma, that part of the self can feel distant or inaccessible.
- Returning to familiar places or seeing old friends can feel off, like being in someone else's body

## **Trauma and Capitalism**

To what extent is it (trauma) a product of capitalism, or of human nature?

- In capitalism, the constant struggle to survive speeds up mental processes and affects one's decision-making and general well-being
- Systemic conditions create large-scale trauma in communities (poverty, job instability, street violence, etc.)
- Many diagnoses are caused by trauma, and economic conditions intensify these effects
- Human nature and capitalism create a cycle where trauma is accentuated by material conditions and protective instincts.
  - Material conditions (poverty, exploitation, and oppression) create traumatic experiences.
  - The mind's protective mechanisms – instincts meant to protect from trauma – may start to justify it (in an effort to “protect” you)
    - Example: The mind may eventually internalize the trauma and feel like the abuse is deserved, deepening the condition
- Capitalism creates an environment of suffering in which you have to go to work every day, so you don't have time to process any traumas

## **Misplaced Anger & Its Effects**

People experiencing trauma under Capitalism often misdirect their anger. Instead of at the bourgeoisie, people start fighting the people around them – which can provide temporary therapeutic relief, but it stifles actual change toward those who inflicted that trauma upon you

## **Reclaiming the Self: Healing as a Revolutionary Act**

- Trauma, especially under capitalism, can cause self-destruction, both physically and psychologically.
- Many don't recognize their own trauma because suffering becomes normalized, or they are just too tired or beat-down to recognize it
- To revolutionize oneself you have to undo all that destruction, – put love, time, and effort into rebuilding oneself
- Healing is a conscious act of resistance, especially when trauma was inflicted to weaken and control – your body can become addicted to these positive things,

*A deeply loved community member shared her lived experience of being abused for most of her life:*

“...at some point, I started letting it happen, convincing myself it was okay, that maybe I wanted it. I played games with myself, told myself I was into it, that it was acceptable. But deep down, I wasn't. I just couldn't break free from the abuse that had followed me from being a young girl to now, even at this age...I have to process all of this – the way I let myself believe he was in charge, that I had to take what he did to me, all the pain, all the hurt. And I did take it. I took so much. And now, I'm left figuring out who I even am without it. Without him. My life feels like this endless path, stretching on and on, from when I was a little girl to now, and all through it, I've been afraid, unwanted, without any real sense of value. One of the only good things in my life was being a nanny, because at least then, I could care for children. I saw what they went through, how even kids in nice homes with good food and clothes could be damaged by their parents – people who didn't mean to be cruel but were. I saw myself in them. And now I'm here, still struggling, still trying to figure out what it means to be alone, to live in this apartment without him. Some days, I'm furious at him, even for dying, for lying to me about who would go first. I wasn't supposed to be the one left to deal with all of this.”

## Revolution as Therapeutic Action

Franz Fanon (psychotherapist, decolonial Marxist) said the best therapy is an armed revolution and spoke about violence as a way to reclaim your personhood and make yourself feel real – debatable but interesting.

## Psychological Colonization

- Comrade spoke to his friend from Sudan, who explained to him that the French were the worst out of all the colonizers, even King Leopold.
- King Leopold killed millions of people in the Congo and chopped off their limbs, but the French were worse because they colonized minds – changing how people thought about themselves/ the world
- In comparison with our community member's past, she is still figuring out ways to fight back and undo the things that he put in her head of the way she thinks about herself – not necessarily an armed revolution Fanon speaks of – she is reclaiming her personhood for herself.

*“If the human, the top, is what Enlightenment discourses and its offshoots have taught us it is (i.e., white, western, hetero-patriarchal, capitalist able-bodied male), with all other living things at the bottom, then I submit that the bottom is where we want to be.”*

*- Jennifer C. James, A Theory of the Bottom: Black Ecofeminism as Politics*

**The Bottom:** A theoretical space in society where marginalized people are placed by systematic oppression and constant dehumanization.

- “It's better to be at the bottom because you're with like-minded people. You're not with the people that are pushing people to the bottom”
- You have a community and you have an army with you. You're surrounded by people who think the same way/ have been treated in similar ways, it's a place to heal and organize.

# Intergenerational Trauma – Nai

Trauma passed down through generations; A phenomenon in which the descendants of a person who has experienced a terrifying event show adverse emotions and behavioral reactions to the event that are similar to those of the person him/herself.

## Caused By:

- Historical oppression and violence against a specific group of people
- How the traumatic event is remembered and retold in communities
  - **Collective Trauma:** An event that affects an entire group or community, often due to systemic oppression, racism, and unresolved historical violence
- A lack of resources to help heal the people affected, which just allows the cycle to continue

## Symptoms, and Manifestations & Long-Term Impacts

- People can experience trauma responses without personally experiencing the initial event.
- The emotional toll of oppression continues in unresolved ways that shape people's identity and self-perception.
- Example: The long-term impacts of Hurricane Katrina – the trauma wasn't just the storm itself but the racial discrimination and neglect that left people abandoned and without resources to recover
  - Although traumatic events like natural disasters may lead to generational trauma, systemic racism/discrimination and unresolved influences are what perpetuate the cycle.

## Mental and Emotional Effects

- Hypervigilance, panic attacks anxiety, PTSD, Depression
- Hopeless, higher chance of addiction
- Identity crises – loss of sense of self
  - especially when someone's home and community is destroyed (gentrification, genocide, displacement)

## **Physical & Social Effects:**

- Sexual abuse and domestic violence – the cycles of harm continue as trauma isn't processed and harmful coping mechanisms are implemented
- Emotional disconnection
  - the trauma can impact family structures, making emotional availability difficult as living conditions take priority for survival
- Struggles with connection, trust, and a sense of belonging, emotional and social difficulties

## **Poverty is Trauma**

- Poverty is a constant violation of one's human rights (life).
- Capitalism enforces intergenerational poverty, allowing disadvantage to start before birth
  - Children born into poverty face high cortisol levels during the gestational period resulting in slower development.
    - 1 in 6 children live in poverty (2020)
  - Social Capital (your network is your net worth)
    - Poor communities are systematically disconnected from wealth-building spaces and opportunities
  - Food insecurity, birth defects, and poor living conditions all contribute to one's environment, health, and upbringing
  - Emotional strain on parents to provide for their family to survive can decrease their emotional availability to support their kid
  - Policing, street violence, and incarceration
    - About 75% of police misconduct happens in communities under the poverty line.

## **Social Traumas**

### **Mass Deportation**

- Forced removal leads to separation of families & mass detainment
- Many face legal limbo, and uncertainty about the future, which increases stress, anxiety, depression, hypervigilance

- Lack of healthcare, aid, and resources to heal, since the trauma is still occurring
- Sexual violence is common in ICE facilities, compounding trauma

### **Police Brutality - “Existing While Black”**

- A systematic form of oppression that exists outside of isolated incidents
- Black people experience constant psychological and emotional tolls from systematic racism, violence, and over-policing
- Ongoing exposure to police violence leads to grief, loss, paranoia, anxiety, and PTSD

### **Genocide in Palestine - Blatant Dehumanization and Violence**

- Entire generations in Palestine grow up under constant violence and displacement.
- The systematic destruction of homes, families, and cultural landmarks in Palestine is an attempt to erase an entire identity and destabilize Palestinians in the region
- The constant threats of airstrikes and military raids create an environment where Palestinians live in perpetual fear, unable to establish a sense of security under oppression
- A lack of action from the international community reinforces the injustice, abandonment
- Normalization of violence deepens collective grief and pain

### **Coping Skills**

- Ask for help- reach out to someone safe (foster community)
- Persist – never give up
- List your Options – what can you do?
- Seek understanding, not blame
- Cry
- Create Meaning- what are you living for?
- Detach from Emotional pain (grounding )
- Notice the source – criticism, advice
- Focus on now
- Journaling

# Discussion

## **Inclusion & Connection**

- How to include people who can't, for example, leave their apartment to come in person?
  - Both as a way to help them cope and also support them through what they're struggling with.
- Making time for their political perspective – especially if they can't be physically present. How do we make sure their voice is still in the room? That's something we don't really have a clear answer to yet.
- Online communication can be overwhelming to manage, but even just starting small can make a bigger impact than we realize
- It's easy to focus on the big picture of wanting to include everyone, but even just on one block, so many people aren't being heard. Maybe it's about starting with just one person at a time.

## **Accountability & Engagement**

- Applying yourself in different places – talking to different people, and opening yourself up to new experiences allows you to learn more about others and their perspectives.
- Accountability is important too, hold yourself to the small actions of saying hello to the coffee shop guy, instead of just passing by.
- Being an intentional member of your community, people you wouldn't otherwise connect with
  - expect nothing from strangers but actively exist in the same space as them.
- Realizing that you and your actions affect your surroundings and your energy affects the people around you.
- Taking accountability for what you put out into the world, and learning from what comes back to you.

## **Reciprocal Healing**

- Support isn't one-sided, it can make people feel better to give advice sometimes
  - Asking someone for advice, or just to listen, makes them feel valued in the world, which is empowering.
- It's not necessarily always about being the most emotionally available person who has all the answers, it's about talking with them in a way that makes them feel needed and included
- Asking for their input, and including them in decisions

## **Collective Healing vs. Individual Therapy**

- Western therapy is inherently individualist, focused on *self*-coping, and internal issues.
  - Self-regulation, coping skills, and therapeutic techniques are often intended to preserve one's inner peace above all
- Collective healing as a system to combat it, as the tools created by capitalism, can not aid in dismantling capitalism.
- Degrees and science aside at the end of the day we're all just living experiences, sometimes solutions and ideas can come out of just regular back-and-forth conversation
- How do we create spaces where people can process things together instead of always having to handle it alone?

## **Rejecting Capitalist Definitions of Worth**

- Capitalism conditions us to search for a gain in everything we do. A reward, a sense of accomplishment, or something material.
- There is no monetary price or value we can assign to what is happening right here, us being able to converse and deal with our trauma.
- Everything under capitalism is assigned a price, so it's important to think about ways to do things that aren't about making money or gaining something.

## **Rethinking Intelligence & Success**

- People like to say the smartest people make the most money, but that's just not true. Some of the most insightful, intelligent people are the ones doing jobs that society doesn't value.
  - I know a guy who cleans the streets in Manhattan picking up cigarette butts and sweeping leaves just for them to get blown back again. But if you ask him about anything he'll give you the most insightful answer.
- When you give someone the space to speak their faces light up. Their situation is no indicator of their level of intelligence (like capitalism wants you to believe), they're just stuck in material conditions that don't value them.
- Some people make an active choice not to sell out, preferring a simple life with honest work over ruining lives on Wall Street.
- Capitalism wants us to believe the rich are the smartest, but they're just the ones most willing to exploit people. Wealth isn't intellect
  - Kwame Ture said that the smartest people are those who strive to become more and more conscious every day. The stupidest people are the ones working to exploit others and make millions of dollars.

## **Organizational Leadership and Personal Capacity**

### **Learned Helplessness and Organizational Leadership**

- People who have suffered the most trauma and the most difficulties in their lives often feel like they have less capacity to take things on.
- Often those same people are the ones who inherently understand the nature of the system the best because they experienced it the most.
- Black and Indigenous women particularly suffered the most in this capitalist, imperialist system that we live in.
  - Despite this, lots of the organizations, (PSL, other anti-capitalist orgs) are run by white people/white men. That is obviously institutional racism.
- Example: A comrade is a straight white guy who grew up comfortably – he recognizes that he has a lot of capacity to take on

and start a variety of different projects, which is helped because he isn't burdened by mental blocks, or financial hardships, compared to other people around him

- "I often end up in a position where people are coming to me like asking me questions – This happened in our encampment a lot in FIT. And people were frustrated because they were like, why is everybody going to him with everything? I don't have all the answers, I don't even necessarily want to be leading"

**Question:** How to balance a comrade like this who can take on many things, but stay aware of his standing in society and the reality that he will miss certain gender or racial undertones because of it.

*As someone whose material conditions have benefited from capitalism, how can I hold myself accountable in my activism while acknowledging my lack of lived experience and oppression?*

- Acknowledging your limitations and continuing to be honest about them
- Setting boundaries for yourself when sensitive situations happen, if you think you might not best person to mediate or discuss with
- As you continue to be in and interact with these communities, you'll learn who would be suited better for these situations, and then it's allowing and giving people the space/opportunity to share their experiences
- Listening to the voices of black women and women of color, *truly* like taking your time and listening to them and knowing that there's parts of the world that you can't understand.

*“The man that knows something knows that he knows nothing at all” – Erykah Badu*

## **Gender and Racial Dynamics in Activism**

- Historically, revolutionary organizations were abusive to the women around them (Black Panthers, Che Guevera, Mao, etc.)
  - What eventually led to their downfall
- As a black woman in particular, one comrade speaks on her experience of not feeling comfortable speaking, as she already feels that she won't be heard
  - Black women tend to be at the forefront of various struggles, but people will choose to ignore her and look to white figures, male figures, even choosing black men over black women, there is a level of respect that black women don't receive
- This societal and systemic mental abuse gives black women built-in ideas that they are less than because they are woman, because they're black, because they're both.
- This built-in psychological abuse makes people afraid, uncomfortable, desiring to talk but not being heard
  - “After a while, if you're living your entire life and nobody's hearing you, you just get tired, you just get fully over it”
  - Example – Educating white people: Black people have already suffered some of the worst atrocities of capitalism and then they have to turn around and teach people about all that suffering – it's tiring.

## **Self-Criticism and Radical Honesty**

- Being open to criticisms is vital to maintaining a safe and effective organization, but it's also important to bring criticisms in a principled way that highlights how we are all accountable to each other in a way that builds trust
  - The ability to freely communicate with comrades, with an understanding that any issues or critiques will be brought to the front and addressed for mutual betterment and cohesion
  - Recognizing when things aren't working, being open to changing, trying new things, working to find solutions
- Overthinking is caused by a lack of communication, getting in your head about how your actions or words could be misinterpreted by others and whether they will speak up on the issue in the first place.