




Understanding the ⁴ Stages of Recovering from Sex Trafficking

As I conduct anti-human trafficking work, I look back on my own recovery from sex trafficking and I notice that advocates and victims/survivors may not quite understand what it takes to recover, as well as, how long it takes to truly be set free. I'd like to address both advocates and victims/survivors, to help them better understand each other. Ninety percent of the work that was done to set them free came from the victim/survivor. The other ten percent came from a community of people who were willing to do their part. They were used as commodities to increase their traffickers' and/or employers' income and status. They must not be used as commodities to promote an organization's status or increase its income. Value what they have to offer because others can learn from their valuable insight.

To Organizers/Advocates: Understanding these four stages will give you an idea of what you need to consider before requesting a human trafficking (HT) victim/survivor to tell their story at your event or organization.

Some key items to remember are below:

- Revisiting their past is not easy, especially at first, but empowering them to tell their stories is key to setting them free.
- Telling their stories for the first time must be done with a qualified professional.
- Telling their stories can be healing for them, however, not handled with care, can re-traumatize them.
- Discussions with groups is done as a service to educate and also as a way to heal from their traumas.
- If they are in the beginning stages of recovery, revisiting their past can trigger them and cause them to regress, back into a dark place and/or relapse back into silence. If this occurs, it may require counseling from a qualified therapist before they are ready to tell their story to groups (if ever).
- If they are in advanced stages of recovery, revisiting their past evokes feelings of great pride for overcoming everything they've been through, and feelings of gratefulness for surviving it all.
- The more they tell their stories, (whether privately or publicly) the easier it becomes. Eventually it becomes only a story to them, one that doesn't haunt them anymore.
- Keep in mind that despite them reaching advanced stages in recovery, they may not be willing to go public with their story. Follow their lead and don't pressure them.




The more victims/survivors we empower to break the silence, the more perpetrators will be sent running.

- 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 them, you need their full consent.
- They need to know if the media was invited to the event and if it's open to the public. Include them in any emails and notices that go out announcing the event.
- Respect their time and efforts.
- Don't take credit away from them by introducing them as someone who has been "rescued" or "saved" from human trafficking. You can save a victim from a dangerous situation, but no one can save or rescue anyone from human trafficking. Understand it is very offensive and demeaning to victims/survivors when others claim credit for all the work THEY did to overcome.
- They should be treated like any other professional speaker and offered a stipend to show respect for their time. They should be reimbursed for expenses.
- Even though some may be willing to donate their time, don't expect them to work for free. Let them make that decision. They worked for free while being trafficked. They didn't have the freedom to make decisions or use their own judgment. We need to do the opposite of that.
- Give them the freedom they need and deserve to voice their concerns and use their own judgment. Answer all of their questions.
- Give them the time they need to prepare for the event and understand that they have the freedom, and the right, to change their minds, even at the last minute.

To *Victims/Survivors*: This article may help you recognize your own victimization, signaling 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 or concerns, bring this to your counselor/therapist to get the necessary conversations started.

Some key items to remember are below:

- Before you accept an invitation to tell your story at an event or when you sit down with a counselor/therapist, remember people will not always be empathetic, including trained professionals
- Human trafficking is a dark subject and hearing the stories can evoke personal emotions in your listeners. However, empathy does not come naturally, it's acquired. If some can't empathize, it can feel hurtful, but don't take it personally. Understand it's their lack of training or capacity that keeps them from being able to respond to you in the needed way. It has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with them.
- When considering opening up publicly, make sure you are strong enough to handle it if some persons 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 and insights.
 - Don't let others pressure you into doing something you don't feel comfortable doing. You can give back by volunteering as a mentor, organizer (of events), advocate for victims/survivors and/or help with clerical work at human trafficking organizations.


1. Victim/Outcast

First, they are victims and then they become outcasts. They were probably abused/and or neglected as children which made them easy prey for traffickers 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 below.

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

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

While being trafficked, they navigate through life with 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 and they believe the empty promises given to them by their trafficker. They become dependent on their trafficker as their protector, provider 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 outcast. 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 on 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.

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 struggling with the following::

- Reluctant to fall asleep because of nightmares
- Relive the traumas over and over through flashbacks
- Intrusive and negative thoughts are overwhelming to them
- Shame, guilt, and fear overwhelm them
- They don't understand their own thoughts and feelings
- 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 are present and need to be addressed
- Built up anger is confusing to them
- 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
- 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. Medical and legal needs are being addressed. They are learning life skills - how to budget money, balance a checkbook, cook and/or drive. Perhaps they are perfecting their English. They may be continuing their education in school.



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 have thoughts of using drugs again to escape the flashbacks, to help them sleep, or to just feel better. They receive counseling and start the process of getting acquainted. But they must 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 counselor. They have to "click" before it will be a fruitful relationship. Finding just the right counselor takes time. 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 they take advantage of their clients' naivety, vulnerabilities and a disproportionate need for approval and they re-exploit them
- They don't understand what sex trafficking victims need therapeutically and they unknowingly re-exploit them
- Pass judgement on them


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

3. *Thrivers*

Work is secured and they are taxpayers and 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 and continuing their education and/or have graduated. They are now a subordinate at work and 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 to understand:

- How they fell prey to traffickers
- What fears are holding them back in life and where they stem from
- 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, and 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
- Their childhood traumas
- Their adult traumas



During this phase, they are really learning a whole new way of communicating - 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:


- Be patient with themselves and others
- 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 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 in 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 whom 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 in many ways: such as mothers/fathers leading their children; a leadership position at work; 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 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.

I was stuck in stage three for over 20 years. Now, I stay in stage four most of the time, but I toggle back and forth from stages 3-4 because I am still learning.

Keep in mind:

Prevention is going to be a lot easier than intervention.

Once a victim gets lost in the life they don't see themselves as victims, so they don't ask for help; and they have to ask for help before they will be open to anything positive. Plus, once lost in the life, there's already a lot of psychology damage done. It takes a long time to heal from the traumas they've been subjected to.

No short-term individual intervention will save a victim from sex trafficking. A short-term prevention measure CAN prevent a victim from falling prey.

- 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.