

Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center Position Paper: Trauma Statement

When a traumatic event occurs, people can have many different kinds of reactions. The reason for this is that trauma shatters many of the beliefs people need to hold onto in order to function. Humans need to believe that the world is safe, people are trustworthy and responsible, and that they have some sense of control.

Traumatic events challenge these beliefs and put them into question. Some people may want to deny that the traumatic event has occurred. "If it didn't happen then my beliefs are still valid." Some people might convince themselves that that kind of thing can't "happen to us."

Other people might look for someone to blame. Being able to assign blame gives a sense of control in that it "makes sense" out of what is often a senseless event.

Others may use blame to avoid looking at their own reactions or having to face the evidence that each human being has the capacity for good as well as the capacity to do harm.

Sometimes people will even use self-blame because that is preferable to not being able to make any sense out of what happened. "If only" statements help people feel that there was something in a person's power that she or he could have done to prevent this trauma (hoping to still be in control). And sometimes maybe there was. However, there are so many interpersonal variables in a relationship or in an individual person, it is impossible to predict what "could have happened."

So who is responsible when trauma occurs? It is a difficult question to answer because there are also socio-cultural issues involved in traumatic events. Some people will blame the family when a young man or woman acts out in violence. Others blame the media for the constant messages about violence. Some people will blame poverty or social injustice or social privilege.

Ultimately, blaming is not helpful, nor is feeling guilty. It may help temporarily or for the short-term, but in the end, these feelings prevent acceptance and healing from trauma. Each person has to think about how this trauma has touched them and then begin to move through the grief process about the losses that inevitably come with trauma – whether it is the loss of a sense of safety, the loss of a sense of control or the actual loss of a family member or friend. Blaming may prevent people from moving through grief and can cause ongoing anger and resentment. In some cases, blaming can lead to acts of revenge, ending important relationships or mental health problems.

So what is a healthy way to respond to traumatic events?

One approach that many people find helpful is called trauma stewardship. This approach is a daily practice through which individuals and organizations attend to the hardships and recovery process of traumatic events.

- It acknowledges that life contains both pain and joy.
- It means believing that the response to trauma is intentional and sustainable.

Someone who practices this approach would want to:

- Stay emotionally and mentally present;
- Make responsible and honorable choices in responding;
- Make intentional choices rather than just reacting;
- Use compassion, including self-compassion and self-acceptance;
- Find joy and meaning in life.

Everyone has different ways of how they might practice this response. A good first step is an effective self-care plan. After that, start doing what is in the plan, one step at a time. It doesn't

have to be done alone; clue a close friend or family member in on the plan, or find a counselor who can be a support.

The Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center at U.Va. strives to practice trauma stewardship and self-care through collaboration, supporting each other and attending to social justice and gender violence issues.