



Care of Ourselves, Care of Others, Care of Community: Using This Guide in Trauma-Sensitive Ways

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Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg became a Reconstructionist rabbi in order to learn our people's diverse and nuanced histories, and create spaces, ritual, and organizing that helps transform our relationships to past, present and future. She has worked as a national organizer at Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, and as a collective member of the Radical Jewish Calendar project. She has served and learned from the rabbis and members of Jewish Voice for Peace and the Jewish Congregation at SCI-Phoenix Prison. She authored an Introduction to Trauma, Healing and Resilience for Rabbis, Jewish educators and Organizers, published by Reconstructing Judaism.

In this piece, the author outlines from her personal perspective the way secondary or vicarious trauma can impact learning about, working on, and responding to abuse and violence, and provides tools for reading and using this Study Guide with an awareness of those potential impacts.

In using this Study Guide for individual study or for work within your organization or community, you will be engaging with topics that are challenging on many levels. When we are engaging with violence, abuse, and their impacts in our communities, we are inevitably interacting with trauma.

Here are some important terms for this discussion: **Trauma** is a word for the way certain hurt and harm can leave imprints on our mind, bodies, spirits, and selves, affecting how we experience and react to the world. **Collective trauma** describes devastating harm that has widespread impact on a collective or a community, usually when the harm has the potential to threaten the survival or identity of a culture. **Intergenerational trauma** describes the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next, usually referring to transmission within a family system or familial relationships. **Historical** or **ancestral trauma** describes collective trauma that can be passed down generationally, through behavior, systems, values, and culture.

Approaches that are trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive provide frameworks rooted in understandings of the prevalence, layers, and impacts of trauma, while being strength-based, emphasizing people's innate capabilities, and our ever-present potential for healing and transformation. They aim to develop services, organizations, cultures, care, organizing, education, ritual, etc., in ways that:

- (1) work to create physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual safety, and
- (2) try not to actively re-traumatize people.

If you're reading this guide, you are likely already very aware of the ways that abuse and violence impact individuals, families, and your community, and can ripple across generations. You want to learn tools and frameworks for ending abuse and healing the hurt it has already caused. The layers of trauma in our society means that, whether or not your life has been directly impacted by abuse, engaging with the realities of abuse as it's discussed in this guide will likely affect you in strong and perhaps surprising ways.

At some point, in every book I read; every lesson I teach; in most meetings or discussions I have about harm, abuse, and trauma, I feel the impact of the content on my mind, body, and spirit. Sometimes I experience a relatively brief swell of feelings like grief or rage; sometimes I feel completely stopped in my tracks. Sometimes I notice the impacts of engaging with content about trauma while it is happening; sometimes I keep reading, writing, teaching, and talking, and later that day, find myself distracted, angry, depleted, or crying. **Secondary trauma and vicarious trauma** are terms to describe the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual impacts of hearing about, witnessing, and supporting people through processing traumatic events. Reading and discussing this guide might bring up your own traumatic and secondary trauma experiences. Working to end harm and abuse in your community might surface stories of violence, and witnessing this violence might, at times, bring up trauma responses in your body, mind and spirit. The frameworks of secondary and vicarious trauma substantiates this experience.

Over time, I've learned tools for anticipating and preventing getting overwhelmed by the impacts of working with trauma and violence. The more strategies I learn, the greater my capacity is to take in and hold hard things. I've learned to be mindful of where, when, how, and for how long a stretch of time I'm immersed in talking and learning about trauma. I have identified friends to call, songs to play, stretches to do, prayers to daven to prevent, address, and move through feelings and responses that emerge when working with trauma.

Most importantly, I've learned to welcome the moments when what I'm reading about punctures my mind's authoritative "I've got this" grip, and I feel the impact of what I'm taking in, feel it in my chest, hands, breath, spirit, heart, and guts. I try to welcome these moments as signs of my aliveness, paths to my humanity. I am not an objective outsider to the hard things I study and work on. I have my own trauma history; my family and friends, loved ones and communities have been harmed by individuals and by systems of oppression. I care deeply about this work because I care deeply about people who've been and continue to be hurt. When I don't acknowledge the way this work impacts me, I'm either shutting off or blunting some part of my humanity, or stuffing down my responses in ways that will emerge later.

What we can do to care for ourselves while reading about or working on trauma are things we often know to encourage others to do, but may struggle to take on ourselves. Taking time to care for ourselves as we work together for others is not extra or tangential to the work of ending violence and abuse in our communities. It is, first and foremost, a recognition that all of us and all our wellbeing, matter. We will not be able to create communities without violence and abuse if we devalue our experiences and responses. And tending and taking care of ourselves increases our ability to “show up” for this work—stronger, for longer, and more sustainably. Also, asking for and receiving care and support makes it possible for us to care for and support others.

So, how do we do it?

While reading this guide, ask yourself:

- How is this material impacting me today? How is this landing in my heart, body, spirit, mind?
- What am I holding for others while I read this today?

You're invited to:

- Take breaks when reading. Take breaks to breathe, move, look at the sky, simply get a little respite from taking in more information or hard topics.
- Talk with someone you can share openly with: a friend, therapist, spiritual director. Write in a journal. Pray.
- Develop your own practices and rituals for acknowledging and honoring the impact of what you're reading, thinking, and feeling, and what it brings up for you.

If you are using this guide with others, in meetings or study sessions:

- Offer a definition of **secondary and vicarious trauma**. Name and normalize that the discussion and work you're doing will have an impact on people.
- Structure and sharing: Offer people opportunities to reflect or journal individually, talk in pairs or small groups, and engage with the large group. In large groups and new groups, and when the purpose of the group is not therapeutic processing, I encourage people to stay vague in how they are describing abuse, and refrain from telling detailed stories of violence and harm. If you are creating space where people will be sharing abuse stories, make sure all participants know that is what will be happening, and have more than one facilitator present who can step out and support people individually. Offer multiple options and use invitational language, so that people have a choice about how to engage: “I invite you to turn to a partner or get out paper to journal.”
- Timing and spaciousness: Assume that opening this discussion will bring up thoughts, feelings, and memories that will impact how people are able to participate. Schedule breaks, try not to go from discussing abuse to other challenging topics, and leave ample time for what emerges. Open and close intentionally, with a meditation, prayer, poem, or moment of silence, both to focus and invite people into the room and the content, and to help them transition to the rest of their day.

Engaging Jewish tradition:

Jewish tradition has offered our people millenia of support for how to live, fight, struggle, survive, resist, grieve, and go on living. Our pockets are filled with the gifts our ancestors are offering us: wisdom, dreams, Torah, traditions, prayers, and songs. Bringing in Jewish practices can create or deepen the sense of connection and community among people. Song and prayer are embodied practices: we move and breathe differently, and usually engage more of our senses and parts of our bodies than when we are sitting and talking. When strong feelings and responses emerge from confronting trauma and its impacts, song and meditation can be practices that support our nervous systems to rest. Prayer and ritual can be containers for processing fear and grief. Jewish tradition can connect us to traditions of survival and healing, and engage our inner spiritual resources.

- Read a favorite psalm or verse from psalms. Psalms [116](#), [121](#) and many others include imagery of supportive Divine help.
- Invite participants to connect with ancestors (those we knew or never met, any ancestors real or imagined) who we feel offer us support, guidance, and loving care.
- Sing or chant any song your community uses or knows for prayers of healing. Offer a misheberach. Sing *ufros aleinu sukkat shlomecha*, "spread over us your canopy of peace" to open or close.
- A prayer for us all as we do this work: May we give and be open to receiving care and support from one another as we do this sacred work. May the love we bring to this strengthen our *neshamot*, our souls, and our resolve to work for a new world. May we trust the wisdom of our bodies and spirits. May we create safe, nurturing, and sacred communities for all, including those who shape, serve, and lead our communities.

This piece is part of the Respect & Responsibility: A Jewish Ethics Study Guide that is a joint project of Sacred Spaces and the Center for Jewish Ethics. Learn more at www.jewishsacredspaces.org.