

reclaiming “**victim**” and  
embracing **unhealthy coping**



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*for* harm reduction conference  
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# WHY NEGATIVE SURVIVORSHIP?

- many survivors do not identify with overwhelming positivity and compulsory optimism/hopefulness of the trauma recovery industry
- linear, short-term paths to “healing” and “recovery” back to normalcy mandated by institutions are unrealistic
- treating lack of optimism and self-esteem as personal failures reinforces victim-blaming
- true validation of survivors’ experiences must include embracing of weaknesses, failures, and vulnerabilities

# WHAT IS NEGATIVE SURVIVORSHIP?

- validation of any and all survival strategies (including so-called “unhealthy” ones) to cope with psychological trauma
- rejection of the singular model of healing and recovery which prescribes a linear, time-limited path
- skepticism toward *compulsory* optimism, hopefulness, and positivity which reinforce victim-blaming
- promotes non-judgmental, person-centered approach to supporting victims and survivors of trauma

HEALTHY VS.  
UNHEALTHY COPING

# WHAT QUALIFIES AS “HEALTHY COPING”?

## Healthy Coping Choices

- ❖ Humor
- ❖ Asking for support, reaching out
- ❖ Getting enough sleep; Exercising
- ❖ Eating nutritiously
- ❖ Taking care of yourself
- ❖ Having a positive and creative outlet for feelings
- ❖ Talking to someone supportive
- ❖ Calling the crisis line
- ❖ Learning more about sexual assault and healing from it
- ❖ Nurturing yourself; Being gentle with yourself
- ❖ Attending a support group

**Some healthy coping choices I have made are:**

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from *Gathering Strength*, a pamphlet made by Portland Women’s Crisis Line

# Coping Strategies

## Healthy coping

- ◆ Routines
- ◆ Healthy eating & sleeping
- ◆ Mindfulness
- ◆ Exercise
- ◆ Pace yourself
- ◆ Inspirations
- ◆ Support
- ◆ Self-compassion
- ◆ Add creativity

## Not so healthy coping

- ◆ Chaotic lifestyle
- ◆ Compulsive behavior
- ◆ Smoking
- ◆ Eating stimulants
- ◆ Doing it alone
- ◆ Risk taking behaviors
- ◆ Beating self up
- ◆ Blaming others
- ◆ Impulsive emotional reactions

slide from the joint staff/  
volunteer training for  
YWCA Yolanda House  
and Raphael House, local  
domestic violence shelters

# OTHER EXAMPLES OF “UNHEALTHY COPING”

- negativity
- defeatism
- social withdrawal
- lowered expectations
- hopelessness
- pessimism
- eating “disorders”
- substance use and abuse
- ambivalence/avoidance
- self-injury
- indecision

- passivity
- silence
- promiscuity

...and other so-called  
“unhealthy” behaviors and  
thoughts people use *some*  
or *most* of the time, which  
*must be validated and*  
*supported by advocates*

**Self-injury is a common behaviour in our society. What do you think is self-injury? Why?**

- working very hard
- smoking
- running a marathon
- dieting
- not getting enough sleep
- exercising excessively
- not exercising at all
- piercing
- drinking alcohol
- walking on high heels
- getting tattoos
- playing football
- eating an unhealthy diet
- mountaineering
- living with someone who insults you
- skateboarding
- ballet
- getting cosmetic surgery
- having unprotected sex
- wearing a corset
- kinky sex / BDSM
- fasting
- working in a job you hate
- driving dangerously
- getting into fights
- skydiving
- BASE jumping
- undergoing psychoanalysis
- working even though you are sick
- depilating (waxing etc.)

taken from *Hurting Yourself*  
published by The Icarus Project

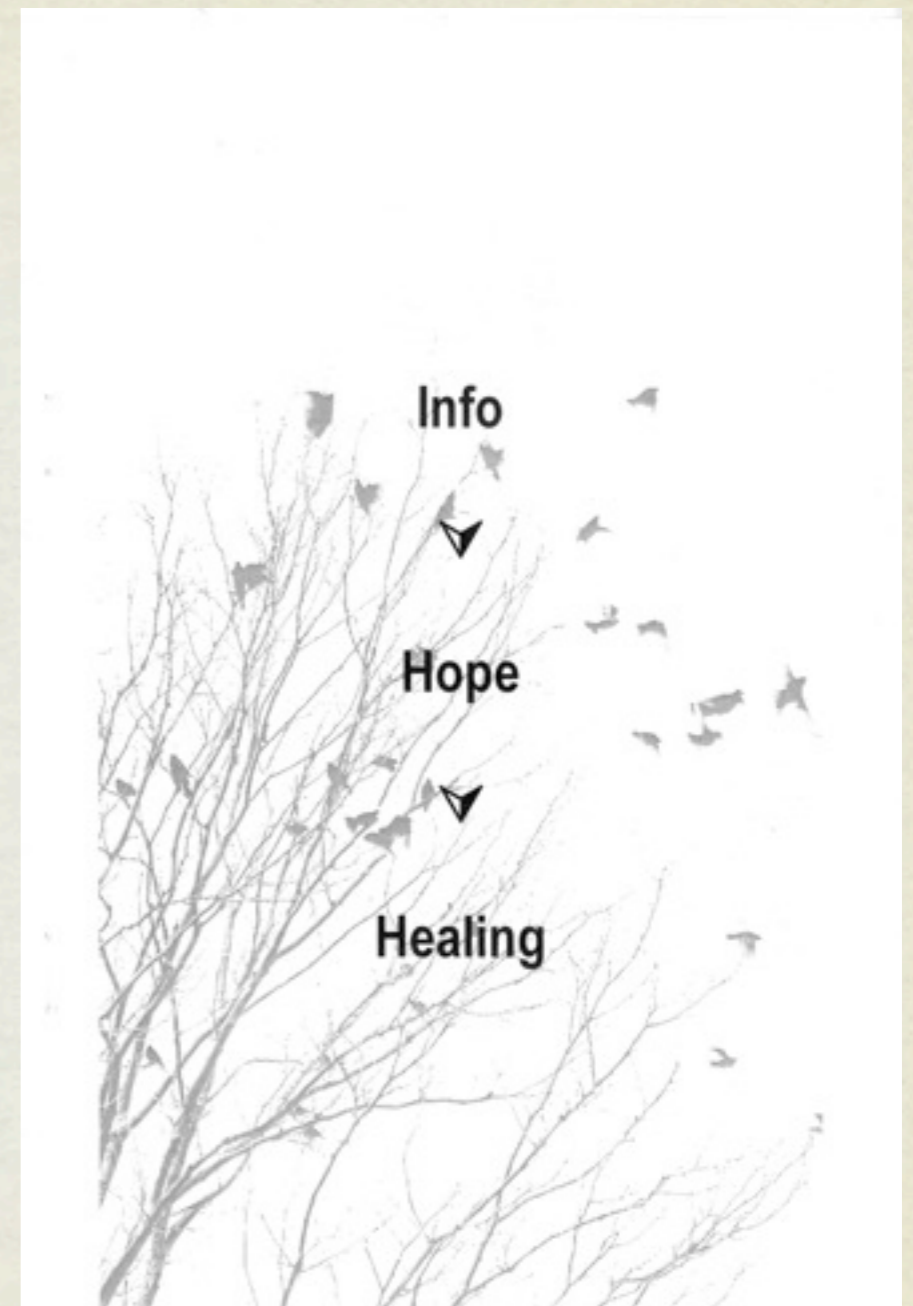
what makes some self-injurious  
or self-risking behaviors  
socially acceptable, while  
others are deemed socially  
unacceptable/inappropriate?



COMPULSORY POSITIVITY  
AND VICTIM BLAMING

# POSITIVITY AS A GOAL AND AN EXPECTATION

- supporters and advocates view their role as “giving hope,” fostering positive outlook on life
- pessimism and hopelessness are dismissed as symptoms of PTSD and depression
- philosophy that individuals can change their lives by *simply changing their attitudes* leads to victim-blaming



pamphlet created by Portland  
Women's Crisis Line

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

supposedly “inspiring” quote from **Eleanor Roosevelt**, found on the very beginning of the new resident handbook (given to everyone who comes to the shelter) at Raphael House, a local domestic violence shelter

...which arguably reinforces victim-blaming: if you don't feel good about yourself (immediately after leaving the abusive relationship to go into a shelter), you are *consenting* to feel that way and *therefore it's your fault*.

# WHY DO PEOPLE PREFER “SURVIVOR”?

- “victim” construed as weak, passive, vulnerable; “survivor” as strong, proactive, resilient

“You have made it past the assault, and you have earned the title of ‘survivor’ rather than the depressing identifier ‘victim’. It takes courage, bravery, and strength to tell your story [...] Being a survivor [...] means that you are not letting yourself or your life be defined by your assault. [...] Identifying as a survivor is a major step in the healing process.”

— D.C. Rape Crisis Center

- ...but isn't there a way to embrace weakness, passivity, and vulnerability in order to validate and honor full range of responses to trauma?

Yes, you are a victim of sexual abuse, but a victim stays in a victim role and never moves further and changes any behaviors that might change the outcome of the feelings that you are suffering from. You can't change what happened to you... but you CAN change how you will react to it and how you want your life to be from this day forward! Once you make the decision to recover, you have the power to change your life!! Your abuser does not have to win! You can take back your power and move on and not stay stuck where you are!

— a sexual abuse support website

Everyone has setbacks, disappointments and frustrations. But the way you respond to these challenges and opportunities is what defines you. Whether you become a victim or a “seasoned survivor” depends on your attitude and the way you view the setback. [...]

Whatever has happened, you can choose to whine and complain about it, or to profit and learn from the experience. Whining is not only unproductive, it also pushes away your support network. Friends and colleagues will listen for just so long, but then it is time to move on. The choice is yours. Your life depends on it.

— Mayo Clinic (note: above is from an article about surviving cancer, which is often treated similarly to other traumatic events)

# INSPIRATION OR VICTIM-BLAMING?

- emphasis on having positive outlook, rather than creating concrete changes in the societal institutions
- suggestion that we all “have the power” to change our lives, neglecting how our power is being weakened and stolen by violence and injustices
- victim/survivor dichotomy
- shaming “whining” and “complaining” leading to blame

# THEORIZING THE “VICTIM ROLE”

- “victim role”: an extension of sociologist Talcott Parsons’ theory of “sick role”
- victimhood is construed as something that *must be overcome*; healing is not optional, but *mandatory*
- failure to move from *victim to survivor* in timely manner results in victim-blaming and sanctions
- like “sick role,” “victim role” is part of the mechanism through which *heteronormative family structure* and *neoliberal capitalist economy* perpetuate themselves



# CONCLUSIONS

# EMBRACING THE COUNTER-INTUITIVES

- we need to honor and embrace counter-intuitive strategies to cope with trauma, including negative survivorship and “unhealthy” coping
- further, we need to embrace weakness, passivity, vulnerability, and even unproductive whining and complaining
- friends, family members, and advocates should own their uncomfortableness with negative survivorship and manage it as such, rather than burdening the victim/survivor with any additional responsibility to be so positive

# HARM REDUCTION- BASED ADVOCACY

- validates whatever ways survivors have learned to cope with their pain and increase their sense of control
- recognize that power and privileges impact survivors' vulnerability to and capacity for dealing with trauma
- offer non-judgmental, non-coercive support and resources that respect survivors as experts in their own lives
- goal of intervention: to help individual achieve goals they set for themselves, not what we think they should do

See <http://eminism.org/readings/harmreduction.html> for the full list.

# BOOKS THAT MAKE SENSE TO ME

*Hello Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks and Other Outlaws* by Kate Bornstein

*The Queer Art of Failure* by Judith Halberstam

*Cruel Optimism* by Lauren Berlant

*Live Through This: On Creativity and Self-Destruction* ed. by Sabrina Chapadjiev

*Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* by Barbara Ehrenreich

***“unhealthy”***  
on coping with pain in socially inappropriate ways

if you liked my presentation,  
you might like to check out  
my zine, *“unhealthy”*: on  
coping with pain in socially  
inappropriate ways



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