Response to Traumatic Stress

# Identity Threat

Street Intervention workers described a tension between the person they use to be and the person they are now. Self-concept is a psychology term used in reference to one’s perception of who they are: socially, physically, spiritually, emotionally, etc[[1]](#footnote-1). One’s self-concept changes over their life course based on their development and life experiences. Studies examining Complex PTSD acknowledge that individuals with chronic exposure to violence often experience negative self-concept, or develop a negative image of themselves that becomes a basis for how they act and relate with others.

The self-concept of street intervention workers is highly dynamic. Their professional role is often part of a process of redefining how they view themselves and their relationship to the communities they work in. Many street intervention workers engage in this area of work as part of a personal journey to repair past harms, reframe their personhood, and prevent others from committing similar errors. Their work in violence reduction contributes to a positive redefinition of their self-concept. Their work in violence reduction contributes to a positive redefinition of their self-concept, as reflected in the figures below;

Despite these efforts to redefine themselves, street intervention workers shared that trauma exposure in street intervention work threatens their transformative journey and development of a positive self-concept. This dynamic was described as “identity threat”, which generally refers to the experience of having their self-imaged threatened by the use of negative stereotypes, or by devaluing or stigmatizing an element of one’s identity. More specifically, their identity as a peace maker, community leader, violence prevention specialist, and reformed/ rehabilitated citizen are called into question.

A supervisor reflected on a dialogue with a worker he wanted to bring on to his team:

*Man, if you're not open to any therapy, then I don't think, you know, we're gonna be able to bring you on our team, man. 'Cause I don't wanna push anybody away. You know, you can be a valuable asset to the community and then you can do so much too, but, uh, if you're not ready to confront your own demons, how are you gonna help everybody else with theirs?*

Supervisors remind their staff “you will be tempted” on the job. The temptation will be a test of their resolve to maintain their new identity as a professional, peacemaker, and community builder. One may be tempted to engage in previous behaviors in their interactions with someone who is currently street involved~~.~~, or they may be triggered by witnessing a shooting or losing a close friend to gun violence. An outreach worker reflected on an incident when he was threatened by a client on the job;

*But when you want to get disrespectful, you made me respond in a way that I didn’t want to, but I had to get your attention… and I was shutting it down and my life was in jeopardy, but you know, being a good person, I had a lot of people speaking up, letting people know, "You better not touch him,"… And you know, my ego, you know, that's one thing about this ego, you know, it wanted me to go just to show, you know, that I ain't the one.*

Finally, study participants shared that when a high-profile incident involving the misconduct of a street intervention worker occurs, it negatively affects the entire profession. They feel, and internalize, the negative perception of street intervention expressed through media outlets and the ensuing public commentary. These sentiments reflect that when one person ‘falls back’, it has ripple effects within the entire outreach community.

# Food for Thought

* As reflected in the quotes above, the relapse into a previous lifestyle happens gradually. To support street intervention workers in their personal and professional journeys it is important to recognize personal and situational triggers that may provoke a relapse into old habits. It is recommended that supervisors and teams discuss these triggers:
  + Are there certain people that provoke negative thoughts and feelings when interactions occur?
  + Are there certain contexts that create temptations to act in ways inconsistent with one’s personal and professional goals? (i.e. parties, bars, hangout spots, etc.)
* When staff members feel tempted to revert back to old habits, what helps them resist? What supports could help them via their supervisor and team members?
* In situations where exposure to relapse triggers is unavoidable, are their opportunities for street intervention workers to respond collectively (i.e. in the company of a coworker)?
* How is professional identity acknowledged within supervision spaces and/ or team meetings? Are opportunities provided for street intervention workers to reflect on how they view themselves as professionals and who they want to become?

1. Neill, J. (2005). *Definitions of various self constructs: Self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-confidence & self-concept.* Wilderdom. Retrieved from [**http://www.wilderdom.com/self/**](http://www.wilderdom.com/self/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)