

Beyond Trauma

The Role of Mental Healthcare in the
Post-Trafficking Journey of Adult Survivors



Executive Summary

The Issue

Human trafficking impacts an estimated 1,090,000 people in the United States¹, and its mental health consequences are profound and enduring. Even after exiting exploitation, research shows that 96% of survivors report at least one psychological issue, and 21% of survivors have attempted suicide after trafficking².

When survivors exit exploitation, they face a crushing gap: 75% say trauma-informed mental health care is their top need³, but qualified therapists who understand trafficking dynamics are scarce, diagnostic criteria and licensure requirements create barriers to access, and evidence-based practices lack trafficking-specific validation.

Furthermore, without addressing trauma, it can be hard for survivors to maintain housing, hold jobs, or build a supportive social network. Providing them best-in-class mental health services is thus foundational to ensuring that survivors can achieve stability, are protected against revictimization, and thrive long term.

What's Working

Drawing from interviews with lived experience experts and leading practitioners, this report identified the following replicable approaches to deliver effective care:

- **Crime Victims Treatment Center** offers various highly individualized modalities, including AEDP*, that emphasize healing through safe relational connection.
- **Eleison Foundation** uses PhotoVoice, training survivors to take photos and tell their own stories, to deliver both rigorous research and a healing intervention.
- **EMPOWER Center** facilitates access and holistic care by partnering with hospitals to deliver multi-disciplinary services in one trusted location.
- **Restore NYC** provides group therapy for navigating recovery within culturally-specific gender, faith, and family dynamics, with a curriculum created by leveraging AI*.
- **Sanar Institute** trains therapists through a 40-hour certification program and integrates somatic experiencing rooted in cultural culinary practices.
- **Shobana Powell Consulting** equips practitioners through its survivor equity and inclusion framework, and guide to trauma-informed interpreting and translating.
- **You Are More Than** leads a national network of vetted trauma therapists and sends "wellness boxes" to survivors not yet ready for formal therapy.

*Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy (AEDP), Artificial Intelligence (AI).

¹Walk Free (2023). **The Global Slavery Index 2023**.

²Lederer, L.J. & Wetzell, C.A. (2014). **The Health Consequences of Sex Trafficking and Their Implications for Identifying Victims in Healthcare Facilities**. Annals of Health Law, Volume 23, Issue 1, Winter 2014, Article 5, p. 71.

³Polaris (Jan. 2023). **In Harm's Way: How Systems Fail Human Trafficking Survivors. Survey Results from the First National Survivor Study**, p 31-34.

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Use of Technology

The emergence of AI and how it could contribute to addressing the field's persistent barriers was also explored. Practitioners are proceeding with caution given the complex relational trauma survivors experience and their safety needs. However, AI-powered apps such as **ComingHome.ai**, founded by survivor leader Dr. Brook Parker-Bello, can deliver emotional regulation and mindfulness tools to augment therapeutic interventions.

The Path Forward

Closing the gap in the availability of mental health services is required for healing trauma from trafficking and requires action across the field:

- **Service Providers** need to implement survivor-led evaluation methods, explore innovative approaches like wellness boxes, peer support and culinary/pottery somatic experiencing, and prioritize survivor choice and safety when integrating AI tools.
- **Funders and Government** should fund multi-year trafficking-specific initiatives—including trauma therapy that is not disrupted mid-treatment, research to establish evidence-based practices, and substance use treatment programs.
- **Academia** must incorporate trafficking trauma into core curriculum for social work and counseling programs, and advocate for expanding the DSM-5 criteria to capture the reality of complex trauma from trafficking.
- **Clinicians** need to pursue specialized training like Sanar's certification program, and join national directories to provide accessible trauma care.

Survivors are clear about what they need. The expertise exists. What's missing is the infrastructure, funding, and trained workforce to deliver at scale. With coordinated investment and commitment to survivor-centered care, we can ensure that every survivor has access to the specialized therapeutic support essential to their healing and long-term freedom.

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Leaders Interviewed: Mitha Choudhury, EMPOWER Center | Sanctuary for Families; Dr. Laura Cordisco Tsai, Eleison Foundation; Kate Keisel, LCSW and Sarah Lott, MPA, Sanar Institute; Taylor Loomis, LCSW, Crime Victims Treatment Center; Gabrielle Masih, LCSW, Restore NYC; Dr. Shobana Powell, DSW, LCSW, Shobana Powell Consulting; Ashante Taylorcox, MA-MHC, LPC, You Are More Than.