

Seeking Safety: Coping Skills

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Seeking Safety is a widely used, evidence-based model developed in 2002. Originally designed for co-occurring posttraumatic stress disorder and substance use disorder, it has since been applied more broadly to other populations (e.g., subthreshold, trauma history only, other addictions). The title of the treatment — Seeking Safety — expresses its central idea: when a person has trauma and/or substance use problems, establishing safety is the most urgent clinical need. Safety is an umbrella term that signifies various elements, including safety from addictive behavior, from dangerous relationships, and from extreme symptoms such as violence to self or others.

Seeking Safety is a cognitive behavioral therapy that can be used from the start of treatment. It was designed for males and females, any type of trauma, any type of substance, any level of care, any clinician, and any individual or group modality. It encourages patients to explore the link between trauma and substance abuse, but without delving into details of the past that could destabilize a person. It is present-focused, offering psychoeducation and safe coping skills in an integrated fashion, focusing equally on trauma and addiction. It is highly flexible to adapt to different settings, and has been used successfully with numerous populations including adolescents, military and veterans, homeless, domestic violence, criminal justice, racially diverse, traumatic brain injury, serious and persistent mental illness, illiterate clients, and others. It embodies a compassionate tone that honors what patients have survived and respects their strengths. It is also one of the lowest-cost models to implement and thus, from a public health perspective provides few barriers to entry.

Seeking Safety offers 25 topics; each is independent of the others, allowing the clinician to conduct as few or as many as time permits. Each topic represents a safe coping skill that focuses on cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, or case management domains. The topics include: PTSD: Taking Back Your Power; Compassion; When Substances Control You; Creating Meaning; Discovery; Integrating the Split Self; Recovery Thinking; Taking Good Care of Yourself; Commitment; Respecting Your Time; Coping with Triggers; Self-Nurturing; Red and Green Flags; Detaching from Emotional Pain (Grounding); Honesty; Asking for Help; Setting Boundaries in Relationships; Getting Others to Support Your Recovery; Healthy Relationships; Healing from Anger; Community Resources; Introduction/Case Management; Safety; Life Choices; and Termination.

Thus far, Seeking Safety is the only model for PTSD and substance use disorder that meets standard criteria as an effective treatment in the field. The evidence base of published studies represents a broad range of investigators and populations and includes seven pilot studies, six randomized controlled trials; one controlled nonrandomized trial; two multisite controlled trials, and one dissemination study. Usually the patient samples represented severe and chronic PTSD and substance abuse, and had relatively high minority representation. Overall, all studies found positive outcomes; in the controlled and/or randomized controlled trials, Seeking Safety typically outperformed the comparison condition; treatment satisfaction was high in all studies.

For further information on Seeking Safety, visit www.seekingsafety.org. The site provides downloadable articles, all of the outcome studies, information and training and resources, and other details.

Lisa M. Najavits, PhD, is professor of psychiatry, Boston University School of Medicine; Lecturer, Harvard Medical School; research psychologist at VA Boston and VA Bedford; and clinical associate, McLean Hospital. She is author of the books Seeking Safety: A Treatment Manual for PTSD and Substance Abuse; A Woman's Addiction; and over 135 professional publications. She has received various awards, including the 1997 Young Professional Award of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies; the 1998 Early Career Contribution Award of the Society for Psychotherapy Research; the 2004 Emerging Leadership Award of the American Psychological Association Committee on Women; and the 2009 Betty Ford Award of the Addiction Medical Education and Research Association. She is chair of the upcoming SAMHSA Treatment Improvement Protocol on Trauma and Substance Abuse.



Kat Hoffman "Timothy's Garden"

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