HOLY THERAPY, BATMAN!



The Use of Superhero Narratives with Trauma Impacted Adolescents

Presented by
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Association for Creativity in Counseling's 2026 Conference

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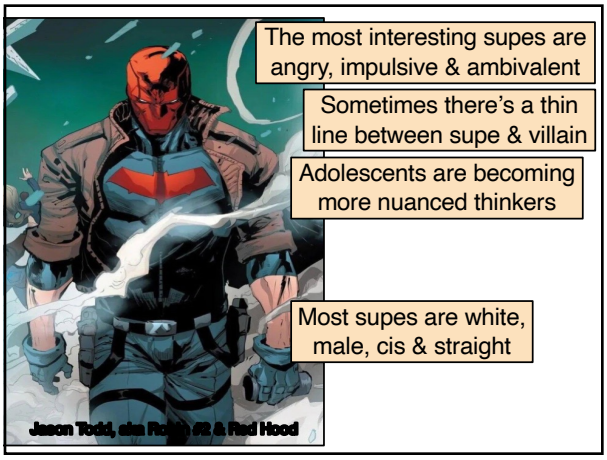
BEFORE WE START

- This is a presentation about trauma
- Many of us have our own trauma histories
- This isn't therapy, supervision, or a case consultation
- Let's avoid overt examples
- Take care of yourself

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Supes aren't models of mental wellness

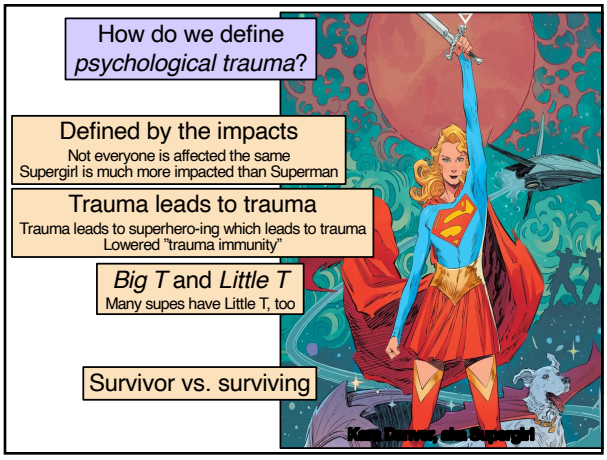
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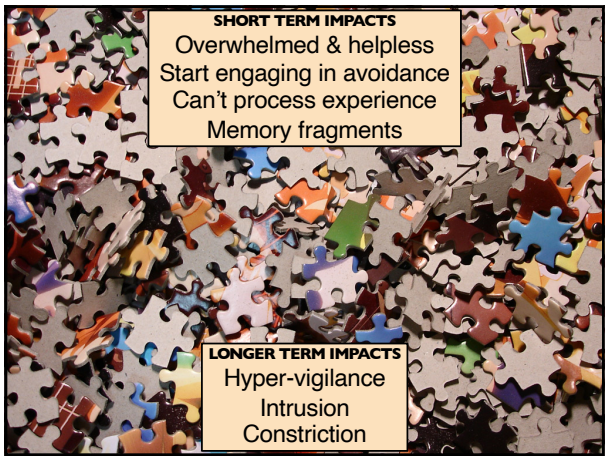
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Part 1:
TRAUMA 101

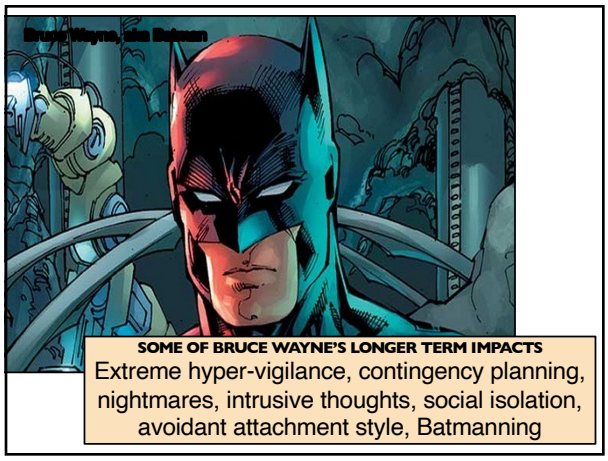
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Part 2:
3 COMMON TOPICS

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PETER'S BACKPACK OF [bleep]



UNPACKING THIS METAPHOR
Talk about trauma without naming it
Teens readily acknowledge [bleep]
Swearing is therapeutic

Peter's backpack includes multiple moral injuries

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WANDA'S COMPLICATED GRIEF

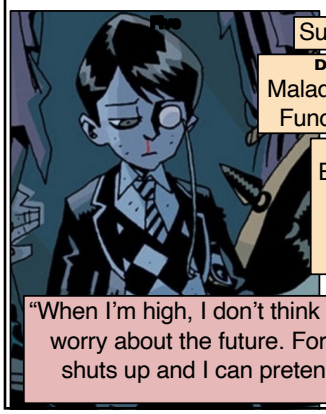


Traumatic grief
vs. complicated grief

TWO TYPES OF TRAUMA-RELATED GRIEF
Grieving what happened
Grieving what *didn't* happen

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FIVE'S SURVIVING MODE



Survivor vs. surviving

DEFINING SURIVING MODE
Maladaptive coping strategies
Functional, but not effective

FIVE'S SURVIVING MODE
Excessive alcohol use
Gambling
Depersonalization
Delores

"When I'm high, I don't think about the past and don't worry about the future. For a little while, my brain shuts up and I can pretend everything is okay."
Andrew, treatment journal

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Part 3:
TAKING OFF THE MASK

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THE EARLY YEARS
Born into family of acrobats
Becomes BW's ward
Starts training to be Robin

DICK'S LATE TEENS
Life of "chaos, danger & stress"
Failed identity formation
BW fires him



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If I take off my mask, who am I?

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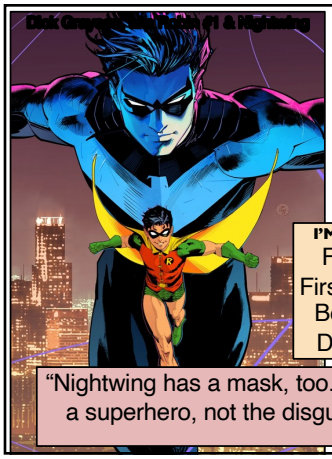
ADOLESCENT MASKS

COMMON MASKS
The I'm Fine Mask
The Oppositional Mask
The Angry Mask
The Self-Destructive Mask
The Violent Mask

CLIENT NAMED MASKS
The Tragic Clown
Damaged Dude
Perfect Princess
Leave Me the Fuck Alone

- **We tend to focus on the masks (i.e. the behaviors), not what's underneath**
- **Adolescents like this because we're not focusing on their feelings or trauma**
- **As a result, the masks get reinforced**

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I'M NOT ROBIN ANYMORE
Forms Teen Titans
First peer relationships
Becomes Nightwing
Develops resilience

"Nightwing has a mask, too. But it's the uniform of a superhero, not the disguise of a scared kid."
Nathan, former client

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