

Apr 15th, 1:00 PM - 3:00 PM

Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse:What Heals and What Hurts in a Couple Relationship

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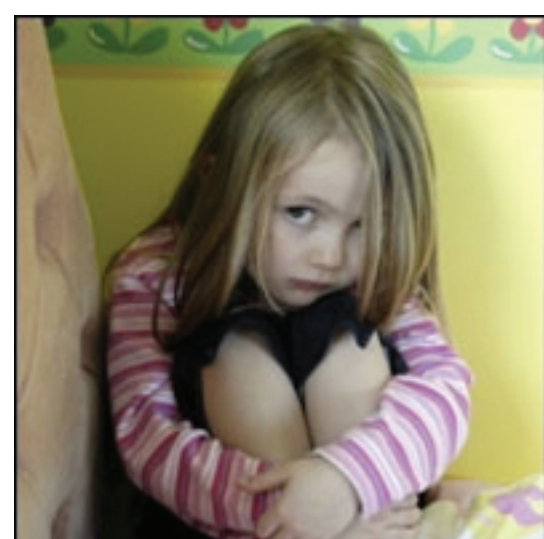
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SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE: WHAT HEALS AND WHAT HURTS IN A COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

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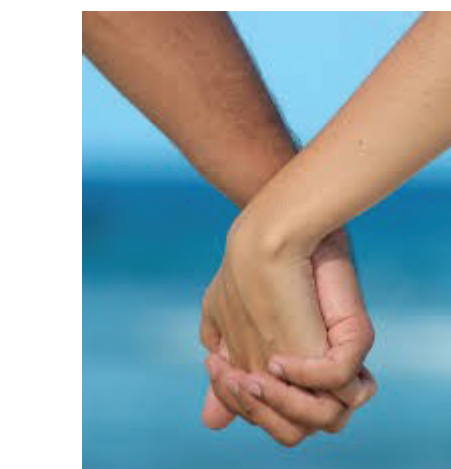
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ABSTRACT

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a significant trauma that affects a person's self-concept and ability to form healthy intimate relationships later in adulthood. Approximately 20% of adults who experienced childhood sexual abuse go on to evidence serious psychopathology in adulthood (Harway & Faulk, 2005). The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the survivor's experience of what is helpful and what is counterproductive in their healing process within the construct of their couple relationship.). Knowledge of how relationship partners affect the healing of the survivor may be beneficial to couples' therapists, to survivors themselves, and to their intimate partners.

BACKGROUND

CSA, causes deep turmoil in one's internal state and severely ruptures one's ability to maintain intimate connections with those around them (Conklin & Padykula, 2009; Wallin, 2007). When couples participate in therapy together, as a survivor heals, couples have a unique opportunity to evaluate what is truly important for their relationship, confront their individual/relationship issues, develop new life skills and deepen interpersonal bonds and commitments (McCollum, 1991).

PURPOSE

This purpose of this study is to investigate the efficacy and importance of the couple relationship during the healing process of a CSA survivor. The results of this study may provide useful information for CSA survivors, their partners and mental health professionals in their work with individuals and couples who have experienced CSA.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach, interviewing adult CSA survivors in a committed relationship of at least one year. 8 participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview questions inquiring as to those words and actions that were found as healing or detrimental to a CSA survivor within the framework of the intimate, couple relationship. Participant interviews were transcribed by

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research team members and analyzed according to qualitative analysis principles. Codes, categories and themes were identified and refined. Conceptualization and interpretations of the data was confirmed and triangulated through different researchers (Harry, Sturges and Klingner, 2005).

RESULTS



What Partners Do to Help Healing:

Safety and Trust within the couple relationship was primary to feeling like they had a place to heal from the effects of CSA.

Acceptance and Validation demonstrated by a partner to validate the survivor's abuse experience and accept them in spite of it.

Open Communication was important to all of the participants to their being able to safely address topics surrounding their abuse

Emotional Intimacy – Perception of Being Loved

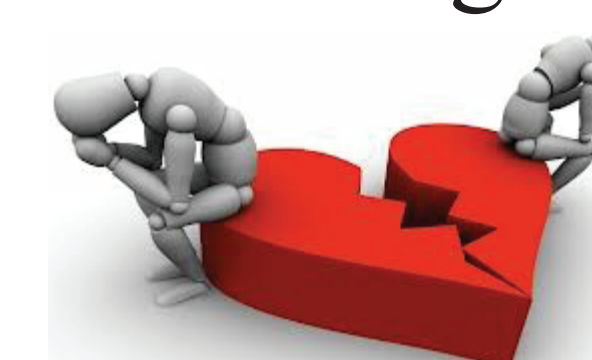
Perceiving a real and legitimate emotional connection contributed to all of the participants' healing.

Support refers specifically to the idea of the participant being emotionally and physically supported during a difficult time.

Empathy was found to be a significant emotional expression given by one's partner that helped participants to heal from the abuse.

Freedom of Choice and having a sense that they have the freedom to have opinions and make choices that will be honored was very important for most participants.

Positive Growth was referenced by a few participants how helpful it was to have their partner grow and change with them.



What Partners Do to Hinder Healing:

Criticism and Rejection a perception that was extremely damaging to the participants' effort to heal. Blame, shame, judgment or a lack of empathy was perceived as criticism and rejection.

Betrayal involved various forms of disloyalty that caused a breach of confidence and trust in the relationship. They involved a breach of confidential communication, emotional

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or physical infidelities, disloyalty before friends or family, disingenuousness, pretense, or outright lies.

Disrespect of Personhood involves words or actions by the survivors' partners that made them feel as if they didn't matter or that minimized their thoughts, feelings or experiences.

Lack of Choice in which participants were pressured for sex, or pressured to change their thoughts, feelings or behaviors, all contributed to feeling unsafe.

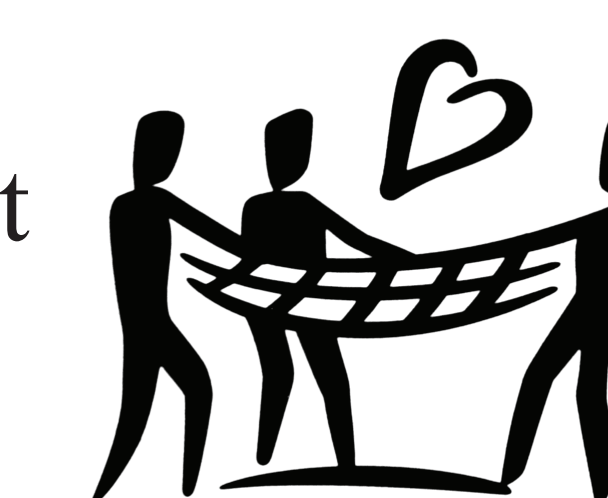
Lack of Communication occurred when the partner was unwilling to discuss issues surrounding the abuse or when the participant didn't feel safe enough in the relationship to talk about it.

Partner Mistrust was experienced by a few participants when they felt their partner was jealous or suspicious of them.

Lack of Growth was problematic for participants if their partner wasn't open to their change and growth, or didn't change and grow with them.

DISCUSSION & CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study confirm and build on previous literature supporting the involvement of a CSA survivor's partner in the healing process. Successful intimate attachment with concurrent growth between partners was confirmed by most of the survivors as being significant to their healing. How the participants' CSA experiences impacted them personally had the greatest influence on what they needed from their partner and which words and actions either helped or hurt them the most. Couples and therapists may benefit by focusing on the themes identified in this study; namely safety and trust, acceptance and validation, open communication, emotional intimacy and connectedness, empathy, support, freedom of choice and unified positive growth. In addition, because all participants reported that in sharing their story, they became aware that their experience mattered, more importantly, that they mattered, therapists and partners should be deliberate in creating a safe space for CSA survivors to tell their stories.



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