

Male Survivors and the Need for Training

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Article

Not only are male survivors locked in silence because of beliefs about males and vulnerability, but service providers may also respond in ways which inadvertently reinforce the misconceptions and undermine the disclosure and recovery process.

Sexual abuse has only in the last twenty or so years, emerged from obscurity as a social phenomenon. Although the average citizen may still be in varying degrees of denial, we in the therapeutic profession see the reality more clearly. We know that sexual abuse is not new, but rather talking about it and seeking help is.

Disclosure of sexual abuse by male survivors is increasing. Every year, we are seeing an increase in the number of disclosures. Women's Programs have been overwhelmed for some time now; children's programs are also full and growing. Since the founding of Victoria Male Survivors of Sexual Assault Society in 1989 and Vancouver Society For Male Survivors Of Sexual Abuse in 1990 (amalgamated in 1997 to form the British Columbia Society for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse) male survivors have had somewhere to go and have been coming forward with ever increasing frequency. Not only have men come forward to disclose their childhood abuse, but we have also seen an increase in the reporting of adult male rape cases (this is particularly a problem in prisons).

Myths are being challenged. Because of the increase in disclosures, the average age of initial abuse and the duration and age of cessation is becoming more clear, as are the circumstances within which the abuse occurs. The relationship of offenders to male survivors, and in many cases, the offender's gender, is different than what we had previously assumed.

Socialized norms around gender roles are now understood in relation to the ways in which they stand in the way of disclosure and impede the therapeutic process for male survivors. As this subtle but steady changing of social attitudes and survivors' readiness for disclosure continues, so too, treatment must also evolve.

While many features of survivors are constant across cultures and genders, many other features vary. As alluded to above, socialized gender role norms are a particularly problematic concern. Not only are male survivors locked in silence because of beliefs about males and vulnerability, but service providers may also respond in ways which inadvertently reinforce the misconceptions and undermine the disclosure and recovery process.

It is important to understand that sexual abuse is a subversive thread, insidiously and intricately woven throughout the fabric of society. It must be recognized that victims and perpetrators exist in both genders, all sexual preferences, all races, religions and socio-economic levels. As it is so pervasive, sexual abuse is complex and varied in its manifestations and impact on survivors and the community.

Fortunately, the amount of research and literature on this devastating problem is on the increase. Nonetheless, as male survivors are the latest group of victims to come to light, less is known about the issues they are burdened with, and therefore less is known about how to respond.

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Helping professionals need specialized training. Along with the establishment of specialized services for survivors, more attention to abuse by the media has also encouraged more survivors to reach out for help. Subsequent to this increase in awareness, readiness of survivors, and greater openness to them, disclosures have been made by men within treatment programs which address a wide range of issues. Many clients have come to British Columbia Society for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse from diverse social service agencies, such as drug and alcohol treatment programs, family therapy, job and life skills programs, crisis lines, police, and hospitals. More and more, therapists recognize the need to be prepared to receive these disclosures of sexual abuse.

As more male survivors seek treatment, a significantly altered profile of the typical male survivor is being formulated. Many long held misconceptions are being eroded and replaced with a broader and yet more accurate understanding of male survivors and their issues. The scope of sexual abuse against males is being seen more clearly, and the need for education and sensitization of helping professionals is more important than ever before.

BCSMSSA periodically offers training to colleagues in the helping professions. Two to three day training seminars are offered to a range of professionals from support worker to counsellors, psychologists, M.D.s, and psychiatrists. Approximately twice a year, training seminars are offered at BCSMSSA for support workers and professionals who work with male survivors. Typically, several of our staff contribute to these workshops. Past seminars have been well received and the feedback indicates that the positive effect has been carried back to other agencies and communities.

Knowledge sharing. Specializing in therapy for the male survivor population, we have gained a great deal of insight and information about treatment. We have built in a number of elements that ensure ongoing development in understanding and treatment of male survivors. Most assuredly, we have learned a great deal from the more than 2000 clients that have passed through the doors of the Vancouver and Victoria offices. We have weekly supervision meetings, during which case conferencing occurs, as does peer support.

Approximately once a month outside professionals are invited to our weekly meetings for the purpose of education and networking. To date, we have had the privilege of sharing knowledge with the Vancouver Sexual Offenses Squad; drug and alcohol counsellors; AIDS researchers from the Vanguard Project; a representative from the Eating Disorder Resource Centre; a representative (and interpreter) from the Deaf, Hard of Hearing & Deaf-Blind Well-being Program; and an editor from a publishing company that specializes in books on recovery. More of these guest sessions are planned for coming months.

In addition to sharing and exchanging knowledge with helping agencies, BCSMSSA supervises student therapists. For several years, the society has been an approved practicum placement site for Masters level students. We have had practicum students from the University of British Columbia Counselling Psychology Department in the Faculty of Education; Bastyr College in Seattle; Antioch in Seattle; and the Art Therapy Institute of Vancouver (while the A.T.I. is not a Masters degree granting program, we see their second year students as functioning at a Masters student level). This has been a very positive experience for all involved. Practicum student work with clients is only with the full knowledge and consent of clients, most of whom welcome the interest, concern and skill evidenced by the students.

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Support and advocacy. BCSMSSA also helps to ensure that male survivors are visible in the justice system by providing victim services specific to their needs. Our victim service worker and trained volunteers, who work on-site, provide clients with justice system information, support and guidance, and information about compensation options. For the victim services program, we have developed and published a victim service training manual/guidebook, and more recently produced a 49 minute training video. Both the manual and video have been purchased by Victim Services and counselling programs throughout B.C. and now, across Canada.

Survivor support and treatment is vitally important to all of us, therapists, survivors, and the community. Therefore, ongoing training is not only important, but an ethical responsibility. Creative solutions for professional development can be found to go beyond the constraints imposed by the current financial climate. We have gained ground in the recovery field and must persevere in ensuring that all survivors continue to have the highest standard of treatment opportunities for recovery and an enriched life.

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