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Healing From The Effects Of Sexual Abuse: How Formators and Spiritual Directors Can Help

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Abstract: Those who have suffered sexual abuse require help to overcome their trauma, shame and guilt. If qualified professional helpers are not available, then other formators can help. Providing a conducive environment for sharing, building trust through empathetic listening, encouraging, self-nurturing, are among the useful methods that help. Supervision and referring to those more competent for guidance, may become necessary at times.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, formators, overcoming sexual trauma, helpful techniques.

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Sexual abuse is getting a good deal of attention especially in the media. The Catholic Church has been caught in a whirlwind of revelations of sexual abuse of children by priests and the mishandling of the issue by

Church authorities. However, sexual abuse is not an issue that affects the Catholic Church alone. It is a society-wide problem. Children, both male and female, are frequently subject to such abuse. Nor are the victims only children. Adults too, men as well as women, are victims of sexual abuse.

Many women religious in particular have been victims of sexual abuse as adults. An earlier article in this Journal (Parappully, 2003) showed that while childhood sexual abuse rates for religious women and for lay women were almost the same, the rate of abuse for adult religious women was much higher than that for lay women. There is also anecdotal evidence that a large number of candidates now entering religious life have been victims of sexual abuse.

Another article (Parappully, 2007) described the consequences of sexual abuse. These were described under three categories – physical, psychological and spiritual. Sexual abuse has a significant negative impact on survivors' self-concept, their relationships and their attitudes towards the body and sexuality. Their ability to trust people is seriously undermined. They live in fear. They experience inordinate shame, guilt, anxiety and anger. They experience intrusive flashbacks of their abuse experience. Their psychological functioning is generally impaired. Their capacity to live joyfully and work productively is often compromised, depending on the nature and severity of the violation.

However, survivors can work through these effects and find healing. In most cases, they are not able to do this on their own and require help from others. Such help is given mostly by specially-trained therapists. However, many

candidates and religious survivors of sexual abuse do not have access to trained therapists. In this situation formators and spiritual directors can provide some help. It is important to note here, however, that it is preferable that survivors be referred to trained therapists for help. It is only when such help is not available that formators and spiritual directors should offer help. Also, it is important that in the case that the formator or spiritual director has been a victim of sexual exploitation, she or he should not undertake to help other survivors unless their own trauma has been effectively worked through. Otherwise, the helper's own issues are very likely to interfere with her/his efforts to help.

Regardless of whether the formator who is trying to help has been abused or not, the nature of working with survivors is such that he or she must be emotionally open to *vicariously experiencing* similar feelings to the survivor, and is thus *likely* to undergo disturbing reactions internally. In other words, the helper will often experience the pain and emotional turbulence that the survivor experiences and can be disturbed by them. It is important that the formator learns to handle these feelings in a healthy way. Having someone to consult and seek guidance in regard to these vicarious experiences is important.

The ultimate goal of helping is to assist the survivor in healing from the negative consequences of the abuse; to accept the abuse as part of his or her personal history and to transform self-loathing into compassion for a more positive sense of self, enabling the survivor look to the future with hope and live her life in more peaceful and satisfying ways. This requires recalling and emotionally re-experiencing the traumatic aspects of the abuse in the

context of a trustworthy relationship, over time leading to an attitudinal reframing of the abuse experience and its aftermath.

This process must unfold slowly, safely and in an emotionally manageable way for the survivor. It cannot be rushed. In this process, the issues that will come up and require working through include: distorted self-concept and thought processes, painful emotions such as uncontrolled anger, shame, anxiety and guilt as well as the dysfunctional behaviours that flow from them; negative attitudes toward body and sexuality; impaired relationships; and difficulties around trust and intimacy. Helping the survivor resolve these issues effectively is complex and demanding work and would require, as has been already pointed out, the presence and skills of a trained therapist. However, in the absence of such competent professionals, there are things that a formator can do to make their trauma more bearable for the survivor, to help her or him experience some healing, and live life more meaningfully and with greater satisfaction. A number of steps the formator can take to assist the survivor in this process are described below.

It is worthwhile to note here that what facilitates healing is not technique per se but the quality of presence (sensitive, empathic, caring, respectful, non-judgmental) that the formator brings to the helping encounter and the kind of relationship (safe, trustworthy, reliable) that he or she establishes with the survivor. A formator can develop such presence and relationship through his or her dedication even if he or she lacks professional therapy training.

1. Offer to Help

When a formator (I include spiritual directors here) comes to know that a candidate or religious has been sexually victimised, a first step is to let the survivor know that healing is possible. She (I will be using the female pronoun consistently to refer to both male and female formators as well as survivors) can suggest names of therapists or counsellors when they are available. In contexts where these trained helpers are not available, the formator can offer help herself. She can simply say that in case the survivor wants to talk about her experiences she will be available.

Survivors are usually reluctant to disclose abuse to anyone fearing that it could feel hurtful to self or to others to talk about what is distressing them. Even in situations where the survivor may not have disclosed the abuse, there are signs and symptoms that can alert the formator to the possibility of abuse. Behavioural manifestation of the effects of abuse as described in the previous article (Parappully, 2007) can alert the formator to its possibility. For example, when the formator finds that a candidate is consistently manifesting sadness, anger, withdrawal, oversensitivity to sexual matters, or any of the other behaviours described in the previous article, she can tell the candidate that she has observed these and simply ask her, "Is there something that you want talk about? If you want to talk, I will make time for you." It is likely that the candidate's immediate response is "I am fine. There isn't anything to talk about." However, after a while, sometime after weeks or months, the candidate might come to the formator and ask "Do you have some time. There is something I would like to talk about."

When a candidate or religious takes the initiative to request an opportunity to talk, it is very important that the

formator makes the time immediately, even if it is only for a short while. The candidate or religious has taken a bold and vulnerable first step toward seeking help. If the formator refuses or postpones, the survivor may never again take the initiative to open up.

2. Create a Conducive Environment

Once a survivor has opted to seek help, it is very important that the formator finds a place where she feels safe to open up. This means a room (and not public space like corridors and halls) where the survivor feels safe, where she has some privacy. Such physical space is very important.

Psychological safety is also very important. The survivor has to feel safe to open up and share her experiences. One way a formator can provide psychological safety is by offering confidentiality. She has to assure the survivor that whatever is disclosed will not be shared with anyone else.

Ideally, the formator in question should not be one who may be involved in decision-making concerning the survivor's future in religious life. In case the formator is involved in such decision-making, it will be difficult for her to offer the survivor the necessary confidentiality. This also applies in contexts where the formator, even if not involved in the decision-making, has to provide reports to major superiors on the basis of which decisions are made. This dual role that a formator plays—decision-maker/information-provider and helper—can complicate the helping process. It cannot lead to a successful healing because in this situation the formator has too much power and authority over the survivor, which makes it difficult for the survivor to develop the necessary trust and

confidence, regardless of how reassuring the authority figure is.

Seeking help in the context of sexual victimization is not an easy thing to do. The formator can enhance psychological safety by affirming and validating the survivor's willingness to seek help. Her words and attitudes at every stage need to be free of moral or other judgment.

Imparting hope of recovery can enhance the feeling of safety and encourage the survivor to engage in the challenging task of healing and recovery.

3. Build Connectedness and Trust

Sexual victimization is a very personal matter that survivors find hard to talk about. Disclosure is facilitated when the survivor experiences trustworthiness and emotional connectedness with the formator. Building such connectedness is one of the basic requirements for effective work with survivors. A strong relational bond with the formator is necessary to cope with the painful feelings of isolation, alienation and helplessness that accompany the healing work.

Since many survivors have been violated by a person to whom they were dependent emotionally or socially, interpersonal trust is one dynamic that is seriously impaired by the abuse experience. Hence, building trust in the helping context is very challenging. The formator has to strive with great patience, sensitivity and respect to win the survivor's trust.

The quality of the formator's presence in the helping situation is very important. It has to be a very empathic and caring presence. The survivor has to sense that the

formator is on her side, is her advocate, cares deeply for her, is interested in her healing and well-being and will respect her no matter what her experiences. Genuine attentive and empathically sensitive listening conveys to the survivor the message that the formator is really interested in her and cares for her.

Connectedness and trust are built by believing and validating whatever the survivor discloses. It is important to affirm and validate the trust the survivor has already placed in the formator by taking initiative to seek help. "I really appreciate you trusting me enough to tell me this. I know it is not easy to talk about such things; things which persons would normally prefer to keep to themselves." Such validation counters the feelings of being alone, worthless and undeserving.

It is important not to react with shock or disbelief to whatever the survivor discloses, but to calmly listen and respond with appropriate concern. A response like "Oh, my God, I can't believe people could do such a thing" is not helpful, since an expression of shock often translates into judgment or condemnation or downplaying or even doubting the veracity of what the survivor discloses. Moreover, such a response invariably deepens the damage, driving the survivor further into shame and isolation.

One fear that many sexual abuse survivors have, as do clients in general, is "What will my formator/therapist think of me if she really knows who I am or what has happened to me." It is very important to allay these fears right at the start of the helping process, saying something like "No matter what you share with me, I will not think less of you. I am not here to judge you or condemn you and think badly of you." It is very important that there is

genuine congruence between such assurances and the formator's body language. Her bodily messages, such as eyebrow-raising, facial tensions, hands or leg-fidgeting should not neutralize her verbal assurances.

The survivor needs such reassurance not only at the beginning but from time to time in order to ward off the shame and self-rejection that often accompany sexual victimization. One client I have been working with for a number of years is so very appreciative and relieved even now, when from time to time, I assure her I don't think any less of her, no matter how messy her experiences.

4. Help the Survivor Tell Her Story

This is one of the most important functions of a helper. Great healing can occur in the very act of narrating what has happened. This is something very difficult for the survivor to do. She is reluctant and often unwilling to tell the story. Abuse is something that the survivor has often tried hard to forget, or has unconsciously dissociated or denied. Retelling that experience brings up painful memories and that is something that the survivor wants to avoid. Yet it is in retelling the story and looking at it differently (reframing) that healing begins.

There is also great secrecy involved in sexual victimization because of the shame, guilt and fear that accompany it. Shame arises from a deeply felt sense of badness associated with the abuse which the survivor wants to hide from others. Guilt makes the survivor feel she is responsible for what has happened. She is afraid that others may not believe her story and instead might blame her. Often the perpetrator threatens the victim with dire consequences in case she discloses the abuse. For these and other reasons the survivor feels it is wise to keep the

abuse a secret. A research on the sexual abuse experience of North American nuns (Chibnall, Wolf, & Duckro, 1998) showed that 23.6 percent of those who were abused had never discussed the abuse with another person. *These women had kept their experience of sexual abuse secret for an average of 54.3 years.* For those who had discussed the abuse, an average of 24.7 years had elapsed between the onset of the abuse and their first disclosure. Keeping secrets, though a normal practice among survivors, takes a toll on them. Helping them to break the secret in a safe, trusted relationship is in itself a healing exercise.

However, the formator has to respect the reluctance of the survivor to tell the story and not put any pressure on her to disclose quickly and fully. She has to communicate to the survivor that she knows it is not easy for the survivor to speak of things that are very personal and painful and which she is trying to forget. At the same time the formator needs to communicate to the survivor that telling her story is very helpful for her and encourage her to share as much of her experience as she feels comfortable. For example, one might say, "I know it is very painful and difficult for you to recall these things that you are trying to forget, and more especially to share it with someone. Take all the time you want. You can begin when you want and stop when you want. You can choose what you want to narrate and you can proceed at the pace you feel comfortable. There is no hurry." This kind of message emphasizes the survivor's control or self-agency over the process, the very thing she was robbed off in the abuse.

Sometimes, especially in the first meeting, the survivor will say, "I don't know how to begin" or "I don't know where to begin." A helpful response is "You can begin

wherever you want” or “You can say whatever you want, or whatever comes to your mind.” Such open responses reduce the pressure and anxiety of the survivor and help to make her feel more at ease. It is also good to check with the survivor if she has any worry or concern about sharing her experiences. If she has, the formator has first to address these.

The formator listens with great attention and respect to what the survivor says, affirming the person through eye contact and body posture and responding with empathy and warmth. Simply paraphrasing (repeating, summarizing) occasionally what the survivor has said and affirming with simple head-nods and sub-vocals like “Hmm,” “I see,” or empathic responses like “That must have been really hard,” or “frightening” or “painful” etc., or affirming words like “Thank you for trusting me to share that with me” or encouraging words like “I am with you. Go on...” or “It will help if you share a little more of that...” can help the survivor to disclose deeper and deeper.

It is not just the act of narrating one’s story that brings about healing, but being listened to with respect and sensitivity and without judgment, evaluation, blaming or unnecessary interruptions or intrusions. Non-judgmental listening calls for hearing the story without the lens of morality and sin, themes so much part of a formator’s training and orientation. Hearing the story through such lenses becomes an obstacle to being truly present to the survivor and her experience. It is important to respond with human rather than moral or legalistic understanding.

It is also very important to communicate to the survivor that the abuse is not her fault. Survivors often feel guilty,

blaming themselves for what had happened. Assurance from the formator that the abuse was not their fault has enormous healing power. Someone on whom she was dependent or whose domination she was too weak to resist took advantage of her dependency and weakness. The survivor has to hold the perpetrator responsible for what happened.

Being listened to this way is a rare and privileged experience for the survivor. Such respectful and sensitive approach to the survivor's experience helps to further strengthen trust and connectedness. One challenge for the formator is learning to listen this way.

5. Provide Helpful Information

Sexual abuse survivors often feel very isolated. They think that they are the only ones who have had such an experience. In this context, telling the survivor that she is not alone, that sexual abuse is the experience of many children, as well as many women who have entered religious life, is very relieving. At the same time it is important not to dilute the uniqueness of the experience of the particular survivor. While letting her know that many others have also been abused, the formator must also convey to the survivor that she is in no way minimizing her experience and all the difficulties and problems that accompany it.

It helps the survivor to know that many survivors like her have been able to work through their pain and lead normal lives. At the same time she has also to be informed that healing from abuse takes time and involves pain. Sharing the story in itself can bring about some healing, but deeper healing involves much effort, time and also pain. It is very helpful to inform the survivor that normally

the symptoms get worse, that is, she will experience them more acutely, in the early stage of the healing work, before getting better. Such information prevents the survivor from feeling discouraged and quitting the healing work.

Repeatedly providing information about the nature of abuse, its consequences, particularly the traumatic symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, dissociation, numbing, intense emotional reactions and hyper-vigilance, helps to break down feelings of isolation and abnormality. Sharing the healing experiences of others instills hope of recovery. Information on the approaches and techniques that facilitate healing encourages the survivor to make use of them.

Providing the survivor with books and articles that describe the nature and consequences of abuse, along with approaches and techniques that enhance the healing process is very helpful. There are also books written by abuse survivors sharing both their victimization and their healing experiences.

It would also be a good practice to make the topic of sexual abuse part of the curriculum in the early stages of formation. It would be helpful to provide the formees information about the prevalence of sexual abuse, its effects, the secrecy that surrounds it, the kinds of help that are available and that recovery is possible. The healing that can come from disclosing the abuse to someone they trust and who has the skills to help them is to be specially emphasized. Dissemination of such information can encourage survivors to seek the help they need.

In order to be helpful, the formator herself has to be well informed. She has to know about the complex and confusing dynamics that follow sexual victimization,

especially the traumatic impact of abuse and the many ways it manifests itself. She has to know how to accompany the survivor and how to be helpful. She prepares for this kind of work by reading and attending awareness and training seminars.

6. Encourage Expression of Feelings

Sexual victimization evokes a number of painful emotions, especially anger, grief, fear and shame. Often the survivor suppresses them. She has to be encouraged to get in touch with these feelings and express them. Saying something like, “This is one place where you have the freedom to feel whatever you need to feel and to express your feelings in whatever way you want” is helpful.

It is important to note here that it is not the venting of feelings in itself that brings healing, but processing the experience of venting. That is, it is not enough to encourage the survivor to access and express feelings. She has to be helped to reflect upon and talk about what the experience of venting was like, what it did for her. It is through this kind of processing that the survivor learns to reframe her abuse experience, that is, change her attitudes toward it and begin to feel differently about it.

The formator can invite the survivor to process the experience by saying something like the following: “I wonder how you feel about what you just experienced.” Or, “What did this experience of expressing all these feelings do for you?” The formator can also point out what she observed during the experience and ask what that meant for the survivor. It is also important to give the survivor time and space to sit quietly with the experience for a while before inviting her to talk about it.

7. Use Helpful Techniques

There are a number of techniques that are useful not only for facilitating the expression of feelings but also for bringing about healing in other ways as well. Among these techniques, two that formators can employ are expressive writing and drawing. Behavioural techniques such as anger management and assertiveness training are also very useful.

Expressive writing is a very easy yet effective technique. It consists in focusing on the traumatic experience for a while and then writing freely whatever comes to mind. It is important not to censor any thought or feeling but give free expression in writing to anything one experiences. Such writing heals by bringing about changes in the traumatic memory tracks in the brain.

It is important to note here that although such writing may look simple, yet it is not always very easy to do. Focusing on the trauma and writing about it can bring up some very powerful emotions. The formator should be available to accompany the survivor with empathic support in such emotionally distressing situations.

Drawing is another simple yet useful technique. Invite the survivor to focus on the traumatic experience for a while and then using crayons draw whatever one feels like. A three-step technique can then be used to process the drawing. The steps are: 1) See; 2) Free-associate; and 3) Feel the Emotional Impact.

One has to look carefully to see all that there is in a drawing. Many images in the drawing will come into focus only when one takes time to contemplate the drawing. In the free association stage, one allows the various images and colours in the drawing to trigger in

oneself any associations in terms of memories, thoughts, feelings, longings, fantasies and so on. In the emotional impact stage one gets in touch with the mood and feelings the drawing and the association to it evoke in oneself.

Such drawing can help the survivor to tell her story in pictures when verbalization is difficult. More than this, drawing like this and processing it a number of times will gradually loosen the grip of the trauma and bring about healing. Free body movements and bio-energetic techniques also help loosen and free the somatic memories of the trauma embedded in the muscles and tissues of the body. Any formator who is interested in helping survivors will acquaint herself with some of these techniques and learn the skills involved in using them.

8. Encourage Self-Nurturing

Sexual victimization affects body, mind and soul. Survivors often develop a very negative attitude toward their body. Sometimes survivors believe that they were targeted by the perpetrator because they had an attractive body. Consequently, they seek to make themselves as unattractive as possible. One way they do this is neglecting the body. Survivors may neglect grooming, hygiene and exercise. They may dress carelessly. They may overeat or undereat to make themselves look fat or emaciated and that way less attractive to others.

Alternatively, some survivors believe they were targeted because they felt worthless and unlovable to begin with, and deserved the abuse. Typically, survivors hold themselves responsible for what happened and feel guilty. They feel they now have no right to celebrate life in any way. Consequently they withdraw from pleasurable activities. Sometimes they consider such withdrawal and

neglect of body as ways to punish themselves for what they consider to be their “sin.” Their sense of inner worthlessness, too, leads them to neglect self-care.

In this context, it is very important not only to challenge their irrational guilt and distorted thinking but also to encourage them to engage in self-nurturing and self-caring activities. They have to be encouraged to take care of their appearance, hygiene and health and to participate in social and recreational activities.

9. Utilize Supervision

I have mentioned at the beginning of this article that helping survivors of sexual abuse requires specialized training; it is normally to be done by trained therapists and counsellors. Formators will engage in such helping only when these professionals are not available.

Since formators are not normally trained to do this kind of work, it is important that they have access to trained professionals for consultation and supervision.

Trained professionals also require supervision because there will arise situations which they don't know how to handle effectively. If this is the case with trained professionals, it is even more important that formators consult someone who can give them guidance. Such consultation need not always be face-to-face. In this age of advanced communication technologies, such supervision can be had even if the supervisor is far away, using any of the communication channels available.

In getting such supervision or expert help, it is important to remember that confidentiality must be safeguarded. The formator cannot reveal the identity of the person she is trying to help.

Supervision is especially needed to deal with the countertransference issues (reactions triggered in the formator by the survivor and the survivor's experience); issues that arise in the course of helping. Anger, confusion, helplessness, ambivalent feelings toward the survivor and about working with her, and memories of one's own traumatic experience can arise in the course of working with survivors; these can affect the formator's ability to work effectively. These reactions must be expected, as they are unavoidable in treating trauma survivors. Supervision can provide a safe and emotionally supportive relationship in which the formator can sort through her own feelings.

10. Make Referrals

It can happen that, after beginning to work with a survivor, a formator recognises that because of the severity and complexity of the abuse and its effects, she is not competent to help effectively. In such a case, it is very important that the formator acknowledges this to the survivor and suggest that she see a professional who can really help her. The formator then provides names and contact numbers of professionals she trusts, encouraging the survivor to contact one of them. It is the responsibility of the formator to have with her information about some such professionals.

Such referrals have to be done very delicately. After having opened up her story to one person, the survivor usually will not be happy to have to go to someone else and start the process all over again. The formator should convey to the survivor that, if she so wishes, the formator can provide the selected professional an update on the work done with her so far and that the survivor then has

the choice of how much she wants to share with the new helper. The formator should also convey she is making the referral because of her own lack of expertise and wants her to get the kind of help she is not competent enough to provide.

Conclusion

Working with survivors of sexual abuse is a challenging task which requires adequate training and competence. However, there are not enough trained professionals available in many parts of the country. In such a situation, formators can provide some help. This article has provided some suggestions that can assist the formator in this delicate work. Attending some basic counselling skills training will be an added asset for the formator in this task.

However, it is important to note that at the heart of the healing encounter is the quality of the helper's presence and the kind of relationship the helper builds with the client. It is not the sophistication of techniques that brings about healing, but the experience of being accepted unconditionally, listened to with empathy and sensitivity, being understood, respected and cared for. Such a caring and sensitive presence provides the survivor with an experience so different from what she is used to, and for that very reason makes it a corrective healing experience. Hence, even if a formator is not therapeutically trained, she can be an effective helper by cultivating and enhancing her capacity to provide such healing presence and relationship. Consultation with trained professionals is useful in developing and enhancing this capacity as well.

It is also important to note here that this article has only described help for survivors of sexual abuse from a

psychological perspective. However, psychological work is only one aspect of healing the whole person. There are other ways of helping, especially spiritual approaches, such as prayer and the sacraments, which also need to be harnessed to facilitate healing from the effects of sexual abuse.

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