

Healing Experience of a Woman Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

This qualitative case study aimed to understand the healing experience encountered by a woman survivor who had gone through childhood sexual abuse experiences and who made the active decision to recover. A total of four themes were identified from the analysis. The themes are “experience of suffering”, “God as savior”, “children as savior”, and “reaching out to help others”.

Introduction

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) affects the women’s sense of self and relationship with others. Several studies had been done related to the field of trauma indicate that childhood sexual abuse affects the developing sense of self (Crowley, 2000; Matsakis, 1996; Roche, 1999). Other study had revealed women with history of childhood sexual abuse required more medical attention than those without this history (Farley & Patsalides, 2001). The study revealed women with childhood sexual abuse indicated more chronic physical symptoms, prescriptions, frequent medical and emergency room visits and suffer with severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Farley & Patsalides, 2001). Harper and Steadman (2003) reported that survivors who had a history of childhood sexual abuse was a unique group of clients that required sensitive attention from their therapist to ensure the survivors well being. Unfortunately, this isn’t reflected in reality. Several studies have revealed that women survivors come across poor quality services from therapists whom they asked for professional help (Armsworth, 1989; Campbell & Carson, 1995; Stenius and Versey, 2005). The study conducted by Stenius and Veysey (2005) revealed that therapists lack trauma sensitivity and had poor attitudes. Furthermore, in the study carried out by Campbell and Carlson (1995), the survivors revealed the mistakes done by therapists such as being a passive therapist, misunderstanding the meaning expressed by survivors, and expressing anger towards them.

The occurrence of insensitive, passive, negative, and angry therapists all continue to haunt and limit women survivors to obtain deserved recovery from their childhood sexual abuse. This occurrence might interrelate with limitation of available training for therapists that covers issues of childhood sexual abuse. Study unveiled, eighty five percent courses that connected with treatment for survivors of childhood sexual abuse was just a topic that was taught in general courses (Winkelspectht & Singg, 1998). In conclusion, there

is a significant need to enhance the helping profession in understanding issues of childhood sexual abuse particularly from a women survivors' perspective. Therefore, the outcome of this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the healing journey defined by the survivor to the group of helping practitioners (counselors, psychologists, social workers, therapists, and other helping professionals) to ensure sensitivity and quality services are provided to the survivors. For the purposes of this study, one central research question was used as a guideline to gather information from the woman survivor, which was "How does a woman survivor experience healing from childhood sexual abuse?"

Method

A qualitative research involving a descriptive case study using a phenomenological lens to explore the experience of a woman survivor was considered as the most appropriate approach for this study. This descriptive case study method is used to explain a phenomenon that happens in a real life situation (Yin, 2003). In addition, a phenomenological study was chosen to "determine what an experience means for a person who has had the experience and is able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moustakas, 1994). The combination of both approaches enables the study to capture the essence of the recovery experienced by the woman survivor through her journey of healing.

Participants

In this study, one female survivor in her forties was identified to be the participant for the study. She was a single mother with two daughters and had identified herself in process of healing from childhood sexual abuse. In this study, participant was named as "Anne" (not her real name). The name of "Anne" was used to describe the participant healing experiences.

Procedures

The process of collecting data started with the observation session which was followed up with the interview session, continued on with self-reflection writing by the researcher. A total of two observation sessions, two structured interview sessions, and two self-reflection writing sessions were conducted for this study. An informed consent was obtained from the participant before the first observation session took place. Both verbal and written consent were obtained from the participant.

Analysis

This study involved three levels of data analysis. In the first level, the collected data from the interviews, observations and the researcher's self-reflection writing were transformed into verbatim transcription. In the second level of analysis, the relevant statements were identified from the verbatim transcription and were grouped into several meaningful categories. Finally, in the third level of analysis, all the meaningful categories were grouped into wider categories and supported with verbatim examples expressed by Anne to provide a better description.

Results

A total of four themes emerged from the analysis expressed by the participant who experienced healing from childhood sexual abuse. All four themes were based on the commonalities that appeared from the collected data from the participant. There were 'experience of suffering', 'God as savior', 'children as savior' and 'reaching out to help others'. The themes that emerged from the study are explained in detail and supported by the participant's words.

Experience of Suffering

In this study, Anne reflected a lot on the suffering she went through in her journey of healing. Anne expressed helplessness and admitted herself that the suffering was so unbearable that she reached the stage where she intended to end her life together with her two children. Anne recalled back her attempted suicidal experience: *"I was in a stage of intention to bring both of my daughters to the 8th floor of the apartment so that we can all end our life without going through all this suffering"*.

God as Savior

The element of 'God' as one of the healing elements appeared consistently and frequently throughout the interview process with Anne. Anne perceived God as the determinant of her life, not others and not even herself. Anne consistently expressed: *"My life is not for me to determine, it is HIM. I really believe in HIS existence. When I need help, HE reaches out to help me (Anne referred to HIM, HIS and HE as GOD)"*.

Children as Savior

Throughout all the sessions of observations and interviews, the element of Anne's children kept appearing consistently. Both children had given Anne a sense of hope to continue in her life. Anne expressed strongly that it was her children that took her out from her suicidal thoughts. Anne reflected an incident in which she attempted to end her life: *"Both my children were pulling my hand, my youngest said, 'Mummy, don't do that, we need you, and we love you'. It was their voices that pulled me out from the thoughts. They saved me from that"*.

Reaching out to Help Others

The final element of healing that emerged from this study was the aspect of reaching out to help others. In this study, Anne had identified a few incidents of reaching out to others that contributed to her personal healing from childhood sexual abuse. Anne described one of her experiences of reaching out by helping to take care of other young children: *"I am not willing to charge high fees (to the parents) because I am concerned that people cannot afford it and let their children stay alone at home. I am more willing to help them to look after the children"*.

In her journey of healing, Anne also managed to reach out to a Chinese lady who was having her own relationship difficulties with her husband and who intended to commit suicide. Anne recalled back her advice to this lady: *"She said she wanted to jump from the building. I told her to be strong. You have only one child, I have two children, you are so much better than me, you have a house, you have a car, I don't have anything, you must be strong"*.

Discussion

The findings revealed that the participant experienced difficulties throughout her journey of healing and it was consistent with previous studies. As reported by Philip & Daniluk (2004), women survivors in their studies experienced the journey of recovery as a difficult process as they encountered a sense of sadness, and loss of the energies they spent to cope and survive from the trauma. Furthermore, a study conducted by Glaister and Abel (2001) had similar findings in that women survivors of childhood sexual abuse reported the recovery process to be difficult and painful. Thus, it is important for helping professionals to be sensitive and be accepting of the suffering experienced by survivors as part of their journey towards healing. The outcome of the study also revealed how the element of spirituality played a significant role in the process of healing. Bogar and Hulse-Kilacky (2006) reported that a relationship with God was helpful to women in their recovery

experience. Therefore the spiritual coping of survivors is worthwhile to be discovered by therapists to find out the possibility of this element in becoming one of the key resources in assisting survivors' recovery.

The study outcome revealed one of the strongest support systems for the participant in her journey of healing was her own daughters. In parallel with previous studies, a support system was one of the important elements that contributed to healing for survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Banyard & William, 2007; Godbey & Hutchinson, 1996). Hence, it is important for helping practitioners to look into the aspect of building a support system for the survivor to enhance the healing process. Finally, the finding of the study indicated that the survivor gained personal healing by reaching out to help others. A study by Elon (2000) revealed that survivors gained personal strengths and skills through reaching out to others. This element reflects a very unique cycle of empowerment that takes place in the journey of healing. Therefore it is important for helping professionals to be aware of this powerful element which might be a valuable source for women survivors in their recovery from childhood sexual abuse.

The finding of the study has its own limitation because it was conducted based on one woman survivor's participation. However, outcome of this study hopes to act like a channel for women survivor's voice to be heard by other especially helping profession. Finally, more studies are required to find out the detail of the healing experience encountered by the women survivors of childhood sexual abuse with the hope to enhance the quality of the counseling services for women survivors now and future.

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