

Serving Survivors of Incest

Incest is a multi-layered trauma experience; cases often involve multiple events that, when experienced by themselves, can be traumatizing. For example, during incest cases the survivor often has to face a combination of traumatizing issues such as: sexual assault, betrayal by a family member, blame or outright rejection by other family members, separation and divorce, grief and loss, secondary wounding by others, involvement with the criminal justice system, possibly having a family member in jail, and more. This Technical Assistance Bulletin will outline some common survivor responses to incest and recommendations for counselors.



Because of the complex emotional challenges incest survivors face, working with this population can be very overwhelming for the counselor. Below are some common dynamics and responses that these cases involve, and guidelines for addressing them.

RESPONSES	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNSELORS
<p>Anger Anger is often the backbone of healing from sexual trauma. However, in cases of incest, the survivor may have grown up in an environment where they weren't allowed to be angry at or express anger toward the perpetrator.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow clients to vent their anger in safe, non self-destructive ways.• Explore healthy ways they can vent their anger between sessions.• Understand that the client may have very valid and appropriate reasons to be angry at other family members. For example, they might be angry at the lack of protection provided to them in their home. Let clients express these feelings in your sessions.
<p>Mixed feelings toward the perpetrator Many survivors have mixed feelings toward the perpetrator. At the same time, they might believe that these mixed feelings indicate that something is wrong with them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand that your client might feel guilty (or be made to feel guilty by others) for having any positive feelings toward their abuser.• Normalize mixed feelings. Reassure them that the positive things that may have happened in non-abusive parts of their relationship with the perpetrator are as real as what happened in the harmful parts of the relationship.

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<p>Survival issues Coping with incest while it's happening is about survival. Victims will try a variety of helpful and unhelpful ways to survive in these situations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss with the client what they did to survive while the abuse was happening. • Remember that they may have a lot of guilt, shame, and confusion around some of the survival techniques they used. They may find it difficult to forgive themselves for some of their survival-related behaviors. (e.g. dissociation (“zoning out”), self-harm, suicidal gestures or attempts, abusing drugs and/or alcohol, lying, stealing, minimizing, rationalizing, or denying the abuse, or recanting a disclosure)
<p>Feelings of guilt and shame Most incest survivors feel some degree of self-blame for their victimization. They may have been told by the perpetrator that they are to blame, or that they wanted it to happen. Even in the absence of external victim blaming, children and teens will often take undeserved responsibility for their victimization and its aftermath. It's critically important that counselors don't inadvertently reinforce any of the client's self-blame.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that guilt is the sense that something one did was wrong or bad, while shame is the sense that who one is as a person is wrong or bad. Explore with the client which of these they are feeling. It could be both. • If the client is willing, discuss why they believe the abuse was their fault. Reassure the victim that sexual assault is never their fault and help them work through the reasons he/she may feel guilt. • Help the client place the blame squarely on the perpetrator. • Know that letting go of guilt, shame, or self-blame may be a process that continues even after counseling ends. These issues can take years to resolve. • Praise the client for any progress you see in this area.
<p>Secondary wounding/secondary victimization These terms refer to the psychological harm done to a victim above and beyond the actual abusive acts. Examples include: not being believed after disclosing abuse, being blamed for breaking up the family or causing a divorce, being ridiculed or made fun of by friends or classmates if the abuse is made public, being called derogatory or hurtful names by family members or others, and/or being accused of having led the perpetrator on or having “asked for it.” These reactions are not uncommon in cases of incest.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore with the client what types of secondary wounding they've experienced and explore their feelings about these experiences. • Acknowledge that secondary wounds are often as traumatic as the abuse itself. • Understand that the client may want and need to spend more time on these issues than on discussing the specifics of the abuse. • Help them anticipate other types of secondary wounds they might face down the road (through the court system for example).

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<p>Role of non-offending caregivers/ significant others The better educated non-offending caregiver(s) and significant supportive people are about issues related to victimization and trauma, the better they will be equipped to help the survivor cope and heal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spend time educating the survivor’s support people about common reactions to trauma and victimization. • Offer to bring supportive people into a session with the client, if you think it might help. • Provide handouts and pamphlets for significant others to read. • Encourage significant others to ask the survivor about how best to help them, rather than speculate what their loved one needs. • Provide support groups when possible for non-offending caregivers.
<p>Multiple layers of trauma responses Most incest survivors experience multiple trauma responses, but often they don’t connect some of their symptoms to the original trauma. We can help them make these connections.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate yourself about common reactions to trauma and basic information about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). • Spend time educating clients about common responses to trauma, and normalizing their reactions. Explaining that certain symptoms are common among trauma survivors can go a long way toward reassuring a client that they are experiencing normal reactions. • See the National Center for PTSD website (below) for additional education on this issue.

You may notice that your client is struggling with all of the above issues and more, but they may not yet be at a place emotionally where they are ready, willing, and/or able to address these issues directly. Be patient with clients and never force discussion of the details of their victimization. Some helpful hints when first developing a plan for healing with a survivor of incest may be:

- Determine if they need emotional stabilization, or are ready to directly process the trauma.
 - If you are unsure if they are ready to address some of these issues directly, ask.
 - If they are not ready, you can plant the seeds around some of these issues, as you build rapport and trust.
- Someone who is not ready to address specifics can still benefit from education about stress- and anxiety-reduction techniques, tools for relaxation, and sensory experiences they might have related to their trauma. Clients will also benefit from education about the criminal justice system if they are a witness in a trial.
- Learn anxiety-reducing techniques that you can easily teach to clients. These could be activities including meditation, using calming music, relaxation exercises, physical exercise, deep breathing, etc... The more tools your client has to calm themselves, the better.

Keep in mind that survivors react differently. Counseling should be based on how the victimization has impacted the individual. Service providers need to be extremely sensitive to survivors' needs and their reactions. The resources below can provide additional assistance and information.

PCAR would like to acknowledge Holly Morreels, Clinical Director – VAC YWCA York for creating this Technical Assistance Bulletin.

RESOURCES

Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape
1-800-692-7445
www.pcar.org

PA Family Support Alliance
1-800-448-4906
www.pa-fsa.org

Childline
1-800-932-0313

National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
www.ptsd.va.gov

National Center for Victims of Crime
www.ncvc.org

US DOJ Office for Victims of Crime
www.ovc.gov

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

- Bass, E., & Davis, L. (1994). *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Courtois, C. (2010). *Healing the Incest Wound: Adult Survivors in Therapy*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Bean, B. & Bennett, S. (1993). *The Me Nobody Knows: A Guide for Teen Survivors*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Matsakis, A. (2003). *The Rape Recovery Handbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Lew, M. (2004). *Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering from Sexual Child Abuse*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- Sonkin, J. (1998). *Wounded Boys, Heroic Men: A Man's Guide to Recovery from Child Abuse*. Avon, MA: Adams Media.

RECOMMENDED DVDs

- "The Healing Years" <http://www.bigvoicepictures.com/the-healing-years/>
- "Boys and Men Healing from Child Sexual Abuse" <http://www.bigvoicepictures.com/boys-and-men-healing/>