

Sex & Survivors: findings from the DCTCT pilot study

Heather B. MacIntosh Ph.D.
May 10, 2017



McGill

Agenda

- Impact of Trauma on Couple Relationships
- Impact of Trauma on Sexuality and Sexual Relationships
 - The literature
 - Our research
- Case material
 - Clinical interventions



Impact of CT on Couples

- Couples and trauma:
 - High levels of distress & dissatisfaction
 - Significant impacts of trauma on relationships
 - Partners feeling left out of healing process
- Direct Impacts of PTSD--Symptoms
- Indirect Impacts of Complex Trauma--Capacities
- CT-"often marry spouses with a significant amount of psychopathology"
(Putnam, 1989)
- Vicarious trauma

Couple therapy NOT just an adjunct to individual treatment



Impact of CT on Sexuality



- Most research focuses on female survivors
 - High levels of distress about sex/sexuality
 - High incidence of sexual pain
 - Struggle with boundaries—knowing they can say no
 - Dissociation, flashbacks & triggers
 - Feeling out of control
 - Confusing partner with abuser
 - High risk of sexually risky behaviour & revictimization
 - Suppression of sexuality & enforced celibacy as avoidance tactic

Impact Cont'd



- Male survivors
 - Higher force/invasiveness=more difficulties
 - Sexual conditioning=compulsions not aligning with desires, orientation, values, relationships
 - Hyperactivation

- Transgender survivors
 - No published research
 - Clinical research FTM suggests disavowal of vulnerability, suppression and efforts to control

Our Clinical Research

- Two main avenues
 - Suppression of Sexuality
 - Bifurcation of Sexuality



McGill

Suppression of Sexuality



- Frequently in female survivors
 - Intrusive trauma symptoms “contaminate” sex
 - Sexual pain—often resulting in avoidance
 - Triggers
 - Concrete
 - Symbolic
 - Flashbacks, dissociation,
 - Gradual growing avoidance leading to celibacy or intentional celibacy in the service of affect regulation

Birfurcation of Sexuality



- Frequently male survivors
 - Distinct pattern of sexual distress
 - Desire for sexual intimacy and closeness with partner but unable to initiate
 - Eventual disengagement and alienation
 - Avoidance fed by dissociation, distractions and sexual compulsions that feel ego/relationally dystonic
 - Compulsive engagement in a segregated sexual life: dissociative reenactments, pornography, illicit sexual engagements with hook ups, prostitutes etc.
 - Further avoidance fueled by shame & secrecy
 - Results in painful relationship with partner, full of tension and devoid of sexual intimacy, while hiding secrets of sexual life outside of the relationship

Developmental Couple Therapy for Complex Trauma

- Emphasizes Interventions to promote mentalizing
 - Based on understanding of the development of self and interpersonal capacities and how this development is impacted by CT
 - Affect regulation
 - Empathy
 - Perspective taking
 - Does not move into process focused interventions until the final stage
- Stage One – Establishing Context
 - Establishing Safety, Therapeutic Alliance
 - Psychoeducation (Creating a common goal)
 - Trauma and Relationships
 - Trauma and Attachment
 - Sex and Sexuality
 - Shame
 - The Negative Cycle and Dyadic Traumatic Reenactment
 - Containing Conflict
- Stage Two – Capacity Building in the Attachment Relationship Context
 - Affect Regulation Capacities (STAIR Interventions)
 - Mentalizing Capacities (MBT Interventions)
- Stage Three – Attachment-focused Dyadic Processing
 - Attachment Histories Living in the Present
 - Disclosure – Telling the Stories
 - Trauma Processing in a Dyadic Context
- Stage Four – Consolidation
 - Mutual Interactive Regulation
- Consolidation of New Mentalizing, Attachment & Affect Regulatory Skills

Psychoeducation

- Focus of the first stage is on psychoeducation
 - Sex and sexuality are key areas of exploration in education
 - This allows for a cognitive understanding of the dynamics
 - Handouts facilitate discussion between the couple and with the therapist





SEX AND SEXUALITY AFTER CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

How does childhood trauma impact sex and sexuality in adults?

- Childhood trauma comes in many forms including sexual and non sexual abuse.
- For survivors of non-sexual abuse, childhood trauma may lead them to have difficulties with trust, self image or identity such that they do not feel that it is safe to be close to another person or even to know themselves well enough to feel that they know who they might be attracted to or what they might enjoy, sexually.
- For survivors of sexual abuse, the consequences for adult sex and sexuality can be very complicated both direct and indirect. These impacts might be different depending on the age you were when the abuse occurred or if you were a boy or girl or if you were abused by a same sex or opposite sex perpetrator.



How might sexual abuse impact an adult survivor?

- Childhood sexual abuse can make it hard for you to feel safe sexually and to feel like you can be fully open to your sexual feelings and desires.
- Childhood sexual abuse often happens before puberty, before the full development of your adult sexual body. Stimulating a body sexually, through force or through attempts to sexually arouse a child can throw off the gradual and slow development of sexual responses and lead to problems with sexual pain or difficulties with becoming aroused and having orgasms in adulthood.
- Childhood sexual abuse can cause some survivors to experience certain kinds of sexual activities or stimulation as triggering of flashbacks or nightmares.
- For some survivors they find it hard to know what they do and do not find sexually pleasurable and this can lead them to engage in sexual activities that end up feeling retraumatizing.



- For some survivors, their sexual responses get “conditioned” to things connected to their abuse. That can often happen if the abuse itself was both arousing and painful or exciting and frightening. This can mean that a survivor might be really turned on by things that, as an adult, now confuse, disgust or frighten them. This can mean that they feel very turned on by things that are painful or involve harming themselves or someone else.
- For some people, especially boys abused by men, this can mean that they are turned on sexually by adult men but feel that they are straight. This can cause people to feel anxious or confused about their sexual orientation



How can the sexual impacts of trauma affect relationships?

- Being triggered by certain sexual positions or kinds of stimulation can make feeling close and safe in your sexual relationship with your partner very difficult and feel frustrating and painful.
- Being triggered by certain sexual positions or kinds of stimulation can leave your partner feeling as though they are hurting you or feeling like they are getting it wrong with you, especially if you can't talk about it.
- Having sexual pain can make it difficult to fully enjoy your sexual relationship with your partner.
- If the things that turn you on are things that you feel bad about, it can be hard to share these things with your partner, which may lead you to keep those parts of your sexual life a secret.



How have these sexual impacts affected your relationship?

- Have you been able to make a list of triggers and share and discuss these with your partner?
- How do you cope with feelings of fear or avoidance in your sexual relationship?
- Have you been able to talk together about what turns you on and what you would like more of and less off?
- Do you have sexual pain and, if so, have you been able to find appropriate resources to help you manage and treat this pain?

Missing

- Issues around consent and revictimization
- Polyamoury
- BDSM
 - These issues have arisen in many of our couples and have not yet been integrated into the psychoeducational materials



Sex & Sexuality in Stage One



- Interventions include
 - Psychoeducation about impact of trauma on sexuality
 - Esp for male survivors to explore normalcy of sexual response (erections/orgasm)
 - Provide resources like Sex for Survivors-Wendy Maltz & Betrayed as Boys-Richard Gardner
 - Exploring triggers
 - Identifying
 - Understanding
 - Validating

Sex & Sexuality in Stage Three



- Looking at reorienting sexual relationship
 - “breaking the seal” if they have stopped having sex
 - Reconsidering sexual activities—initiation, foreplay, intercourse etc based on specific needs of couples
 - Wendy Maltz videos—free viewing
<http://healthysex.com/>

Dealing with Secrets



- The question of individual sessions
- How to explore secrets
 - Timed and careful planning
 - Maintaining the alliance
 - Judicious disclosure
 - Does the partner need to know everything?
 - Dealing with resulting injuries
 - Exploring repair and healing

Conclusion

- Sex/Sexuality may be significant challenges in couples with history of childhood trauma
- Must be addressed directly with care for both partners' safety, comfort and trust
- Stage One—Psychoeducation
- Stage Three—Unpacking and Healing

