

“Healing on the Inside”

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Sisters Inside Inc. 2003

This paper aims to address three very important issues women face who are victims or survivors of sexual abuse when they are incarcerated in South East Queensland Prisons. These issues are highlighted by the barriers within the prison system, the women’s lack of trust and danger of becoming re-traumatized within the prison environment. I hope to provide you more insight into these difficulties and the effects they have on women when they request to see a counsellor from the outside.

I am employed by Sisters Inside Inc. as a Sexual Abuse Counsellor. Sisters Inside Sexual Assault Counselling is funded by Queensland Health Prevention of Violence Against Women (PVAW). My role is to assist women in their journey to heal from the continuing effects that being sexually abused has had in their lives. Women are referred to Sisters Inside Sexual Assault Counselling by the Sisters Inside Programs which are the Crucial Connection Program, working with youth and mothers and children, BOWS Program (supporting women and their children), The Personal Support Program (PSP), The Indigenous Support Worker, outside agencies such as Brisbane Rape and Incest Centre (BRISC), and sexual assault services. Other referrals are made from members of the Sisters Inside Steering Committee in prison, the prison staff such as counsellors, psychologists and welfare staff. Some women refer themselves by word of mouth within the prison.

85% of my time is spent in the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre. The remainder 15% of my time is visiting the low security prisons in South East Queensland. The women I have worked with are aged between eighteen and sixty five years, all of whom have suffered from sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Recent research concerning the nature and prevalence of sexual assault shows that whilst there are no limits to who may be victims of sexual assault, the majority of survivors are women and girls who have been abused by trusted family members, partners, husbands or friends and many over long periods of time. Therefore the impact of sexual assault is often long term and affects a victim’s life on an emotional, psychological, social, and economic level. (*Australian Institute of Family Studies, ACSSA, September 2003*).

I work within a holistic framework applying Gestalt Psychotherapy methodology. This type of therapy emphasizes working in the “here and now.” I assist women to build self awareness by discovering what makes us who we are and enabling change to take place. The Gestalt Psychotherapy modality assists healing through the integration of the mind, body and spirit. The aim is to join the disowned parts of the self which have usually been cut off or fragmented by the experience of childhood trauma and sexual abuse. The aim of therapy is to bring the disowned parts together to make the person a whole person.

I experience women telling me their story for the first time. Some women find this to be very traumatic especially those women who have become aware of their past traumas of sexual abuse whilst they are in prison. A woman who is in prison, who has suffered the traumas of sexual abuse in silence, can experience the prison environment to trigger her emotions. She may experience panic attacks, flashbacks and past memories of being sexually abused. It is my role as a sexual assault counsellor to support these women through their trauma with the hope that they may start the healing process to become whole again.

Professional experience at Sisters Inside and the latest research indicates that 89% of women in South East Queensland prisons are victims or survivors of sexual abuse. Sisters Inside research reveals that 99% of women in South East Queensland prisons who have been sexually assaulted have identified men as their perpetrators. These statistics support the view that children who have suffered the traumas of sexual abuse can face emotional and physical pain that can lead to imprisonment. Kilroy, D. (2001).

This paper concentrates on the following important aspects that affect a women’s physical, emotional and spiritual health while in prison:

1. Insight into the barriers within the prison system that prevents access for the women to obtain counselling from Sisters Inside Inc.
2. The importance of the development of mutual trust between the Sisters Inside Sexual Abuse Counsellor and women who request counselling.
3. The impact strip searching has on a woman who requests counselling.
The danger of her becoming re-traumatized and reminded of her past experiences of sexual abuse.

1. Barriers.

A Barrier is a “boundary or limit of any kind.....” Stein, J. (1973).

It is often difficult to access the women who have requested counselling and can be frustrating to both the counsellor and the women. Sisters Inside is formally allowed access to the prison by management. Whilst some prison officers are helpful and generally assist with access to the women requesting counselling, there are those who sometimes appear to have an attitude problem and do not concur or make it easy to access these women. Sisters Inside Counsellors are required to be escorted around the prison facility, however, there are often long delays waiting for an escort to become available and take me to the desired location. This means that time is wasted for a counsellor and

often leads to uncertainty for the woman. As a counsellor I am unable to make fixed appointments with these women.

There are time restraints to see women both during the morning and the afternoon access times. Two hours is available in the morning and three in the afternoon where one can enter the prison facility and be escorted around the prison. Women cannot be called away from workshops in the mornings. This means one has to seek those women who are not working and leave the working women without assistance. When women are not working they are at the health centre, attending activities or have a visit. The officers will not call them back for counseling during this time. I have had experience where staff has not been compliant in calling the women back from their workshop in the afternoons. This requires persistence in requesting to see women, especially if I have not been able to see them for some time.

There are also barriers that prevent access when the prison is on lock down. This may happen for a half day or for the entire day depending on the nature of the problem. Lock down prevents any outside contact from Sisters Inside. Some of these barriers include code alerts, drills, cell searching, critical incidents, and lack of available officers to escort me to see the women. Women are regularly moved to other sections of the prison and it is time consuming to find out which section they are in. All these barriers play a large part to the consistency that is required to work supportively and maintain open communication between the women and myself. As a woman once said to me in counselling (and has granted me permission to quote):

“The greatest consistency in the prison is the inconsistency”

When there are days without the above barriers, I can spend more quality therapy time for sexual abuse and trauma counselling. This can be for a period of forty-five minutes to approximately one hour depending on the women’s emotional well-being. One is able to see an average of six women for professional sexual abuse counselling without these barriers.

These are examples of some of the barriers that prevent access to women who are incarcerated. These barriers make it very frustrating for both parties, and produce poor time management (as a counsellor), hence the opportunity to effectively meet the needs of the women inside prison.

2. Trust Issues

“When children are sexually abused it becomes dangerous for them to trust their own perceptions”. Bass, E & Davis, L. (1993).

Women who have been sexually abused have already faced enough trauma and betrayal throughout their lives. They do not trust easily. When a woman enters the prison system she does have access to counsellors, psychologists, welfare staff and chaplains, however women often comment that they do not trust the present system. Women tell me that they are reluctant to disclose their past history for fear of becoming vulnerable.

Confidentiality is the most crucial aspect of working with women in prison because they do not trust and they say they feel this vulnerability grows because they are in confinement with others who they may not trust and they need to keep to themselves safe.

If a woman talks about her past issues to anyone she fears that it may have repercussions on how she may be treated on the inside. She is also compelled not to disclose her heart felt feelings or show any signs of grief or tears. If she does cry she may be placed on observation for signs of suicide. Therefore confidentiality and trust is the most essential part of my role as a sexual assault counsellor. It is important to re-assure the women that they can cry and grieve in our sessions and equally important that they are centered when they leave the session to go back to their unit.

Sexual abuse counselling has no time limits. Incarceration may trigger emotions for the first time for some women. Her memories may return and the prison system coupled with its environment may trigger memories from her past traumas of sexual abuse. In order to assist in a woman's healing from sexual abuse it is crucial for one to develop a mutual therapeutic relationship which is built on trust. When entering the prison one needs to trust that they can effectively work in a therapeutic and professional manner, in order to assist women in their healing and without too much interference from the system.

3. Re-traumatization

“Reliving the experience of being abused, experiencing panic attacks, can be caused by triggers that remind you of the abuse.” Bass, E & Davis, L. (1993).

Sexual abuse victims and survivors can be faced with dangers of being re-traumatized. The prison environment is controlling and the structures may remind women of traumatic times in their lives where they were controlled and unable to reason. Some the issues are:

a. Lack of Privacy

The fact that these women know they are being monitored by a camera most of the day, can affect their health. Women find that treatment strips them of their dignity and respect as a human being. For women to function healthy emotionally and physically they need some privacy. They do not want to lose their dignity and respect as a human-being, however, being monitored by camera twenty-four hours a day does insure this.

b. Environment

Some women have told me that when they hear the prison doors slamming, especially at night they feel very nervous and immediately feel the need to protect themselves. They often cannot sleep when they hear officers talking and walking in the corridors. This sometimes triggers childhood memories of when they were being abused at night. Being locked in a cell at night in confinement also has a huge effect on women who have been abused. These women often experience flashbacks, memories of sexual and physical abuse and have nightmares of their past abuse. This results in lack of sleep, insomnia and depression.

c. Strip Searching

Women who are strip searched before and after counselling have reported that they re-live their sexual abuse; they feel intimidated, fearful and self-conscious. I am truly honored that those women who do come to see me value their counselling enough to go through this trauma.

There needs to be a greater understanding of the issues women face when they have been victims of sexual abuse. Strip searching can induce flashbacks to the original trauma of their experiences of sexual abuse. Strip searching is violation and affects women's health and wellbeing both emotionally and physically. The trauma of being strip searched may lead to grief and depression. A woman experiences a loss of personal power of their physical body their self esteem is further damaged and is already low in prison.

My caseload for sexual abuse counselling has not been below thirty women since March 2003 and has on occasions risen to the forties. I have seen an average of sixty women since February 2003 for sexual abuse counselling. Given the latest statistics that:

“89% of women incarcerated have been sexually abused”, Kilroy, D. (2001).

I have been counselling approximately a third of women identified at risk who are incarcerated in South East Queensland.

If women incarcerated are to rehabilitate and be part of the community on the outside, they need to be heard and feel safe enough to seek assistance to heal. Often women do not remember the traumas they have encountered from the past until they are incarcerated. In order for sexual abuse counsellors to assist in women's healing, the system needs to understand that the above barriers do not assist rehabilitation but re-traumatizes the women who have faced a dreadful life of betrayal and violence.

In order for a seed to grow, it needs nurturing. The human spirit is like a seed that needs nurturing for it to grow and develop to its fullest potential. When a woman is violated especially in cases of repeated sexual abuse, their growth and spirit has been crushed. It is essential that honesty, understanding and guidance in self-support are given from the sexual abuse counsellor.

Reliable, professional and consistent therapy from the outside supports women towards healing and growth on the inside. Women who seek counselling need to be able to trust and they should be treated with dignity and respect. I feel that trust is the most important aspect in working with sexual abuse victims because without it therapeutic healing is not possible. If women do not feel that they are trusted then they cannot trust in return. To address these concerns and make positive changes to rehabilitation for women incarcerated:

“Healing on the Inside needs more contact with the Outside not less.”

References

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