

*Learn how counselors work with survivors of traumatic events like rape in this article, the first of a two-part series on working with veterans experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder.*

# Tips from counselors of sexual abuse survivors



**V**ietnam veterans and rape, incest or other sexual abuse survivors have much in common: they all have been traumatized and they all have the potential of developing post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

Just as the PTSD of some Vietnam veterans remits on its own without professional intervention, some 17-25 percent of rape survivors have been found to be almost symptom free one year post-rape without professional help (there are no comparable data for incest survivors).<sup>1</sup>

Yet some sexual abuse survivors, like some Vietnam veterans, need counseling support, and counselors of sexual abuse survivors and PTSD-afflicted veterans struggle with some of the same clinical issues, e.g., the issue of dual diagnosis and, more importantly, the issue of healing. Without denying or minimizing the negative effects of trauma

(whether it be combat or sexual abuse), is it possible for a counselor to help a traumatized client turn the experience around and somehow make it work for survivors, rather than work against them?

Along these lines, sexual abuse counselors and researchers have some suggestions which can be applied to PTSD-afflicted Vietnam veterans. McCarthy, a psychologist who works in the area of sexual trauma, suggests that sexually abused clients examine their abuse experience on three levels 1) the incident itself, 2) how the individual and others—family, friends, social agencies—reacted to the incident, and 3) any life-long labels which resulted from the experience.<sup>2</sup>

In a parallel manner, the troubled veteran needs to examine core war experiences, how he or she and others reacted to these experiences, and how he or she may have negatively labeled themselves due to war experiences.

For example, during some firefights in Vietnam, John felt he was more of a coward than a hero. Although externally he acts tough, internally he has labeled himself a sissy and a loser and avoids many risk-taking but potentially growth producing experiences. Part of John's therapy consisted of 1) examining the firefight and other traumatic war experiences more objectively (i.e., was he really a coward or was running away perhaps a legitimate option?), 2) examining how his actions were viewed by others, and 3) identifying the labels he put on himself as a result of the firefights and how those labels are continuing to influence his life in the present.

Sex abuse counselors also suggest helping survivors examine their abuse from the point of view of three constructs: expectancy theory, attribution theory and cognitive appraisal.<sup>3</sup>

## **EXPECTANCY THEORY**

What were the client's expectations about ever being traumatized? How did the client expect to behave or feel after the trauma? In the case of a rape survivor,

did the woman expect to be raped in her lifetime or did she believe she was immune to rape? In general the woman who thought "it could never happen to me" has a harder time coping than the woman who had conceded the possibility that she could be attacked.

Did the woman expect to "fall apart" if raped, or did she expect herself to carry on as if nothing happened? The greater the variance between her expected and her actual reactions, the greater her psychological distress.

In parallel manner, the veteran client's expectations about serving in war and about how he or she would react to various traumas associated with war (e.g., enduring strenuous physical conditions, observing or participating in combat and/or in abusive violence, being wounded) also influence adjustment and need to be discussed in therapy.

### **ATTRIBUTION THEORY**

In the face of trauma, people tend to ask two basic existential questions: why did the event occur and why did it happen to me?

In attribution theory, individuals formulate an attribution or explanation for why a particular event occurred and why it occurred to them. There are basically two types of attribution: behavioral and characterological. Did the event occur due to some particular behavior on my part (behavioral attribution) or, did it occur because of some personality characteristic on my part (characterological attribution)?

For example, if the rape survivor blames the rape on being out alone at night or on how she was dressed, she is making a behavioral attribution. On the other hand, if she believes she was raped because she is too trusting or naive, she is making a characterological attribution. Similarly, a veteran with PTSD symptoms who blames his unit's defeat on a particular mistake he made during combat is making a behavioral attribution. If he were making a characterological attribution, however, he would attribute the trauma to some inherent aspect of himself, e.g., his stupidity, clumsiness or cowardice. Both behavioral and characterological attributions need to be identified and discussed.

### **COGNITIVE APPRAISAL**

Cognitive appraisal refers to the individual's interpretation of the meaning of a particular event. Does rape or combat trauma mean that one is devastated forever and can no longer experience joy? While no rape counselor would ever say that rape was a positive experience, counselors can suggest that rape, as an important event in one's life, can be a precursor to positive change. However, it will take persistent effort on the survivor's part to overcome the negative effects of the rape.

Similarly, without sounding like a Pollyanna, readjustment counselors can state that while war is seldom good for people and can leave long-lasting physical and emotional scars, participation in a war can represent a crossroad, after which the veteran can assume greater control over life and redirect

efforts to make life as self-enhancing and positive as possible. The veteran, however, will need to expend considerable energy to counteract the emotionally and spiritually draining aspects of war-related symptoms, and may need the help of others.

Rape crisis counselors have used three models to encourage positive change in clients 1) a life

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*... participation in a war can represent a crossroad, after which the veteran can assume greater control over life. . .*

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threat/life appreciation model, 2) rape as a consciousness raising model, and 3) rape as a challenge model.<sup>4</sup>

### **LIFE THREAT/LIFE APPRECIATION MODEL**

For rape survivors and Vietnam veterans with PTSD symptoms, being in a life-threatening situation can result in a greater appreciation for life and a greater resolve to make (my) life count.

### **RAPE AS A CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING MODEL**

Using this model, rape survivors learn to view rape in its sociopolitical and economic context and come to see it as a societal rather than an individual problem. Similarly, the veteran's war experiences can be viewed in the context of sociopolitical and economic forces which influenced the conduct of the war and how he or she was treated by others and by various societal institutions upon return from war. Healing begins to occur when clients realize they are not alone with their readjustment problems and that some of their difficulties can, in part, be traced to social forces outside the individual.

### **RAPE AS A CHALLENGE MODEL**

In the rape as a challenge model, the rape survivor who expects to crumble is encouraged to avoid retreating from life and to continue functioning and consequently see herself as brave, strong and capable and experience a sense of mastery in having successfully met the challenge.<sup>5</sup>

Counselors tell survivors, "Now that you have been raped, you are at a crossroad. There are several things you can do. Some of these things restrict or limit your freedom. These include accepting subtle blame for the attack, limiting your physical movement (not going out at night, discontinuing a night class, never being alone), limiting yourself socially (not meeting new people, making yourself physically unattractive), and limiting your growth and positive potential. By doing other things, you can take control of your life. You can take an active role in the police investigation and court procedures of your case. You can set your own schedule. You can explore new

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# Getting into college

by Thomas Golabek

The ability of individuals to be accepted to a university may depend on how well he or she completes an admissions packet. Whether applying to a university, fine arts college, teachers college or a technological institute, the following tips can help veterans in their quest to attain college admission.

—Make sure the university's application deadline is met. This means that the applicant must have secured prior transcripts (official copies), have SAT test scores and letters of recommendation well beforehand. If packets are not received by the school's deadline date, the admissions committee will not consider the candidate.

—Make sure the application is neatly typed. Applications completed in pencil, sloppily erased, with words crossed out, spaces left blank, or with grape jelly marks leave a poor impression. All the admissions committee knows about you is what is in front of them, on paper. You want to make a positive impression, so make sure your application is fully completed and orderly.

—Some colleges ask for a biographical statement. If so, take this assignment very seriously. Take your time, write a draft, then lay it aside for a day. Ask your friends or parents to read it, and take their comments to heart. Rewrite the paper, then put it down for another day or two. When the final draft is com-

pleted, make sure it is proofread, ensuring that there are no spelling or punctuation errors. And don't send it in handwritten form. If you can't type you should learn (you'll be using those skills throughout your college career), or have someone type it for you.

—On references: don't be bashful to ask your references for a copy of their letters of recommendation. You should know the content of the letters.

—Take the Scholastic Aptitude Test well before you are required. If you do poorly, you can retake the test before the application deadline.

—Another good idea concerning the SAT is to study for it. You might try the various self-study booklets on the market. They also suggest daily readings of the newspaper to increase your fund of knowledge as well as increasing reading speed.

—Don't bank all your hopes on one school. You might consider applying to several schools so you have a choice in case you're turned down from your most desired choice.

The admissions application is an important document. Follow the directions, take your time and review it. Doing it right can mean the difference in being admitted to the college of your choice. ■

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avenues for personal growth. You can help other survivors. You can overcome what has happened."<sup>6</sup>

In a parallel manner, we must acknowledge to clients that their experiences were horrendous. However, we also will lend our support as they attempt not to let war experiences continue to rob them of peace of mind, self love, the love of others and satisfactions which life can offer.

Rephrasing the statements made to rape survivors we can say, "You have been through the hell of war. There are several things you can do. You can retreat from the society which sent you to war and from others around you, continue to put yourself down or otherwise limit your growth. You can also slowly but surely kill yourself with alcohol, drugs, food or loneliness. By doing other things, however, you can resume control over your life. You can help heal yourself by attending individual or group therapy meetings at a Vet Center or elsewhere. You can improve your vocational and other skills. You can get help with your personal relationships. You can take control of your schedule. You can take an active role in a veterans' organization or in otherwise promoting veterans' issues. You can help other veterans, too. You can take some steps toward overcoming what has happened to you." ■

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Veronen, Lois J., and Kilpatrick, Dean G., "Stress Management for Rape Victims," pp. 341-374 in *Stress Reduction and Prevention*, edited by Donald Meichenbaum and Matt Jaremko, Plenum Press, New York, N.Y., 1983, p. 351

<sup>2</sup>McCarthy, B. W., "A cognitive behavioral approach to understanding and treating sexual trauma," *Journal of Sexual and Marital Therapy*, Vol. 12, No. 4, winter 1986, pp. 322-329.

<sup>3</sup>Veronen and Kilpatrick, *op cit.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Veronen and Kilpatrick, *op cit.*, p. 351.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

# Voice

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