

# Chapter 50

## Picking up the Pieces: Working with Adult Women Sexual Abuse Survivors

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter reports the findings from a review of contemporary assessment and treatment approaches with adult women who have experienced Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). The social worker who engages with women recovering from CSA in adulthood needs to address issues of trust, relationship, and safety. Services that provide culturally sensitive and appropriate models of intervention are likely to impact positively on client rapport and engagement with the social worker and, therefore, greater therapeutic gains are possible when a relationship of trust is established. The implications for social work practice are discussed in relation to a multi-systems and multi-theoretical approach involving the client and her social networks from within strengths-based and ecological systems perspectives. Future research is recommended on the impact of the availability of culturally appropriate services for CSA survivors and cultural safety supervision for social workers, as these variables influence the therapeutic outcomes for women survivors of CSA.*

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, some of the major debates relating to working therapeutically with women survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) are outlined. The case is made for social workers to be involved as active researchers in their practice in order to be effective in working with clients in this challenging field. This rationale is followed by a description of the search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the results obtained from the sources, including electronic database searches. This information is reported so that readers can see how the evidence was identified, and the range of journals, books, and other publications that yielded “evidence” for practice. My background as author is also described as this is likely to impact on the way I have approached the search and analysed the literature as a middle-class Pakeha woman (Pakeha is a term used to describe a New Zealander of European descent). Noteworthy

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also is my identity as a social worker turned academic born in New Zealand where bicultural practice in social work is embedded in the practice standards for social work (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2013). Since moving to Australia to live and work, I have become more aware of Aboriginal social work models and ways of thinking. Another influence on my practice is feminist theory and values which inform this review. This feminist worldview developed when I was employed in the health services working alongside adult women survivors as a mental health social worker. An interest in trauma-informed theory as a psychotherapist also informs my practice which I am aware is written from within a largely individual psychological Western framework. In my view, trauma-informed approaches usefully inform practice with adult women who have experienced CSA but need to be balanced with more systemic understandings. For example, human rights and social justice models involving an analysis of power and powerlessness inform my practice. I am interested in the processes by which women become marginalised in their families and society through structural inequality. I am also interested in the ways in which cultures impose social taboos about disclosing sexual abuse and other forms of oppression. These themes are important to me as a social worker and I have developed theory related to my experience of working to address inequality using these models (Pack, 2004, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2012). From an analysis of power and powerlessness, the social taboos about disclosing sexual abuse and other forms of oppression which effectively silence women from engaging in seeking help for their issues, are important to consider. With this positioning and background outlined, the results of the search are analysed and the major themes are then presented.

## **BACKGROUND**

I am mindful in writing this chapter that much of the literature I discovered is derived from a Western paradigm and so I acknowledge that there are many comprehensive Indigenous models of practice that are under-represented in this literature review. However, the systemic focus of many of the articles reviewed aligns with social work's unique person-in-environment or ecological systems theory perspectives. This understanding of the role of broader systems brings an appreciation of social work's act of witnessing survivor narratives, with witnessing seen as a political activity in which many private troubles inhere in public issues. Individual therapy I see as being an act of witnessing in the way described by Herman (1992) in her theory development for therapy with survivors of trauma.

With this explanation of what is to follow, I wish also to acknowledge the current emphasis on risk and resilience and the disclosure of abuse which are key themes I have discovered in the literature. These themes are to be viewed with some degree of caution as being less relevant to some women and in some cultures due to core assumptions about "recovery" as a concept which is based on Western assumptions. The healing process from CSA is, therefore, to be viewed in a context in which some adult survivors may be silenced due to threats, and felt powerlessness, not allowing them to engage freely in a therapeutic process that is recommended in this chapter. The intention is not to minimise these women's experiences but to emphasise the recommended approaches for those clients who are able to engage with social workers and other helping professionals.

The therapeutic process described in this chapter is not meant to imply that healing from CSA is a linear process. In the models presented, a staged approach is recommended within the tasks and phases of healing. Healing is also viewed as needing to be supported by the survivor's significant others and families in the community; therefore, the individual focus of some studies needs to be tempered with

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