

OUR CLINICAL VIEW

We have been fortunate to provide several psychological support trips to Haiti in the past four years. Our focus remains in providing psychotherapy, consultation, and psycho-education workshops about child sexual abuse and its impact on the individual survivors, their families and community at large. During our last trip, someone approached us and asked the following question: "How can the victims of such abuse succeed in staying positive after being sexually abused?"

Based on our years of clinical experience, we were able to provide the following answer: *"Often times, the victims are understandably not positive. One of their initial reactions is to blame themselves. The sexual abuse trauma victim can experience an array of emotions. Some of the noted responses may occur to various degrees and they include the following: create shame, guilt, depression, anxiety, eating and sleeping problems; weight lost, nightmares, (night terror in children); paranoia, fear, tearfulness, hopelessness, sadness. Some victims can also experience a sense of insecurity, doubt, feelings of helplessness, and anger. Also, victims can act out aggressively; behave in promiscuous and sexual risky behaviors, and/or other self-destructive behaviors. It is not uncommon for survivors of sexual abuse to experience relational problems especially as the levels of intimacy increase in their adult relationships. Some survivors may experience difficulties in expressing their sexuality and maintaining a healthy self-fulfilling sex life. More often, survivors of sexual abuse may experience trust issues, which may undermine their ability to trust themselves and others in intimate relationships. Sometimes depending on the severity and the age of the person when the abuse occurred, the impact of the abuse (such as how this person was received upon disclosing of said abuse) the survivor may develop some peculiar ideals about relationships, sex, and intimacy."*

"However, we wholeheartedly believe that one who suffers such an abuse can heal and thrive in the face of it. As psychotherapist whose been privileged to support individuals through their recovery, we have witnessed the resilience of survivors shine through with effective psychotherapeutic interventions. In therapy, survivors learn to reconnect and process feelings in an appropriate and constructive manner. They are able to gain perspectives about the abuse and place the blame where it belongs, on the abuser. They develop a more positive view of themselves because they understand what happened to them was not their fault and it does not speak to any deviance about them. Moreover, therapy can help them realize that they were

violated; a criminal act was committed, and in many cases betrayed by a loved one. Ultimately, they learn more about ways to separate the abuse suffered from their identity, thus becoming empowered to actively commit to their recovery."

It is the result of these trips that, two years ago, we were able to provide evaluative services to 24 young Haitian men who were sexually abused for a period of 10 years in Cap-Haitien by a caretaker. The majority of the boys were street orphans who were offered refuge by the "Project Pierre Toussaint," a boarding school for homeless boys. Our weeklong meetings with these young men have been the only formalized attempt to provide some level of mental health support services to them since their abuse were publicly revealed. During our interviews with these victims we noticed many of the aforementioned symptoms, which place many of them at risk for more chronic mental health issues. Almost all of the young men displayed overt signs of major depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Anger Management, various forms of Anxiety Disorders, and Substance Abuse. This of course is not surprising given that these young men were twice victimized; once by the perpetrator-caretaker, and again by their community who banished them for daring to reveal and shedding light on their abuse. We have and continue to emphasize the need for psychotherapeutic services for these young men and others such survivors to support their growth toward a healthy self-actualization. We are equally in favor of them being financially compensated, as some have been, but not at the exclusive disregard for their mental well-being and a healthy community reintegration. Their abuse and suffering was and continues to impact the community, which welcomed their perpetrator while ostracizing them for revealing their betrayal and pain. These young men and the community need healing so as to recalibrate all to the value of our innocents, our precious Haitian children.

Although we celebrate these young men's tenacious fight for justice and their recent civil victory, we were awe struck to witness the unfolding of the civil case. As aforementioned, we believe that these young men needed to be compensated, but most of all, the community of Cap-Haitien equally needed to have given the opportunity to support and safeguard so many more victims. We have to remember that the Pierre Toussaint Project's Director had a decade to rape with impunity and thus created accomplices of so many good people thrust into the throes of this aberration called child sexual abuse. This wolf in sheep's clothing not only betrayed the precious children in his care but also betrayed the adults/community that opened their arms in embrace of this seemingly benign benefactor of their priceless cargo. Therefore, we find it astounding that the litigators and advisors did not find it necessary to safeguard these young men and their community as a whole. It is disingenuous to offer them money professing to make them whole

again without assuring that the needed infrastructure exist to support such a journey. It is common practice in the United States to provide psychological treatment for victims of sexual abuse once identified. These services are offered during and after trial (criminal and/or civil) and much is done to make sure that community services exist to provide such care and develop awareness about such services. It is astounding that this very important measure was omitted during this landmark trial. As a result, it has reduced these brave souls' conquest to a mere shallow victory.

As we continue our psychological support of our brethren in Haiti, we are troubled by the signs looming before us. It is evident that our clinical judgment forewarns the possibility that many who suffer from such depths of abuse cannot simply shake off their pain. To walk through the hell of child sexual abuse and come away with a purposeful sense of self, require a concerted effort from the village of our common humanity. We must turn our embraces toward the children, these brave young men and offer them a clear path to regain their sanity and dignity.

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