

Sexual Abuse, Suppressed Memory and Transference in Relationships

The intimate relationship involves a highly personal interaction between two people during which the survivor may perceive the other person not only as a powerful authority figure, but also as a psychologically important person that the survivor has become dependent on. The powerful nature of this interaction, together with the survivor's vulnerability may remind the survivor of similarly psychologically important figures in her/his childhood, causing him/her to see the other person as a symbolic manifestation of these figures.

This investment will distort the survivor's perceptions of the other person so that she/he begins to respond to that person as if she/he were responding to that psychologically important figure in childhood. For the male survivor in the partnership, the female partner may begin to represent the survivor's collusive or abusive mother, while for the female survivor, the male partner may begin to represent the sexual/psychological abuser. Once this process of transference has taken place, old feelings, thoughts and behaviours will be reactivated and directed at the other person. These invariably include anger, hurt, betrayal and rage. For relationships where both people have been abused this will enable an intense web of transference and counter transference to continually disrupt the relationship harmony.

The other person will need to deal with this transference by not feeling personally attacked but recognising that primitive responses have been reactivated and that it is the survivor's inner child who is responding. Transference can provide useful insights into therapeutic issues that are current for the survivor which need to be fully explored with a therapist to be resolved. Thus the other person should, without denying the validity of the feelings generated, point out to the survivor that the inner child is responding by expressing her/his long buried and deeply repressed feelings. Reassurance should be given that it is permissible to act out these feelings within a therapeutic session. The other person should also ensure that they remain objective during transference and not feel personally threatened or attacked.

Releasing these feelings in a safe, supportive environment is healthy and cathartic, and facilitates the trauma resolution. To deny or leave these feelings buried will only impede the healing process. The survivor should be encouraged to act out her/his transference, especially if this is interspersed with sessions in which the survivor explores her adult feelings towards the other person, rather than seeing him/her merely as a primitive important figure. This shows the survivor that she/he has a choice to respond with her inner child or to respond on an adult level, and to integrate both responses into self.

The other person (and the therapist) must at all times be aware of the transference process and not feel threatened psychologically by any acting out behaviours. It is vital to retain an objective perspective and to validate the survivor in allowing her/his child a voice. The other person must be wary of not showing his/her emotional reaction to destructive onslaughts. Even if the partner experiences feelings of anger, hurt, rage, disappointment or irritability, it is crucial to remain impassive but sensitive.

Adapted from Sanderson, C., 1995, *Counselling Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse 2nd Edition*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Sexual Abuse, Suppressed Memory and Counter-Transference in Relationships

The partner needs not only to be prepared for the survivor's transference, but must also be cautious of the possibility of counter-transference through which the partner reacts to the survivor with his/her own primitive behaviour patterns based on his/her own childhood experiences. This is especially the case for the survivor partner of a survivor that finds that his/her material resonates and re-stimulates childhood abuse experiences. However non-abused partners are just as vulnerable to counter-transference.

Disclosed material may sometimes strike chords in the partner which can re-stimulate a childhood memory or feeling which has been repressed. Although this may not be an abuse related memory, it may nevertheless reactivate archaic feelings and behaviour patterns which the partner must not allow to infect the relationship. These require immediate attention and need to be dealt with swiftly outside of the relationship setting during counselling so as not to impede the healing process.

Being aware of the possibility of counter-transference can help partners prepare for it by making contingency plans such as arranging their own therapist. Knowing that there is a support network will remind the partner that he/she has not failed in his/her reaction to the material, but has prepared for this by being able to work it through with someone else rather than transferring reactions onto the relationship and their survivor partner.

Adapted from Sanderson, C., 1995, *Counselling Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse 2nd Edition*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.