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Professional Therapists as an Instrument of Healing

By [Michael J. Bland, Psy.D., D. Min., L.C.P.C.](#)

Editor's Note: It pretty much goes without saying that competent, licensed, professional therapists play a significant role in the healing opportunities available to victims of child sexual abuse. While the VIRTUS[®] programs and the *Protecting God's Children*[®] program do not provide or offer therapy in any form, we believe it is worthwhile to share some insight into some of the healing opportunities available to victims through a healthy relationship with a therapist.

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When we consider that helping professions—such as professional therapy—hold the potential of being spiritually fulfilling, it is no wonder why people want to be a part of this profession or ministry. The impact of working with victim/survivors can be for *better* or *worse*, making it among the most fulfilling as well as the most emotionally draining of human endeavors.



Yet, the process of working with victim/survivors flows in two directions —(1) toward the victim/survivor, obviously influencing the victim/survivor, but (2) also toward the therapist, affecting the personal and spiritual life of the therapist. We hold sacred the intimate opportunity to learn from those we try to help and to apply what we know and understand to ourselves. However, as therapists, our work is about victims/survivors, and not about ourselves. Some of us experience a great sense of accomplishment and flourish as a result of this work. And, some of us become depleted and despondent over time because of the pressures, conflict, and stress of the position.

As competent professionals, it is important for therapists to recognize the impact of various therapeutic components that a victim/survivor may undergo during their healing process. We can improve our effectiveness by being aware of and understanding factors such as modeling, catharsis, empathic responding, intensive questioning, and constructive confrontation that often can guide the victim toward

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becoming a thriving survivor as he or she embraces a greater self-acceptance.

Victims of sexual abuse share many common experiences. Therefore, we should not be surprised that victims and survivors also share many of the potential long-term effects from the abuse. These problems often have a pervasive impact on all areas of a survivor's life. Not everyone shares all the different types of symptoms. Nor do all survivors experience the same degree of intensity of the problems. But, if there is one quality most survivors share, it is low self-esteem.

Chronic feelings of being *bad* or *unworthy* are intricately connected to all the other "self" words: self-effacing, self-deprecating, self-conscious, self-blaming, and so on. Low self-esteem causes survivors to become their own worst enemies by turning against themselves.

As therapists, we have an opportunity to assist the individual victim/survivor to see him or herself in a more positive light. But this can be a delicate balance—a balance between being someone warm and approachable who listens to and understands a victim/survivor and being a competent and confident professional. Sheldon B. Kopp (1972) in what I think is a classic book, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him*, promoted growth through personal parables. Kopp wrote "When I work with a patient, not only will I be hearing his (her) tale, but I shall be telling him (her) mine as well. If we are to get anywhere, we must come to know one another. One of the luxuries of being a psychotherapist is that it helps to keep you honest." (p. 17)

Yet, as Jeffery Kottler (1986) points out in his book, *On Being a Therapist*, self-disclosure is one of the few therapeutic activities that is so misrepresented and distorted under the pretext of being helpful. Kottler suggests that excessive self-disclosure by a therapist may be done to relieve our own discomfort with the inherent inequality of the relationship between ourselves and the other. The person visiting a therapist is seeking assistance. Therefore, it is realistic for that person to want to talk with someone who is professional, competent, confident, and who can offer a sense of hope and direction. In this way, it is vitally important that we self disclose what makes us an "expert" and competent to listen to them. What is it that gives us the perceived power, status, and prestige to be in the position? As victims are seeking healing and reconciliation, we have to be honest and forthcoming in telling them why we believe we can help them find the healing they seek.

Kottler writes that "whether at the lecture podium, in the media, when writing, teaching, counseling, (or meeting with a victim/survivor), self-disclosure is most effective when the therapist adheres to a personally developed set of standards that best bring out her (his) personality with professional restraint. We wish to communicate our warmth, authority, expertise, and power" (p. 37) while at the same time remaining professional, objective, and emotionally healthy. To develop such a balance takes time, training, and supervision. Kottler offers a few reflective questions to assist in developing such a self awareness.

- What do I hope my self-disclosure will accomplish?
- What do I risk in not self-disclosing?
- To what extent am I meeting my own needs?
- Is this the right time for the victim/survivor?
- If I self-disclose, how can I do it concisely?
- How can I keep the focus on the person before me?

Often there is no time to reflect on these self-queries in the moment, which is also what makes a therapist's position so challenging. Nevertheless, such a vigilant attitude should be developed to avoid hurting the one we are trying to assist in finding healing and reconciliation.

Victims/survivors often feel grateful whenever we give away any part of ourselves, although they may sometimes stop and consider *why* we did that. We can be most helpful by presenting to them only those parts of ourselves that help them to see themselves more clearly as they seek to become a thriving survivor and to develop their own story and enhance their own self-esteem. As therapists, our work is about victims/survivors, and not about ourselves.

References:

- Kopp, S. B. (1972) *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!* New York: Bantam Books.
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