

Healing The Silent Survivors

March 8, 2018 | Sue Jones

Several years back I was sitting around a kitchen table chatting with two friends with whom I am very close. One of them was Paula (name changed for privacy). We were reminiscing about our college days and we got to talking about various regrets, mostly involving alcohol. Paula began telling us of an experience she had that involved excessive drinking and a boat. Through a bit of uncomfortable laughter she described an evening during which she got more intoxicated than she had planned and then climbed into a boat for a ride on a lake with a young man (who was also drinking). She then stated blankly: "He had sex with me on the boat."

Full stop.

I asked her what she meant by "he had sex with me." She explained that he had gotten on top of her against her protestations. She recalled, "I just kept saying no, but he did it anyway."

We looked at her with concern. She stared back at us, her expression flat.

"Paula, you were raped," we told her. Her expression didn't change; as if it was difficult for her to take that word in.



The truth is, that only 15.8 to 35 percent of sexual assaults are reported to the police. Moreover, so many women (like Paula) do not even recognize their sexual assault – often because they felt somehow responsible. Perhaps they were drinking too much, flirting too much, wearing too little, and ended up in a boat with someone.

To an outsider looking in, this may be hard to understand; but taking on the burden of responsibility in response to a trauma is a remarkably brilliant, and surprisingly common, survival mechanism of the human brain and body.

It may be that Paula took responsibility for all the ways that she perceived she had caused her unacknowledged rape. She drank too much (ok, never do that again). She got into a boat (ok, no more boats). She let him kiss her (alright, never again), and on and on. This type of thinking has a purpose: As long as she can remember all the things that she "did wrong," she can prevent the experience from ever happening again.

Paula, like the 65-94 percent of sexual assault survivors, kept mum about the whole thing until 25 years later around the kitchen table.

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In a society that prioritizes talk therapy for mental and emotional wounds, it is difficult to imagine how we could even identify those who do not come forward with their sexual trauma or assault, let alone heal them. We rely on women to seek out the mental health system for help, which is intimidating and expensive, with or without health insurance. After one or two days of getting the red tape runaround, it would be easy to decide it wasn't worth it at best, or feel re-traumatized at worst.

Thus, hundreds of thousands of silent survivors remain silent, symptomatic, unheard and unhealed, sometimes for years. Many turn to health risk coping mechanisms such as addiction, eating disorders, or danger-courting behavior (such as prostitution), and often end up homeless or incarcerated. The entire course of their lives can be impacted.

I work every day with U.S. women in substance abuse recovery, incarcerated women, women veterans, survivors of intimate partner violence, and homeless women, and I can tell you with certainty that the common denominator among them is sexual trauma. I can also confidently say that the majority of these women have never reported their assault, and it is likely that many of them stay silent due to incomprehensible feelings of fear, guilt, and/or shame.

I also work with women in developing countries like Haiti and Kenya, where sexual assault is so prevalent as to be a matter of "cultural custom." Being the victim of rape is even punishable by death in some countries, because it brings dishonor to the family. Under these conditions, the statistic of unreported assaults is extreme; after all, where would you go to report what is just the accepted treatment of women?

When I began my work, I did not set out to focus on sexual trauma. But I have come to learn that nearly all women are survivors of sexual trauma to some degree, whether they are aware of it or willing to say it or not. Whether in the U.S. or abroad, nearly all of their abuses are unreported and often unrecognized, and deemed as *not that important* to report.

But silent survivors can and are being healed, and they don't have to share one word of their abuse, assault, or trauma. Many of the women who go through yogaHOPE's mindfulness-based trauma recovery training are relieved to learn that they don't have to tell their story at all to reap the benefits of the program.

TIMBo (Transformative Intervention for Mind and Body) focuses on identifying and experiencing sensations in the body, coupled with learning new ways to conceptualize how our body and mind work together to ensure our survival. Women learn how fear shows up in their bodies, and they identify for themselves (often silently or in private writing) how this has impacted them, without ever needing to discuss their specific life narratives. TIMBo offers tools to shift uncomfortable sensations in the body, in combination with a safe community in which to hear the insights and awareness of others, helping them learn that they are not alone and there is nothing wrong with them.

But sensations in the body are not the only way that survival mechanisms respond and adapt. From the time we are able to understand cause and effect (often around the age of 2 or 3), our survival response begins to shape our thoughts – starting with identifying what we did to "cause" the stress/fear response, and attempting to change our behavior in that situation so it never happens again. For example, the women we work with in Iran often talk of being beaten as young girls if they are caught laughing in public. In this situation, our survival mechanism may very well deduce that laughing is what caused a beating; so, better to adapt ourselves — no more laughing.

By the time we are older and find ourselves in boats (like Paula), or parking lots, or dorm rooms, or the office, because we drank too much, or wore the wrong thing, or trusted too much, or were too friendly, or too confident, or felt too sexy, this survival adaptation is already firmly rooted.

When a woman learns how her primitive survival response works with her cognitive reasoning from a very young age, it becomes much less about the trauma and much more about finding true compassion for every aspect of every traumatic experience – including the

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fact that she didn't report it. And all this can happen without her having to share one word of her story with anyone in the TIMBo group.

I often think of Paula and the many, many women like her. I know that every woman who participates in TIMBo is also a Paula. It is my vision that this method of healing can reach many more Paulas over the next year, or five, or fifty; and that those Paulas will share with others like them the things they learn about their survival mechanism and tools for immediate and long term healing. Because I, too, am a Paula. And I know what's on the other side of the silence, isolation, and shame:

Freedom.



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