

Anita and Beverly Childhood Sexual Abuse

Introduction

Today's lesson is a brief introduction to the use of the Faithful Brain model of Christian counseling with people who have experienced childhood sexual abuse (CSA).

I'd like to present two anonymized cases that illustrate the complexity of this topic with young women. In another lesson I will present case studies that focus on CSA with mature women.

Anita was 15 years old when I began working with her. She became paraplegic in a suicide attempt precipitated by four years of sexual abuse by her father.

Beverly was 17 years old when I began working with her. She had become quadriplegic in a fall from a third story bathroom window as she attempted to escape from captors who had held her hostage and sexually assaulted her for several days.

I worked with Anita and Beverly early in my career at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in Downey, California where we focused on helping them adjust to their disabilities and participate in school and in the community. Both Anita and Beverly presented with very serious trauma histories to which each had a different response. It's in the differences from which we can learn.

I want to address two intertwined themes in today's lesson:

1. The criticality of faith in a loving God to facilitate redemption and restoration.
2. Affirming the unique experience of each of our clients, which is always necessary for clients who have experienced trauma, and is especially important with regard to childhood sexual abuse.

Background: CSA as Evil Behavior

Childhood sexual abuse is the epitome of evil behavior. There is no more serious crime against humanity. As a consequence, it is more likely than any other trauma to lead to PTSD. Interpersonal trauma violates how God designed us to be relational. Earthquakes and forest fires and hurricanes and tornadoes are all terrifying but they're not interpersonal and therefore not as likely to cause PTSD. There is a reason that evil in the Genesis garden speaks; **evil is always interpersonal** and so, as the epitome of evil behavior there is no more serious crime against humanity than childhood sexual abuse.

Please notice that I use the term "evil behavior" intentionally. My intention is to remind us that the perpetrator is a broken person who was not born evil but developed over time. Evil behavior is learned. The perpetrator learned to negate the beauty and humanity of his or her victim. It's true that perpetrators' brains have been hijacked by their cultural experiences, but they're not beyond God's redemption.

I don't believe that people are inherently evil but that each of us can be recruited by the forces of evil. Once hijacked so that our brains negate the beauty and humanity of our victim, any of us can instigate evil behavior. It's only a question of degree. Treatment of CSA perpetrators is beyond my scope of experience and I bow to those professionals who have the expertise and commitment to attempt redemption and restoration of perpetrators.

Faith in a Loving God

This is where we need to begin.

For victims of CSA, faith in a loving God seems to be critical at the same time that it is so difficult to accept.

Childhood sexual abuse appears to be a complete abrogation of faith in a loving God. Could there be any better evidence that God does not exist or is not omniscient?

Affirming the Experience of Abuse

Beyond a focus on the criticality of faith in a loving God, the second theme that I want to address is on affirming the unique experience of each of our clients, which is especially important with regard to childhood sexual abuse.

It's sometimes difficult for clinicians to appreciate and understand the nuances of each person's traumatic CSA experience, there are several reasons for this. One reason is that we can only learn about the specifics of each person's trauma by asking the victim to recount it for us. This is often very difficult and likely to be re-traumatizing if not handled properly.

Another reason that clinicians have difficulty appreciating and understanding the nuances of the CSA trauma is that it is so difficult for us as caring human beings to fully grasp the horror of our client's experiences.

In other lessons I talk about the importance of balancing our caseloads so that we respect our own sensitivities and emotional burden that we experience as we work with clients who have been severely traumatized. Please consider this as you look at your own ability to provide these services. I'm not talking merely about skills here I'm talking about your emotional resilience.

Faith is Foundational

Returning to the first theme of today's lesson, faith in a loving God is foundational for our work and for the success of the interventions that we offer. My own experience is that unless we can help our clients examine and develop or refresh their faith in a loving God, success in the treatment of victims of childhood sexual abuse is very hard to come by.

At this point, I need to depart from what my theologian or pastoral colleagues would do to address the problem of childhood sexual abuse and focus on the integration of faith and neuroscience as counselors apply it to treating CSA victims.

From the perspective of brain science, faith in a loving God provides the necessary context for brain restoration after childhood sexual abuse. Healing from nightmares, PTSD starter responses, condemning self-shame and corrosive self-disgust, starts to be possible within the context of the safety of a loving relationship with God.

Developing safe and nurturing relationships within the context of God's love provides the opportunity for the counselor to guide the client into exploration of the traumatic experience so that **neural reconsolidation** can occur, decreasing the emotional salience and disturbance tied to the traumatic memory.

I'm offering to you the stories of Anita and Beverly because they became very helpful in my return to God and my eventual acceptance of Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. Anita's story was a cautionary tale that helped me appreciate what I was missing but Beverly story was salutary and deeply meaningful.

Anita's Story

Let me tell you about my experience with Anita.

When I began working with Anita, I was well-established in my atheism. Actually that's an understatement, I was anti-theistic. God was a mythical concept and as a mythical concept, God was worse than useless. Anita's story was an excellent example that seemed to justify my anti-theistic beliefs.

Anita was the youngest daughter in a family that was nominally Christian and they were very active in their local church. Anita's father was a long-haul truck driver and her mother worked as a secretary at the local school district offices. Her parents appeared to be happily married and her older sisters were successful high school and college students, beginning to make their way in the world.

But Anita's suicide attempt exposed a dark and deep chasm of evil behavior in the family.

At about age 11, Anita's father had initiated a sexual relationship with her.

Anita told me that she felt "weird but special" about her sexual relationship with her father. Anita knew that there was something wrong about what she and her father were doing but her father obviously loved her, perhaps even more than he loved Anita's mother. In fact, that was the theme of her experience as she began to rebel against her mother's influence in her early teens.

What precipitated Anita suicide attempt was her father's unwillingness to divorce her mother and leave town with Anita to set up a life together elsewhere.

The reality testing of victims of childhood sexual abuse strains credulity but is entirely consistent with the plasticity of the young brain and its need for God-honoring values-based guidance. Time and again, I am absolutely amazed at the effects of grooming by the perpetrator to create a God-negating reality that the victim finds acceptable and can even embrace.

Anita made a dramatic suicide attempt.

One afternoon, when her father returned from a trip and her mother and sisters were inside the home, he came out to the backyard and found Anita in a tree behind the house with a rope knotted around her neck. She yelled, "You don't really love me!" and jumped. The rope snapped taut and broke free of the tree limb over which it was looped. She fell down onto a concrete bench on the ground, permanently damaging her spinal cord.

It wasn't until several days later when the cause for the suicide attempt became clear. By that time, father and mother had closed ranks, insisting that the father had not been abusing his daughter, that she was sexually promiscuous with several boys at school, which was the cause of her suicide attempt. Fortunately, the authorities obtained confirmation from one of Anita's sisters that their father had abused her as well.

Mother denied all knowledge of what was going on. Their mother's emotional abandonment permanently isolated Anita and one of her sisters from their parents.

As you can imagine, when Anita was transferred several hundred miles away to our pediatric rehabilitation hospital a few weeks after her injury, her story was very engaging and predisposed the treatment team to embrace her.

Anita developed many healthy relationships and received the best care possible in what was at the time the world's premier rehabilitation hospital for children with spinal cord injuries and brain injuries.

But we did not have a faith-based component to our work.

There was a Catholic priest father, Fr. Robert Gipson who was available and had developed helpful relationships with many of the teenagers, but that was not the case with Anita. As far as I could tell, there seem to be a prohibition against professionals discussing matters of faith with our patients. I look back over more than 40 years and find that very little has changed in this regard in spite of what we have learned about the health benefits of faith and participation in faith communities.

Although the relationships that Anita developed at our hospital were loving and caring they were tied to her role with us as a patient. The superordinate relationship that she might've been able to establish with God was not explored.

After several months, Anita was placed in a foster home in another community and

returned to high school. Unfortunately, the damage to her faith that was done by her parents' betrayal was never addressed. Although she was placed in a loving foster family once again their relationships with her were limited by their own frailty and her ongoing spiritual and emotional wounds.

As I look back now, many of us failed Anita because we did not offer to explore her spiritual and emotional wounds with her. In many ways, she was open and outspoken and I think would have been capable of careful exploration but I never considered it and I don't think anyone else did.

Although she got excellent care medically and her foster family was wonderful and she was accepted at her new high school, she was obviously deeply wounded and had not healed spiritually. As a consequence, over the next several years, Anita developed a host of self-inflicted injuries that eventuated in a successful suicide at age 21.

Beverly's Story

And now, let me tell you about Beverly.

Beverly's quadriplegia caused her to be dependent on others to a degree that most newly injured people find absolutely intolerable. I have found that this is even worse for teenagers and young adults, and it was certainly the case with Beverly.

I began working with Beverly about five years after I met Anita, and by this time I was much more respectful of the importance that faith played in successful rehabilitation.

However, I was still a nonbeliever. I was simply more respectful of the beliefs of others.

For me now, looking back at Beverly's eventual success in rehabilitation, the signal aspect of that success was the **faith-infused support of her parents**, primarily her father, in helping her forgive the men who had abducted and abused her.

The perpetrators had been caught and were brought to trial. In their trial, Beverly testified in great detail, including revealing that the youngest of the men had helped her escape, even apologizing to her as he helped her get out the bathroom window.

Beverly's father, I will call him Hank, was beside himself with anger and grief but he saw a brief glimpse of humanity in this young man's behavior and asked the judge for a reduced sentence, which was granted. As Hank told me later, "Except for him, my beloved daughter would be dead."

Several months later, Hank visited this young man in prison and happened to meet the young man's mother. She completely and without reservation apologized for her son's behavior and they prayed together for their children.

When Hank met the young man privately a few hours later, the young man was deeply regretful and ashamed of his behavior and asked Hank for forgiveness.

Now, it was not the intention of Hank to forgive the young man, just simply to thank him for the small part he played in saving his daughter's life.

But Hank was a practicing Christian and had been meeting with his pastor and other Christian fathers since the very first word came of Beverly's abduction.

He had insisted that he was not ready to forgive, but he knew that his pastor and his buddies had given him the space and the freedom to make that a possibility. As he told me, "I knew that the guys were okay with me hating this kid forever or even forgiving him, if I ever got around to that. And knowing that they loved me enough to give me permission to go wherever my heart led me made a huge difference."

Let me point out here that the Faithful Brain Model presumes that **we must love God first** before we can love others enough to have forgiveness become a possibility.

Loving God sets us up for loving ourselves and others. And that love is intentional, an act of will, with the feeling of love and the desire for love only coming **after** we make the commitment to love God. There were several men in Hank's life, including his pastor and one of his brothers who modeled putting God first and building their ability to love by practicing with God.

As it turned out, Hank did not forgive the young man during his first visit to prison but schedule a second visit a few months later.

At that visit he could still not bring himself to forgive the perpetrator but the healing process had begun, led by his growing awareness of the practical importance of forgiveness for himself and for his daughter and wife.

And what is the practical importance of forgiveness?

The contrast of the effects on the brain between forgiveness and the strong emotions that take its place when we avoid forgiveness could not be greater.

We don't yet have a definitive study, but my more than 46 years of treating traumatized people tells me that we live longer and healthier lives when we can get past our anger and feelings of revenge. With childhood sexual abuse and other horrific traumas, this takes supernatural effort.

I actually have a structured clinical interview that I've been using for most of my career which I've asked thousands of people how they're doing in many different ways. The very last of my 83 questions in the structured clinical interview is, "To whom do you turn for emotional support?" Before I ask this question, I make a bet with myself about whether or not the person has an active relationship with God and mentions God in their response to my question.

I'm correct about 80% of the time.

The people who don't have a relationship with God often are doing quite poorly in the aftermath of trauma and, conversely the people who do have a relationship with God are often doing surprisingly well. This effect has been a major influence in my ongoing faith journey.

Returning to Beverly's story, eventually Hank forgave the young man as a person while continuing to condemn his behavior. That's a bridge to forgiveness that can be quite helpful for everybody concerned.

At about three years after the young man was incarcerated, Hank encouraged his wife and Beverly to meet with them together.

Beverly went through a similar healing process, shepherded by her father and eventually by her mother. The recollection of the trauma was very difficult for her to tolerate when at first she met the young man in prison, but the **neural reconsolidation** that occurred the hours and days after the meeting made possible by God's love, modeled by her mother and father, helped the traumatic recollection to be gradually less painful.

Beverly gradually returned to participate in her community, graduate from high school and attended college with help from the disabled students program. She was a good student and especially interested in social psychology, eventually getting her doctorate. She got married and had an excellent career as a community college psychology professor.

Expensive Lessons

The sad lessons of Anita and the hopeful lessons of Hank and Beverly are important orienting influences in my life. I don't know whether or not Anita could've been helped had we addressed her spiritual wounds as well as we addressed her physical wounds, but I believe that would've been the case.

Since I've witnessed the power of God-guided forgiveness and its healing effects on Hank and Beverly, I've had the opportunity to watch that play out with literally thousands of trauma victims.

We now understand, that the **neural reconsolidation** that takes place in the few hours after exploration of the trauma memory allows the emotional impact of the memory to be either improved or worsened.

I can't imagine a better context for improving trauma's emotional impact than what we have available when we can lean into and relax in the loving embrace of God.

Thank you very much for your attention. I hope that you find these lessons useful.