

Healing Past Childhood Sexual Abuse

Common Themes

Yehuda Tagar & Robin Steele

Chapter 9 in *Psychophonetics Holistic Counselling & Psychotherapy: Stories & Insights from Practice*.
Great Barrington MA: Lindisfarne Books (2011, pp145-162)

The number of people who suffer from past and present sexual abuse far exceed the numbers affected by cancer or heart disease. The long term consequences of being sexually abused cover a wide range of symptoms such as low self-esteem, fear and anxiety, depression, psychiatric illness, with a vulnerability to substance abuse, destructive relationships, repetition of abuse, and inappropriate sexual behaviour. The cost for the individual and society as a whole is high. Whereas, a physical attack affects the physical body, an emotional attack affects the soul life, neglect of a person affects their life body, but sexual abuse attacks the human spirit. This is what makes this experience so severe.

I would like to highlight some themes found from clinical experience and case study research, in Australia and South Africa, of adults' recovery and healing from past childhood sexual abuse. Encouraging people to articulate non-verbally the reality of their experience held in the bodily memory, allows the person to express creatively what can't be expressed so easily in words. The non-verbal language of sensing, gesture, visualisation and sound gives a language with which to access the experience of these patterns, as it goes beyond any differences in language and culture. From many years of clinical observation and the phenomenological exploration of clients' experiences from case studies, the following themes or clusters of experience were found to be crucial for empathy and effective inner work with this issue.

Main clusters of experiences

The following clusters of experience¹ also include drawings and descriptions by Jess² who attended a number of Psychophonetics counselling sessions in 2002. At that time, Jess was a twenty-three year old woman who had suffered digestive problems from age thirteen which became worse throughout her teenage years and was diagnosed as having Irritable Bowel Syndrome at age

¹ These 'clusters of experience' were originally published in the book "*Contributions to psychotherapy in South Africa*" (2003), in a chapter by Yehuda Tagar (pp104-107). The editor, Sylvester Madu and the author, Yehuda Tagar, have kindly given permission for a revised version of these descriptions to be included in this book.

² The name *Jess* is a pseudonym and Jess has given permission for her contributions to be included in this chapter.

seventeen and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) at eighteen, which lasted for about five years. She had seen doctors, naturopaths, Chinese herbalists, homeopaths and traditional chiropractors throughout this period with little result. At age twenty she began seeing a kinesiologist and for the first time became aware of herself as being beyond just a physical body. This started an inner journey to seek a deeper connection with herself. At twenty-two years old, Jess saw a Network Chiropractor and at twenty-three years, she was experiencing a general 'stuck-ness' in life and a 'new' emotion of anger which she said: "I don't know where it's really coming from". When she felt ready to find out more, she began attending sessions in Psychophonetics counselling. It is interesting to note that Jess had not used drawing before these sessions and found during this process that she had become an artist.

Biographical concentric layers - imprints frozen in time

For people who have experienced past sexual abuse, the abuse experience continues to live on in their body-memory, in which different layers of biography live within each other like concentric circles, much like the rings of a tree. The resonances of past experiences as well as the various mechanisms with which they have survived since are represented simultaneously. They surface into the emotional and mental processes upon typical triggers rather than in any logical or sequential order, controlling perceptions, emotional responses, interpersonal interactions, self perceptions and the motivation for action regarding present situations.

Biographical layers are uncovered experientially during the action phase of the counselling process which usually starts from a typical present day adult example of the behavioural pattern in question. Through a process of sensing this moment and entering the experience through bodily sensation to gesture the expression of the sensed experience, then letting go and physically 'exiting' this position, a precise visualisation of a biographical layer originated decades earlier, can be brought into conscious awareness.

In the following description of her drawing (Fig.1), Jess describes her experience of discovering layers of the past living in the present:

During our first session I mentioned to the counsellor how I see myself in layers and how this was particularly evident to me during high school. This first piece was an exercise for me to "get to know and understand" these layers. The picture shows the fire is locked in a cage and needs a mighty big key if it's ever going to get out. The cage is another part of me oppressing this anger; the colour coming out from the cage is the energy that's left over from this inner conflict. This energy doesn't last very long and it turns black. The result of this struggle is what I felt I presented to the outside world - a mask-covering up the real me, even though I had no sense of who that was.



Figure 1: Jess- Locked in a cage

Excarnation – ‘leaving the body’ when under threat

From clinical experience and client feedback, the actual experience of the most people who have experienced sexual abuse before the age of seven, is that in order to survive their consciousness left the body so that they were not fully present while it happened. It seems that children leave their bodies when they cannot process or digest the experience of what happens during sexual abuse. Consequently, they are still not fully present in the body as an adult. Clients have described how they often feel as if they are not fully here; that the body feels vacant of the presence of consciousness, sensation, feeling, perception, and the ability to respond and relate to others fully. Expressed in a gesture the person can appear empty, listless, hanging there with vacant eyes - they have left. When this is accepted in the counselling session, it is often the first time the client feels understood regarding the underlying pattern of their reality.

Once this experience is understood by the practitioner and acknowledged by the client and respected, there is a sense of relief in being understood and of being able to understand one's own experience in this way. Upon request, clients can always point to the direction in which they have left the body; for example, on the ceiling, behind furniture, out of the room, across the road, in the garden, always away from where the body is. They always know where they went and can describe the landscape precisely. As the counsellor, we go with them physically or imaginatively to that place, to join the soul in its disembodied position; such as getting up on a chair, behind furniture, in the garden, across the road. There comes a point where the client always stops and says something like: *“This is it. That is where I went”*. It is a place in which they feel safe. In looking back, the client can ‘see’ the body left on the floor of the room in the previous position. From this location

they feel safe enough to observe the precise position of the body. It is in this position, in the relative safety of being 'out of the body' that they can see, often for the first time, just exactly what happened to them. This can be very orientating and may need time for them to digest and integrate what happened. When the client feels ready the process of returning home to be present in the body can start, remembering that they are not consciously in their body, and we are joining them where they are. In the following drawing (Fig.2), Jess describes how when she feels too much pain she leaves her body:



Figure 2: Jess– In pain

In this drawing, the woman's body and the clenched fist are mine. The little figure sitting down, pounding her fists is me as a child. I am sitting in the area of my right ovary because this was where I had experienced pain on and off for years. The position I am sitting in (hands pounding the air

and my head down), was the position I made during a session. I went 'into' this pain; I was sitting down and began punching the air. It wasn't in a violent way, and my head was down like I couldn't look at what I was punching. Again, my spiritual body is leaving me; out through my back. It has left my body but it is by no means free as it is tied up by black rope. The robots represent the disassociation I felt as a result of me leaving my body. They also represent living with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and the feeling of being empty and living life in an automatic mode; a feeling of not quite living.

The acknowledgement that one 'is simply not fully here' is orientating, reassuring, bringing together one's concept of self and one's actual experience. Accepting, rather than judging this experience, leads to the possibility of 'joining' the location of the departing soul physically, which can lead the client to a place of clarity, safety and orientation. From the point of view of the disembodied soul the new step in the process can be plotted together between client and practitioner. The plotting is always about how to come back and to clear the body from the traces of invasion and to connect with the resources needed. Jess describes her experience of feeling sadness and leaving the body. The fire is her fury at being polluted by the toxic blackness, at the bottom of the picture (Fig.3):



Figure 3: Jess— leaving the body

This is the same brick wall that I had ‘found’ myself looking at during a session a couple of weeks before. It was not long after revealing to my counsellor about the instances of sexual abuse when I started experiencing a sadness about what happened which I hadn’t been able to feel at the time. It was like I was grieving. During the session I had ‘gone into’

this sadness with my whole body and my counsellor asked me what I could see. We realized that I wasn’t actually in my body so we went outside to find myself. We went across the road and there I was with my back turned to the house staring at a brick wall. The small child is me and this is the brick wall. I would rather look at this than see what happening to me during the abuse. The footprints lead to a place somewhere in my body where I came back to. A ‘fairy-frenzy’ had kept it safe. The space is safe but it also small and confining. The black seeping up from the bottom is a poison that is threatening to taint everything.

The imprint of past sexual abuse is experienced as physical toxicity

From the experience of confronting this phenomena many times it can be concluded that the pathology resulting from sexual abuse is not primarily of a psychological nature, but is a phenomena that is experienced in the body, in relation to which psychological phenomena are primarily symptomatic. To the client, the body feels contaminated, toxic, internally dirty, for many years after the abuse. Time itself does not clear this toxicity and is the major reason people who ‘left their bodies’ cannot fully return to be present in their body. It is as though the body or parts of it have been overtaken by a foreign presence, strange, indigestible, malignant and obnoxious, disinheriting their ability to reside in it fully. Typical expressions from clients are: *something foreign was deposited into my body, coming from the outside; it frightens me; it hurts me; it is black; I cannot stand it; I cannot stay in its presence; I cannot get rid of it; my body is no longer mine because this is present in it; I have no other body to stay in; I am stuck, half here, half nowhere; or please help me to get it out of my body so that I can come back to live in it fully.*

Adult sexuality has no established counterpart in the child's constitution. The child's constitution is unable to match its energy, to break it down, digest it, or to clear it away. A toxic deposit in the subtle dimension of the bodily memory is being experienced by people who have been sexually abused, as if this was a physical toxicity insoluble by the passage of time and insoluble by just verbal descriptions of the experience. In this light, it appears all the psychological, emotional, mental, and relationship patterns acted out by people who have experienced past sexual abuse are but symptoms of a deeply entrenched experience of toxicity. Processes applicable to the embodied dimension of experience are required to break down and clear the experience of toxicity. From clinical experience, it has been found that this toxicity needs to be 'washed' out of the system and the non-verbal modes of sensing, movement, visualisation and sounds can be effective in doing this. Other modalities will also have their own ways of working with this. The presence of this toxicity is an actual reality for people who have experienced sexual abuse. In Figure 4, Jess describes her experience of being held down and gagged:

This piece could be placed underneath the previous one. It could reveal what is behind the seeping black poison that is threatening to taint the previous picture. Here the focus is a part of me that has been vulnerable for as long as I can remember: the digestive system. Pain in the bowel area has decreased as I gain a deeper understanding of myself. The green small intestines represent a contaminated gut, and there are little angry versions of me in the large intestine. One is trying to get out, one is asleep and one is shouting. The flowers are being overtaken and strangled by weeds. I am being silenced by someone else's hands. The fairy is chained up and is crying because it feels helpless and unable to help me. This represents my own feeling of helplessness in the past and thinking that I will never ever be happy and pain free.



Figure 4: Jess- feeling helpless

Precise visualization involves a process whereby the client can come to perceive the imprint of past experience in their own psycho-physical constitution. Perceiving an imprint of a past experience through visualization is made possible by creating perspective in regards to one's own experience, through a process of: 'Enter-Exit-Behold'. This process includes focusing, sensing, movement and visualization which enable people to imaginatively see their experience as if watching it on a screen in front of them. Precise details not only of what took place in the external sense come to light through this process, but also precise details of the internal dynamics that resulted from the event become conscious through this most central therapeutic process. People can *see* what is happening in their inner world. Jess describes her experience in which she realises that in she had depicted the evil eye of her assailant (Fig.5):

This picture features a window with heavy curtains. The window has an "outside" and an "inside". On the inside a purple figure sits head down. From this point on I adopted purple to represent my physical body. I am holding the tail of my spiritual body which has just left my physical body. From this point on big purple lips, closed eyes and colourful trail came to represent my spiritual being. Again, fire is anger and it burns on the inside of the window. The fairy is perched on the window ledge and is attempting to protect me from what is outside the window. This space outside the window remained empty until near completion of this piece. I knew the inside of the window very well; it was the other side I had started to feel physically sick about the



Figure 5: Jess - through the window

closer I got to it. I knew it had an 'evilness' about it, I knew it was peering in and invading me in many ways. Deep down I think I knew what it was, but it wasn't until my next session that I mentioned it for the first time to my counsellor. It was very difficult to talk about because I honestly didn't think it was valid enough to be behind the rage.

I told about a boy who used to live across the road from me who sexually abused me when I was four or five. I told about two incidents which I managed to erase from my memory during primary school, but later returned to my memory mid teens. Up until this stage I had little feelings about what happened and had dismissed it as something that had not had any effect on me.

The 'Landing Pad' – a safe haven in the abused body

From Psychophonetics research and clinical experience, it was found that the body is not completely abused, that there is a spot within the body that is not contaminated and this is how full consciousness can return to the body. Clients have often expressed in sessions that their deepest desire is to be more in their body, to be more fully present, to clear the place completely and to own their life as an expression of their true being. In the action process, many clients can visualise/discover in the observed abused body, a spot that has not been contaminated and where their being is preserved in the body, even during the abuse. Through this spot they can start the return, to what is called: 'The Landing Pad'. The client visualises this place in a specific place in the body which varies from person to person, such as: in the heart, in the throat, in the middle of the forehead, inside the head, in a toe, in the belly, in the clenched fists. It is always a specific, clearly located place which the client sees as a pure, safe, beautiful colour: radiant blue, green, pink, golden, and can imagine returning through it. This is the point of return.

Clients can be encouraged to re-imagine themselves as being in possession of a powerful, resilient, incorruptible place which is beyond the abuse. This realisation, when becoming a direct visual experience, is very empowering for the client's sense of Self. On this basis, a way can be found for ritualising the return to the body through the pure 'Landing Pad' in the body. Once returned people learn to become more aware in staying in their bodies more fully. In the following drawing (Fig.6), Jess describes the heart as her safe 'landing pad':



Figure 6: Jess- cleansing

Here the contaminated gut features again. The heart is big, strong and safe and the blue represents a cleansing ritual that I worked through with the counsellor. The ritual began by looking around the body for a place that was not tainted and was safe - the heart. Having found this I proceeded to gather my fairies, strength and energy from surrounding trees to form the "cleansing" ingredients. I placed them in the heart, took them down into my gut and through my intestines, and back up through my throat and finally out of my mouth. I used the sound "ffffff" as I cleared my gut and the sound "gggggggg" as it left my mouth. I repeated

this ritual many times. I visualised the boy from across the road being in the room now and my counsellor asked me if I could protect myself. I felt strong and put my hand up to the boy "Stop!" I told him to leave the room and I watched him walk out the door. "Don't you ever come back". The two circles are my potential. The flames are no longer anger; instead they now represent power. They are blocked off from the main image. The two figures are the facelessness and numbness I feel while being unable to step into my potential. The fairies are helping with the cleansing process, and for the first time an orange fairy appears- this is the 'potential' fairy.

Summary

Practitioners need to be sensitive to the pace of the client's capacity for recovery, and not push people to 'open up' when they are in states of high distress. It is not safe to help clients to call forth traumatic memories unless the client is able to contain the flow of their anxiety, emotion, memories and body sensations at will. In Psychophonetics, the client's wish helps to protect the client and the counsellor, especially when working experientially and during the crucial phase in the recovery- when the actual experience of abuse is being re-experienced; when the detached, dissociated part of oneself is safely returned to the body; the inner wound is being addressed by the caring adult presence; the dis-empowered component of oneself is being encouraged to take charge of the soul-space and to restore safety; the deposited 'toxicity' is being cleared; and when breached boundaries are mended and healed.

Preparation is needed in the recovery and healing process through a number of sessions, as pre-conditions need to form- for the creation of safety in the therapeutic interaction between client and practitioner; resistances need to be owned, acknowledged and dissolved; the building and establishing of trust and safety within the client's soul, in terms of inner layers of experience coming to trust the adult intention to explore them; the creation of a higher level of coping regarding the client's current life; and the arrangement of safety in the client's social, physical and time-management environment as they go through this phase of the process. The following are typical stages in the crucial phase of the recovery process. It will vary in order and form with every person and type of issue.

The following summary illustrates the above described elements during the crucial phase of the recovery process.

- A clear 'wish' is established by the client relating to the emerging picture.
- Examples are chosen which exemplify a pattern from their present life that is in need of change, and through which the underlying issues can be externalised.

- Exploration through an 'Enter-exit-behold' process- entering in gesture, exiting from this position and observing the images created by re-experiencing the chosen example from life, so that the inner dynamics can become conscious.
- 'Compassion Triangle' process- addressing the negative self-talk, self hatred, self-resentment and putdown on oneself that have accumulated from years of suffering. Process includes exposing the negative talk, putting it in context and discovering a source of inner compassion towards oneself.
- 'Russian Doll' process- entering the inner layers of the pattern displayed in the chosen example through a number of 'entering, exiting and visualising' processes until the source of the pattern is discovered. It is during this process that the original trauma is likely to become exposed for direct observation and with perspective.
- 'Excarnation' process- in the presence of re-experiencing the original trauma or even on the way to it, our consciousness leaves, if that is how we learnt to survive. The task is to acknowledge this experience of not being fully present, to find the direction and location of where our consciousness has gone to. By joining the departed self and embodying this position has the immediate effect of becoming more orientated, clear and present, with the ability to describe the experience.
- 'Staging' or deep visualization process- from this 'excarnated' position a clear view is made possible regarding the actual physical situation at the moment of being traumatised. This is the time for the clearest description of what has actually taken place in the act of sexual abuse itself. With some distance, it is safe to observe it. For most clients this is the first conscious meeting between the child experience and the adult awareness since the original abuse took place, often after years of repressed memories. This visualisation includes the precise picture of the 'toxicity' of the foreign energy of the adult deposited on the defenceless child body. The colours and shapes of that deposited toxicity can be graphically described by the client, from this perspective.
- 'Landing Pad' process- Identifying in the visualised vacant body left behind a special spot inside the body, visible from the distance, into which the energy of the abuser has not penetrated. The client is asked to identify this location in the body, its colour and the relative strength of that spot. This helps to forge the resolution to return to the body with new strength, via this 'Landing Pad' and to clear it from within.
- Invoking new strength - sometimes new strength must first be attained, imagined, practiced and acted out in preparation for the return. Internal archetypes could be created by the client, or aspects of one's higher, stronger, healthier being, previously untapped in the client's life until this moment. Sounds could also be found for the direct expression of the

qualities of this new strength which are to be used in the act of returning to and clearing the body.

- The Return - via the 'Landing Pad', is done by physically moving into the body that was left on the floor. A solemn ritual of re-unification creates a moment of great compassion and warmth, conceived and conducted by the client.
- Clearing toxins– this is done with sounds through the process of 'Sound-Naming' the sound qualities which resonate with the client's experience of the qualities of the toxicity, as well as the sounds which resonates with the qualities of inner strength. These two sets of qualities, expressed through sounds, are sounded against each other with full bodily gesture, until the 'toxicity' is cleared away.
- The Advocate- the adult awareness, having embraced and defended the child, then becomes the 'Child Advocate', by standing for the child in the face of the adversarial character involved in the original abuse. A ritual of authoritative dismissal can take place on behalf of the child. This ritual is sometimes called 'Firing the Parent' in relevant situations.
- The Guardian- either the same character as the 'Child Advocate' or a special one created for this purpose can be invoked and used to create and 'guard' an inner space of safety that was missing or that had been breached.
- Inner child care– once the restoration of being present in the body is restored with the necessary protection to make the return stable, then it is time for healing, nurturing and replenishment. An 'Internal Dialogue' can be established between the adult who became the 'Child Advocate' and 'Guardian' and the child experience. Direct requests are expressed by the child experience to the adult consciousness. The care and healing becomes a self-subscribed and self applied process. Jess describes how the fairy is content to look on as she, as the adult, is caring for her inner child for the first time (Fig.7):



Figure 7: Jess- caring and protecting

This piece came after a session where I connected with my 4/5 year old. She talked and told me she needed to cry like a child. She needed protection and understanding. Here the purple hands are mine. I am holding and protecting a part of me which I have shown here as my spiritual being- big purple lips and closed

eyes. The words are coming from my spiritual being and are directed at the current me: 'Time breeds momentum. The years have been persistent at passing, yet I have remained the same. I am still here. I can shake with rage. I can twist with pain. I can roar fire. I am not bad; I am you. Let us talk. Let me cry'.

- Follow up- in view of the 'Internal Dialogue' and the caring awareness, a plan is developed for the follow up, protection and care, for further development and maintenance of what was achieved in the sessions. A range of elements for a self care rituals and daily routines are constructed out of the material of the sessions.
- Wrapping up- at the close of each session, in view of the vulnerability of the experiences shared and of the life reality to which the client is about to return – there is a process of wrapping up, closing the protective sheaths, and consciously covering with care that which was opened up in the session.

In Psychophonetics counselling, reflective, verbal awareness is extended to incorporate the non-verbal modes of knowing and communication, of sensing, movement, visualisation and sounds. These modes of knowing help to create a bridge between the client's present adult experience and consciousness, and the client's own child experience and consciousness from the time the abuse took place. That bridge enables the client's mature abilities of caring, protecting and reassuring as an adult to be applicable to the vulnerable dimension of the client's own experience as a child. In order to heal from past sexual abuse, a tremendous level of healing energy needs to be activated, so that often people who have been through this experience become healers in their own right.

These are the main themes and clusters of meaning of clients' experiences of past sexual abuse discovered phenomenologically through the therapeutic process. Our intention in writing this chapter is to encourage clients to trust their own experiences and knowing, and for practitioners of other modalities in this field, to become more aware of the potential of including a creative and expressive approach, and to apply these findings in their own work, in their own way.