

# PROFESSIONAL EXCHANGE

## HELPERS AND HEALERS: ARE WE REALLY WHO WE SAY WE ARE?

—by Dan Sexton

I am director of the ChildHelp USA/IOF Foresters national child abuse hotline and the National Survivors of Child Abuse program in Los Angeles. I have worked with survivors for over 10 years and am myself a survivor of child abuse and an adult child of alcoholics. Years ago, I looked for therapy, but there wasn't much. What was available left me out: it was for women only, for incest survivors only, etc. I was told that my childhood trauma should no longer be a problem. Worse, I heard that telling anyone about it could hurt my credibility as a professional. These messages only reinforced what many of us have felt and still feel as survivors: isolated, alone, ashamed.

Many helpers and healers come from dysfunctional families. Some of us are working out personal issues with clients; some are still in denial about our backgrounds. "Maybe if I get an advanced degree, get more experience, or get elevated to a position of power, nobody will really know who I am and what I'm feeling about myself," we think. We can create an unsafe environment for survivors, keeping the real issues from surfacing, because our own issues are in the way.

*"Helpers and healers who are survivors are trying to fit into a world that keeps saying that we are damaged goods, and should keep our problems to ourselves."*

One of the areas I struggled with was my personal and professional training. I could diagnose clients, create a treatment plan, do everything I had learned was most appropriate. What I couldn't do was be with survivors, facilitate their healing by giving them a sense of control in their own process. I was the therapist. I was trained always to know what was best for the client. The factor that escaped my control was my own abuse issues. They were blocking the process. Survivors educated me and still do about how my own issues interfere with the resolution of their issues.

This field needs to create a safe environment for helpers who are themselves survivors. Survivor-therapists need to feel affirmed about who we are and what we overcame in our childhoods. We need role models, people who feel a sense of pride in their healing. Our non-abused colleagues' disciplines and level of education are less important than their warmth, openness, and helpfulness in creating a meaningful process through which we can interact as profession-

als and people with integrity and loving compassion.

We all want to find out more about ourselves and to have a meaningful impact on dysfunctional systems so that people can be healthier, happier, and more productive. But in many ways it is easier to hide our histories behind our initials or position of authority. It is easier to think, "Now I have credibility. No one has to know my past; no one has to know what I really feel about myself." We tell our clients that the only way to heal is to expose the secrets. But—too often—that advice is only for our clients.

Helpers and healers who are survivors are trying to fit into a world that keeps saying

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that we are damaged goods, and should keep our problems to ourselves. So of course we seek positions of power that can isolate us from our feelings. Look at our present systems: How functional are they? What do they reflect about the people who created them?

This field appears to have little room for the voices of survivors. Just go to our national conferences: How often do you see a keynote about survivors, or from a survivor? Survivors are a vital piece to preventing this horrendous cycle of violence against children. We need to embrace the courage of survivors. We need to create a safe environment for all survivors to share our pain and secrets in order to heal and be healed. The field needs to help survivor-therapists take pride in what we have overcome and begin to reclaim our personal power. If the people in the helping professions still deny their own or their colleagues' abuse, still feel shame or suspicion about it, what do we expect from the rest of society?

In some ways, this field is a snare for healers who are survivors. It is filled with burned out, overworked, and underpaid people. We love to hate all the work, lack of money, lack of self-care, etc. But we're set up to love secretly feeling important and powerful because all these people depend on us. We are indispensable. What would happen if we just said no to another project, or went home after eight hours of work? People might forget about us or realize they don't need us. They might discover what we secretly fear—that we really don't matter that much. We are doubly attracted to the conflicts and the chaos because for many of us this is what we know best. To have something that is nurturing, loving, and has boundaries is too foreign. It doesn't sit well; we don't trust it. Even as we strongly expect risk-taking from our clients, we fear taking risks that will create wellness for ourselves.

We must look at how we can facilitate our own healing. Sometimes it helps to remember, "What we teach is teaching us." We need to move toward being the kind of people we say we are, the kind of people we

urge our clients to be. We are in a position of creating change. We have to create a voice, very much like the civil rights movement did. The credibility gap implied in the question, "Are you a healer or are you a survivor?" doesn't have to be as significant as we make it. If we are willing to own our histories, people will begin to see the magnitude of this problem. People will see then that child abuse isn't just "over there" somewhere, among marginal groups, far removed from their own worlds. By owning our histories and organizing, healing ourselves as well as our clients, we can force political and societal changes. We can initiate a response to the problem itself rather than just to the symptoms.

Everyone in this field has a wonderful opportunity to facilitate positive changes for adult survivors and ultimately for all children. Survivor-therapists should not be afraid to look inside at who you are and what you want in ways that are loving and positive. The world will change if we allow it to, and if we commit our collective energies in a healing posture. There is power in numbers, and power in healing, and we are that power. Like healing from abuse, power can be very positive. Be courageous.

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## INVITED RESPONSE TO DAN SEXTON

—by Christine Courtois

I write this invited response as a professional who is not a survivor of physical or sexual abuse. As someone who entered the helping profession to bolster self-esteem and to achieve personal credibility, however, I understand the dynamics of seeking to help/heal as compensation. Hopefully, careful attention in training, supervision, and personal therapy alert the trainee and practicing professional to the treatment traps inherent in these compensatory dynamics.

A major focus throughout my professional career has been sexual assault and abuse, in particular the aftereffects of incest and other forms of molestation and the treatment of the adult survivor. I have thus been closely connected to the plight and the cause of this long-denied and neglected population, and have advocated for personal healing as well as societal change. I agree with Dan that the needs of today's adult survivors have been ignored for far too long, the needs of sub-populations of survivors even more so. Although such special populations as males, survivors of color, those abused by women, gays, and lesbians, those ritually abused, the differently abled, adoptees, and military dependents have been increasingly identified and services developed, others remain to be acknowledged and served.

The fields of traumatology and child abuse and neglect are relatively young but fast developing. Those of us in the field, survivors, non-survivors, and pro-survivors alike, must commit ourselves to the development of a field that is comprehensive in its awareness of survivor sub-populations and

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