

ABSTRACT

The study explored the impact on therapists who work with survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The aim was to determine the extent to which therapists experience vicarious traumatisation both personally and professionally and to explore this from a Gestalt perspective. The growing amount of literature related to the impact of working with survivors of child sexual abuse. Mac Ian & Pearlmann (1995), Benatar (2000), Steed & Downing (1998) and Way et al (2004) revealed how the impact of working with this client group affected the therapist and created vicarious trauma. However, there does not appear much literature within the Gestalt field regarding trauma itself and its impact on the therapist. The study first explored the literature related to how trauma is defined and how an individual copes with psychological trauma, and also how trauma and coping mechanisms are viewed from a Gestalt perspective. It continued by exploring the definition of vicarious traumatisation, the contributing factors and their impact on therapists followed by a critique of six studies that had been conducted. A phenomenological methodology was used to explore eight trained Gestalt psychotherapists experience of how the impact of working with survivors of child sexual abuse had affected them both personally and professionally. The data was analysed and gathered using the Colaizzi (1978) method and an explanation of the limitations to the study and the ethical considerations was discussed. The themes were identified, followed by a discussion based on the findings in the light of the present research, together with a Gestalt perspective and recommendations. The study identified four themes; (i) that the field conditions contributed to the development of vicarious trauma, (ii) that the impact to ego resources because of vicarious trauma affected the therapeutic process and interrupted the quality of contact within the dialogical relationship, (iii) the immense existential challenges and changes had a profound and significant impact on those who were interviewed, (iv) and for some in particular in relation to their sexual identity and sexual intimacy. The results have highlighted that there is an immense cost to working with survivors of child sexual abuse and the need for specific training and supervision at all levels is paramount. It also highlighted the importance of further study to explore the Gestalt perspective on vicarious traumatisation.

After I realised I had been affected by working with this client group I decided to make the phenomenon of vicarious trauma a specific focus for exploration both in supervision and personal therapy. This enabled me to have some understanding that this process was a natural outcome of working in this field and not a sign of weakness on my part or badness on the part of the client. It also raised my awareness of how and when I interrupted contact within the therapeutic relationship because of vicarious trauma. (Pearlmann & Saakvitne: 1995).

The experience and understanding changed the manner in which I used supervision and therapy and it also challenged and expanded my whole concept of ethical practice when addressing the needs of traumatised clients.

With that in mind the purpose of the research is:

- i) To explore, identify and assess from a Gestalt perspective the vicarious impact on therapists of working with adult survivors of child sexual abuse.
- ii) To provide an insight into the creative adjustments that may be used by the therapist and the impact this has on quality of contact within the therapeutic relationship.
- iii) To provide the author with more of an informed understanding of this topic in order to enhance my own personal practice and consider the ethical implications for the therapeutic community.

The rationale for the research issue is;

Question. Is it necessary in order to work with traumatised clients that therapists are trained in an understanding of ‘vicarious traumatisation’?