

Understanding and Working with Male Survivors of Sexual Assault—A Gestalt Approach

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≡ Abstract

In this article I share some of the ideas that I have found useful in understanding and working with men who have experienced sexual assault. These ideas have emerged from a synthesis of my own developing thoughts, numerous co-workers, writers and contributors in the field of sexual assault, masculinity studies, feminist discourse, and other contemporary psychotherapies, particularly Gestalt therapy that is the main therapeutic approach I use. In particular, it is the men I have worked with who have been most helpful in teaching me how to work with them. These ideas about working with men and trauma are, of course, still in process and open to new ideas and feedback. I imagine that many of the ideas shared in this article pertain not just to male survivors, but also to victim/survivors of sexual assault and abuse in general.

When working with men, I consider it important to hold a perspective that is holistic. Keeping in mind both the internal (emotional, cognitive, physical, developmental, spiritual) and external (systemic, socio/political and cultural) issues and forces which impact on men's world. Here I particularly touch on the socio/political and developmental dimensions that impact on men's experiences.

The gendered field and the development of shame

One lens that I have found useful in this work is to consider how dominant constructions of masculinity and heterosexuality impact on men and, in

particular, men who have been sexually assaulted. Besides the impact of sexual assault, what William Pollack (1999), calls *the boys' code* (a set of injunctions that expects young men to act strong, autonomous, tough, and unfeeling), is already shaping the emotional and cognitive ground of many young men's lives in a profound way. According to Pollack boys become,

... so thoroughly hardened (by this gender straight-jacket) that they literally anaesthetize themselves against the pain they must cope with. (1999, p. 46)

Many boys also become shame-phobic and organize their thoughts, awareness, ideals and actions to live up to the *boys' code* and to avoid *losing face* and a loss of belonging in front of their peers. The cost of this is that many young men grow up feeling ashamed to acknowledge any experience that violates this code. This *boys' code* appears to act as a *ground structure*, an enduring set of shame-generating introjects that freeze figure formation. This embedded shame often organizes male survivors' perception to anticipate a lack of reception in the field for qualities outside this code (Lee, 2004). Unfortunately, as a result of this shame, many men miss out on the sense of belonging and connection that comes with disclosing their genuine experience and receiving support.

Taking this ground of gender conditioning into consideration, it is not hard to imagine how this internalised straightjacket magnifies the shame for a man who is grappling with the effects of sexual assault. Patrick O'Leary, in his excellent article *Liberation from self-blame*, states how

... dominant notions of manhood go a considerable way in explaining the extent of sexual abuse in our culture... (and) also can affect the ways in which men respond to the experience of sexual assault. (1998, p27)

Numerous other writers have also spoken about the impact of dominant constructions of masculinity on men's experience and of its impact in relation to sexual assault (Lew, 1993; O'Leary, 1998; Pollack, 1999). I have also noticed how these dominant notions of masculinity and heterosexuality, that traditionally expect men to be heterosexual, independent, emotionally invulnerable, in control and powerful, have a profound impact on how men experience and make meaning out of their sexual abuse. It is these meanings and their effects that I would particularly like to write about.

These dominant notions of masculinity can commonly lead to the following effects and issues for men who have been sexually assaulted:

- A profound sense of inadequacy, shame and isolation where men may believe that they cannot live up to the expectations of traditional masculinity and heterosexuality. This can create beliefs about being a 'failure' e.g. *A real man should be able to stop the abuse... should not be affected by the abuse*. These traditional expectations can disable young and adult men from being able to acknowledge and seek support about their sense of shame, guilt, powerlessness, fear, vulnerability, betrayal, anger and other effects associated with being abused.
- Sexual identity confusion and inadequacy as a result of the following assumptions and beliefs: *If I was abused by a homosexual, I must be homosexual. This must have happened to me because I'm gay? Because my body became aroused I must be gay? Or will I become gay because of this?* (Lew, 1993)
- Because of these gender expectations, men are not supported to acknowledge and seek support to talk about the effects of sexual assault. Out of a need to feel safe and survive, the public self becomes split off from their inner world. As a strategy of coping, many men desensitize to, minimise and deny the impact of the abuse in their lives and on the surface attempt to act like a normal man in order to fit in and belong.
- Due to the common effects of sexual assault (loss of trust, betrayal, shame, fear, powerlessness, loneliness, anger, vulnerability, PTSD symptoms, dissociation, aggression, loss of self-worth) many men have trouble developing the relationship skills and trust which enable them to develop meaningful friendships and hence to experience a genuine sense of belonging based on more authentic forms of self-expression.
- A number of relationship dilemmas/difficulties and creative adjustments can arise from the inability to integrate the experience and effects of sexual assault. These may include re-enacting and reliving victim-victimiser experiences, identification with traits of the aggressor as a way of avoiding vulnerability, self-blame in relationships with others, meeting emotional needs through sexualised behaviour, avoidance of intimacy and vulnerability, a need to control others, a sense of inadequacy in building trust and friendship, and in receiving and giving love.

- As a result of sexual abuse and the impact of this gendered straightjacket men are often left with fewer resources and options in how to cope. Other strategies I have noticed men may use to creatively adjust to their abuse are:
 - 1) over identifying with traditional masculine traits (self-reliant, strong, able to cope, appearing confident)
 - 2) avoiding and externalising the feelings associated with the abuse through promiscuity, aggression, violence or risk-taking behaviour
 - 3) withdrawing and isolating oneself
 - 4) retroreflecting the feelings associated with the abuse through self-blame, self-harm, lack of self-care, suicidal ideation and
 - 5) drug and alcohol abuse and de-sensitizing behaviours.

Because of the above effects, and the profound shame generated by the internalized *boys' code*, many men face difficulties in disclosing their experience of sexual assault. Those who do decide to disclose must risk a great deal. In particular, many young men, and young people in general, are at a developmental stage where their main task is attempting to form an identity of their own, to become clear about their sexuality and to experience a sense of belonging with their peers (Geldard and Geldard, 1999). It seems to me that disclosing and facing issues arising from sexual assault can be profoundly threatening and disorganizing to young men attempting to achieve these developmental tasks.

The dilemmas of working with men

Given what has been said so far, it is not surprising that many men are terrified of counselling. In coming to counselling or disclosing to another trusted friend or worker, male survivors must often risk being disbelieved, shamed, overwhelmed by feelings, judged, misunderstood, and of having many of their worst fears confirmed e.g. *It was my fault* or *I will become an abuser* or *that I must be gay because I became aroused*. (Physical arousal due to sexual stimulation and abuse does not mean that it was at all enjoyable or consensual. However, some men can interpret this to mean that they must have enjoyed it, therefore that they consented to the abuse, or that they must be gay).

They must also choose to begin the often painful and uncertain journey of acknowledging to themselves and another person the impact of what happened. This task is coupled with the fears of disclosure and its

impact on their sense of self, family, reputation and relationships. In fact, I believe that for many male survivors, the very idea of acting in the world to obtain emotional support is profoundly unfamiliar and shameful. Kepner states about survivors of sexual assault in general:

The survivor has generally had to operate in a retroflective mode, doing everything for (him) her-self, because support (nurturance, help, validation) was either unavailable or dangerous, in that it made (him) her vulnerable to further abuse or invalidation. (1995, p.20)

Of course, the impact of dominant messages about masculinity are not the only factors that contribute to men avoiding support. The experience of secrecy can also be influenced by the messages and threats internalised from the abuser, one's developmental capacity to know oneself, the intensity of the trauma, degree of threat and violence used by the abuser, and the post-abuse denial or lack of support from significant others (Kepner, 1995; Briere, 1996).

The decision to come to counselling for male survivors involves doing the opposite of what their survival needs and dominant constructions of masculinity encourage them to do. So how do we support men to do something that violates these gender injunctions, and asks them to be vulnerable, trusting, open, and to reveal their worst ideas about themselves? This is a major challenge!

Strategies to engage male survivors of sexual assault

First couple of sessions

Support is the fundamental interpersonal base on which the rest of development is built (Kepner, 1995). Keeping this in mind, I have found that the first steps in engaging male survivors of sexual assault is to actively build safety and support. As already mentioned, for many men, their first issues about coming to counselling are whether they will be believed, further shamed, controlled or misunderstood. I have also noticed how male survivors have the fearful assumption that they must talk about the abuse straight away. This assumption seems to create more anxiety for the man and reinforces their avoidant behaviour. Hence, as early as possible I will remind them that it is important that they feel in control of what they want to talk about, and confirm their courage in risking disclosing sexual abuse.

Right from the start I ask men about what it is like to come to counselling. What is it like being here right now with me? What were they expecting? Did they come of their own volition? Have they been to counselling before? These questions may give the man permission to express background issues, concerns and fears. It is usually helpful to let them know what counselling involves, and to reassure them that they can go at their own pace, talk about what they want to and not answer any of my questions if they are not up to it. Once I have covered these issues, I then think I am in a better position to clarify what is important to them and what they are hoping to get out of counselling. I also notice that most male survivors feel safer if they are asked if they want to talk about the *effects* of sexual abuse, rather than the abuse itself. I think this distinction can provide a supportive platform for men to start pacing themselves when embarking on such a huge and often unknown journey.

Apart from the other necessary work of establishing boundaries, discussing confidentiality, and getting some demographic information, I also find it counter- shaming to be actively responsive, confirming, concerned and supportive (not neutral), and to share my appreciation of the men's courage in seeking counselling. One of the ways to do this is to openly acknowledge the man's strength in taking a stand against the pressure to tough it out on their own. Some other questions I might ask are:

- . *What messages about being a man have made it hard for you to break the silence or come to counselling?*
- . *What beliefs might others have about sexual assault that can make it hard to talk about?*
- . *Have you disclosed these experiences with others? How did they respond?*
- . *What message are you giving to others in breaking the silence of the abuse?*
- . *What messages do you think men often get about how they should cope with emotional pain?*
- . *What did it take to make the decision to come to counselling and talk about this?*

These questions can begin to support male survivors in locating their experience within the wider context of patriarchy and to begin to question the effect of the *boys' code* and other myths about sexual assault on their lives. I would like to acknowledge the ideas from Patrick O'Leary's article *Liberation from self-blame* (1998) for contributing to many of these questions. I have commonly noticed how relieved male survivors look when

I ask these questions and affirm the strength and courage it took to seek support, and to risk being real.

It is also worth considering how these dominant messages of masculinity not only impact on the men we work with, but also on health professionals. I believe that if practitioners do not question their own notions of masculinity (and femininity), they run the risk of colluding with or overlooking the ways male survivors' behaviour is shaped by the *boys' code*. Understanding and working with these gender constructions gives us scope to begin to stand outside of their influence and to explore how they impact on young men and ourselves.

Maintaining support and a dialogic attitude

Other ways I have found it useful to establish support, safety and a relationship with men is to share my own experience of the man in a supportive way, encourage choice over the content of the session, help regulate the pace of the session, use age-appropriate language, normalise and validate their story and experience, name and affirm their trust, and caution or mistrust of me (and counselling) as it arises. Building support, safety, and a healthy therapeutic alliance is not something one develops to move on from. I believe it is an ongoing process that requires constant attention to what is going on between the male survivor and the counsellor, and to how the client and I are experiencing the counselling process as it unfolds.

It is this essential process, and of working with the *in-between* (including transference and other relationship issues), that can allow the male survivor to co-create skills with me to meet their needs for safety, trust, boundaries, pacing and regulation of their self-expression and affect. These new skills, often underdeveloped for male survivors, can help them to avoid becoming overwhelmed and re-traumatized during counselling, and can then be transferred to other parts of their life (Kepner, 1995; Briere, 1996).

Asking questions such as:

*How is the counselling going so far, how are you and I going...
are we on the right track here?*

*How would you know when you feel safe to talk about...
or trust me with this part of your story?*

*What do you need to have in place before you are ready to talk
about this?*

How would you know (in your body) when you have said too much?

These are some useful ways, I have found, of doing this. Lastly, I also consider it helpful to build support by being transparent, and sharing my own impressions and experience of the man when it feels appropriate. This may include choosing to share my concern for them going too fast into memories, the impact of their survival strategies or communication styles on me, or my appreciation of their courage to explore feelings. Many of these ideas are informed by a core component of Gestalt therapy theory called the dialogic approach (see Hycner and Jacobs, 1995).

Ongoing work and interventions

The importance of working phenomenologically

Understanding male survivors' lived experience and meaning, to me means doing my best to not let theories and models about sexual assault get in the way of listening to and understanding the unique phenomenology and context of each man I meet. I actively attempt to understand the unique meanings, context and experiences of the man from their perspective, and do my best to avoid making premature interpretations and assumptions about their experience. In Gestalt therapy terms, this style of work is influenced by the principles of phenomenological inquiry (Spinelli, 1993). This basically involves supporting men to describe their experience in a way that brings awareness to how they are in contact with themselves in the present moment while talking, and to bracket and question their automatic assumptions about the meaning of their sexual assault so that they can become open to new meanings and understanding within a broader context.

The men I have worked with often have many complex and contradictory feelings towards the abuser, including love, and may or may not be ready to name what happened as abusive. I believe that if I jump in too early with my own assumptions (e.g. *It wasn't your fault*, or *What happened to you was abuse*) about what happened, I may miss out on understanding the man's unique meanings and beliefs. I also run the risk of closing off any opportunity to help explore and de-construct their own ambivalence, mixed feelings, shame, guilt and feelings of self-blame. This does not mean that I don't challenge men's minimisations and denial of obvious acts of violation. It simply means attempting to bracket my own views and opinions until I have really given space for the man to express his. I come from a position where I am not the expert on the man's experience. Therefore, when I do offer ideas, opinions and impressions

about the man, I offer them tentatively, with permission to do so, and with plenty of room for him to knock them back. It reminds me of a saying I learnt in counselling training—*Flirt with your hypotheses but don't marry them!!*

Working phenomenologically (attempting to understand their unique meanings and experience) also involves paying attention not just to the content of the man's story, but also to how they tell their story (process). I believe that it is important to track the person I am working with by noticing their verbal language, congruence, body language, breathing, facial expressions and non-verbal signals while talking. This can give me important information and cues about what might be going on for the man, and in particular helps me to track non-verbal signs that indicate possible hyper-arousal (sweating, pale skin, dilated pupils, accelerated breathing), or dissociation (looking spaced out, absent or ungrounded) that might indicate the risk of re-traumatization. This somatic information can then inform me to slow down, attend to issues of pacing, and support the men to ground himself in order to manage his over stimulation or dissociation (splitting off awareness from one's body or feelings), during the counselling session.

Working with shame, self-blame and guilt

A whole book could be written about the different effects of sexual abuse on men. However, I do want to make some brief comments about shame, self-blame and guilt, all of which are common effects of abuse on men. Firstly, I believe that it is important to understand the nature and function of shame as an effect of sexual abuse. From a Gestalt perspective, the survival function of shame is to help us move away, close down and protect ourselves from an environment that is perceived as dangerous or critical (Lee, 1996). Originally, in an abusive context (and in some current contexts), the effect and function of shame may have been useful, however it may now keep a man permanently disconnected from aspects of himself and from the environment. Unfortunately, because shame can make us feel unworthy of contact, many male victim/survivors find it difficult to receive support and to break the self-reinforcing cycle of shame.

In my opinion, one useful way of working with shame is for the counsellor to name and actively respond to shame when they see or sense it arising in the session. Shame can manifest in obvious ways such as blushing, withdrawing or avoiding eye contact, but can often manifest indirectly through shame defenses such as changing topics, tensing up,

getting angry, blaming others. Shame can also be a trigger to dissociation (Yontef, 1993). By tentatively naming shame when it may be appearing, the man can then have the important opportunity to learn that shame itself will not be shamed, fixed, judged or avoided by the counsellor (Kepner, 1995). I have noticed how relieved some men become when they can acknowledge their embarrassment and shame about their abuse, or ways they have coped with the abuse. From my experience this can help the man's fears to be reduced and enable him to deepen his awareness and ability to tolerate shame and be vulnerable.

I have also found it helpful to normalise shame and its function, to reflect how painful it can be to feel and, when the time is right, to help the man to contextualize their shame and associated introjects within the abusive, neglectful or cultural contexts in which it developed. I suggest to men that often shame is interpreted as information solely about oneself (e.g. *I'm inadequate*), rather than understood as a signal of a lack of support in the field. This re-frame can help men begin to understand their shame from a much more compassionate perspective. It may also begin to help the man separate what he learnt about getting support in his past, from what is available and possible in his current context.

I find that self-blame and guilt can be one of the most challenging and complex aspects of working with male survivors of sexual assault. In working with men's sense of self-blame and guilt, I find it helpful to explore its unique meanings. Once his self-blame and guilt are out in the open (the man must feel safe to do this), I can then begin to ask questions that gently explore its function, effects and development. For example:

What might your self-blame do for you?

How did self-blame help support you to cope with the abuse?

How does self-blame strengthen or weaken you?

How did you come to see it was your fault?

How do you think the abuser contributed to making it feel like you are responsible?

And what messages about being a man might contribute to you blaming yourself?

The function of self-blame is incredibly complex and often contains historic adaptive functions for the man. For instance, by blaming themselves, men may create an illusion of control, which helps them to avoid the more painful feelings of grief, anger, powerlessness and despair about the abuse. It may also stop them from needing to seek support.

Furthermore, depending on the unique context of the man's life, some men may have wanted the affection of the abuser, and were willing to tolerate the abuse in order to gain this affection. This adds further layers of complexity and confusion for the man in working through his self-blame, and understanding the abuse of power inherent in his relationship to the perpetrator.

Because men are expected to be strong and invulnerable, they often do not take into account the unequal power dynamics between themselves and the abuser. I have noticed how many young men feel ashamed and guilty for not being able to stop or protect themselves from the abuse. Because of these issues, I believe it is important to challenge men about the power imbalances between themselves and the abuser, and to ask how their self-blame is connected to expectations about masculinity. I am indebted to Patrick O'Leary (1998) for his ideas about unmasking the politics of power. It is also useful to bring to men's attention the many tactics and tricks perpetrators use to make the victim feel responsible for the abuse.

Balancing exploration with building self-skills

Some of these ideas have already been briefly mentioned. Typically many survivors of sexual assault, particularly where other forms of abuse were involved, have had little opportunity and support to learn the self-skills of tolerating and managing their experience and affects in healthy, integrity-building ways (Kepner, 1995). I have noticed how many men rely on dissociation, numbing, drug and alcohol abuse and other tension-reducing activities such as aggression, avoidance and self-harm to cope with their feelings. I find it useful to assume that these men are doing the best they can, given their level of development, insight and the internal and external resources that they have at the time. Although sometimes harmful to self and others, I also assume that within some of these survival functions are the genuine needs for self-coherence, expression, integrity, connection, strength, safety and equilibrium.

Given this point, I believe that one of the most important parts of working with male survivors of sexual assault is to inquire into and honour the underlying need of their current creative adjustments. Once this has happened, I am then in a better position to gently challenge their strategies and to support them in creating new, more adaptive skills to meet to their needs, and to manage their experience and contact with the world. This is particularly important in cases where I think men disown their responsibility for hurting others or themselves. Without these skills,

men who want to explore their memories may run the risk of being re-traumatized. They have no more internal or external resources to face their unprocessed feelings and experiences than when the original abuse occurred. Kepner also states that:

We cannot expect the survivor to change ways of being that have worked so well for her (him) in desperate conditions unless we have first helped her (him) to develop new resources in the present and a sufficient sense of support. (1995, p. 64)

Pacing skills

I believe a particularly important part of working with male survivors is to encourage their awareness of how to pace the speed and level of affect intensity of their exploration in the session. This can help them to learn to tolerate and ride waves of feeling without resorting to old modes of adaptation such as denial, self-harm, dissociation, avoidance or acting-out behaviours. Often male survivors have had little experience of learning to do this. Collaborating with male survivors to develop pacing skills helps them to know and identify their body signs when they have explored enough and may need to slow down, relax or divert their attention to more soothing discussions. It also empowers them to make choices about how to manage their level of stimulation during and after the session so that counselling doesn't become a place that can replicate the intensity and flooding of feelings inherent in the original abuse (Kepner, 1995).

For example, one young man I have recently been working with did not notice his rising agitation while talking about his past. All of a sudden he became aware of feelings of rage he did not know how to handle. In hindsight, I can see how I got too interested in his story and forgot to notice his non-verbal cues, and to encourage him to slow down and to notice what was happening in his body while speaking. This could have helped him to ride the wave of his anger by grounding himself. Eventually this young man did learn to do this and now, according to him, has an easier time coping with his intense anger. He can also notice his growing body signals (knots in his stomach) that remind him of what he needs to take care of himself. It has been through mistakes like this, and seeing the consequences of men uncovering historic memories too fast, that I have learned the importance of pacing skills.

Other self-skills that may help men to manage and tolerate their feelings and interpersonal situations might include the following:

- **Grounding and affect-tolerance skills**—having the skill to manage intense feelings or dissociation by making contact with the chair, feeling one's feet on the floor, bum on the seat, and breathing slowly and deeply while looking around the room (Kepner, 1995).
- **Boundary skills**—These skills can be developed by helping men to actively choose what they want to talk about, where they want to sit, when they have had enough, when to change topics, and acquiring the ability to notice one's personal space boundaries and saying no to people.
- **Self-support and self-soothing skills**—These skills involve supporting young men to learn how to take care of themselves, to eat when hungry, sleep when tired, to relax or talk to someone when stressed, and to do things for themselves that they enjoy doing e.g. taking a walk, reading a book, listening to music.
- **Mindfulness and affect-tolerance skills**—Encouraging male survivors to learn to stay with their feelings without judging or wanting to change them (Linehan, 1993). This may firstly involve externalising and challenging their judgements, and reminding them that feelings come in waves when they don't try to interrupt them (Kepner, 1995).

Re-contextualising creative adjustments and symptoms

Generally, male survivors of sexual abuse had little power or capacity to act on behalf of their own needs and to manage their interpersonal boundaries during the abuse. Furthermore, often the abusive context becomes internalised and experienced as about oneself, rather than about the context. For example, this process can be a result of messages internalised by the abuser (*it was your fault*), minimisations and denial of the reality of the abuse by caretakers (*what happened to you wasn't important*), childhood concrete reasoning made about the abuse (*I must be bad because this happened to me*) and feelings related to the abuse becoming seen to be about oneself e.g. feeling dirty from the abuse becomes *I am dirty* (Kepner, 1995). As described already about shame, effects that are essentially a result of an abusive context, can end up being perceived to be solely about oneself. Men are often left with a set of experiences and symptoms that are severed from the original context and because of this become more vulnerable to confusion, self-blame, guilt and shame. This is further exacerbated by the effect of the *boys' code* and mainstream values of individualism that encourage men to perceive themselves independently from their surroundings.

Given these factors, it can be very helpful when working with male survivors to help put their current negative perceptions, symptoms and behaviours back into an interpersonal context (often the abusive context) where they make sense. The idea, according to Kepner (1995), is to take experiences or thoughts that are seen by the man as about himself, and reframe them into a context that includes cultural and historical events. For example, one's current belief about feeling unworthy of support may be a result of growing up in a chronically neglectful environment, or one's experience of fear and free-floating anxiety may be about having been frightened and terrified by the abuser.

So far *I have met no men who have been able to see the effects of their sexual assault as normal reactions to an abnormal and abusive event*. If they did they would not need counselling! Usually, it is the other way around. They perceive their current behaviours and symptoms as abnormal experiences, with no connection to previously abusive or neglectful contexts. When doing this re-contextualisation work, it is very important to consider how ready the man is to do this work, and to offer hypotheses tentatively to the man. What I consider important is to ask the man whether the guesses I offer them *experientially* fit. It is like asking the man to try on a coat to see if it fits. The following steps I find helpful to do this kind of re-contextualising work are:

- 1) Explore descriptions of *creative adjustments** or survival strategies—current patterns, symptoms, self and other perceptions, and coping strategies e.g.. drug and alcohol abuse, controlling behaviour, violence, dissociation, self-reliance, withdrawal, perfectionism, self harm, workaholism.

*Note: *Creative adjustment* is a Gestalt therapy term that refers to how we creatively resolve the dilemmas life presents to us to the best of our ability (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951). In relation to young men a creative adjustment is *a solution used by a young man that helps him adapt to his abusive environment and its effects in a way that best maintains his self-cohesion, integrity and equilibrium, given his current resources and level of development*.

- 2) Look for and validate the *genuine* purpose and function of the *creative adjustment* within the current environment e.g. Is there a need for safety, familiarity, predictability, comfort, power, equilibrium, survival, security, integrity, self-cohesion that gets met in their current

coping behaviour, patterns and perceptions. I assume that most people's current symptoms and problems are a result of once highly adaptive responses to abusive and neglectful environments.

- 3) Tentatively link the purpose of current coping strategies to the original context (re-contextualisation experiments) (Kepner, 1995) e.g. dissociation, numbing and withdrawing were once adaptive responses to being abused.
- 4) Explore how the *creative adjustment* is a resource and hindrance now. What are its costs and advantages? How does it effect others? In what contexts is it strengthening and weakening you? How does it get in the way of you growing/healing?
- 5) Invite experiments to explore new ways of being, in relating to others and in perceiving oneself and the world that allow new choices and possibilities. This can involve helping the man learn new self-skills and to separate the present conditions of his environment from his past.

In this article I have attempted to portray the way I work with and understand male survivors of sexual assault. I hope that I have conveyed how complex and challenging this work is, and yet how incredibly rewarding it is to see male survivors grow, and develop healthier ways to live with the knowledge and effects of their abuse. It also feels important for me to say that it is much easier to write about this work than actually practice it. This is the part where I often find myself swimming, forgetting what to do, and only remembering afterwards what might have been helpful.

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