The sexual assault victim: What every nurse practitioner should know

Sinegugu Duma, Associate Professor, UCT

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Structure of the Presentation

- The theory of recovery from sexual assault trauma
- My AHA moment - Discovery of neurologic explanation
- Implications for practice
Theory of Recovery from sexual assault trauma

- A longitudinal study for 6 months, then end of first year
- Ten women
- To discover the process (journey) of recovery from sexual assault trauma as experienced and described by victims
- To develop a theory to guide nursing practice in South Africa
Findings

Women’s Journey of Recovery from Sexual Assault Trauma

- Returning to self
- Readiness for closure
- Defining own landmarks
- Reclaiming what was lost
- Supportive environment
- Intervening Conditions & Context
- Non-Supportive environment

Turning point

Sexual Assault Trauma

Awakening

Pragmatic acceptance

Non-Supportive environment

Supportive environment
### Sexual Assault Victim

#### Week 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Behaviours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual assault trauma</td>
<td>Inability to move, lying motionless, inappropriate thinking, not knowing what to do, loss of control “Mental Paralysis”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awakening</td>
<td>Realising what has happened, self blame, guilt, fear of not being believed, seeking help, <strong>selective disclosure</strong>, conflicting views, complying or not complying with management</td>
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Mental Paralysis

He got up, cleaned himself with my husband’s socks and left us lying there. My husband was still lying with his hands and feet tied. I did not even think of untying him, I just lay there. I could not move, or think. My body was just heavy. I don’t know how long I lied there motionless!
I just lay there. He came back and said: “Good, you are still here.” He continued from where he left, Sine. I am sure he thought I really wanted it. He did his thing until he was satisfied. He left me and disappeared. I laid there naked for a long time before I even remembered my daughter.
He grabbed my bag and searched and threw it back to me. Well I thought he will let me go. He then said – “Ride on the bicycle” This did not make sense, but I got on the bicycle. He then cycled with me as if I was a parcel that he was carrying. I could feel tears coming down my face, but I could not think straight. I could not scream or anything.
Mental Paralysis

At 12 weeks

I think I have forgiven myself. There were times when I used to think, I could have tried to fall off the bicycle or scream and attract the attention of people we passed on the way, but I did not. I could not. I was numb all over. I had no power in me to do anything. I was just paralysed mentally.
Selective Disclosure

I have not told my dad because he does not care any way. If my granny was here, I would have told her. She is in Eastern Cape. My mom,....... I can’t tell. She will be angry with me and ask many questions.
Selective Disclosure

I asked my partner not to tell his family. I don’t know, I just feel like that this is a private matter.
Promise me you won’t tell the nurses and the detective, but some of the things I told you, I did not tell them. I don’t know, but some I only remember now. Some I just did not think of telling them, please, please.
My Aha Moment – Discovery of Neurologic explanations

- IAFN 2013 – Prof R Campbell

- What is “mental paralysis”? 

- What causes it? 

- Why does it happen to some but not all? 

- What causes “selective disclosure” 

- Can rape victims be trusted when they chose what to say and to whom?
Tonic Immobility/ Thenatosis

• Mammalian response in extreme fearful situations
• Automatic response to rape (and other forms of trauma)
• 10-50% of victims of rape
• Fight, flight or freeze when a cocktail of hormones are released to protect and sustain one
# Tonic Immobility/ Thenatosis

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Hormone</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adrenalin</td>
<td>Arouses you to your circumstances “I am being attacked”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cortisol</td>
<td>Provides you with uncommon energy (To fight/ flee)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opiods</td>
<td>Act like morphine – to temporarily numb your pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxytocin (Bliss hormone)</td>
<td>Attempts to stabilise your emotions, romantic attachment</td>
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Brain Regions Impacted by Trauma
Brain regions impacted by trauma

- **Amygdala**: Detects threats
- **Hypothalamus**
- **Pituitary gland**
- **Adrenal gland**: Activates a cocktail of hormones being released
- **Complete shutdown “Freeze”**
Brain regions impacted by trauma

- Increased Stress hormones
- Overflow

- Impaired Hippocampus
  - Decision making
  - Storage of memory

- Fragmented memory
  - Slow recall

Events CAN be remembered accurately
Effects of the cocktail of hormones

- Block the Hippocampus to organise and store thoughts
- Disjointed thoughts – makes it difficult to recover encoded information
- Trouble recalling the attack in a chronological order
- But smell, sounds of voice etc. remains intact
- Alcohol use prior to rape may also affect recall
Victim behaviours

- Trouble recalling the attack chronologically
- Affect – no emotion or smile/ laugh inappropriately while telling about the ordeal
- Slow in answering, anger busts
- Long silence before answering
- “Shroud of doubt”
- Guilt for failing to protect self
- Statement incoherent
Implications for Nursing Practice

- Allow time to recollect thoughts/consolidate thoughts
- Ask what she remembers e.g. smell or anything she heard/felt in order to corroborate evidence
- Allow her to find the missing pieces of the puzzle on her own
- Assure her that she can tell things as she remembers them
- This is no time for “interrogations”
- Assure her that Tonic Immobility is normal/ Give it a name
Implications for Nursing Practice

- Tonic Immobility & forgetfulness are frightening to the victim
- Self blame – for not being able to save/protect self
- Assure her that she did the best she could under the circumstances
- Help her understand that there is nothing to be ashamed of
- Written information and follow-up care
More information ....
References

• The neurobiology of sexual assault. Dr Rebecca Campbell, Professor of Psychology, Michigan State University