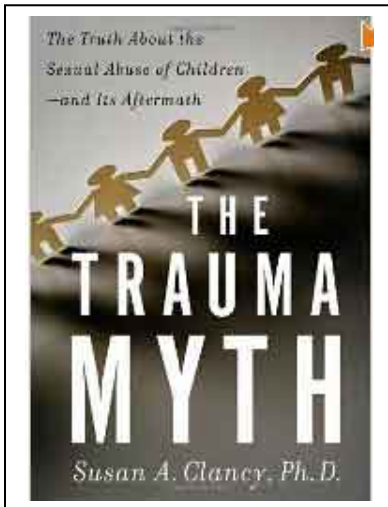


The Trauma Myth

In her book *The Trauma Myth: The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Aftermath*, Susan Clancy challenges traditional practice regarding treatment of victims of sexual abuse. In studies with survivors of sexual abuse, Clancy made the discovery that survivors' concept of the abuse differed from when it occurred and how they viewed it later in their lives. The abuse was not necessarily traumatic when it occurred but became damaging later on in the victim's life.



The original purpose of the trauma model in the 1980's was to provide an explanation for the damage sexual abuse inflicts on a survivor's life. Mental health professionals hoped to be able to help victims cope and recover from the damaging crimes.

Clancy points out several difficulties with the model. There appears to be no direct relationship between the severity of the abuse and the problems victims experienced in adulthood. Conventional medical establishments have not developed a clear effective treatment for victims of sexual abuse or consensus as to the best treatments for recovery. Survivors continue to spend time in psych wards or given

prescription medications to deal with the effects and continue to suffer from psychological and social problems in the aftermath of their abuse.

The problem centered on how trauma can be the cause of harm if most victims say that the abuse was not traumatic when it happened. Increasingly researchers in the field of sexual abuse are coming to the understanding that the extent sexual abuse damages victims has more to do with the aftermath than the actual abuse itself. Research that studies the consequences of sexual abuse through developmental, cognitive, and behavioral pathways may be more productive than continuing to focus on the severity and nature of trauma.

In the words of a survivor: "What I mean is that what it was like when it happened and what it is like now are two separate things entirely."

The victims did not experience the abuse as traumatic or awful when it happened because most did not understand the meaning of the sexual behaviours they were engaging in. At some point, later on in their lives, they understood what actually happened to them was wrong. Only at this point—when the sexual abuse is fully comprehended does it begin to damage victims. Clancy calls this "reconceptualization." After this discovery, Clancy interviewed the victims by asking questions in two parts: What was the experience like when it happened? And what is the experience like for you today, looking back on it? By the end of

the study, Clancy was able to discern a process or series of emotions experienced by survivors: feelings of betrayal, attribution process, self-blame and guilt, finally shame.

When survivors discover that they have been abused, they report feelings of betrayal. The extent of the betrayal survivors felt afterward depended on how traumatic the abuse was when it happened - the less traumatic it was, the more betrayal victims reported. The betrayal forced the survivors to rethink their pasts, many reported feeling a new insecurity and vulnerability. Betrayal also affects a victim's feelings of trust for others and overall self-worth. A lot of victims turned their anger inward and blamed themselves. As they struggled to make sense of their pasts; they engaged in an attribution process, examining all the possible explanations why the abuse happened. Almost all of the victims studied by Clancy viewed an internal explanation; they saw the abuse as their own fault caused by their own characteristics or behavior. Given the levels of betrayal, guilt, and isolation victims feel, it is not surprising that they also commonly report shame. The self is viewed as incompetent and as an object of ridicule, contempt, and disgust. Many victims use the word "shame" to describe how their abuse makes them feel as adults.

Clancy found that the degree of guilt victims experienced was strongly related to the degree of trauma experienced during the abuse when it happened. The less traumatic (forceful, frightening, threatening) the abuse was while it occurred, the more guilt and self-blame the victims report later on. Those victims whose abuse involved force or violence usually report the least guilt. Victims who report no trauma at all during the abuse (for example, those who loved the perpetrator, enjoyed the attention, or occasionally welcomed the contact) feel extremely guilty.

Some of the victims were quoted as saying "What happened to me was different from other kids. I . . . well . . . it's hard to say out loud, but basically I let it happen. There is something wrong with me. "

"I wasn't afraid. Sometimes I liked it. Obviously something's screwed up with me."

"My abuse did not involve such force and violence. I basically let it happen . . . so it wasn't classical abuse."

Clancy puts forward that most adult survivors' knowledge about sexual abuse, about what it is like, how children react etc., is linked to what they see, hear or read in the media, the popular, cultural images and concepts about the crime. Due to the trauma myth, sexual abuse almost always involves force, fear, threats. The experience is portrayed as traumatic and violent. According to Clancy the real dynamics of child sexual abuse are rarely pointed out, the

grooming process, that victims do not often resist, care about the perpetrators and receive gifts for participation e.g. attention, gifts, praise. Any aspects of sexual abuse that run counter to the trauma model appear to be suppressed by health professionals.

Clancy attributes the emphasis on the trauma model in the mental health field and the suppression of practical, reality-based information on sexual abuse for the fact that many victims experiences are ignored, dismissed, overlooked and denied by the people who are supposed to be helping them.

Clancy asserts that victims need to hear the truth to highlight publicly the true dynamics of sexual abuse—to expose the painful reality that most victims care for and trust the perpetrator (before, and sometimes during and after, they are abused), that they do not really understand the nature of what is being asked of them, that they feel they are receiving love and attention, that it does not hurt and sometimes feels good, and that, for all these reasons, participation is common. *(From the book The Trauma Myth: The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Aftermath by Susan A. Clancy. Copyright © 2009 by Susan A. Clancy)*

In order to help victims feel less stigmatized in the aftermath of sexual abuse, it should be communicated that they were indeed victims, not as the trauma model portrays them, but victims of their own level of development concludes Clancy.

This new information needs to be distributed in prevention campaigns, books, websites, and other outlets. Until this happens, victims will continue to feel alone, guilty, and ashamed. Clancy points out the tragic paradox of the trauma model. The less traumatic the sexual abuse was when it happened, the more betrayal, guilt, isolation and shame was experienced by the victim and more psychological and dysfunction they felt in its aftermath. The trauma model is actually backwards, Clancy points out, and because it is backwards it is failing to help victims and may be actually causing harm by emphasizing the damaging beliefs (it was my fault, there is something wrong with me etc.)

Clancy puts forward some very controversial and challenging views on the subject of sexual abuse and the treatment for consequences of the abuse. Whether or not you agree with her theories or not, survivors do not need any further barriers to their healing or beliefs that hinder or harm their progress.

Do you agree with Susan Clancy – the trauma model may not be helping sexual abuse victims but actually causing harm?