



## **Biblical Principles for Counseling Complex Trauma in Victims of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation**

### **I. Introduction**

- A. Complex trauma results from chronic or long-term exposure to emotional trauma such as verbal, emotional, physical, sexual abuse, neglect, or sex trafficking.
- B. There are similarities between complex trauma and post-traumatic stress response such as hypervigilance, heightened startle response, flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia and, avoidance of people, things, or places that would trigger traumatic memories.
- C. Complex trauma is labeled as “*Complex posttraumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD)*” and is considered a disorder that can result from severe, chronic, or extremely threatening trauma. Often, this trauma happens early in life, lasts for a long time, involves a mix of trauma types, or is followed by one or more unrelated traumas.
- D. The reader will find trauma from cover to cover in the Bible.
  1. History reveals that the kinds of extended trauma faced by today’s victims of sexual abuse is not a foreign subject in the Bible.
    - a. Tamar (2 Samuel 13).
    - b. The Levite’s concubine (Judges 19:22-28).
    - c. The father who offered his daughter to the mob (Judges 19:24).
    - d. Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the men of Sodom (Genesis 19:6-8).
    - e. Dinah is raped by Shechem (Genesis. 34:1-2).
    - f. Lot’s daughters commit incest (Genesis 19:30–37).
    - g. Prostitution (Joshua 2:1; Proverbs 7:10; Judges 16:1; 1 Corinthians 6:15 – 16).
    - h. Cult prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:17; 1 Samuel 2:22; 1 Kings 14:24).
    - i. Incest (Genesis 35:22; 38:12 – 19; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13).
    - j. Adultery (Leviticus 20:10 Jeremiah 23:11 – 14; 29:23; 2 Samuel 11:4; Ezekiel 22:11; Malachi 3:5; John 4:17 – 18).



## **II. The Phenomenology of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD)**

A. Complex trauma results from chronic or long-term exposure to emotional trauma such as verbal, emotional, physical, sexual abuse, neglect, or sex trafficking. The effects are cumulative.

1. “Victims suffering from complex trauma often experience depression, anxiety, self-hatred, dissociation, substance abuse, despair, and somatic ailments. Individuals exposed to this type of trauma are also at heightened risk for self-destructive and risk-taking behaviors as well as re-victimization and tend to experience difficulty with interpersonal and intimate relationships.”<sup>1</sup>

2. There are similarities between complex trauma and post-traumatic stress response such as hypervigilance, heightened startle response, flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia and, avoidance of people, things, or places that would trigger traumatic memories.

## **III. Treatment Methods for C-PTSD**

A. Trauma Informed Care is an organizational structure and treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma.

1. Trauma informed care recognizes and responds appropriately to trauma symptoms and is considered a crucial part of a victim’s recovery.
2. Trauma-informed care focuses on the strengths of the survivor and empowers them by building trust in the process.

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<sup>1</sup>Christine Courtois, “Complex Trauma, Complex Reactions: Assessment and Treatment,” In Evidence-Based Mental Health Treatment for Victims of Human Trafficking, Erin Williamson, Nicole M. Dutch and Heather J. Clawson at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2010), 3.

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3. Trauma-informed care does not treat specific symptoms or syndromes.
4. The goal of treatment is to help the person regain a sense of control over their life.
5. The primary treatments are various forms of trauma-focused psychotherapies that usually take place over 8-16 sessions and medications.
  - a. Cognitive therapy (CT, CBT).
  - b. Exposure therapy (ET).
  - c. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).
  - d. Antidepressants/ Anti-anxiety medications
  - e. Zoloft, Paxil, Minipress

#### **IV. The Need for a Spiritual Connection**

- A. Secular sources have concluded there is value in incorporating spirituality in the treatment of those who are struggling with trauma.
    1. The “spiritually connected” victim is more likely to have a different perspective on their traumatic past than those for whom spirituality is not as important.
    2. “Spirituality” is not enough in biblical counseling they need salvation through Jesus Christ (Romans 3:23; 1 Peter 2:22 – 25)
    3. A trauma survivor must have a biblical perspective to endure what she has suffered and come through it with a sound mind (James 1:3 – 8; 1 Peter 1:6 – 7)
    4. God never wastes a wound.
  - B. Problems with a Spiritual Connection
    1. They may be angry at God for allowing the abuse to take place, and because he did not intervene in their circumstances.
    2. Their experiences may result in them questioning all religious beliefs.
    3. They may wonder about the existence of God.
    4. They may wonder about the justice of God.
    5. They may struggle with doubt.
    6. They will struggle with the selfless love of God.
    7. They may fear judgment, punishment, or rejection from God.
    8. They may have a totally false view of Scriptures teaching on the heart/mind/soul.
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## V. Stolen Identity

- A. The child who was sexually abused in childhood may have built their identity upon lies.
  - 1. They may think of themselves as someone who does not measure up
  - 2. They may believe they are unlovable, is incapable, incompetent, or a failure.
  - 3. Abused children are often victimized as adults.
- B. Trafficked women have been trained by their pimp or captor to think of themselves as property, body parts, and slaves.
  - 1. The names assigned to them are not what they *do*; it is who they *are*.
  - 2. Shame becomes part of their identity.

## VI. A New Identity in Christ

- A. The survivor must learn to view themselves through the lens of scripture and accept what is true about themselves according to the unchangeable standard of God's Word rather than their self-evaluation.
  - B. The survivor's identity in Christ is crucial to help her overcome the psychological problems and complex trauma she has endured.
    - 1. They have they been crowned with glory and majesty (Psalm 8:4-5)
    - 2. They have been created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26 – 28).
    - 3. They have been “fearfully and wonderfully made by God (Psalm 139:14).
    - 4. Being “in Christ” becomes the foundation for the survivor's most basic understanding of her new identity (2 Corinthians 5:17).
    - 5. Jesus has given her a new relationship with God. She has been spiritually adopted into the family of God and is his beloved daughter (Ephesians 1:4 – 5).
    - 6. The Christian's identity problem is solved in belonging to God in Christ and acknowledging that God accepts her.
  - C. Help her evaluate if the conclusions she has reached about God and herself accurately reflect who she is in Christ.
    - 1. Help her develop an accurate and biblical view of God.
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2. If her truth does not line up with scripture, the survivor must choose to believe God's Word even when her feelings do not agree.
- D. Counseling process and possible homework
1. Provide survivors with lists of Bible verses to biblically answer the question, "Who Am I?" to help them fight the battle of thinking negatively about themselves (Philippians 4:8).
  2. Memorize Scripture such as John 1:12; John 15:16; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:1, 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 1:14
  3. Teach her to study, memorize, and meditate on the Word of God (Isaiah 26:3; Philippians 4:8; Psalm 1; 104:34; 119:15, 48, 97-99; 77:1-12; 143:5).
  4. Emphasize progressive sanctification (Philippians 2:12-13; Ephesians 4:17, 22, 24; Romans 6:12 – 13, 12:1 – 2, 8:13; Colossians 3: 9b – 10; Galatians 5:13 – 26).

## VII. Biblically Counseling the Trauma Survivor

- A. Fear and Anxiety
1. Fear and anxiety are common, natural, and normal responses in victims of sexual abuse and exploitation.
  2. A person struggling with the effects of complex post traumatic distress is not abnormal, disordered, or diseased.
  3. Fear is not always bad; it can serve a useful purpose (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; Isaiah 41:13).
  4. In trauma survivors, fear responses occur when there is no present threat.
    - a. The anxiety that accompanies PTS is considered "vigilance that is out of control" or, "toxic scanning."
    - b. The person is always constantly scanning their environment for threats and lives on the edge of fight or flight.
    - c. PT distress becomes a very serious and often debilitating form of suffering that cripples a person's ability to function in everyday life.
  5. The problem is not the *emotion* of fear but the *reason* for the fear.
    - a. The fear proceeds from what the counselee wants and thinks in their heart. What think and want in their heart comes out in what they do and feel.
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- b. Identifying the trauma response in biblical terms describes what the survivor experiences and provides the opportunity for the correct analysis of the difficulty.
  - 1) Together with her counselor, she should attempt to identify the reason for her fear and determine whether there is or is not a genuine danger.
  - 2) The survivor should be encouraged to accept that the feeling of fear exists and not deny or repress it.
  - 3) A biblical framework provides hope and comfort (Matthew 11:28 – 30).
    - a) Help her to put together the pieces of her life in a biblical context, through a Christian worldview of her past circumstances (Creation, Fall, Redemption).
    - b) Encourage her with the truth that God’s master plan for her life is not ruined (Providence of God).
- B. Counseling process and possible homework.
  - 1. Create safety and stabilization for the counselee before going into any discussion of their trauma.
    - a. Determine who should and should not interact with the survivor and provides an environment that emphasizes their spiritual and personal growth.
    - b. Teach basic self-care, guide her in making her own choices and encourage her to participate in decisions that affect her.
  - 2. Build a relationship at the beginning of the counseling process.
    - a. Listen attentively
    - b. Allow them to share at their own pace.
    - c. Observe Halo Date (body language, etc.)
    - d. Proceed with patience, grace, and support as the survivor begins to face the reality of their victimization.
      - 1) Help her put her story together in a timeline.
      - 2) Help her see where God is throughout her story.
      - 3) Consider working through Psalm 56 with her.
    - e. Embody Christ by being patient, gracious, genuinely empathetic, and caring. Love, encourage, and accept the victim. remind her frequently that she is not



alone, and that God is with her and for her (Isaiah 41:10; 1 Peter 5:7; Psalm 119:145).

- f. Help the survivor to see how her suffering is revealing ways that God is currently at work or wants to work in her life.
- g. Be wise when you do finally speak. Don't offer platitudes and clichés or glibly quote Bible verses such as Romans 8:28 – 29; Philippians 4:4 – 9; and 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18.
  - 1) Enter into her fear with her (Psalm 56).
  - 2) Address the counselee's fear by helping her to address her heart.
  - 3) Help her to develop biblical, accurate thoughts and desires to overcome her enslavement to fear (Proverbs 23:7).
  - 4) Teach her how to control her thoughts and to speak truth to herself rather than listening to her unbiblical thoughts (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Corinthians 10:5).
    - a) Journal her thoughts, beliefs, and desires of the heart.
    - b) Take her unbiblical thoughts, beliefs, and desires captive (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).
    - c) Replace fearful thoughts with God's thoughts and overcome fearful thoughts with God's promises (Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:22 – 24).

## VIII. Conclusion

- A. This process demands time and perseverance.
  - B. The biblical approach to helping those suffering with post-trauma distress begins with their new identity in Christ, which is found in the scriptures.
    1. The survivor's identity in Christ is foundational and among the most crucial components of their recovery.
    2. Her focus must be on God and her relationship with Christ.
  - C. Embrace progressive sanctification- continue to put off sinful thoughts, beliefs, desires, and actions and begin to act and respond in accordance with the scriptures.
  - D. Seek healing and hope by immersing themselves in God's Word and adopting a biblical approach to resolving the problems
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Dr. Julie Ganschow – Biblical Principles for Counseling Complex Trauma in Victims of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation.