



Sexual trauma can create sexual insecurities. Female survivors of sexual trauma may have general insecurities about their bodies: how their body looks, how their body feels, how their body smells, and how their body performs sexually. Because of sexual trauma, a female survivor may equate self-acceptance and self-esteem with sexual power, which may be how she defines her worth. Yet regaining and reclaiming sexual power can entail particular difficulties for her. These difficulties include dealing with the energies of the sacral and naval chakras, heightened fear of vulnerability and abandonment, and problems untangling sexual pleasure from sexual shame. She may need to talk more with her partner about her sexual desires and fears than might be the case for women who have not experienced sexual trauma. She may need to take concrete steps, some of which may not feel comfortable, to make the sexual arena feel safe for her. This article ends with a list of treatments that may offer help to survivors of sexual trauma, along with some suggested activities for establishing intimacy.

#### THE SACRAL CHAKRA AND THE NAVAL CHAKRA

The chakra (or energy center) of sexuality (i.e., the sacral chakra) is connected to the power chakra (the naval chakra). After a woman experiences sexual assault, she may find that these two energy centers become entangled. This alters the sexual power dynamic for a survivor who has not yet reclaimed her body. For her, sex often serves a purpose, although sometimes she may not be aware of that purpose.

Sex can become a way for her to process frustration. Much of our physiological energy of stress is stored in the power (naval) chakra, which is above the sexual (sacral) chakra, which makes it likely that a survivor of sexual assault will use sex as a way to process some of the physiological stress in her body. The stress that she feels is located in her core, right above the vagina (the sacral chakra). This stress therefore is processed through her being sexually penetrated. Sex can become a tool to help the survivor to relieve stress, just as an alcoholic can use alcohol to relieve the physiological stress in her/his body. She may use sex as a tool to help her relax and channel the stress, just as the alcoholic uses alcohol to process, numb, or channel physiological stress.

Sometimes sex is used to establish or reestablish a level of power. The sexual act sometimes involves the survivor's being in a dominant position during the sexual act, which may subconsciously represent an attempt to regain some control. This dominant position can help her to feel safe while she acts out the energy in the naval and sacral chakras. This position can also be an attempt to surrender that sexual (naval/sacral) energy to somebody she perceives as trustworthy (someone who won't hurt her physically or emotionally). Allowing herself to be vulnerable may be desired yet terrifying because it may conflict with the desire to feel safe.

## THE POWER OF SEX

Many survivors have a natural (perhaps subconscious) inclination to reclaim their sexual power but may not know how to do so. Living in a highly sexualized society makes it hard to reclaim sexual power. The woman, even if she's not a survivor of sexual trauma, learns quickly that her sexuality renders her powerful and powerless, sometimes in unpredictable ways.

She learns quickly that sex can be used as a tool to get what she wants or to help her survive. However, paradoxically, her sexuality can simultaneously make her powerless because she may be objectified and victimized as well upon entering the sexual arena.

Unresolved sexual trauma can result in a survivor's putting herself in high-risk situations in which an assault may be more likely to occur. One reason for this could be that she is trying to reenact the trauma to regain power and control and to create a different outcome. This process does not usually happen consciously.

## SEX AND SAFETY

Some men who are predatory can read the woman's desire for safety: This woman is his potential prey. His intentions upon meeting her may not always be clear to her because she may hunger for closeness, safety, and maybe even love. In addition, if she has experienced real or perceived emotional or physical abandonment, he may become the rescuer in the sense that he takes care of her unmet needs. These needs (e.g., he changes a battery in her car, runs errands for her, or comes to her house if she is scared). There is a cost associated with these loving tasks he completes for her. He meets her needs as a way to gain her trust so that he can gain sexual access to the woman. These tasks build trust and make her feel safe and cared for. This can result in the woman's subconscious desire to surrender or release the neural or sacral energy. Hence, she may feel safe—sexually safe.

Sometimes she wants to release her sexual power, while at other times, she may feel that she has to do so because she owes the man something (sex) for helping her to feel safe. She has learned that her vagina holds sexual power. As a result, she may prematurely open up sexually. She may give her body quickly due to a single act that a person does that makes her feel cared for, taken care of, or rescued. It is possible that in this instance, there may be a regression: She becomes vulnerable, as she was when she was assaulted (especially if she was a little girl when the assault occurred).

For some women, there's a perhaps subconscious desire to be dominated in a way that feels safe because this may feel similar to the dynamics in her first significant sexual experience (unfortunately, this experience may have occurred in childhood). Childhood sexual molestation, although nonconsensual, may have been her first significant sexual experience. As an adult, this survivor may find herself in situations in which her partner dominates her because it's physiologically and psychologically familiar and therefore feels normal. However, the alternative can happen, meaning that she finds herself in positions in which she has to maintain dominance to feel comfortable performing sexually because this feels less scary.

Some survivors of sexual trauma become more sexual after consuming alcohol, which may help the survivor to relax so that she can be freer in expressing her sexuality. Many survivors are unable to be free sexually unless they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Sometimes, sexual pleasure feels shameful because of its association with sexual trauma. Experiencing sexual trauma at a young age may negatively influence the survivor of sexual trauma's perception of sex. As a result, some are not

comfortable with feeling sexual pleasure because the feeling of sexual pleasure is entangled with emotional and physical pain from childhood sexual trauma, so physiological numbing helps to relax the trauma-related somatic reaction in the body.

#### SURVIVORS' HEIGHTENED FEAR OF ABANDONMENT

Many of the ways in which survivors of sexual trauma use sex aren't obvious. One of the key behaviors in a survivor of sexual trauma is to use her body sexually to get a partner or to keep a partner from leaving. She may attempt to become what she defines as a really good lover ("the best he's ever had"), so she may use whatever techniques she believes might work. She wants to make sure that her partner associates her value with what she gives to him sexually. In that way, she becomes valuable to him, and her desire is that this means that she will not be abandoned.

Where does this fear of abandonment come from? The survivor of sexual trauma experiences abandonment when she experiences sexual trauma due to feeling isolated, alone, and powerless while being abused sexually. Nobody rescued her. Maybe nobody else other than the assailant even knew what had happened. Or maybe they knew but didn't do anything about it.

This fear of abandonment and the feeling of powerlessness can arise in the survivor of sexual trauma even if she is already an adult at the time of the assault. If she tells someone but is not believed, this can reinforce the original feeling of being alone and powerless. She may even blame herself for the assault and therefore refrain from telling anyone else about the traumatic event. This type of experience of powerlessness can negatively influence her subsequent sexual behavior, much of which may be an attempt to regain power or to find a safe way to surrender that power because it's too much for her to handle.

#### UNTANGLING SEXUAL PLEASURE FROM SEXUAL SHAME & UNDERSTANDING DISSOCIATION & PROMISCUITY

It may seem impossible to the survivor to untangle the pleasure from the shame associated with sexual acts. Other vices that might enable her to have sex without experiencing traumatic body memories through dissociating from them include drugs, alcohol, or other voluntary and involuntary forms of dissociation. During the sexual act, it's not uncommon for a woman to dissociate. When we think of dissociation, some may think of an individual regressing or seeming to become someone else: a little girl instead of a woman who's engaging in sex. Another common but often misunderstood type of dissociation occurs when a survivor is having sex but her mind wanders. For example, she may ponder what she's got to do the next day, what she should cook, or what she should wear. Her body is present, but her mind isn't. As she distracts herself, she might only become aware of what's happening in the present moment when she starts to wonder when the sexual act will be over: "When is he going to be done?"

Shame may surround using sexual promiscuity as a coping mechanism (in this case, a form of dissociating from the sexual act). Promiscuity has many negative connotations in our society, especially for women. We call the promiscuous woman names like "whores," "hoes," or "thots" (slang for women who use their bodies to gain men's attention or favors). This type of sexual freedom in the woman has been frowned upon because in general, society expects a woman to keep her vagina reserved for one other person, even if that person is not her spouse. If she doesn't, then she's often described as loose, dirty, or immoral. The attempt to regain control or dominance over one's body may be one of the

subconscious reasons for emotionally disconnected promiscuity. Or the survivor may just like sex. (How many people agonize over this being true when discussing a man instead of a woman?)

#### TALK MAY NOT BE ENOUGH BUT MAY BE NEEDED FOR THE SURVIVOR TO FEEL SAFE

Talking about the traumatic sexual experience is not enough. Talking about it can help survivors to come up with reasons why what happened to them wasn't their fault. But the rational side of the brain can come up with many reasons why the sexual trauma was not her fault without this stopping her from experiencing the body sensations associated with the horrific act. Unless the survivor of sexual trauma can process the body sensations associated with the trauma safely, she may not recover.

One of the first steps of reclaiming sexual power is defining what safety is. When I say "safety," I'm talking about not only physical safety, but also emotional safety. It's important to establish emotional safety with a partner before having sexual intercourse. This means that discussions about emotional safety need to occur before the sexual act takes place. One example of emotional safety involves the survivor's being able to trust the prospective sexual partner with her emotions when she shares her experiences and her feelings. Crucial here is his ability to empathize with her authentically without trying to take advantage of her in this emotionally vulnerable state by trying to get her to sleep with him. Also, it's important to talk about sexuality, including what it means to be sexual and what the survivor and her partner want from sex and whether and when sex occurs.

Once these discussions have taken place—and before both partners get caught up in lust impulsively—only then can the process begin of discussing how the partner can help the survivor to reestablish sexual safety. The process of establishing sexual safety involves first exploring physical touch without penetration by creating activities that I call "intimacy without intercourse." I encourage clients to sit down with their trusted partners and come up with ideas that fit the definition of intimacy without intercourse: exploring the body without the expectation of imminent penetration. I do caution them, however, that these activities may nonetheless lead to sexual intercourse.

When I give this assignment to clients, some survivors feel uncomfortable asking their partner to come up with ideas about intimacy without intercourse. They may have elevated anxiety because they fear that their partner may not be open to trying this exercise, yet it's key for the survivor of sexual trauma to begin exploring in a safe way what feels pleasurable without believing that immediate sexual payment to her partner is required.

#### TREATMENTS

- Bilateral processing
- Somatic experiencing
- Trauma psychotherapy
- Energy work
- Meditation

#### IDEAS FOR INTIMACY

Massage or foot massage  
Couples showers/baths (washing each other)  
Washing each other's hair  
Cuddling  
Pillow talk  
Expressing deep feelings  
Candlelit dinners  
Reading to each other  
Feeding each other fruits and candy  
Pillow fights  
Tickling  
Holding/rubbing hands  
Kissing (eyelids, face, etc.)  
Slow dancing  
Going for a walk  
Lying on the grass at night under the stars  
Hugging