

Street Talk

“Not Angry- Hurting.”

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Introduction

Street Talk is a small registered charity, which provides counselling for women in street prostitution.

The service is client led.

Everything learned has been through the generosity of spirit, patience and trust of the women who have come to the service.

The names of the women referred to have been changed.

I am going to talk about some of our learning from the lives of the women and then I am going to explain how we have adapted therapy to make it accessible to the women.

Hurting

The women who come to Street Talk are in pain. They have all lived through trauma and self medicate for the symptoms with whatever is available, alcohol or substances which leads them into addiction.

Prostitution is a desperate means to support the addiction. It brings more brutality, more pain and that's the trap women are in.

Would a child who had been run over and injured be left to cope with their injuries, left to cope with the pain without help or treatment at the right time? What's the difference?

Societal Denial

Women's experiences are denied:

When professionals don't listen.

When professionals don't believe them.

When professionals prevent women from feeling safe enough to talk.

Does this occur because the reality of the day to day lives of the women is unbearable? Is it too much for professionals to take in?

The denial of the day to day suffering of this client group, may go some way towards explaining the failure of services to meet their needs.

Failure in services for women with dual diagnosis

Our women with dual diagnosis are almost always turned away from mental health services on the grounds that their psychosis is caused by their addiction.

They are signposted to addiction services but are too mentally unwell to have the capacity to engage.

They are left on the street with neither mental health care or help with their addiction, with catastrophic consequences, including custodial sentences or death.

Services lose sight of women's capacity to recover

There is an assumption amongst services that women have chosen this lifestyle.

In part that comes from the complexity of the term prostitution. There is a conflation between the indoor prostitutes who have a platform based on the right to choose prostitution and women in street prostitution for whom it isn't a choice. After twelve years I haven't worked with one woman who has chosen to get into or who would choose to remain involved in street prostitution. It is violent, dangerous and humiliating.

The women feel deep rooted shame which comes from abuse in childhood and feel that they are dispensable. This is constantly reinforced by services who treat them as though they are dispensable. Services seem to have lost hope in the women's capacity to recover. Is it possible that the punitive response from services comes from the difficulty in accepting the extent of the clients' vulnerability?

The model

We practice object relations therapy.

Practitioners are qualified to Masters Degree level with considerable post qualification experience.

Practical Adaptations to model:

Outreach service.

Length of sessions adapted.

Continuity provided by taking therapy to women who go into prison, hospital, rehab and bail hostels.

Contact by phone or letter when women are away.

Advocacy alongside therapy.

Thorough supervision.

Case load limited to eight clients per therapist.

Stages of engagement

The essential difference between the work which is carried out with this client group and work in other contexts, is the pace of the work.

Looking back over case histories collected over the last twelve years a very clear pattern of engagement has been established by the women.

Four distinct stages of engagement have emerged.

Initial engagement

Women present to the therapist at one of the hostels or day centres at a time of a particular crisis.

Typically attend five sessions at that point.

During this phase the client tests the therapist.

Beginnings of a therapeutic alliance.

During this phase, the therapist sees past the client's trauma and their defences, to catch a glimpse of their humanity. This forms the basis of the counter-transference which is fundamental to the next phase.

Passive creative therapy: “You didn’t give up on me.”

Intermittent engagement over up to four years.

The therapist continues to attend weekly making themselves available to the client.

The counter-transference sustains the therapeutic alliance.

The importance to the client of the therapist being there.

When the client is ready to engage in a more regular way, they look back on this period, as one where the therapist has maintained their belief in their capacity to recover. This forms the basis of the therapeutic alliance over the next critical stages.

Turning point “I know why I am here.”

For many of the women this moment comes four years after first presenting to the service.

Precipitated by a significant life event, a woman becomes motivated to commit to the therapy, attending weekly, for fifty minute sessions, usually for a period of about a year.

Momentum picks up within the therapeutic alliance.

Becomes possible to work with the transference.

Post recovery

Women adapt from communal to independent living which some struggle with.

Women move to a new area where they sometimes feel out of place.

Loss of community.

Drama replaced by mundanity. Instead of appearing in court on Tuesday women have to remember to put the bin out on Tuesday.

Goals women have been striving towards for years are achieved and women sometimes feel a loss of purpose. A sense of anti-climax.

This is a vulnerable period for women where there is a risk of relapse which is why Street Talk continues to offer therapy.

Shift in perspective, hind sight and the establishment of a stable routine free from trauma leads to a particularly rich, insightful period in the therapy.

The work at this stage is not open ended. It usually goes on for about one year but with affixed end point.

Women know that if something happens they can come back and have further support.

Some women go on to volunteer with Street Talk at this point, as mentors.

Anyone can recover

Anyone can engage in therapy.

Anyone can recover, no matter how complex their needs and no matter how long they have been involved in street prostitution.