

DIMENSIONS OF THRIVING IN WOMEN CHILD ABUSE SURVIVORS

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Purpose: Identify and describe the conceptual dimensions of thriving as manifested in narratives of women child abuse survivors (physical, sexual, verbal, neglect), in order to understand how success in relationships and work is achieved, and how the phenomenon of thriving occurs in traumatized persons. Thriving, exceeding expectations for success in recovery from an overwhelming experience, is a newly theoretically described concept, about which there is little research.

Method: Recruitment was through flyers, response to a newspaper feature on the study, and word of mouth. Narrative analysis by a multidisciplinary team was used in this major qualitative exploration of thriving. Twenty six sets of 3 open-ended interviews, spaced over 7 months, were done with women who were ethnically, SES, and educationally diverse, aged 20s-60s, living in the southeast. Participants varied in patterns of abuse and healing. The method included structural and thematic exploration of verbatim transcribed narratives. This included chronological sorting of events, searches for metaphors, essential action, genre, and interpersonal relational descriptions. Subjective interpretations by participants themselves was prioritized and consultation with women having similar histories was another reference point for accuracy of findings.

Findings: A central dimension of thriving, termed “Resoluteness” (focused and “driven”), was evident in participants whose stories reflected high degrees of life achievement. In addition, there were other dimensions, many expressed in in vivo terms: Moving On, Getting Over It, Quest for Knowledge, Closure, Finding Someone to Be There, Stepping Outside Self, Putting It (trauma), Outside the Self, Use of Therapy, and Relating to Family (of origin). While conceptually these dimensions form the experiential phenomenon of thriving, they are not mutually exclusive, and most are manifested within several patterns or constellations. In individuals, the patterns in which some or all of these dimensions are configured form diverse profiles and trajectories of thriving over time. Use of therapy, for instance, varied considerably in whether it was sought at all, motivation, type, duration, effectiveness and self-evaluation. Relating to the family of origin ranged from complete separation to reconciliation. Expected qualities of thriving, such as spirituality, were less central to thriving in this group, and quite diverse. Comparisons were made based on demographics, abuse patterns and aftereffects, self-concepts, and strategies used. The role of creative pursuits was key to thriving for some women.

Discussion: Thriving is distinguishable from related concepts of hardiness, resilience, sense of coherence, etc. This analysis sheds new light on a poorly defined, new concept, through a narrative exploration providing both retrospective and prospective insights. Variable outcomes of psychotherapy raise questions about its efficacy for all survivors of trauma. Further research is recommended with male survivors.