

Attachment, Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction Among Survivors of Sexual Trauma

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Survivors of sexual trauma often have unresolved attachment status, characterized by fears of abandonment, difficulty trusting others, and challenges establishing and maintaining close relationships (Bailey, Moran, & Pederson, 2007). Further, adolescents who experience sexual relations that are not grounded in a strong relationship experience increased vulnerability to depression and low self-esteem. This poster presentation will address the topic of attachment, sexual self-esteem, and life satisfaction for survivors of sexual trauma. Relevant empirical and theoretical literature will be reviewed and implications for counseling psychologists will be discussed.

Sexual assault is one of the most prevalent violent crimes in the United States, and it is important for counseling psychologists to consider the effects of sexual trauma on the self-esteem and interpersonal relationships of survivors. The construct of sexual self-esteem refers to a sense of well-being in a sexual relationship that involves positive communication and little need to dominate the sexual relationship (Kelly & Erickson, 2007). Sexual self-esteem is correlated with global self-esteem, indicating individuals' domain-specific esteem related to sexual relationships also affects their overall comfort with themselves (Oattes & Offman, 2007). Other factors that are important to consider when understanding the effects of sexual trauma are attachment security and romantic relationship satisfaction. Attachment theory, as proposed by Bowlby (1979) and expanded by Hazan and Shaver (1994) proposes that early childhood relationship experience with caregivers influence individuals' attachment patterns in adult relationships. Individuals with greater attachment security are more likely to be satisfied with

their current romantic relationships (Lowyck, Lyten, Demyttenaere & Corveleyn, 2008). Alternatively, individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles may experience less satisfaction with their relationships (Spanier, 1976). If proven, this would indicate that attachment security contributes to relationship satisfaction with a current romantic partner (Denton & Burwell, 2006).

Autonomy and confidence are also highly associated with individuals' romantic relationship satisfaction. In other words, individuals with a degree of independence from the relationship may be more content with their romantic bond as compared to individuals who do not maintain a degree of autonomy (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). Research has linked individual self-esteem and confidence with relationship satisfaction (Crocker & Knight, 2005). As stated previously, sexual self-esteem is associated with global self-esteem. As described by Oattes and Offman (2007) sexual and global self-esteem are highly related to general communication in a romantic relationship, which in turn could relate to greater relationship satisfaction. This research suggests a connection between current sexual self-esteem and relationship satisfaction as it is related to sexual trauma and attachment.

Counseling implications related to existing empirical literature will be presented and directions for future research will be offered in this poster presentation on attachment, self-esteem, and romantic relationship satisfaction among survivors of sexual trauma.