

Sexual Secrets and the Challenges Of Disclosure In Developmental Couple Therapy For Complex Trauma With A Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivor And His Partner

Heather B. MacIntosh, PhD

Associate Professor
MScA Couple and Family Therapy
School of Social Work
Associate Member
Department of Educational Psychology
McGill University
3506 University Ave., Room 425
Montreal, Quebec
H3A2A7
Phone: 514 398 7056
heather.macintosh@mcgill.ca

Working with Graham and Jeremy, this therapy aimed at helping Graham break down the dissociative barrier he had erected between his compulsive, reenactive, sexual liaisons with unknown men he met through the internet and his virtually absent sexual relationship with his long-term partner, Jeremy. This presentation will focus on the process of unraveling the factors and forces associated with the development of a severe bifurcation in Graham's sexuality and the judicious disclosure and reengagement of Graham and Jeremy in their sexual relationship. Graham is a 37-year-old cisgendered gay man from a middle class family who experienced sexual abuse from the ages of three to thirteen by his uncle. Over the period of years of abuse, it escalated from non-intrusive fondling to intrusive and aggressive sexual violence. As a result, Graham came to link a number of factors of his abuse with his adult sexual arousal including pain and aggression. Graham did not feel comfortable sharing these desires with Jeremy and, over time, a dissociative barrier grew up between his gradually fading sexual relationship with Jeremy and his escalating sexual engagement with strangers he found on the internet. Jeremy is a 29 year old cisgendered gay male who comes from a large working class French Canadian, Catholic family. While Jeremy's upbringing was loving and boisterous, his family was very distressed when he came out and distanced themselves from him, which left him feeling isolated and sad. Jeremy has felt a longing to build a family with Graham and while he understands that Graham has experienced sexual trauma, he has not fully understood what seems to stand in the way of Graham being able to commit to him and the idea of building a life and a family together.

The treatment approach used with this couple is Developmental Couple Therapy for Complex Trauma and we will be discussing the third stage of treatment, which focuses on disclosure, trauma processing and healing the sexual relationship. This couple progressed well through the first two stages of treatment and had developed a strong therapeutic relationship, in addition to sufficient emotion regulation and mentalizing capacities to move into the third stage.

BEHAVIORAL LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After attending this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Recognize the impacts of childhood sexual trauma on the development of sexual distress in couples.
2. Demonstrate the basic intervention strategies in stage three of Developmental Couple Therapy for Complex Trauma focused on addressing sexual distress in couples.
3. Intervene skillfully in facilitating judicious disclosures of sexual secrets in the context of trauma couples.

BIOGRAPHY

Heather MacIntosh PhD

Heather MacIntosh is Associate Professor in the MScA Couple and Family Therapy Programme at McGill University where she is the recipient of the H. Noel Fieldhouse Award for Distinguished Teaching. Dr. MacIntosh is a clinical psychologist and principal investigator on SSHRC and FQRSC funded research projects examining the impact of early life trauma on the process and outcome of couple therapy, and the development and maintenance of healthy adult relationships. Dr. MacIntosh is the author of the recently released book: *Developmental Couple Therapy for Complex Trauma a Manual for Therapists* by Routledge Press, a treatment manual outlining her evidence based treatment model for working with couples dealing with the impacts of complex trauma, as well as a number of peer reviewed articles and chapters in the area of trauma and couple therapy. Dr. MacIntosh provides trauma focused consultation to the Mohawk community of Akwesasne and maintains a small private practice in North Lancaster, Ontario.

DISCUSSANT

Kathryn Hall, PhD

Kathryn Hall, PhD is the immediate Past President of SSTAR. With Irv Binik, she is the co-editor of *Principles and Practice of Sex Therapy* and has just completed work on the 6th edition. In a sex therapy/research career that has spanned 3 decades, Dr. Hall has worked in treatment programs for incarcerated sex offenders, been the Clinical Director of a treatment center for sexually abused children and their families, and been an expert witness in Court on matters related to sexual abuse, harassment, and violence. Dr. Hall has been a consultant to professional organizations and has evaluated and treated individuals accused of professional sexual misconduct. She has written about and provided therapy for sexual trauma survivors who span the age and gender spectrum. Throughout, she has maintained a private practice with a specialty in sex therapy. Helping people enjoy and express their sexuality while also understanding that the power of sex can be abused has been a counterbalancing act for her entire and entirely fulfilling career.