Writing disclosure: to tell or not to tell?

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore from a lived experience perspective the factors impacting on the decision to disclose experiences of abuse to gain support. The author hopes to inform healthcare and allied professionals of the barriers people face when disclosing traumatic experiences to facilitate learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The author has shared various experiences of sharing details of traumatic experiences. It is important to reflect on the narratives of those with living experience to facilitate learning and opportunities to remove any common barriers to disclosure.

Findings – This lived experience narrative will support healthcare and allied professionals to reduce any barriers to disclosure so that early intervention may be facilitated. Collaborative learnings and reflection which support professionals and those with lived experience to work together to create meaningful services which support people in recovery and support is important.

Originality/value – This is the unique perspective and experience of the author which is shared to facilitate understanding and the removal of barriers to disclosure.

Keywords Abuse, Support, Barriers, Disclosure, Lived experience, Expressive writing

Paper type Viewpoint

A burnt orange sun sits resplendent in the midday sky. The moon hides, waiting patiently for the first welcoming of an ink black night. They exist separately but are ultimately linked and entwined in each other’s journey. As one rises, the other wanes. Yet, there is a moment in time when both exist in the same space, at the passing point, filled with opportunity to share. A brief fleeting moment in time when the act of union provides opportunity to disclose. Imagine the possibility held in that communal moment to be open to receive what burdens another. To receive, to acknowledge, to value, to hold just a small piece of the heaviness for a while. Dark night beckons and the sun fades away. A resplendent moon sits in the night sky until the first warming of the sun’s rays are felt. The moment of sharing passed.

I longed for a passing point, a moment in time when I might have unburdened myself of the things that were happening to me. It did not come, not for a long time. It was too late in the coming in many ways, but I cling to the possibilities afforded now that I have spoken. It has taken me over 40 years to find a way to disclose experiences that are very often too painful for others to hear. Hearing myself speak the words has brought a relief I never believed to exist. It has been complicated, ambiguous, filled with barriers, rigid and unnecessary. I have lost friends, family and those whom I thought cared for me. Opportunities have slipped by into the nothingness that often descends, and I still struggle to make sense of things at times. In turning towards my wounds, I have had moments when the words stuck in my throat like burnt ash and the withering stares from others have rendered me unable to speak. Amid all of this I have also found the part of me that has been missing for many years, a new solidity, a freedom long awaited, and I continue to grasp this and move forward. Who knows how heavy are the secrets that others bear, leaden and weaved into a life’s narrative that the release of them is almost as painful as the carrying. Disclosing experiences of child sexual abuse would almost be the undoing of me, but there is grit there too and an absolute stubborn refusal to be bowed.
Reprisal

On reflection I was never very good at art, not as much as I thought myself to be at the
time. At school I would long to be part of the in-crowd, artistic and trendy all rolled up into
a small group of girls often found hanging around the art room. It was found on the top
floor, a world set apart from the hum drum of the rest of the school. A large secondary
school in Liverpool is an intimidating place for a 12-year-old girl uncertain about most
things. I thought that if I sat in the art room for long enough, I might soak in the ability to
draw, that it might imbue me with all the coolness that would get me noticed. This was
born from the naive hope that if someone noticed how unsure I was, I would not have to
speak the words myself. On reflection, with an older mind I see that it was the art teacher
I really wanted to be close to. The calmness she exuded permeated the air and I would
imagine a thousand ways of telling her what was happening and in each of them she
would turn to me and listen, hold the burden for a little while. I never really found the right
moment and the one that found me was swept away by the imagined cruelty of how
young people can be.

I stayed behind one afternoon after art class, volunteering to clear up and surprisingly found
myself to be alone. Setting about the task of cleaning all the paintbrushes, I became aware
that my art teacher had entered the room. She sat next to me quietly and after a while she
asked me if everything was OK. I couldn't find the words, they had dried up and stuck,
swollen and lodged in my throat. Images of getting in trouble for telling someone crowded
into my mind. The laughing faces of everyone at school and imagined fingers pointing at me
closed any hope I had of speaking up. I started to panic that my family would be punished,
that I would be blamed and that I would be responsible for ruining the perfect façade that
had been crafted. I wondered if I had in fact got it wrong, perhaps what was happening to
me was normal, perhaps she would laugh at me for my lack of maturity, my lack of
coolness. I felt ashamed that I couldn't put anything in order, that I didn't understand what
was happening, so I did what I knew best and stayed quiet, remained unmoved. Eventually
she moved away, a hand lingered on my shoulder for a few seconds but the moment was
gone.

It is difficult to speak of what we do not fully understand, to find the words to articulate
just a sense that something is wrong. I was 12 and I wanted to fit in desperately. I also
wanted what was happening to stop and could not find a way to make that happen
without the feeling of causing trouble. I had no comprehension that I too had needs and
that I deserved to feel safe and be protected. How can one even know what that really
means at such a young and tender age. I was weighed down with the responsibility of
protecting everyone else. This feeling of responsibility would stay with me for many years
to come and would lead me down paths that took me further away from myself. The
words rang loudly in my ear, drowning out any burgeoning sense of self that may have
been beginning to form

No one will believe you anyway.

What do you think will happen if you tell?

People will be angry at you and there will be a lot of trouble.

We just keep this to ourselves.

Ambiguous

I took every ingredient possible from the fridge. This was to be the best sandwich ever
created. It would bring me a kind word, most likely and an approval which I craved.
There would likely be other actions not wanted but I pushed them to the back of my
mind. Today would be different. It would be full of laughter, family love and the sense that I mattered. I layered the sandwich until the sides bulged, overflowing with all manner of tasty treats and carried it lovingly into the dining room. It had the desired effect and for a few moments I felt at the centre of his world, loved, cared for and special in a normal kind of way. Later, that feeling would be shattered and the rug would be pulled so far that scrambling back to anything resembling normality would seem impossible.

This pull and push between experiences that I longed for and experiences that I did not was confusing and muddied the waters so much that I could not see clearly. I had moments of real closeness with him combined with moments of pure terror. How can one assimilate all of this within a young and developing mind? It left me perpetually anxious, unsure of whether to disclose the bad bits, fearing I would likely lose the good. It played out in other relationships over time. I became inured to relationships out of which behaviours grew that were damaging to me. I had little agency to change the pattern of things and consequently became vulnerable to tolerating situations others would remove themselves from. Of course, I was blamed for this also. It seems there is little escape when one is stuck in an endless vortex of ambiguity and self-blame. Liberation would come with the endless repeating of stories until I gathered them into myself, and they finally made sense. Writing would become a way to be a witness to my own story. The physical act of writing allowed me to be slightly removed from the intensity of the emotions stirred but still intimately involved enough to feel them safely. Over time, this meant that I could begin to see things differently.

Disclosure brings with it intensely conflicted feelings and guilt, an ever-present companion. Disclosure is complex, nuanced and evolving. Sometimes it brings relief and sometimes it brings anything but. There have been times when I have regretted the disclosing of such personal material, and there have been times when it has thrown me a lifeline and towed me to shore. There is always an ambiguity inherent in the sharing of information that will implicate others, cared for and loved into a story that is bound to bring recrimination and pain. There is no clear bright line showing the way forward, instead it is incumbent on each person to make that decision for themselves. Being aware of the many dilemmas inherent to the act of disclosure is essential. Knowing and accepting that it may not bring us what we want or need brings a more enlightened choice. Contemplating these matters takes time and patience. In the bright light of an autumn morning, I wondered who I would become if I did not come out of the shadows and speak. I wondered how it would be to craft a stronger version of myself through the sharing of my story instead of endlessly falling into the version of myself others had created.

Who would I become?

Crisp autumn leaves skitter along the pavement and a streetlamp glows in the distance. I stand looking up at the imposing front of a local church, unwelcoming and cold in equal measure. I can hear the faint sounds of people gathering in the building behind and eventually the cold air drives me forward to the open door. I have paced around the block several times trying to warm the cold feeling in the pit of my stomach signaling my resistance. Eventually I walk through the entrance, still conflicted, unsure I want to attend a group meeting of fellow survivors. I had been reassured by a well-meaning therapist, “that it’s the best things for people like me”. I am always too slow to ask what people mean when they say things like this, but my insides know that it’s not answer I’d likely want to hear so I just smiled in agreement. The room is laid out with a half circle of chairs, and I move silently, taking up as little space as I can, sitting on the chair nearest the door. A woman bustles over to me, her face adorned with a huge welcoming smile. With a clipboard in hand, she encourages me to sign in and, “grab a hot drink” before they all
go. I remain seated and watch as a woman shuffles forward carrying the weight of lifetimes pain on her strained face, eyes glistening with the beginnings of tears. She sits opposite, and we exchange furtive glances until the room begins to fill. A young man wanders towards me and takes his place on the next chair. He sits fidgeting and his feet tap endlessly on the wooden floor. The facilitator wanders in and out and eventually the circle is complete.

The next few hours contain stories that would break the strongest heart, moments of connection and sharing unknown to me before. I can see the benefit, but I still don’t want to be here and have fought the urge to escape until I can bear it no longer. All around me I see evidence of the long shadow that abuse leaves and the trail of lives destroyed. All around me I sense the pain emanating from souls lost in a vortex of loneliness and although momentary laughter punctuates the heavy air I am choking. We are regularly reminded of the long-standing impacts of childhood abuse by bold chalk words etched onto the blackboard at the front of the room. Statistics swim before my eyes and it seems my life’s trajectory is neatly mapped out in front of me. We are regularly reminded that, “it’s good to talk to other survivors” but I no longer want to be part of this club. Each story spoken brings me closer to my own and the rising bile in my stomach eventually forces me out of the chair towards the door. I find myself running down the road, the hot breath of shame chasing at my heels and it’s not until I reach the car that I take a moment to exhale.

I have spent years carefully curating a mask to show to the world. I have spent years carefully curating a story that presents me to the world in a certain way, and I am not ready to relinquish that in the search of authenticity. I prefer to hide within the folds of an unremarkable tale of a happy life instead of naming and sharing what really happened. I don’t want to be seen as “damaged goods” or treated to the condescending looks of professionals who have already neatly folded me into a diagnostic box or two. Within each pattern of behaviour there is a story waiting to be told but as yet I can find no one to listen. I can hardly listen to it myself and the thought of sharing with fellow survivors leaves me cold. It’s a club I don’t want to join, not yet anyway.

Years later I would find a writing group of fellow survivors. It would provide a space where I could speak and be heard, one in which shared creativity would bind us together rather than the distress we all carried. There was a lightness to it that eased out my confidence and step by step I felt my way into all the painful places, previously avoided. We would sit quietly in communion, drinking in each other’s written words and in the folds of this community I shared what had happened to me feeling the burden lift on every syllable spoken. I had found my passing point.

The second wound

I carried secrets that were heavy for the tiny frame of a young girl and over time, unspoken they weaved themselves into my bones, providing scaffold. The thought of letting them go left me fearing collapse. The tipping point came when the weight of them left me equally fearing collapse. I had planned my disclosure to close family with the wise guidance of a therapist and a precision that took months. The time eventually came to unburden myself of all that had transpired within the family setting.

As with all best laid plans they were also to collapse. Emotions ran high and the calm loving disclosure hoped for descended into recrimination. My words were met with denial, disapproval and utter disbelief. Worse still, they were left unacknowledged, and a tone of indifference hung in the air. It felt to me at the time that the fragile covering of the first wound had been ripped open and exposed to a hostile and unforgiving air. A second wound had opened. Now that I have grown a thicker and more stable skin, I see that these disclosures cannot be held by everyone and perhaps they were best left unspoken. They have left in
their wake ruptures unlikely to heal. Reparation seems a distance too far to travel, and my words have sunk back down into the mists of denial. I have long recovered from the additional pain these episodes brought and have recognised how difficult these words were to hear. My healing continues in the company of those who have not turned the other way when confronted with such expressions of truth.

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