

Living in silence after workplace sexual assault

Finding a new life as a survivor

by Tammy Lundgren-Costa



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For many people addiction, substance abuse and trauma go hand in hand. After I was sexually assaulted at work I struggled with addictive behaviours. I think for about the first few days I was numb; I had no concept of time or what day it was even. The fact that I had been sexually assaulted played like a constant horror movie in my mind. Those few minutes that it took to assault me would change my entire life forever.

No matter how tired I would become I found it impossible to fall asleep. I tried to close my eyes yet I couldn't clear my mind of what happened. I think two or three days had passed by when I first remember seeing a reflection of myself in the mirror. All I remember was rage, shame and disappointment in myself.

I was working as a counsellor in a residential treatment facility. I went to admit a client, and as I was leading him back up the stairs to the facility, he attacked me.

How could I have let this happen to me? I had years of training and I was always a great judge of character so how was it that I misjudged this person and what he was capable of doing to me?

Seeing my reflection in the mirror was

my first breaking point. I don't know how or why I did it but I started grabbing all kinds of things like Comet cleanser, toothpaste, vinegar and other things and I started to scrub it all over my face. I had so many mixed emotions that I just lost my mind, I guess. The only way I can describe it is like I was having an out-of-body experience that I had no control over. It was like I was someone other than myself. Someone I didn't know.

Maybe I thought somehow that if I could erase what I saw in the mirror I could erase the sexual assault from my life.

By the time I stopped I had a lot of abrasions on my face where I had been scrubbing really hard. The bathroom was a mess and I was sitting on the bathroom floor. I felt a calm come over me and I broke down crying. I remember I lay down on the bathroom floor as I covered myself with a bath towel. I have no idea how long I was lying there but I must have slept for hours.

When I got up I was cold and I felt so alone. I wanted to cry out and have someone there but I had no one I felt I could call.

I wanted to tell my husband but how could I tell him? He was working out of town for another four days so I was all alone. When I was 12 my mother was gang raped and when

she told my father he blamed her. Now I had been raped. Would my husband blame me?

I constantly struggled with suicidal ideation (thoughts of suicide). I would come so close and then something would happen that stopped me.

My husband came home days later and although I told him I had been raped he never asked me questions, nor did we ever discuss the details of what had happened that day.

I tried going for therapy on a weekly basis for about six years. I never found therapy to be helpful. All I really got out of therapy was a title; I was diagnosed with extreme PTSD, agoraphobia and manic depressive disorder. I just could never move beyond that day.

Whenever I had triggers I would resort to self-harm. I had been cutting myself and using bleach afterwards just so that I could feel physical pain. I knew that if I felt physical pain I wouldn't have to feel the emotional pain.

I was a mess. I was so fragile. I had turned from a confident positive woman who was a counsellor in a detox centre and in a residential treatment facility, to a broken down victim who locked herself in her basement not wanting to go anywhere or interact with anyone. I had traded my career that I had worked so hard to achieve for a retired life on permanent WCB.

I once helped to counsel victims of sexual assault who became addicted, most of whom were dependant on drugs or alcohol to help them through the toughest times. I knew from working in the field, how easily this could happen to one suffering extreme trauma. I was offered so many types of medication by my doctor, but I couldn't allow myself to go down that road and now I found myself struggling with suicidal ideation to live through the night.

It wasn't until I was sent a pamphlet about Threads of Life and the family forum that my life had hope. I wasn't going to attend at first but my WCB worker asked me, what did I have to lose? Maybe I had a lot to gain.

The first year I attended a Threads of Life family forum I was so scared I had no expectations of finding hope but what I found was amazing people who greeted me, protected me and became my new family. I could never have imagined the impact it would have on my life. I went there broken and wrapped so

tightly inside my cocoon made of glass. I was so guarded, not wanting anyone to get close.

After that weekend, it seemed like my cocoon started to open and some of the pieces of glass slowly started to break away. It was like I had found some underground hidden world that no one knows about until you need them.

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I've been connected with Threads of Life now for four years and they will forever be my extended family. I found that breaking through the stigma of my addiction and actually speaking to others about my pain was what helped me to heal. I no longer have the need to self-harm. I know now that I can speak to others about my emotions. I have realized that I can spread open my wings; there was no more glass cocoon holding them back any more.

I feel like I have a new life. I create goals and I have dreams that come true. I am no longer a victim.

Today, I am a survivor. May God be with us as we try to live our lives purposefully, and in His strength.

Grief

Grief

One word.

Used to describe so many emotions.

Hollowness, pain, anger, guilt,

Hurting, sadness, lonely,

Do I need to say more.

One word, Grief.

Don't say you have been there,

You may have lost someone, something,
but your grief is not the same as mine.

Grief, does not explain how I feel

-Claire Abbott



Tammy Lundgren-Costa... today

Where to look for help

The following information is from the Canadian Mental Health Association (www.cmha.ca)

A support team can help you on your way—no one should ever have to follow their journey entirely on their own. A team of carers and supports can guide you, provide help and assistance, celebrate your victories, and back you up when you need it.

Building your team

The first steps may be the toughest, but knowing where to look for help is a good start. Here are good places to begin building your team:

- Talk with supportive friends and family. Share your feelings with them and let them be part of your team.
- Talk to your family doctor. They are a great resource and can link you to other professionals, if needed.
- Connect with community mental health clinics or organizations like the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) for information, support, and services.
- Call a help line. Some organizations offer support online or through text messaging.
- Learn more about mental health. You can find useful books, website and other resources through your provincial or territorial government and community agencies.
- Connect with others who have personal experience with a mental illness and learn more about their recovery journey.
- Attend workshops and education sessions hosted at community centres, agencies, schools, colleges or universities.
- Talk with a member or leader you trust from your faith or cultural group.

Are you in crisis?

If you or someone you know is in crisis and needs immediate assistance, go to the nearest hospital or call 911.