

DEFINING SUCCESS

Advocates and other providers may need to rethink the way we define success when working with people who are survivors of multi-abuse trauma and who struggle with multiple issues.

Be aware that “success” may mean different things to different people. Courtois, Ford and Cloitre (2009) point out that all people do not heal the same way – what might seem like a partial success for one individual might meet another’s full capacity:

“Some people who have survived multiple traumas never progress beyond life stabilization and/or sobriety, and this is a sufficient and valuable attainment if it is meaningful for them, a genuine victory, and a profound change of life even if no further change is undertaken.”

For example, some people with disabilities may be employed but still need some degree of subsidized housing or public assistance to pay for medication, and may continue to need this assistance for the rest of their lives. Does this constitute success? What about a person with mental health issues who will require medication or even periodic counseling for a lifetime, but otherwise holds a job and lives independently? How about a person who, instead of leaving a domestic violence shelter to move into an apartment, checks into a long-term residential drug treatment program after recognizing problems with alcohol or drugs? How about a woman at a domestic violence shelter who decides to go back to her abuser until she finishes school and can get a better-paying job – only now, she has a safety plan and has enrolled in school and can see a way out of her situation? Or a person with substance use disorder who still smokes cigarettes but has managed to stop drinking alcohol or using illegal drugs? How about someone who chooses to move up the career ladder at a fast-food restaurant rather than enroll in college? Erin Patterson-Sexson at S.T.A.R. in Anchorage says:

“I’m not going to base it on whether she gets a job or keeps a job or goes to college. None of those things are as important to her as they are to other people. But I’m going to pay attention to the way she’s starting to perceive herself and her quality of life in this world” (Patterson-Sexson, 2010).

She adds that she is often more concerned with how the people she serves come to view themselves and their experiences:

“My goal is to firmly plant the seed that no matter what you’ve dealt with and overcome, you are worth it. You can feel happy. You can get to a place where you feel at peace with your experiences. I want to teach women that it’s okay to be pissed off and it’s okay to be angry and to feel betrayal and to not run and hide from those feelings. I want to teach women healthy options to cope. And if anything, I just want to teach them that they are teachable and they are capable and I don’t care what

A SURVIVOR OF MULTI-ABUSE TRAUMA SHARES HER SUCCESS STORY

I went to treatment at 26 years old because my addictions had put me in the hospital. I was the only woman who started my residential stint with ‘a happy marriage to a good provider.’ I had a lovely child, a home, a family that supported me and two vehicles that worked. I went into treatment with ‘a little problem with cocaine.’ Before I left treatment I was labeled as an alcoholic-drug addict with incest issues and had to go to 12-Step meetings, continuing care and a mental health provider several times a week. After going home I had another label, domestic violence victim (verbal and sexual abuse) and moved into the women’s shelter.

Within two months of getting help for my ‘small cocaine problem’ I was penniless, had no transportation, realized I sucked at parenting, had not been employable for several years, was full of terror and rage from the incest issues and living in a small room with my 3-year-old and my cat in a house full of women fresh out of their own trauma. I didn’t drink, I didn’t use and I didn’t cry myself to death. The shelter had a night advocate in recovery who lived at the shelter, and took me and the other ladies in early recovery to 12-Step meetings. They had parenting classes and incest survivor classes and support groups, and a program that helped me to see I was a worthwhile human being. They had made sure I could attend my aftercare groups and see my mental health therapist.

I stayed at the shelter for 6 months, and I know without a doubt if they were not there, or didn’t work with the other agencies and offer support that I needed, without labeling or judging me, I would not have made it. I stayed sober. I stayed sane. I eventually sponsored women in recovery, taught parenting classes, helped other incest survivors by starting a non-profit agency, became a victims’ advocate, child advocate, sexual assault advocate, and then became a substance abuse counselor and Native victims’ advocate. Today I have 21 years of sobriety, am about to complete my bachelors in social work and have reconnected with my Native heritage. I plan to obtain my Masters degree and then ... who knows ... I could be a Native recovering drug addict-alcoholic, incest survivor, domestic violence survivor with a Ph.D.

they’ve dealt with in their lives, they are not ruined. If I can help plant this smallest of seeds within them, then I’ve done my job” (Patterson-Sexson, 2010).

Cindy Obtinario at New Beginnings says it’s important to celebrate “baby steps” as well as big achievements:

“With someone who’s doing self-harm, it might be that they haven’t done that for the past month. I think our job as advocates and practitioners is to really support and

help them see that. You did something different. You picked up the phone. You called somebody. Celebrating those ways that they have succeeded is empowering. It's important for us to do that" (Obtinario, 2010).

"Success" means different things to different people. Several survivors shared with us what helped them feel successful, and when they began to feel that they were addressing their issues effectively.

For one survivor, the journey toward success began when she found a place and some people she trusted would really offer her the right kind of help: "I knew things were turning around when I began to feel hopeful. I wouldn't say that's the same as successful, but once I got the right service, I found the place where I felt accepted, where I felt encouraged, and it was going to be okay. And it's been a work in progress since then. I feel like I'm beginning to reach that point of mastery, where I can be successful in life, in relationships, in my being able to trust other people, being able to care for myself financially, all those kinds of things. I could not do those things 14 years ago."

For another, her sense of success began with her ability to open up: "I couldn't open up. I couldn't say anything. When I did, what a big difference! When you do open up, I can equate the resemblance to when you have a cut in your finger, you bleed and that's how the inside evolves – taking out all that garbage, all the hurt, all the memories of what I experienced in life. Then my heart turned into gold. The gold I'm talking about is compassion for others. I can feel others when they're hurting because of the heart of gold I have in me."

One survivor said education helped her feel successful: "I was able to leave that relationship after 10 years, and then I went to where my father lived. I stayed with him until I got divorced. Then I started to go to school. I worked full time, went to school full time and I was still on welfare. But I did that for several years and got a degree. But it all started, I think, with the education and just learning. I've been able to get to a point where I feel good about myself. I feel good about what I'm doing. It's not just me, but my children and even my mother and my grandmother. It's like this whole thing has been able to open up, even with the elders, which is really neat to see. My healing is still ongoing."

And another survivor began to recognize her own strength: "After a while, I came to appreciate what I did to survive. Then I had a renewed sense of confidence. Not only did I survive all this, but I went to college, I went to law school. I totally live a really good and full life. The violence I've suffered in my life is not all of who I am. It's a part of my life. I took back a lot of it. I can have dogs, which is a really big deal. I can live on a farm. I can go camping in the woods. I can do all sorts of things that I never, ever imagined I'd be able to do."

As partners in a survivor's journey to safety, sobriety and wellness, we need to celebrate all victories, including the baby steps, whether or not they meet the larger society's definition of success. And we may need to work harder to get this message across to funders and the public.

References

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