

## **Forms of Secondary Wounding and Overcoming Secondary Wounding Exercises Help for Rape & Sexual Abuse Victims & Survivors**

*(Adapted from I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for trauma survivors, Aphrodite Matsakis  
Ph.D, New Harbinger Publications Inc., California, 1992)*

### **1. Identifying Secondary Wounding Responses**

\*Denial and disbelief: Statements such as "You're exaggerating", "That could never happen" or simply "I don't believe it". People who respond to you in this way are denying the reality of your trauma

\*Discounting: In denial, people do not believe your story. When you are being discounted, people do not deny that the traumatic event occurred. However, they minimize its effect on you or the magnitude of the event. An example might be, something like "yeah, but what you're talking about wasn't nearly as bad as the girl down the road. You should be thankful". Or the author cites an example of a woman having trouble responding sexually, and her partner says, "How could one little rape have affected you that much? I know some women who have been raped three or four times, but they still like sex" It might also include the friend who ridicules you for being afraid to go into pubs.

\*Blaming the victim: When you hear things like "but what were you wearing? You must have provoked it"

\*Ignorance: Ignorance of trauma and its effects plays a major role in secondary wounding experiences. People are also often ignorant about possible economic, social and psychological consequences of trauma. An example of this might be the person who believes that rape by somebody you've had sex with before is not rape at all, or who interprets your PTSD symptoms as "craziness" or "self-pity", insisting that you should just think more positively and get over it.

\*Generalization: One of the social consequences of being victimized is being labeled a

victim. Once you are labeled, there is a tendency for others to interpret most, if not all of your emotions and behaviour in light of that label. Examples of this might include not being given a promotion in your place of work because the boss is aware of your PTSD history; even though you could more than adequately fill the requirements, it's assumed that you will be too unstable. You might also hear comments about, "Oh, you know she tends to be a bit neurotic about things after what happened", etc.

\*Cruelty: Most secondary wounding experiences feel cruel. Therefore it is often difficult to assess whether the secondary wounding arises from a desire to cause pain, or whether it is caused by ignorance, generalization or some other secondary wounding process. In many cases, a mixture of cruelty and some other process is at work as some of the preceding examples illustrate. Sometimes the fact of your PTSD may be used by people you know. In the absence of trauma, they would have found something else to use as a weapon against you.

An example might include somebody who brings the fact of your rape up in front of others because they want to embarrass or humiliate you in some way. What has happened to another board member, being harassed and ridiculed on another site, is an example of secondary wounding by deliberate cruelty along with ignorance.<p>

There are other forms of secondary wounding such as when somebody insists on you telling him or her every little detail because they are getting a thrill from your trauma. It is also partners who might start to engage in rough sex-play once they find out you were sexually assaulted. This could be coupled with ignorance; "Oh, she must like the rough-stuff" etc. (I think some survivor's experiences of legal process have are a good example of secondary wounding which can entail several of the above categories).

Secondary wounding may also include betrayal of confidence. An example of this is the teen survivor who finds out her friends are gossiping about her assault, or the church pastor who confronts a perpetrator of partner abuse thereby endangering the victim.

It may also include people who "make it all about them." Your family or friends may naturally be upset about your assault(s), but they shouldn't make you responsible for their feelings or expect you to comfort them. People who "make it all about them" may engage in

"one-upmanship" such as "Oh but wait until you hear what happened to me." Your assaults and your healing are about you.

### ***Identifying Your Secondary Wounding Experiences***

You need a journal for this. In it, list as many secondary wounding experiences as you can remember, including any current ones, one experience to a page. You will need to leave space for analysing and commenting on each experience.

When you have finished, review your list and categorise each experience as denial or disbelief, discounting, generalization, victimizing, ignorance or cruelty etc. Include as many labels as apply, for example a single experience can contain elements of many of these categories. After you have completed the labeling for each experience, identify your emotional response. Did you have no feeling at all? Did you experience irritation, anger, hurt, disappointment, disgust, desire to retaliate or any other feeling? List as many feelings as apply.

Now take some time to reflect on the process you have just been through. Were you surprised at how many secondary wounding experiences you have endured? Did the labelling process help to ease the pain, or did it make you more furious and sad?

Did any of the secondary wounding experiences ignite your anger, lower your self-esteem, or make you feel hopeless or helpless? In your journal, write more about these particular experiences. Once these feelings are faced, their intensity may be lessened. You will likely never feel neutral in the midst of a secondary wounding experience or when you are remembering one. If you can feel your feelings, you are going to feel angry, sad, powerless, betrayed and a host of other emotions. But that does not mean that you are hopelessly bound to the past and will never feel joy again.

### **2. Secondary Wounding-Your Attitudes Today**

In your journal, do some writing on how your secondary wounding experiences are still affecting your life. More specifically, for each experience, consider whether or not that experience had the following affects:

1. Did it alter your views of your social, vocational and other abilities?
2. Did it change your attitudes towards certain types or groups of people and/or certain government or social institutions?
3. Were your religious or spiritual views affected?
4. Did it affect your family life, friendships, or other close relationships?
5. Did it alter your ability to participate in groups or belong to associations or your attitudes towards the general public?
6. Now look at what you've written and ask yourself "which of these attitudes do I wish to retain? Which of them are in my best interest to reconsider? Which ones would I like to discard because they hamper my life in the present?"

### ***Secondary Wounding and your activities***

Suppose that one of your worst secondary wounding experiences was being treated like the criminal, rather than the victim in court. Now someone owes you several thousand dollars and in order to get it you need to take that person to court.

If you hadn't had the experience that you had in court, you would probably have already begun the paperwork for the lawsuit. However, because of your hatred of courts and fear of being once again denied justice, you procrastinate about pursuing the litigation. At this point, what do you think is in your best interest – avoiding the courtroom with all its secondary wounding memories and the risk of repeated victimization, or pursuing the thousands of dollars you are due? The decision is yours. It may be that if you receive some healing assistance for your secondary wounding experiences, you will be able to tolerate being in court.

Counselling can assist you in differentiating you past experience with the present situation.

And with support, you might be able to manage any PTSD symptoms that emerge as a result of placing yourself back in that setting.

On the other hand, you might decide that you simply can't handle it. You'd rather do without the money than subject yourself to another courtroom experience. This is not cowardice. Rather, it is a respectable, life preserving decision. At all times, it is very important for you to know and respect your limits, and not be pushed into activities that are emotionally overwhelming or otherwise destructive for you. Your emotional health comes first, not some inner voice that says you "should" be able to handle anything. This is the same voice that has probably been telling you "you should have been able to go through the trauma and everything that's happened since without it getting to you. You just aren't strong enough". This "should" has no basis in emotional reality. But even after you let go of this unrealistic expectation of yourself, others may still believe in it. They may encourage you to do things you know are not in your best interest, or denigrate you for letting your "fears and neuroses" or "skeletons from the past" control your life. Close your ears to these voices and listen to your own inner voice – the one that knows what you've been through and what you can tolerate. With that caution in mind, list the activities that your secondary wounding has taught you to curtail or avoid in your journal. Then for each of them do the following:

1. Ask yourself whether at this particular time in your view (not someone else's) you can tolerate the activity. What will be the emotional cost? Is it worth it? Once again the main point is to realize you do have a choice. During the original trauma and the subsequent secondary wounding experiences, you had either no choices or very few, or all the options available were so aversive they were not really choices.

2. For each of the activities you have decided you currently cannot tolerate, or do not feel it's in your best interest to attempt, consider whether counselling or some other form of assistance might make them more tolerable. Do you want to make the attempt? If you don't feel you can or want to, you may wish to in the future when you are further along in your healing process.

