

Falling Into a Crevasse Within the Crack: My Experience of IPSV

Imagine walking across an ice field and slipping into a crack. As you slip deeper into the crack you find yourself falling into a deep crevasse. There is nothing to stop you falling and no help to be found. That is how I have felt.

Intimate Partner Sexual Violence (IPSV) is the subject of an ever growing body of research. From the seminal studies by Russell, Bergen and Finkelhor and Yllo in the late 1980s and the 1990s there has grown a wide range of articles on IPSV; the victims, the perpetrators and the effects. Most of these articles deal with IPSV within a battering relationship. Where does that leave those of us who faced no physical violence outside of the bedroom? This article will discuss my experience of being a survivor of IPSV where there was no physical battery.

“Real” Rape:

It has been a long battle to have IPSV, also known as partner, marital and wife rape, accepted as “real” rape. While it is now a criminal offence in many countries it is still a crime that receives little public attention or validation through the legal system. In many states in America, wife rape laws still have exemption clauses, often giving a man who rapes his intimate partner a get out of jail free card. Other barriers to the prosecution of IPSV include shorter reporting time limits and more stringent evidentiary requirements. It is no wonder that IPSV is the least reported and prosecuted type of rape.

Academics and activists have worked hard to change the public perception of what constitutes “real” rape and who “real” rape victims and perpetrators are. Studies have shown that a rapist is likely to be known to their victim, with only 26% of reported rapes in the USA committed by strangers (USA Dept of Justice cited in Wikipedia). Of the remaining 74%, 38% were committed by a date or acquaintance, 26% by a current or past intimate partner and 7% by another family member. These figures make it clear that the popular media image of a wild-eyed stranger as a typical rapist is wrong in the majority of cases. Yet it is this enduring stereotype that many people think of when they think about who a rapist is. It also neglects the very small percentage of female rapists. People don’t want to think that a rapist could be the person they are married to, who their child is dating, a person they work with or a favoured relative.

Wife Rape:

Diana Russell's 1985 study found that 14% of women who have ever been married had been raped by their husbands (Weingourt, 1985). This figure does not include those women who submitted to sex out of "wifely duty" or helplessness, people in a de facto or dating relationship or teenagers. Nor does it include those who, for whatever reason, cannot acknowledge or identify inappropriate sexual behaviour by a husband (Russell, cited in Weingourt, 1985) so it is reasonable to expect that the figure of 14% does not accurately reflect the true scope of the problem.

Other studies have shown that 33 – 59% of women in domestic violence shelters reported both sexual and nonsexual violence in their relationships (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Monson, 1998). This shows that sexual victimisation co-occurs frequently with physical battery and other forms of intimate partner violence. With such a high figure it is surprising that few services are equipped to deal with the specific issues of IPSV. Many domestic violence workers consider it to be just another part of domestic violence or they call it a sexual abuse/rape issue. Sexual assault workers tend to do the opposite, naming IPSV as a domestic violence issue. All too often this either/or attitude results in a failure to address the specific issues that result from sexual assault within an intimate relationship.

The Crack:

With so few specific services available to IPSV survivors it is not surprising that many feel as if they have fallen through a gap in the system. This is something I feel acutely. I am still trying to find a "place" within the system where I feel I belong. The domestic violence groups I have attended have mentioned sexual abuse only in passing, without acknowledging the particular issues related to IPSV. The local sexual assault service I was referred to refused to accept me as a client as I was still in the relationship and being subjected to abuse. I was fortunate to be able to access sexual assault counselling from another service, by telephone and then be referred to a psychologist who is experienced in the area of trauma related issues. But I still find myself looking for that "place" to belong as I negotiate my healing journey, for a label that covers what I went through.

The Crevasse:

The enduring stereotype of domestic violence is that it always involves physical battery. Without that some people have difficulty identifying what domestic violence is, including many victims. "Real" domestic violence may also include other types of abuse, such as sexual, financial and emotional abuse, but without battery many people cannot name it as domestic violence. So what happens to those of us who were primarily sexually abused or had a complete absence of physical battery? Personally, I still struggle to call what happened to me as domestic violence because he never hit me.

Some studies have shown that 1 – 10% of women in non-battering relationships report incidents of IPSV (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Monson, 1998). This shows that I am not alone in my experiences, and probably not in my hesitation to name it as domestic violence. From personal experience it still feels like I am. Without the bruises that are sometimes evidence of battery it is not easy to identify as a victim of domestic violence. Even now, four months after ending my marriage I find myself minimising what happened. "He never hit me" is a phrase I frequently use when talking about the abuse, as if, somehow, that makes it better. Just as frequently I used to wish that he would hit me. Perhaps then I would feel more accepting of the domestic violence survivor label. That is not to say that the sexual abuse occurred in a vacuum. There was mental and emotional abuse as well as social isolation. But he never hit me.

Needing a Label:

Being a rather logical, obsessive type of person I like to have things identified properly, a trait I share with many a bureaucracy (Try getting help for a special needs child without a label!). Yet for most of my marriage I had no label, no name, for what was happening. During that time I honestly thought that the problem was with me and that was why I was unhappy and full of self-loathing. It wasn't until just over a year before I ended my marriage that I was able to identify the emotional and mental abuse by my husband. Even that only happened because I was finally able to disclose some of what was happening in my marriage to friends. But I couldn't bring myself to disclose the concerns I had about sexual things that happened. I tried any number of times to disclose to a friend. I had even planned how I would start the conversation.... "Sometimes he does things in bed that I don't like or that

hurt.” But I just couldn’t get the words out. It never occurred to me that those things he did could be considered sexual abuse or rape.

The Book That Turned My World Upside Down:

Have you ever been in a bookshop or library and just wandered around, not really looking for anything in particular, only to have a book you *need* to read practically jump out and bite you on the nose? That is what happened to me. If I hadn’t found this book I doubt that I would be alive today. Even if I was I almost certainly would not be writing this. The book? *Real Rape, Real Pain: Help for Women Sexually Assaulted By Male Partners* by Patricia Easteal and Louise McOrmond-Plummer (Easteal & McOrmond-Plummer, 2006).

I could rave for hours about what I got from this book but shall restrain myself. The four most important things I did get were a name for what was happening to me, the knowledge that I wasn’t alone, a feeling of hope that it was not only possible to survive this but to heal from it and the information I needed to find support from others. Of course I gained a lot more than just those four things but they are the big ones. This book became my bible and I would borrow it from the library and sneak it into my study on a regular basis. Sometimes I would just hold the book to draw strength from the voices inside, the voices who had been brave and strong enough to break the silence.

Commonality, Community and Support:

From *Real Rape, Real Pain* I found my way to the website Aphrodite Wounded, developed and maintained by Louise McOrmond-Plummer. This website contains a wealth of information about IPSV. It also has a link to Pandora’s Project; a website for survivors of sexual assault and rape, and the associated message boards at Pandora’s Aquarium (aka Pandy’s), developed, maintained and moderated by Shannon and her team of wonderful administrators and moderators.

The community of members at Pandy’s have become a great source of support and friendship. It is a place where people can share the worst details of their assaults and how it affects their lives, as well as discuss a wide range of other topics. There I have been able to tell the most disgusting details of my abuse, my sense of shame and self-loathing, as well as share my triumphs and victories, receiving support that I will always be grateful for. As well

as finding support and commonality I have also been able to give it back to others, in the hope that it helps them just a little.

It was in many ways the support I received on Pandy's that encourage me to break my silence in real life. Slowly I started to reach out to my friends, building a network of support. I approached the local domestic violence service. The staff there have provided a lot of support and through them I was able to access the psychologist I see, who has been an amazing source of information and support. All of this occurred while I was still in the marriage, still being regularly abused by my husband. It was so very hard to maintain a semblance of normality at home while I was sharing the darkest days of my life with friends and professionals.

The Abuse, The Kids, The End:

The abuse I suffered at the hands of my husband was disgusting, demeaning and humiliating. I believe the trauma I went through will affect me in some way for the rest of my life. There are things that happened that I will probably never speak about. While, mostly, I am able to place the blame for the abuse where it belongs, with my husband, there are still many days when I question if there was anything I could have done to make it stop and keep the marriage alive, but of course there was nothing. Other days I cried to have my ignorance back. Being miserable was hard but knowing why I was miserable and feeling that there was nothing I could do to change things was harder.

My biggest fear in ending my marriage revolved around our children. While I was not completely blind to the effect my husband's abuse of me was having on them I truly believed that they were better off with an emotionally absent but physically present father than a part-time dad. But I was watching my daughter begin to be treated like I was, without the sexual abuse. She did not deserve to grow up believing that as a female her role was to be a slave to the males in her life. And I watched my son withdraw into his bedroom and the obsessions that are a manifestation of his autism. The truth was that my kids were hurting.

When the end came it was a bit on an anti-climax. He left with no protest, threats or declarations of undying love. The improvement in the kids was immediate. It was as if a weight had been lifted off them. My son was suddenly more stable and settled in school,

which was a huge improvement. The best thing is that through visitation the kids and their father have to spend time together and are beginning to build a real relationship.

For me the end of the marriage has meant the beginning of a whole new set of problems, with little relief from the old ones. Fear, anxiety and depression are still regular visitors. The only thing that has completely gone is the sexual abuse, although the mental and emotional abuse have decreased. I lean heavily on my support system, something I feel guilty about a lot. And every day I get out of bed. For my kids I function, at times only just. I have to believe that it will get better and remember that healing will take time.

The Future:

Now it is time for me to start giving back. I remember how alone I felt when I couldn't name what was happening. If others hadn't broken the silence I would still feel like that. I hope that I will be able to help others break the silence and begin to reach out for support. I also want to help increase public awareness about IPSV, especially about the fact that it can occur without battery. It has been done with rape, domestic violence and child abuse, now it is IPSV's turn.

I want to help fill the gap and stop other women feeling like they have fallen into a bottomless crevasse.

References:

Easteal, P., & McOrmond-Plummer, L. (2006). *Real Rape Real Pain: Help for women sexually assaulted by male partners*. Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers.

Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J., & Monson, C. M. (1998). Marital Rape: Is the Crime Taken Seriously Without Co-occurring Physical Abuse? *Journal of Family Violence* , 433-443.

McOrmond-Plummer, L. (n.d.). *Aphrodite Wounded*. Retrieved from Aphrodite Wounded: www.aphroditewounded.org

Shannon. (n.d.). *Pandora's Project*. Retrieved from Pandora's Project: www.pandorasproject.org

Weingourt, R. (1985). Wife Rape: Barriers to Identification and Treatment. *American Journal of Psychotherapy* , 187-192.