



The Children's Assessment Center

INVISIBLE CLIENTS

By Diane Vines, MA, LPC, LMFT

She almost seems to be in a trance as she nods her head in recognition. I'm empathically describing what it's like to be violated and no one seems to notice. "No one sees that you're different now because of the abuse, that something is bothering you," I say. I continue, "They go on with their lives like nothing is happening. You begin to wonder if there isn't something wrong with what you're feeling, like you're overreacting. You start to feel *invisible*." The nodding continues and sometimes becomes more vigorous.

This scenario has taken place in my office so often that it surprises me at times. The first few times I shared this view of invisibility with clients, I was guessing in a way. Now, I say it with confidence because I've never had a client tell me that they don't feel invisible. Frequently, they thank me for understanding.

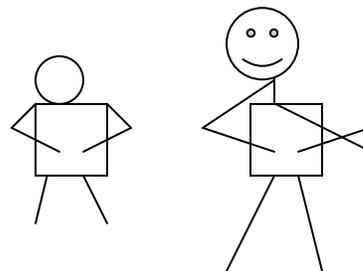
You may be wondering what I'm talking about when I say that a client feels invisible. Imagine that you are in a crowd. Suddenly, someone rushes up to you, begins yelling and screaming at you, and then hits you. Hard. You feel confused and scared. You fall down and cry out for help, maybe quietly at first, but your cries get louder because no one is responding and the beating continues. Your cries get even louder as you begin to grasp at people's ankles and feet. Maybe you kick someone nearby. And still no one responds. Why not? You are taking a merciless beating right in front of them! Can't they see what's going on? Can't they hear you screaming? Don't they feel you grabbing their clothing, scratching their legs as they step over you and your assailant? Some of the people look right at you, but their facial expressions don't reflect that they see you beaten and bloody and fighting for your life. They seem to be looking through you. Sometimes there is some irritation that you and the assailant are in the way, but not usually. There should be shock or outrage or even fear. Instead, there is nothing. Doesn't anyone care? You wonder, "What do I have to do to get someone to help me? Am I *invisible*?"

This feeling of being invisible is something that my sexually abused clients seem to have experienced all too often. I've seen it in mothers who were sexually abused as children who wind up in the system because their child is now a victim too. They come to see me because, when the mother learns about sexual abuse through psycho-education, she is in a better position to help her child to heal. The problem is, more often than not, they have their own childhood sexual abuse history, and they haven't dealt with it yet. Oh, they almost always say that they have, but when it happened to them, they were invisible too. They "dealt with it" by coming up with their own (wrong) explanation of why it happened to them and then they have attempted

(unsuccessfully) to forget about it. They had to “deal with it” on their own, because no one responded appropriately or effectively to their symptomatic behavior. As a result, they began to believe that what they feel and what they experience is not important to anyone else, which makes it unimportant altogether. In their eyes, it also makes *them* unimportant, and by extension, what they *do* is unimportant. No one is meeting their emotional needs, either at all, or to the degree to which they need to be met, so they must do what they can to get those needs met on their own. And still no one really notices. They learn to “fly below the radar”. They do things that most of us find offensive or unsavory. They tell lies of omission or they lie outright. They appear selfish. They expect their children to meet their emotional needs rather than striving to meet their children’s emotional needs. They seem to expect everyone to excuse everything thing that they do. I actually think that they believe that no one will notice what they’re doing, because up until now, it seems like no on has. They “hit the wall”, so to speak, when their children are sexually abused and they end up “in the system” with all of their invisible “baggage” which is loaded down with these inappropriate behaviors for getting needs met.

I almost hate to use the term “inappropriate behaviors”, because what they really have are ways of coping with a lifetime of other people’s inappropriate or ineffective responses to their traumas and their feeling and needs. Very often during the time of their trauma, their ways of coping are effective and, given the context, appropriate. However, once the trauma is over, more effective ways need to be sought and incorporated into daily living. Unfortunately for my clients, that hasn’t happened, because when you think about it, when is the trauma “over”? Is it when the touching stops? Is it when the perpetrator goes to jail? How about when he gets out? Or when he apologizes? Or when mom apologizes for not protecting you? Or when you finally move away from home? Or is it when you get to come back home?

I don’t think that the trauma is every really “over” for any victim. With therapy, it gets to be manageable. My supervisor, Julia Wolf, uses a wonderful visual tool that explains it. The bottom line is that the trauma remains the trauma, but with therapy, the victims grows bigger, stronger, and armed with information that make the victim better able to carry that trauma, sometimes seemingly effortlessly.



Unfortunately, without therapy, the victim spends considerable energy, that should be used in the ordinary growth process, to rationalize the abuse and even more energy trying to avoid (unsuccessfully) thinking about it. She or he remains stuck and “small”, which means that, comparatively, the burden of the abuse remains big and hard-to-manage. Sometimes the victim “puts the box down” so she can rest, but because it is tethered to her, it must move with

her. Moment by moment, she must pick it up again, and it is at least as big as it has ever been. And she is as small as she has ever been.

So, a therapeutic goal that I create for my sexually abused clients, both children and adult survivors, is to make the invisible visible. Together we examine the details and search for meaning. What does it mean to oneself, others, and the offender that one is a sexual abuse victim? What does it mean when people respond inappropriately? We validate their original emotions and we normalize their current experiences based on their past. We search for the client's intrinsic value and why their experiences really do matter. We work to restore their self-esteem. We work to make them visible.