

Creative Art Activities: Life Beyond Experiences in Commercial Sex

By: Shay Valentine, Doctoral Candidate,

William James College

Human trafficking is a profound violation of human rights that has become a significant and growing global endemic and one of the world's most shameful crimes. Though the impact of human trafficking varies according to individual circumstances, victims and survivors are particularly susceptible to adverse experiences such as extraordinary physical, sexual, and psychological violence which puts them at acute risk for acquiring devastating physical and psychological health conditions and social disadvantages (Deshpande NA, 2013; McQuaid, J., 2020).

The average age a child falls victim to commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) is between 12 and 14 years old (Adams, Owens, and Small 2010; Greenbaum 2014). The impact of childhood trauma can last well beyond childhood and persist into adulthood because it interferes with normal developmental processes (Dye, 2018; Rouse et al., 2022). Victims of sex trafficking are at substantial risk of contracting human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/ AIDS infections and other sexually transmitted diseases (Wirth, 2013; Deshpande NA, 2013; McQuaid, J., 2020). Due to the violent nature of the crime victims often suffer from physical injuries such as broken bones, head trauma, dental problems, gynecological issues, and malnutrition. Common psychological issues include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, eating disorders, acute anxiety, depression, and self-harm (Deshpande NA, 2013; McQuaid, J., 2020). The social effects of trafficking suggest victims are vulnerable to social ostracism and have a greater prevalence of illiteracy, homelessness, isolation, and poverty (Deshpande NA, 2013). Many times, coercive control can escalate into physical abuse. However, countless victims of trafficking are initially coerced through covert forms of control without physical abuse leading them to be defined as "consenting" or "voluntary". These victims are then revictimized and subject to criminal charges and deportation (Raghavan et. al. 2015).

Evidence shows trauma experiences are both psychological and physiological. During trauma, the body receives sensory information through the five senses (sight, smell, touch, taste,

and/or sound) and stores those memories implicitly in “sensory memory” making the experiences hard to access verbally. Sensory integration and responses to sensory experiences are drastically altered in the aftermath of trauma. Creative art-based therapies purposefully use art practices, such as visual arts, dance/movement, music, drama, and poetry as a means of intervention by providing an alternative medium for expression within the therapeutic relationship (Malchiodi, 2015; Rouse et al., 2022; Morison et. al., 2021). Immersive experiences such as art-based activities allow for tactile, kinesthetic, and sensory experiences that engage clients through the act of doing and interacting using art rather than purely cognitive functioning which is commonly seen in psychotherapy. Art therapy gives survivors the creative freedom to process emotional experiences through images, symbols, color, and movement. This allows for the externalization of traumatic memories while giving the client a sense of containment and control. Through this process of projecting onto art materials, survivors can begin discharging energy and internal emotions offering a cathartic and visceral release. Art therapy also helps survivors heal by exploring memories and emotions associated with certain sensations to recognize somatic responses (Duncan, 2019; Morison et. al., 2021).

While the therapeutic impact of creative arts itself is evidenced throughout literature, it is important to also recognize the significance of the relational context of working with a licensed therapist. The working relationship itself can become a vital means of helping to re-establish a healthy attachment relationship (Rouse et al., 2022). Service providers reported that all trafficking victims need some type of mental health counseling (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). Whilst healthcare access in general in the U.S. is a public health issue, the lack of access to mental health services is especially difficult. As a result, many people go without any treatment. Barriers to accessing mental health services include high cost, insufficient insurance coverage, limited options, scarcity of services, long waits, and lingering social stigmas (Coombs et. al., 2021; National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], 2017). To this day there is still confusion regarding who is a victim of human trafficking. The majority of trafficking victims do not self-identify as victims and they go further unidentified because others do not view victims as victims (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). Harmful stereotypes about what a victim looks like, how a victim should act, and how a victim should process their experience as exploitation and seek help influences service

providers and law enforcement. These assumptions play into who is branded as a consenting prostitute, not worthy of protection and services, and who is regarded as a victim and given access to care. Reinforcing the idea that the victim is to blame for their exploitation.

For those unable to access therapy, who choose not to, or who have complete therapy, creative expression can offer an alternative or continuation of therapeutic resources for healing. Creative expression allows for self-exploration, and personal development, and contributes to reducing stress, anxiety, mood disturbances, and depression which in turn increases general well-being by alleviating the factors contributing to negative health outcomes and chronic disease (Rouse et al., 2022; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Uniquely designed specifically for survivors of trafficking, Crossing Point Arts is a non-profit that employs teaching artists to bring expressive arts workshops into anti-trafficking agencies. These expressive arts workshops aim to provide a safe space for those with commercial sexual experiences to experiment with music, dance, visual arts, poetry, and drama. Making creative arts accessible to all, trauma-informed teaching artists encourage participation and self-expression while simultaneously building connection through relationships and a sense of community. Trauma destroys the social bonds between an individual and a community through isolation, stigmatization, and shame. The solidarity of a group has the power to not only protect an individual but to re-create a sense of belonging, worth, and identity and ultimately restore one's humanity (Herman, 2015).

Alternative means of expression reduce some of the internal and external barriers people with experiences in commercial sex face. Talking about these experiences can be too exposing. Expression through an art form takes away the pressure to name and communicate experiences and offers another possibility to discharge emotions and communicate affect (Rouse et al., 2022). Emotional release through creative expression is natural and expected. The art-based activity itself does the healing and release work. Often trauma can lead to a fragmented self. Expression through a creative medium can facilitate a safe reconnection and integration of emotions and memories. While the response from other group members being shown the artwork could generate new perspectives and reflections (Rouse et al., 2022). Teaching artists and the group play an invaluable role in bearing witness to the art-making process. Participants take solace in the art-making process but also in being present with others who have experienced similar

experiences. Survivor groups play a special role in recovery beginning with the discovery that one is not alone (Herman, 2015). The saying, “there is strength in numbers,” highlights how groups not only in a physical sense have strength in relation to an antagonist but also showcase how having others on our side reduces insecurity, anxiety, and a sense of powerlessness (Schein, 1980). The support and deep understanding survivors provide for each other cannot be replicated in ordinary social environments (Herman, 2015).

A trauma-informed approach to care offers a holistic view of health, the body, and traumatic experiences' impact. Trauma activates the stress response and if left unhealed the brain can remain in this constant state of stress endlessly searching for safety. This is why creating a safe space has become the key to expression, empowerment, and healing. Safe spaces offer a reprieve from stress and provide temporary relief from constant threat assessments. What if art was a conduit for creating a safe life-giving space? Engagement in art-based activities helps survivors regulate and manage strong emotions and preoccupying thoughts connected to abuse by providing a temporary distraction. “I can’t even describe the relief it was to go to dance class and just take a break from everything that I had no control over. To have something you have control over, something beautiful and something you can anticipate with joy” (*Jherico* in Moe, 2014, as cited in Rouse et al., 2022, p. 13).

Functioning as a refuge, art-based activities can enable individuals to reach a flow state, similar to mindfulness, where one becomes deeply absorbed in their creative pursuit with effortless momentum (Rouse et al., 2022). Flow is not only associated with full-task engagement but also low levels of self-referential thinking like worrying and self-reflection, as well as increased activity in the brain’s dopaminergic reward system. Experiencing flow plays a role in psychological well-being and is accompanied by a sense of accomplishment, autonomy, meaningfulness, and positive mood states (van der Linden et al., 2021). Through immersion in creative activity, survivors become grounded in the present moment and are able to experience the world in a new and meaningful way (Rouse et al., 2022).

This article provides evidence of the importance of creative art activities in the recovery and well-being of people with experiences in commercial sex. The literature reviewed documented the engagement and participation in the arts in a spectrum from clinical art therapy

to non-clinical art-based activities. Both interventions have been shown to promote mental health and wellbeing. Recovery is an individual experience, in which creative art activities offer a holistic, low-cost, non-medical intervention. The specific art medium and creative art activity and its helpfulness will vary according to the individual's history and needs and may change over different stages in the recovery process.

There is a call to action to make art-based activities more widely available in health and social settings. Taking into account the wider sociopolitical context, the barriers to accessing mental health services, and the impact of inequalities, there is a need to resource and support communities with art-based activities which provide a safe space for survivors to come together on an informal basis and connect with others (Rouse et al., 2022). Moving away from the isolating personal experience of human trafficking into a wider political arena of connecting with others who have similar experiences makes the once invisible crime visible with art as a conduit for creating a safe life-giving space.

Resources

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