

The Salt Lake Tribune

McEntee: Therapy helps male survivors of child sexual abuse

By Peg McEntee

The Salt Lake Tribune

Published: April 6, 2011 08:48PM

Updated: April 6, 2011 11:23PM

Even years after his father died, Dave would check every corner and closet in his home to make sure his dad wasn't there, or awaken in the night, paralyzed with fear, as he listened for footsteps.

But after three years in therapy and recently joining Jim Struve's group for male survivors of childhood sexual abuse, Dave doesn't have to do that anymore.

"Everything is so different now," he said.

For Struve, a psychotherapist who has worked with such boys and men for 35 years, the essence of his approach entails safety, mindfulness and mind-body awareness. He's also part of a team that uses a variety of healing work, including "shame-busting," which often turns into a lot of manly horseplay.

The techniques are part of a therapy that recovering men learn to embrace and practice, not in denial of what happened to them, but to spend the rest of their lives genuinely thriving.

Struve knows how they can disguise their damage. Some work out or play sports obsessively, others strive for professional heights.

It's about holding themselves together, staying in control at all times, to compensate for the utter powerlessness they felt as little boys.

In both private and group therapy, the first order of business is safety.

"You trusted somebody, and somebody violated your trust," Struve said. "It's important to teach the skills of being in charge of your safety."

As I met with the men, I could see what he meant: They spoke openly of their histories, their mental and physical states before getting into therapy, the lies they told themselves and the damage many did to themselves with drugs, alcohol and other self-destructive behavior.



Peg McEntee

The men allowed each other to be safe, too, a key element in group therapy.

“It’s the first time in my life that I’ve felt safe enough to discuss the horrors of what happened growing up, but also the realities of how it impacted my life,” Gerald said. “And that, honestly, has saved my life.”

Mindfulness, a Buddhist concept as well as a therapeutic one, is the willingness to be in the present moment. Our minds control all of our experiences, Struve says, “the stories we tell, the way we frame them. Pain is real, but it’s how you experience it that matters.”

That means helping his clients get to the point that they can clear their minds, see things as they really are, and at last understand that what happened all those years ago doesn’t have to control them now.

Most men, not just those abused as kids, are “kind of trained not to feel what you’re feeling” to avoid being seen as weak, Struve said.

“Mindfulness is slowing down, and feeling,” he said.

Another element of mindfulness is directed breathing. Struve and other therapists teach what’s called six-directions breathing — side to side, back and forth, up and down. It’s a way of teaching men to be comfortable being inside their bodies; some dissociate to the point they feel like they don’t exist.

“It creates a sense of boundaries, like roots and anchors, a sense of space all around you,” Struve said, which in turn creates safety to be who they are now.

Now, about that shame-busting horseplay. Struve and his colleagues regularly hold retreats in which, early on, the men can just have fun. Again, it’s about inhabiting their bodies, and giving themselves permission to play.

A man might have been bullied as a kid, for example, and still feel ashamed of himself for his perceived weakness. Another might have been lured into abuse through athletics; a coach would let him be on the team only if the kid had sex with him.

In shame-busting, Struve said, “some men say it’s the first time they’ve given themselves permission to play.”

Men like Dave, who during one retreat was “swinging around the room and just being free,” Struve said. “For a couple of hours, he didn’t have to be in his abuse.”

These techniques, of course, are only a part of Struve’s therapeutic arsenal. In some circumstances, short-term medication can be useful. And research around the country is increasingly supporting how abuse affects physiology.

“My goal is to keep men functioning on their own,” he said. “I don’t want people to become professional clients. Recovery is about having a life while you’re doing the work.”

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MaleSurvivor to host *Joining Hands in Healing* on April 20

MaleSurvivor (www.malesurvivor.org), a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping boys and men overcome sexual victimization, will hold its *Joining Hands in Healing*, an interactive dialogue with male survivors, their loved ones and audience members on April 20 from 6 to 9:30 p.m. at the Episcopal Church’s Wasatch Retreat & Conference Center, 75 S. 200 East, Salt Lake City. Co-hosts include the Salt Lake Rape Recover Center and the Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

Note to readers

Over time, Peg McEntee has met with male survivors of child sexual abuse who gather at the Salt Lake Rape Recovery Center for group therapy. Most of the men, and their psychotherapist Jim Struve, told their stories openly and often tearfully. Her first two columns appeared on Sunday and Tuesday and can be found at sltrib.com/mcentee. This is the third in a series that will continue through Sunday.

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