

Our Say: Women's Response to the False Memory Debate - An article for the ASCA newsletter

By Rebecca Braid

What a privileged journey I have taken in starting and finishing a research study called "Our Say: Women's Response to the False Memory Debate". The work began in 1995 as I worked as therapist with women who were recovering and surviving incest. These women were being rocked by the media attention concentrated on the False Memory Debate. My concern for the women's journey and the difficulty that this publicity was making for their recovery and their sense of peace birthed the research. I met with 18 women over the next 18 months in a qualitative research study. ASCA (thanks to Liz Mullinar for the initial encouraging contact with this work) helped me with contacts and I contacted women I knew in the therapy field to put me in touch with other women who may be interested in what I was doing. The women's honesty, depth of feeling and strength of decision to share their lives has been an experience I will never forget. The results of the research are at the University of NSW.

The results of the research showed that the way women know themselves and their experience is unique. Women's experience of their abuse survival is a powerful call to other survivors not to give up and not to believe others who would wish you to be silent. Women have a way of knowing that their abuse is filled with pain but also with survival and healing.

The research concluded with these summarised recommendations from the women.

Recommendations for Survivors.

1. Seek your personal truth of your experience.
2. Know the truth will not be someone else's truth and be ready for the difference.
3. Your truth will be moved and viewed by your own experience, your years and your personal history.
4. Your truth will be as individual as you are.
5. In sharing your truth you will be encouraged to meet other survivors and hear their story but their story will be different from your own.
6. Pain comes and goes; it may be intense and then impossible to find. It is felt in the body, in the emotions and in the way we exist in the world.
7. Therapists can be good and bad, so look for personal recommendations or use a checklist for 'therapist hunting' in self-help books such as *The Courage to Heal*.
8. Know that some therapists believe they can work with survivors without having to believe them, so ask the therapist you intend to work with what their personal view is.
9. Know that in sharing your survival or disclosure that societal systems will promote you feeling shame and in this way hope to silence you. Know also that you will be encouraged to know of others' experiences and not feel alone and isolated.
10. Know that other things in your life will continue to happen and that the women in the research of "Our Say" were women, mothers, sisters, lovers, artists, writers and many more things as well as survivors.
11. Know that women can understand the depth of your experience a little. This depth is not the depth of insanity or false memory but rather a way of surviving and managing life.

Recommendations to therapists:

1. Women do not make up therapeutic difficulties which turns "their whole being inside out".
2. Survivors are very fragile and can be made into victims again by therapists.
3. The therapists belief of the incest is paramount and survivors want a therapist who will journey with them and discover them rather than investigate the fact or fiction issue.
4. "Denial is a pleasant place" that survivors use for rest on their journey and then they progress on to recall and heal.
5. Blocked memory - rather than False Memory - is more descriptive of survivor's experience and the block can be useful in protecting the survivor.
6. Disclosure is a difficult decision and therapists need to understand the need to disclose and the shame that goes hand in hand with telling your experience.

Recommendations for Policy Makers:

1. Don't believe that it is all false because people go back, retrieve, work through and are healed.
2. Validity for proof is in the changed and healed lives of the survivors.
2. Remember the survivor's pain and hard journey while they tell about their experience.
4. Teach the professional about the symptoms of incest and abuse and have this taught in universities and courses.
5. "You (ie. the policy makers) should ask women what do they want...they have to find out what the women need."

From the author: *I will never quite know how to thank the women who were involved in this work...I hope that the results go on to encourage other women in their journey. I realise that men and their views were not included in this study and hope that as more men speak out their stories will also be told to the readers, hold on to your experience as we remember.*