

The Strength in Weakness

Counselors can help clients who have experienced childhood abuse remember that there's strength in choosing to survive.

By David Prucha, LPC



“THE STRONG do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

—Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

“Sometimes I can still feel the twine chafe against my wrist,” my client James (an amalgam of several clients) told me. He was recalling a time in his childhood when his grandfather would tie his hands to a low-hanging air conditioning duct in their unfinished basement. He spent 18 days in the basement. He had toast for breakfast, a spoonful of peanut butter for dinner and an orange Home Depot bucket for a toilet. His grandpa called it “a life lesson.”

Like many who've experienced childhood abuse, James was frustrated with himself. He didn't understand his response to his grandpa, or rather his lack of response. “I just accepted it,” he said. “I didn't even raise my voice.”

At the core of his problem, James told me that he didn't trust himself. This is what he hoped to resolve in therapy. He thought that if he had fought back or attempted to escape the basement, things would be different. He would know at least he was a fighter. But because he was abused without a struggle, he saw himself as weak and worried this meant he couldn't keep himself safe now as an adult.

Offering a New Perspective

Cognitive processing therapy is an evidence-based treatment that posits that five core areas are affected when people experience traumatic events (see Patricia Resick and colleagues' *Cognitive Processing Therapy for PTSD: A Comprehensive Therapist Manual*). One area relates to control: A client who felt powerless during a traumatic experience may conclude they no longer have power or control over other areas of their life. Drawing on this clinical approach, I decided to share a mythological story with James to help him reconceptualize his past trauma and sense of powerlessness.

When James finished sharing his frustration at doing nothing to stop his abuse, I asked him, “Do you like music?” James' emotion was welling over, and he rubbed circles around his temples with his middle fingers. “As much as the next person, I suppose,” he replied.

“This might seem like a redirection, but humor me for a moment, James,” I continued. “There's a story from Greek mythology about a music competition between Apollo and Marsyas. I'll spare you the details, but Apollo was the god of music and Marsyas was the god of absolutely nothing. Yet despite the power difference between them, it was the weaker Marsyas who challenged Apollo to the competition. Marsyas was testing the hierarchy.”

“How’d that go?” James asked.

“Not great for Marsyas,” I replied. “Apollo was simply the better musician, and so he won the competition. The underdog failed.”

“Well, that sounds about right, doesn’t it?” James said.

“That’s not the brutal part, James,” I added. “As punishment for being challenged, Apollo took Marsyas into a cave and flayed him alive to torture him. Then he pinned his skin to a tree.”

I told James that the wisdom within this harsh story pertained to the risks of challenging power: If you challenge a corrupt power structure and fail, you’ll be excessively punished by that power structure. I told him this seemed to be true in workplace dynamics, politics and even childhood abuse. Then I stopped talking.

James flashed an unexpected smile. “That’s a very disturbing story,” he said. “You can add that to the list of things you should never tell me again. I’m here to resolve trauma, not to acquire it,” he joked.

“That’s fair enough,” I said. “But if it’s OK, let me ask what might seem like strange questions about your grandpa: What was his approximate height and weight?”

“Maybe 5 feet, 10 inches tall and 170 pounds,” he said.

“And how about you, James? What was your height and weight as a child?”

He thought for a minute and replied, “I’m not sure about my height, but I was probably under 100 pounds.”

“I see,” I said. “And if you had tried to fight him or escape and you were unsuccessful, what do you think would have happened?”

James thought about it and said, “I probably would have lost, and then he probably would have increased the punishment.”

“Is it possible that you made some kind of intuitive calculation? Something like, ‘This suffering is too much, and I can’t handle any escalation. But if I accept this situation, I might reduce the chances of increased punishment,’” I asked.

“It might have been something like that. I know I was terrified of what might happen if I fought back,” James said.

“He was bigger, stronger and an adult, James. You were barely a teenager,” I said reassuringly. “The odds of overcoming him were vanishingly low. This wasn’t a movie. The power difference between you was dramatic. Could it be that you bravely carried your pain and wisely reduced the chances of making the situation worse like what happened with Marsyas?”

Reconceptualizing Powerlessness

It’s an uncomfortable truth, but sometimes accepting powerlessness is the surest path to survival. It can be a wise choice. At the beginning of the session, James believed that something could have been done to prevent his suffering and that he failed to exercise his options. This belief started to shift as James realized he had kept himself safe on a relative scale. He had assessed his options accurately and chosen the path of surest survival.

There are many clients who, like James, worry that their inaction in the face of abuse means they are weak or powerless. They too misunderstand their survival strategies in hindsight. Perhaps we counselors can remind them that in their moments of great suffering, they understood something Marsyas never did: When presented with overwhelming force, temporarily accepting your pain isn’t weakness but strength. ■

David Prucha, LPC, serves clients in Colorado and California. Over the past 12 years, he has spent time working with clients with a variety of emotional difficulties, teaching in graduate counselor settings and writing about his experiences as a therapist. Contact him at davidprucha@gmail.com.

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