



Healing sexual trauma

Guest: Holly Wood

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Hello, welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference. Today I'm speaking with Holly Wood, a marriage and family therapist, EMDR trained trauma specialist and clinical sexologist specializing in trauma, sex and intimacy concerns.

She's currently pursuing her PhD in Human Sexuality, focusing on sexual trauma and social justice. Thank you for joining me Holly.

Holly Wood

Thank you so much for having me, Meagen.

Meagen Gibson

So before we start talking, I just want to set the context that we're going to be talking about sexual trauma, sexual assault, things in that genre, and that if anybody needs to take their time, pause the video, take care of themselves, walk away, we know that this kind of stuff can be extremely activating. So take care of yourself and we're going to go through this and be as gentle as we can with it.

Holly Wood

Absolutely.

Meagen Gibson

So I would love to start, first and foremost, with setting the context for the fact that the reason we talk about this is to bring to light what all encompasses sexual trauma and also give people a lot of hope about the potential for growth and healing if they've experienced sexual trauma.

Holly Wood

Absolutely. Unfortunately sexual trauma, sexual violence itself is an epidemic that overwhelmingly impacts women. I want to set the tone for that too, that not only do women experience sexual violence, people across genders and social constructions do experience sexual violence, but it is an epidemic of grand proportion. So a lot of folks have experienced sexual violence. But I've also been lucky enough to witness a lot of folks heal from sexual violence. And I think it's important, too, that we

define those terms because I think there's a lot of terms that go along with sexual violence, sexual assault, sexual trauma. So that way we know exactly what we're talking about.

[00:02:07]

So the term sexual violence is like an umbrella term. It's an all encompassing term, a non-legal term that refers to things like sexual assault, rape, sexual abuse. This can include, and by sexual assault we mean sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim. So this can be a range of different things from being touched in a way that you did not consent for, whether it's just hands moving in places where you weren't okay with during a hug or in a business meeting.

Sexual violence also includes rape. And by rape I go off of the US Department of Justice definition, which is the unwanted penetration of a person through any orifice with another body part or object. And then also any other unwanted sexual touching or forcing the victim to perform sexual acts, such as oral sex, also falls within the lines of sexual violence.

And so by sexual trauma, we define that as any lingering physical, emotional or psychological symptoms resulting from a physical assault of sexual nature. So that can include any of those aforementioned concepts that fall under that umbrella of sexual violence.

Meagen Gibson

I'm just going to name it, it's hard to hear all of it, and I'm listening so intently, and I just noticed in my body I'm holding my breath. Because it is an epidemic, and I don't know many people who have either not been affected directly by it or don't know someone that they're in a relationship with that hasn't been affected by it. So it's important for us to understand and to really learn.

So what are the sexual impacts of sexual trauma on people?

Holly Wood

We know that there are psychological, physical impacts of sexual trauma. So it's very well known that sexual trauma can cause PTSD among a lot of other physiological, psychological impacts. But as far as sex there's a great deal of sexual side effects as well. So this can include avoiding or fearing or lack of interest in sex, approaching sex as an obligation or as a duty, experiencing negative effects like anger, disgust or guilt with any type of sexual touching, even if it's touching ourselves.

Having difficulty becoming aroused or feeling sensation, feeling emotionally distant. I hear a lot of times people say they just check out during sex. Experiencing intrusive or disturbing sexual thoughts and images. This could be flashbacks to prior assaults or other disturbing images. Engaging in compulsive or inappropriate sexual behavior. So sometimes people fall on the other side where they can see that their way to take power back is by engaging in sex compulsively, which can have other negative side effects.

And then other sexual side effects can include experiencing difficulty establishing or maintaining an intimate relationship, experiencing vaginal pain or orgasmic difficulties, especially women. And then for men or male body individuals, they can experience ejaculatory or orgasmic difficulties.

[00:05:38] Meagen Gibson

And something that occurred to me while you were speaking is that there's also insidious ways that you can be impacted by this. Like you might not fall under the definitions that we've already talked about, as far as how you've experienced your trauma, you could be of a group that is hyper sexualized. You could be in a culture or a neighborhood where your cat called, continuously harassed, followed, things like that, that all create the systemic pile up of a traumatization of your relationship to yourself as a sexual being. Is that true? I'm literally just spitballing as I'm talking to you, but I want to make sure to check in that that's something that's true.

Holly Wood

Absolutely. On top of experiencing a direct experience of sexual violence, and unfortunately women are disproportionately affected as those being more likely to get cat called or being groped at work or experiencing other systemic forms of sexual violence, which can really shape our ideas of who we are as a sexual being. And so people can be shaped to think that they have to hide their bodies for protection or fear of outside people trying to push their boundaries as a being or trying to push them to do things sexually. Or we might develop a sense of, this is who I'm supposed to be as a person in the world, I am an object to be gazed upon and to be cat called. So it definitely impacts our ideas as a sexual being and who we see ourselves as a sexual being.

Meagen Gibson

And as we start to talk about how you begin healing and a sexual healing journey, ideally what we want is for whatever the expression of ourselves and our embodied self in the world is what's true for us, not necessarily a reaction or a response to or a coping mechanism of having experienced sexual trauma.

Holly Wood

I think that's definitely part of it. I would say, though, that the very first step is knowing that that sexual healing process is not going to be linear. It's a gradual, ongoing, no one size fits all process, and it doesn't happen overnight. It's a hard, arduous task. And despite not being able to erase the memories, people can heal from sexual trauma. It takes work but I always tell folks, if you can withstand the trauma, you can withstand the healing and just remember to be kind and gracious to yourself along the process.

I always say that the point is to stretch yourself enough to bend but never to break, and you might have experienced a loss of control as a result of direct or systemic sexual violence, but you do have control over your healing, and there are steps to manage that.

Meagen Gibson

So let's talk about those steps in practical terms. What would you say is the first step if somebody is just coming to terms with sexual trauma.

Holly Wood

I think the first step is acknowledging the abuse. I think a lot of times we have a tendency to say, was that sexual assault? Was that sexual violence? Or we get like a gray area level of sexual assault. I think a lot of times people can blame themselves, too, because maybe they drank, maybe they were

wearing XYZ, or maybe they went to this person's home. A lot of different reasons that people might say that this isn't sexual assault.

[00:09:25] Meagen Gibson

I can say from personal experience, you've put yourself in a position because you know you're going to get something out of it, like you're in a relationship with a person of power because you know that it's going to advance your career or whatever, like you've taken advantage of an opportunity and therefore you feel like you're at fault.

Holly Wood

Right. One of my favorite colleagues, Dr. Holly Richmond, says the only reason a person gets raped is because they met a rapist. And so the only reason that somebody would experience sexual violence is because they came into contact with a perpetrator of sexual violence.

And I think it's also important to acknowledge what sexual violence is about. I think a lot of folks have the tendency to conflate sex and sexual violence, which is why it impacts our sex lives so much. Especially for a lot of survivors who maybe their first experience of sex was through sexual violence. But contrary to what most might believe, sexual violence is more about power than it is about sex. So rather than stemming from this innate need to satisfy sexual desires, sexual violence arises from a perpetrator's desire to control or dominate another person. So I think it's important to acknowledge that, too, in order to separate that sex and sexual violence are completely different. They're about two different things.

Meagen Gibson

So we've got the acknowledgement down. Is there anything that you would recommend for people around that process? Is that something that you would encourage people to do on their own or with the safety of a partner or a therapist? What's the container for that acknowledgement?

Holly Wood

So I always encourage folks to, first of all, if they've experienced sexual violence, to tell somebody that they trust. So this could be a friend, this could be a family member, a Church member, a therapist, but somebody that they trust, with whom they feel safe and comfortable sharing this with.

And then, as far as the sexual healing journey, if you're already acknowledging and then you're at the point of making this step to go along with the sexual healing journey, I would recommend going with an experienced clinician who knows how to work with sexual trauma survivors. And if you're focusing specifically on the sexual side effects, knows how to work with the sexual side effects of sexual abuse.

Meagen Gibson

Are you speaking physiologically and otherwise, but physiological side effects of sexual abuse? I'm assuming, I don't want to put words in your mouth but I'm trying to be really clear.

[00:12:05] Holly Wood

Physiological and psychological. I think it's really important to note that the body does hold on to trauma. I'm sure there's other folks at the conference talking about that. So noting that there is a physiological response.

So let's say that somebody has made the cognitive decision to go on the sexual healing journey to separate sex from sexual violence and to make that choice of, okay, I want to go along this journey with a therapist or with a clinician.

The next step, then, would be to notice what those physiological responses are, because even if our brains are on that track, our bodies might not be there yet. And so traumatic experiences, especially from sexual assault, can cause your nervous system to become stuck in a state of either hypervigilance, alertness or dissociation. So this can manifest as symptoms of PTSD or other mental health concerns, causing hypersensitivity to stimuli that can trigger flashbacks, nightmares, panic attacks, and intrusive memories. There are steps that people can do to reduce the intensity of triggers and upsetting memories, which can include anticipating and preparing for potential triggers, tuning into your bodily and emotional responses, grounding yourself in the present, reminding yourself that you are safe now, and doing some self-soothing exercises with anxiety before it becomes unmanageable. Again, I think it's always helpful to have somebody who is experienced as a clinician to help you develop these skills and tools.

When we talk about triggers, triggers can come from a lot of things. It could be somebody who has experienced assault and is now seeing their perpetrator in the news, or it could be something like a smell, something that we don't even cognitively relate to the assault. A smell, a movie, a sound, something that comes up. But the better we get at noticing those triggers, the better we can get at managing those. And doing so with a therapist can be really helpful.

So that's the hypervigilant side, on the other side what we see is dissociation or a hypo reactivity. So with folks like that, I often hear that they dissociate during sex, or they just check out which might seem helpful in the short-term because you are blocking those things from coming up in the present, but it's a short-term solution to something that's long-term, especially with sex. Ideally, if we're separating sex from sexual violence, sex itself should be something that is pleasurable, mutually beneficial, intimate, a right of way to connect with somebody else. And unfortunately, if we're dissociating, we're not able to deeply connect with somebody on that level.

So once we can re-establish that mind-body connection, people can feel more safe. Then you can feel in control, you can feel that sex can be pleasurable and connecting. And some ways to do this might include mindfulness meditation, trauma-informed yoga, as well as specific therapies like EMDR, CBT, psychosomatic work, with again, a trained professional. And though therapists and clinicians might have really good ideas and tools to help you navigate the sexual healing journey, it's important to know that the sexual healing journey is your journey, too. So you can work with a clinician to create your own tools or your own toolkit of things that are going to work specifically for you.

Meagen Gibson

That's a really important piece. Because we're in a state of dysregulation or working just in the steps of just recognizing our trauma, when we come to a therapist for help, we're looking for them to just figure it out. It's like, I feel broken, fix me. And so often it's sometimes more helpful to say, this is the part that's most difficult right now. Show me the plan to begin at this stage. And next, I want to work on this. And next, I want to work on this.

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So it's great. And also I want to talk about, we've got people all over the world that tune into this conference, and so their access to, not only to therapy or trained professionals, might vary based on a lot of things, socioeconomic factors, geographical factors, etc. So what are the types of trainings or modalities or keywords that somebody might look for when looking for a trained professional to work with?

Holly Wood

Yes. Coming from where I'm located in the US, Southern California, my scope might be a little bit limited as well, but some research proven modalities would include EMDR, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT, and psychosomatic work.

And beyond that there are a lot of other really great resources. There are books by wonderful authors like Wendy Maltz and Staci Haines. There are support groups, there are crisis lines, there are people out there to talk to. And sometimes that's the first step, and the most important step, is finding someone that you can be trusting with, someone that you can feel safe with. And it might come in the form of a support group and saying that you're not alone and that there are other people on this journey with you. But there's help out there.

Meagen Gibson

Because I think that's part of the unfortunate thing, and this goes for most types of trauma, but sexual trauma in particular that we're talking about now, is that the person you think you want to tell, that might be able to hold this, does not have the kind of reaction to make you feel supported and held and safe. A lot of that isn't necessarily because they're a terrible person, it's just that they're not equipped or ready or prepared to appropriately hold and react to this information or this news.

And so these groups and professionals can be, literally trained containers, to make space for that and allow you to disclose that experience without any judgment, without any blaming, without any inappropriate reactions.

Holly Wood

I would also encourage people to look out to their local support or crisis centers, rape crisis centers or sexual assault support centers. Because not only do they have listservs of people who can provide professional support, but there are people there who are volunteering their time to do this work. And even those volunteers have to go through training. So as crisis interventionists, and as crisis hotline operators, these people go through training specifically to deal with the kind of problems that you would be bringing forward. So I think that would be a really good start, too.

Meagen Gibson

So I imagine that there's going to be some people that are watching this that aren't necessarily trauma survivors, but they're in support roles of trauma survivors. So let's address what we just talked about, which is if somebody comes to you in your life and says that I've been the victim of sexual assault or sexual violence, how do we support them? What are the things that we should say?

[00:20:11] Holly Wood

I think the most important thing to be aware of if somebody is sharing this information with you is to already know that they're sharing this information with you because they are vulnerable and they feel safe with you, and that at the end of the day, everybody just wants to be heard and validated. And that is what is so important. I think folks, as those who are receiving the information, a lot of times we want to fix things. We want to fix things for the people we care about. Whether that's saying we should call the police or you should do X, Y and Z and offering advice. But what's most important is listening and hearing that person out and asking maybe what they might need from you. Because we think about sexual violence, again, it goes back to that idea of power, and power being taken away from somebody else. So even as a loving support person, by offering all this advice, you are unintentionally taking that power away from somebody else who's sharing that information with you.

So the best thing you can do is listen and say, I'm here to support you and you tell me what you want to do about it or how I can help you. Giving that power back to the survivor.

Meagen Gibson

That's an important point. That's a really important point, because we want to fix things, it's in our nature, we want to help people, and we want to fix things. And disempowering people, especially when they're coming to us with something incredibly vulnerable, is a well intentioned misstep. So letting somebody take the lead. And what also I think about is if you're the support person or you're in an intimate relationship with somebody and you have a sexual relationship that this journey is going to be long and not linear, just like you said. And it's not something that your partner can go to therapy and fix. There might be points of lightness or brevity or look like healing, and then some backsliding, for lack of a better way to say it.

Holly Wood

No, it's so important. And a lot of times I get folks who present to me individually because they're in a relationship and they're struggling being intimate with their partner with maybe whom they've been married to for 20 years, and their partner is not understanding why they have difficulties in their intimate relationship. So they're coming to me as an individual because I'm the person who's been assaulted so it's my problem to fix. And I redirect that right away. Because if one person in a dynamic has experienced sexual violence and is dealing with sexual trauma, both parties are now dealing with sexual trauma because it's a problem that's impacting both of you.

So I think it's important to go from an approach of the individual who's experienced the violence going to therapy or seeking services and support for their individual concerns, but the couple working together on the concerns that impact the couple and develop a mutual healing strategy. I like to call intimate partners, partners in healing. So you two are on this healing journey together, and that way you have a partner that you feel safe with, that you can go on this long, arduous journey with and develop skills to repair your relationship in a way that not only repairs the damage done by sexual trauma, but also helps to develop skills for long lasting relationships across the board.

Meagen Gibson

That's such a good point, too, because we get into relationships, and it's understandable why we would, A, not have come to terms with any sexual violence or assault in our backgrounds. And B, not disclose that right away.

[00:24:16]

So you can get into a long-term partnership and years down the road have it suddenly become an issue, when it has been all along, but in ways that you could push or manage or cope. And as our relationships change, as our bodies change, as our physiology changes through life, so does our relationship to our traumatic experiences that can create some of these roadblocks. It's just important to put that into context and that it's a healing journey you're going to go on together.

Holly Wood

Absolutely. And to know that both people in the dynamic do usually end up getting hurt. So I think it's really important for both couples to work together to address heightened emotions. A lot of times we'll get the person who has experienced violence, unintentionally by the other partner of course, feeling as if their partner is like the perpetrator.

And on the flip side, if the partner whose experienced violence is not wanting to engage sexually, the other partner then feels like, what's wrong with me? What changed? Why isn't my partner attracted to me?

And so I also think it's really important to challenge those unconscious projections that they're having with each other. And adjusting to changes in sexual relating, having that open line of communication, and again, working together as an active healing team.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Holly, this has been a good conversation and a tough conversation, but one that I'm really glad that we had together.

If people want to find out more about you and the work that you do, where can they find that?

Holly Wood

Sure. So if folks are interested in some of the work or need some resources, you can find me on my website site at thehollywoodsexologist.com

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Holly Wood

Thank you for having me.