

Pre-trial counselling for women survivors of sexual violence: learning from clients' experiences

When a survivor of sexual violence and abuse has an open police investigation or the possibility of a future court case, the Criminal Prosecution Service (CPS) recommends that the survivor receives therapy only under 'pre-trial' conditions. Therapy under 'pre-trial' conditions means that the survivor cannot share any case evidence, anything mentioned in their police video statement, or any other details or facts about the incident, with the therapist. Since the CPS recommendation is based on expert opinion rather than research and has the potential to impact the survivor and their therapeutic experience, the Survivors' Network in Brighton (the Rape Crisis Centre for Sussex) conducted research aimed at exploring the impact of pre-trial therapy conditions on survivors' experiences of therapy following sexual violence.

Thematic analysis of individual interviews with ten women aged between 28 and 48 who had completed their contracted pre-trial therapy sessions, (10-12 sessions) identified three key themes representing the women's experiences of therapy and one theme comprising their recommendations for best practice.

The first theme "Positive Impact", indicated that just over half of the women felt a positive impact of pre-trial therapy conditions. The women experienced a shift in attention away from the sexual violence towards an alternate focus on self-care and areas of life they could control. A further positive aspect was not having to re-tell their traumatic stories. Despite these positive aspects, four of the women reported experiencing a negative effect of the pre-trial therapy conditions as represented by the theme "Negative Impact". These four had hoped that therapy would provide a safe space to discuss their traumatic experience as they felt they had no one else (family/friends) to talk to about their experience. With the restrictions of pre-trial therapy, the women were still without a space to talk about their trauma experience, hindering their ability to process the trauma. This left the women feeling disempowered. Two women reported repressing their trauma during therapy due to the pre-trial restrictions; only after the court case was over or the CPS had dropped the case, did trauma-related symptoms such as flashbacks start. The third theme "The Therapeutic Relationship" represents how a key to recovery for survivors under the pre-trial conditions was a good, trusting relationship with the therapist. Therapists' normalising, non-judgmental and non-directive approach was felt the most effective way to working with the survivors under these conditions. Of note, survivors who perceived an overly strict adherence to the conditions, found this to be unhelpful. The final theme derived from the interviews comprises suggestions to facilitate the best therapy under pre-trial conditions and is labelled "Improvements". Providing the client with a clear understanding of the pre-trial conditions and the reasoning behind them was reported as helping to build the foundations of a good therapeutic relationship. Most participants wanted more choice of times and venues, therapist and modality, and more pre-trial therapy sessions. In addition, many of the participants said they would have liked some sessions closer to the court case to discuss anxieties about the upcoming trial. Many participants also wanted post-trial support, with counselling to process issues relating to the trial and to address any trauma symptoms that were emerging after the trial. Post-trial group support with other post-trial women was cited as being beneficial for two participants.

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