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Supporting Survivors Coming Forward

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Supporting Survivors Coming Forward

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Abstract

As an intern at Survivors Healing Center an issue that was identified was child sexual abuse cases are too common. The contributing factors that have a correlation to the community problem that was mentioned is denial, emotional maltreatment, and family characteristics. The consequence of the contributing factors led to depression, suicidal and a potential recurrence of sexual abuse. The purpose of the project was to educate participants on how to support survivors who are coming forward. By educating them the expected outcome was to have some participants leaving with knowledge towards the issue. As a result of addressing the contributing factors during the panel discussion the end result were positive outcomes. There was an increase in confidence from the participants in regards to approaching the issue. A recommendation given was to provide a Spanish speaking panel in the future to educate more participants.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, denial, depression, language barriers, stigma, survivors,

Agency & Communities Served

Survivors Healing Center (SHC) is an agency under the Family Service Agency of the Central Coast (FSACC) located in Santa Cruz. According to SHC its mission is, “To empower those victimized by sexual abuse through a healing process and to prevent sexual abuse of children through community outreach” (2019, para 1). The agency provides group therapy for survivors of child sexual abuse for male and females, partners of survivors, and mothers survivors. The main population that the agency serves is survivors of child sexual abuse. Although SHC also advocates to end child sexual abuse and to bring awareness to the issue through various events and collaborations with other agencies.

Problem Description

The main problem that the community faces is child sexual abuse (CSA). According to the National Sexual Violence Research Center, one in four girls and one in six boys experience child sexual abuse (2018). This proves that children are still getting raped at a high rate. There is a lot of stigma in regards to thinking that strangers are the ones that can cause harm to children. Although that is not entirely true, 90% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child or child's family knows (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). The misconception of stranger danger still lingers in parents' thoughts and when raising their children that is the one of the things that they teach their children to fear. It is difficult to come to terms that someone close to the family might harm their children but the reality is, that it is occurring. The percentages are high and children are still getting raped. Unfortunately getting raped causes trauma that later in the children's lives that they might have to overcome. That is why agencies like SHC exist to help adults deal with their trauma of being sexually abused as a child.

Contributing Factors

Child sexual abuse is an issue that continues to grow even after raising awareness and being in a current state where it is openly talked about. One of the reasons that this issue continues to occur is due to denial. This denial towards rape that is strongly considered it helps condone sexual aggression (Gresson et al., 2018). Since it's helping condone sexual aggression then individuals are basically siding with the rapist and turning their backs on the victim. Denial is known to be the first thought or feeling and individual has after a victim seeks help. It is understandable that the human mind wants to disbelieve something that it truly hard to understand like child sexual abuse. Not being able to wrap your mind around on believing that someone was capable of raping a child can be difficult but it is possible. As long as the individual is able to step away from denial and be willing to side with the victim.

It has been recognized that emotional maltreatment has a correlation with child sexual abuse (Estévez et al., 2016). The emotional maltreatment is known to develop uncertain feelings towards an individual or the world. Feeling uncertain or insecure as a child makes them an easy target. They can easily be brainwashed and predators can manipulate love to harm. Emotional maltreatment derives from a lack of parenting skills that is known as emotional neglect. Emotional neglect is the failure as a parent or guardian to provide sufficient affection and emotional support to their child (Estévez et al., 2016). Love and affection are some things that a child seeks and desires. Like mentioned before, without these things a child can become more vulnerable thus rapists used this as their advantage.

In addition to emotional maltreatment, family characteristics contribute to the risk of children being sexually abused. Some of the family characteristics are correlated with the age a mother gives birth. For instance, for teenagers ages 17 and under that become pregnant their

children are at greater risk of getting raped between the ages 3 and 5 (Matta Oshima et al., 2014). The chances of the children getting raped decreases as the mother gives birth at a later age. This characteristic can be due to the fact that when a child's mother is a minor the chances of her having a stable home or life are slimmed. Which creates a pattern and the child's life also becomes unstable and it puts the child at greater risk of neglect, maltreatment and being sexually assaulted. Another contributing to family characteristics is poverty. A child that comes from a poor family is three to seven times likely to be sexually assaulted (Matta Oshima et al., 2014). Being raised in a low-income household most likely means that the parents or guardians are hardly with their children. Without the supervision of parents, the children are exposed to more danger. That danger in this case being more likely to get raped due to the lack of support.

Consequences

One of the most consequences of being raped as a child is that it is more likely to reoccur a second or third time. The timeframe between the first and second report for sexual abuse is about 639 days (Palusci & Ilardi, 2020). This means that less than two years after a child has reported being raped, the incident happens again. It is difficult to accept that an individual has been raped, after seeking help, but still being prone to recurrence again can be devastating. The recurrence is also more likely to happen if the rapist was a male (Matta Oshima et al., 2014). As mentioned before, dealing with getting raped once should be more than enough to try everything possible for it to not occur a second time.

Another consequence from this trauma is depression. Child sexual abuse survivors are more prone to experience depression at an early age (Li et al., 2020). Depression is one of the most common effects after experiencing high levels of trauma. Being sexually abused as a young age can definitely leave permanent scars and without seeking help it can deteriorate. The

timeframe of experiencing depression for children that have been raped compared to those that have not is 6.5 years earlier (Li et al., 2020). It proves that traumatic events have a high correlation with mental issues at an early age. Depression is not common in children who have not experienced high levels of trauma. The reason being is that their mind isn't trying to block any bad memory, which children who have this trauma are constantly trying to avoid. That is why depression is more common in these cases.

Children that have been sexually abused are also more likely to attempt suicide. Although children that experienced that abuse through penetration are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide (Matta Oshima et al., 2014). This can be because the child was exposed to more pain compared to a child that was only touched. Whatever the case might be, sexual abuse victims more correlated to suicide attempts than any other form of abuse (Power, Gobeil, Beaudette, Ritchie, Brown, & Smith, 2016). As mentioned before, being sexually abused causes an immense trauma. It develops issues of trust, acceptance, forgiveness and it takes away an individual's right to their own body. These factors contributed to the unwillingness of wanting to continue to live.

Barriers to Service Delivery

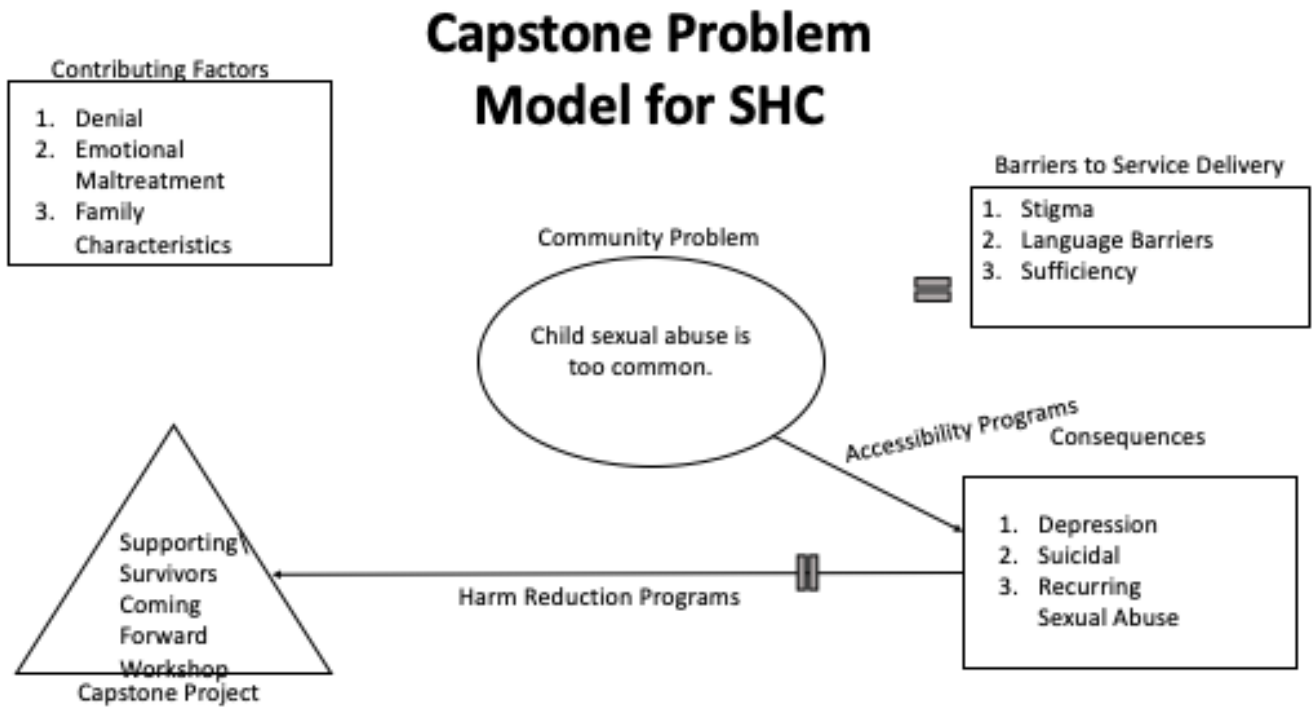
As mentioned before there is a stigma related to child sexual abuse. A stigma that takes a hold on an individual's life and stops them from seeking help. We see this with any sort of mental health issues, it is common to see that things that make an individual feel uncomfortable or vulnerable makes them choose to avoid it. This is being taught upon at a very young age, parents and guardians neglect to teach their children to name their body parts. In *Darkness to Light* (2000-2020) there was a case where a little girl told her teacher in front of her class that her dad ate her cookie last night. The teacher dismissed it and went on teaching her class, only to

later find out that the little girl was being sexually assaulted by her father. The reason why the teacher didn't report it was because she literally thought that the girl was referring to an actual cookie. Unfortunately, she was referring to her vagina, but her parents taught her to name it otherwise. Situations like this are happening a lot due to the fact that parents or guardians are teaching their children to be ashamed of their body, which then makes it a barrier for agencies like SHC to have individuals come and seek help. The reason is because this stigma also makes individuals feel ashamed of being weak. If people acknowledge that they need help they also refer it to being weak and some of them cannot accept that. We see this mostly with male survivors of child sexual abuse because as boys they are taught to be manly, to not cry as a girl, to block all emotions. So when a boy gets sexually abused it can be extremely difficult to let people know that they are hurting and that they need help.

Another barrier to service delivery is a language barrier. Survivors Healing Center is located in downtown Santa Cruz and it is the only agency in town that provides services for child sexual abuse survivors. The Hispanic population is high and there is a non-active Spanish group. When it comes to advocating the agency doesn't have a full-time or part-time employee that can translate information in Spanish. SHC relies on interns or volunteers to help and translate or the information simply does not reach the Hispanic community.

This comes hand in hand with sufficiency, another barrier that the agency faces. The agency is a non-profit organization that sustains itself with grants, fundraising, or donations. Non-profits also don't pay employees a lot of money so they are at a situation where there's more clients than the agency can serve. All these barriers are in the way of providing service to everyone that needs it whether they cannot come to terms to accept it, speak a different language or there's simply not enough staff.

Problem Model



Capstone Project

A capstone project that I will create is a panel where I would have speakers share their story and healing journey. Getting the perspective of survivors is important because it will make a greater impact on the issues I am trying to address. This panel will educate the participants on the importance of knowing what to do when faced with a situation when a survivor discloses their abuse. As mentioned, I will be doing this by creating a zoom virtual panel. I will be promoting the panel on EventBrite and send emails to the SHC emails list. This project will be useful because one of the contributing factors of sexual abuse is denial and one of the points I will be addressing is the importance of believing the survivor. Even though this is aiming for individuals that have already been sexually abused, the presentation will be open to the public. I will be educating them and raising awareness towards child sexual abuse. I will also be following up with a short survey at the end of the panel.

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Project Purpose

Child sexual abuse is a difficult topic to discuss. Parents and guardians do not know when is the perfect time to talk to their children about sex. Unfortunately the more parents or guardians neglect this conversation, their children are less likely to identify the first signs of sexual assault. There is a huge misconception about child sexual abuse. This panel will educate others about this topic so they are aware of the signs, and find supportive resources. The main point I want to address is the importance of believing the victim. Denial is a contributing factor that in many cases prevents individuals from seeking help. As difficult as it can be to wrap your head to what has occurred to a child. Denial should not be something a child or adult hears when they have

opened up to you. I want to raise awareness and provide some tips that will help individuals process the disclosure and help the survivor to the best of their abilities.

Project Justification

As mentioned before I will be focusing on the effects that denial has on survivors of child sexual abuse. The importance of being nonjudgmental has been identified as an essential aspect to provide a safe space for survivors to disclose (Chouliara et al., 2011). A nonjudgmental approach makes the survivor feel comfortable talking about their experiences especially if it is the first time they have disclosed any of the events. This approach is considered essential to the process of disclosure because it is a difficult topic to talk about. No one truly wants to relive a traumatic event, especially one where they have been raped. Avoiding phrases such as; “are you sure, what exactly happened, what were you doing to cause this?” These phrases can make an individual not want to disclose more about the events because they may feel attacked and blamed for their assault. In addition to a nonjudgmental approach individuals need to be aware that the survivor chose them for a reason. They are the ones that they trust, feel secure and already have a meaningful relationship (Chouliara et al., 2011). In order to help the survivors seek the appropriate help that they need the first person that they disclose their abuse to are the most important ones. If the right approaches are not being taken, then that can result in the consequence that I have mentioned. This project will benefit the participants by being informed which will result in better results for survivors.

Project Implementation

In order for this project to begin to take action I will start off by writing a brief description of the event which will be called “Supporting Survivors Coming Forward”. I will then reach out to five potential panelists that have prior experience to events as the one I will be

conducting. I will email them individually and ask them if they would be willing to participate and share their healing journey. Apart from the panelist, I will reach out to a therapist to ask if he can be present the day of the event to support anyone who needs someone to speak to. Once I get a confirmation from the panelist and the therapist, I will sign up to EVENTBRITE to promote zoom panel discussion. Amelia and I will upload the brief description/purpose of the event followed with an agenda. The event will take place on December 5, 2020 at 10 am to 11:30 am. Participants will be able to register for free and the sign up will be available till December 4, 2020. The panel discussion will be an hour and a half long where I will be asking panelists a total of five questions. The next thing that needs to be done will be creating the five questions that I will be asking the panelist, a flyer, the agenda, a zoom link and the survey. Once I have a rough draft of all of these things, I will meet with my mentor Robyn and my co-facilitator Amelia to receive some feedback. After that I will send the information to the panelist so that they can be prepared and know what questions I will be asking them the day of the panel. A day before the event we will all meet and do one last run through. The day before the event we will send out the zoom link for the event to all participants that have signed up. On the day of the panel I will start off with a welcome, short introduction of myself and the agency. It will follow the introduction of the panelist, a short breathing exercise and then start with asking the panelist the questions I came up with. Once the panelists have answered the five questions I will provide an open space for the participants to ask any further questions. It will end with thanking everyone for their participation. At the end of the panel discussion I will send out the short survey to the participants that will help me track the outcome of the event. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Expected Outcomes

After the panel discussion and survey, I expect for there to be a 40% or higher increase of participants leaving with a better understanding towards approaching survivors . The importance of being prepared and knowing how to respond to disclosure is something that everyone should know. Child sexual abuse is an issue that keeps growing. Individuals that are the first to know about their patients' assault should be prepared and know where to look for information. One of the reasons why a person might not be prepared is because they are not trained and are not considered mandated reporters. The disclosure can happen to anyone: a mother, father, uncle, aunt, sibling or a friend. Whoever it is the topic will be difficult, but the survivor needs to feel supported. That is why I want to address the importance of knowing how to respond to a disclosure. This can be achieved by educating the participants during the panel discussion. I expect at least half of the participants to feel a little more comfortable towards addressing this issue. I also expect the participants to take away some tools that will help them be prepared if they are ever found in a situation where someone is disclosing their abuse to them.

Assessment Plan

The assessment plan I will implement will be an anonymous survey that I will be emailing to the participants after the panel discussion has ended. The survey will consist of three questions regarding their knowledge on child sexual abuse prior and after to the panel. The first question will be answered from a scale of 1 “Not Confident” 2 “Somewhat Confident” 3 “Confident” 4”Extremely Confident” the question being, “How confident are you in helping a survivor of child sexual abuse prior to the panel”. The second question will use the same scale but it will be answering “How confident are you now in helping a survivor of child sexual abuse after hearing the panelist”. The last question will be a written answer based on, “What is one

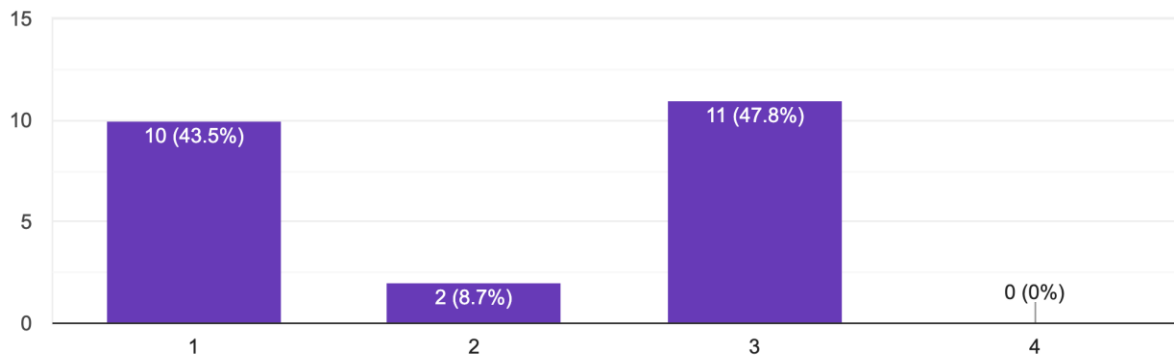
thing you will be taking away from this panel?”. This survey will demonstrate the effectiveness of the panel and provide feedback on how to improve.

Project Results

As mentioned before educating the participants was the main purpose of the virtual speaker panel. I had a total of 26 participants and after the event a survey was sent out to each participant. It was an anonymous survey where I asked participants to rank their confidence towards helping a survivor prior to the panel on a 1-4 scale, 1 “Not Confident” 2 “Somewhat Confident” 3 “Confident” 4 “Extremely Confident”. I received 56% of the participants answering “Confident”, 8% answering 2 “Somewhat confident” and 43% answered “Not Confident”. I asked the same question but now after leaving the workshop and the numbers slightly increased. There were 30% participants answering 2 “Somewhat confident” and a decreased to 4.3% in not confident. The third question was a written one and majority answered that they will take in consideration the strength it takes for survivors to come forward. Most of the participants completed the survey which provided me with an idea on who was most of the audience. The expected outcome was what we had hoped to achieve since there was a substantial increase in the confidence level prior and after the panel.

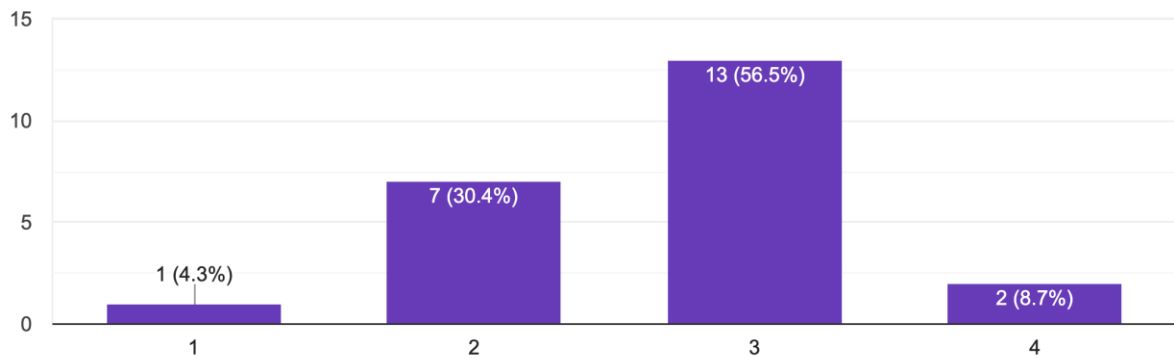
How confident were you in helping a survivor of sexual abuse prior to the panel?

23 responses



How confident are now in helping a survivor of child sexual abuse after participating in the panel?

23 responses



Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the data collected my only recommendation would be to outreach more towards that population we are trying to reach. I received a high percentage of participants being confident towards the issue of child sexual abuse. The reason being was because a great majority of participants were either staff members of Survivors Healing Center or were members of other agencies. A great majority of the participants already had some knowledge of the issue that was

being addressed. Apart from those participants the ones that had no knowledge towards the issue did express gratitude. It made an impact on the participants and the panelist that I do recommend for this panel to recur.. If it were to occur again as mentioned I would outreach more towards that another set of community members. Such as outreaching at schools, community centers, patients, and members of other agencies that can refer their clients. I would also recommend creating a panel in Spanish. As mentioned before one of the barriers to service delivery is a language barrier. Educating the Hispanic community towards this issue by providing a safe place to hear the healing journey of survivors in Spanish is something that has not been done as much as an English speaking one. I am certain that it would receive positive feedback and the results would mirror or even exceed that results I gain for my mind.

Personal Reflection

Towards the end of the results section I learned that the problem I addressed received positive feedback. Child sexual abuse is an issue that is occurring and having the opportunity to educate others towards how respond to survivors was a huge accomplishment for myself. A personal accomplishment would be the development of my leadership skills. Taking the lead on school projects or work has always been an issue with me. I have never seen myself as a person that can lead. Although I have learned that a successful leader is only successful when they work with others and who is open to receiving feedback. Having had the opportunity to lead and created an event from scratch is another accomplishment I would be taking away from this experience.

Since the beginning of my major classes I have been told and taught that collaboration is the key to success. Without collaboration the event would have not been possible. Since the very beginning of the development I worked closely with my mentor and as the event planning

progressed I collaborated with other members of the SHC as well as outside sources. Even though I was the main facilitator for the panel there was a whole team that made it possible for its success. Another strength that I contributed was my passion towards the issue I wanted to address. Since the beginning of my internship I knew right away that an issue that survivors deal with is their disclosure of their abuse. On a personal level, I know how difficult it is to disclose your abuse and not be believed or to be in a situation where the person you disclose to does not know how to respond. Due to that, I was passionate about creating an event that will potentially benefit future survivors all while having a set of panelists sharing their own journey. That passion led to envisioning something which thankfully I executed it to my best ability.

Unfortunately one of the challenges that I faced in the development of the event was having to create it during a pandemic. The format, the problem, and the vision were all the same but it had to be switched to a virtual audience. It limited the ability for the panelists and participants to connect. As much as I tried to make everyone feel welcome a lot of participants felt the need of having an in person interaction. The topic that was addressed might have been the main issue for that need. Switching to a virtual aspect brought upon the challenge of confidentiality. I addressed this challenge by not allowing videotaping, recording and creating an anonymous survey. The day of the event before getting started I remind everyone of the safe space and need of confidentiality. Although creating a virtual event you truly are not able to know with certainty if everyone followed through the expectation that was stated. Apart from those issues I still believe that the event was successful.

Broader social significance

The broader issue that the project aim to address was the understanding that child sexual abuse is an issue that is recurring. In order to address the issue the project touched based on a

contributing factor has led to that outcome. The contributing factor that was mentioned was denial as a result of survivors not coming forward. The panelist expressed their fear of denial and raised awareness towards the importance of being opened minded towards an issue like the one being addressed. Another way the project addresses the issue was through raising awareness towards the stigma that it has. This was also addressed by the panelist when they shared their personal experiences and recommendations towards dealing with stigma.

As mentioned in the recommendation section, one thing I would have done differently to accomplish the broader social issue I was trying to address would be outreaching towards a broader set of participants. Outreaching to members of the community, parents, guardians, clients, former patients, or other organizations would have provided us with different results. The purpose was to educate the participants on how to support survivors coming forward. Although most of the results were positive due the audience that we had. Another thing that should be done is addressing the language barrier to service delivery that could be accomplished by providing a Spanish speaking panel.

Additionally, advice that I would give to any future capstone student or intern at SHC would be one that I received at the beginning of internship. The first team meeting I had with my mentor and the interns Ama Delevett said to us that once people know that you are part of this team and the issue the agency addresses, you will be surprised by the number of people that will disclose to you. Remember the tools you learn and most importantly remember the importance of self-care (personal communication, August, 2019). I was new to the agency but hearing those words made feel like I was already part of the team. To my surprise two months later within two consecutive weeks I found myself in that situation. Individuals disclosed their abuse and their healing journey to me. Having heard this within less than two weeks apart was emotional

draining. Which then leads to my final advice, this agency can be emotionally draining or triggering but remember that everyone is there to help you through it. As an intern you will be reminded and provided with tools of self-care and you will always feel like your opinion matters.

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Appendix



Supporting Survivors Coming Forward

Date: December 5, 2020
Time: 10:00 a.m - 11:00 a.m
Zoom ID: 818 8069 1229
Pss Code: 176224



The logo for FSA CC Survivors Healing Center features the letters 'FSA' in a large, serif font, with a blue wave-like graphic element that flows from the 'A' and underlines the 'CC'. To the right of this graphic, the words 'Survivors Healing Center' are stacked vertically in a smaller, sans-serif font.