ABSTRACT

A qualitative study on “feeling of being contaminated” in sexual-assault survivors with posttraumatic stress disorder by examining the narrative change in Prolonged Exposure (PE) therapy

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Many sexual-assault survivors feel “contaminated.” To clarify this feeling and how it changes as PTSD symptoms improve, we conducted a qualitative study on the narrative change of eight successfully-treated clients (10 events in total) in Prolonged Exposure (PE) therapy. We analyzed narrative records in three sessions: the initial, middle and final phases of treatment. Our results showed that “vague feeling of being contaminated” in the initial phase diverged later into “feeling of being contaminated physically”, “feeling of being contaminated psychologically” and “feeling of being contaminated in intimate relationships” in the course of treatment. “Feeling of being contaminated physically” ameliorated along with relief from flashbacks of body sensation. We found “feeling of being contaminated psychologically” changed when the survivors regained positive self-images and re-verified memories. However, the survivors may remain anxious about being accepted by intimate partners because sexual assault invades not only personal but also intimate inter-personal territory.

Key Words: sexual assault, feeling of being contaminated, post-traumatic stress disorder, prolonged exposure therapy