

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 32 – Todd Elliott

Intro - Hi, I'm Charmaine Williams, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Academic, for the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Welcome to Profiles in Social Work. This podcast series is produced by our Faculty and Alumni Association. In 2014 the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work is celebrating 100 years of contributing to Social Work Practice and Education. You can find out more about us by visiting us online at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca We're glad you could join us today. The series Profiles in Social Work highlights how social workers are making a positive difference in our communities by presenting stories of how social work graduates are using their degrees. We hope you will enjoy this series. Especially if you are thinking about a career in social work or interested in hearing about what social workers do.

Profile - Todd Elliott

My name is Todd Elliott and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, in 1999.

I completed a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and I had an interest in doing clinical work. I was faced with the decision whether to pursue studies in psychology or social work. I wanted to focus more on working directly with people, doing front-line work; social work was a better fit and it enabled me to do that.

I recall that the faculty offered courses that provided me with the opportunity to explore some of my areas of interest in social work and which helped me to prepare for work in a clinical setting with a focus on family violence. I did my placement in a child abuse program at a children's hospital and it was there that I developed an awareness of the prevalence of child abuse in our society and the systemic factors related to child abuse and neglect. I also learned how to conduct forensic interviews of children and families and how to support and provide treatment so as to minimize the impact of abuse on children. This experience led me to develop a specialty in the area of family violence and a career focus working with people who have either committed violent acts towards others or who have experienced some form of violence themselves.

Forensic interviews are connected to legal investigations, where a crime has been committed and often include looking at risks: someone's risk of committing future acts, or the impact of harm on others. My early experiences conducting forensic interviews included working as part of a multidisciplinary team. The hospital that I did my placement at, the team included social workers, physicians, pediatricians, nurses, psychologists, outside agencies including police officers and children's aid workers, would work together in conducting an investigation. The role of social work was to meet with the child or family and gather information.

I've always had a passion for doing group work; it's what I love doing the most. So I've always been drawn to that type of work and I think it's one of the most effective treatment modalities because in various group settings, clients learn, not just from facilitators, but they learn from each other and often times depending on the nature of the group, clients realize that they're not alone with their specific issue. They feel less isolated, and they are able to challenge each other in a different way than perhaps a clinician would in an individual setting.

A few years ago I was offered an opportunity to develop a curriculum and facilitate a group therapy program for adult men who experienced some form of childhood trauma. For victims of trauma there is a lot of services for women, but very few for men. My first task was to develop a trauma treatment manual, or curriculum for the group. I spent countless hours researching and connecting with other therapists across the country who were providing services. I also had to scan the literature and decide on an evidence-based model. My main role is to facilitate the groups and provide some case management and individual support. Part of my role has also been to meet regularly with the program coordinator and discuss any program related issues: how to advertise the group and recruit men, how the groups are going and to meet regularly with the clinical supervisor to seek advice and support regarding any clinical issues that may arise with individual members.

Men who attend the groups are 18 years or older and have experienced some form of childhood trauma, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Part of the screening process is to ensure that men are not currently struggling with active addictions or non-stabilized mental health problems such as psychosis, severe depression or personality disorder or be living in crisis. Men have experienced childhood trauma present with a wide range of symptoms. Some of the more common issues include emotional difficulties including anxiety. One example is posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD. It involves reliving the abuse day to day. It includes men experiencing flashbacks, memories of the abuse, nightmares. There's also an avoidance component to PTSD, where men feel an emotional numbness – they talk about not being able to feel or feeling detached from society, lacking the ability to be intimate with people or they just avoid people altogether. There's also an arousing component to PTSD, where men are startled easily or they are hyper vigilant. Or they

view the world as a dangerous place where they don't feel safe. They might be irritable, have anger outbursts or sleep difficulties. Men also experience depression requiring psychiatric support. Some men have attempted suicide a number of times. In my experience one of the main motivating factors for men coming to the groups is relationship difficulties. They are often dysfunctional in relationships or they have trouble being intimate with people, feel uncomfortable being intimate with people, they lack self-confidence or they experience substance abuse issues.

In trauma work it's important that men are fairly stable so that they're able to handle any painful feelings that might arise in the groups, men have an opportunity to share their personal experiences and struggles, offer their own wisdom and insight, and at a later stage create and share a trauma narrative. A trauma narrative is a detailed account of their traumatic experience. The process of creating and sharing their story in a group setting is in itself therapeutic for men because it helps them uncover and organize their memories of the trauma and release the shame associated with it.

There's also a psycho-educational component to the groups, where information is shared and various topics are discussed that are relevant to the men including the impact of trauma, creating safety and stability for themselves, managing emotions and flashbacks, creating and maintaining healthy relationships, and also looking at the impact of childhood trauma on male identity. Groups run anywhere from 8 to 12 sessions.

The men benefit from the group because they realize they're not alone. Male survivors are more isolated and experience more barriers to accessing services. Also it's more difficult for men to disclose having experienced childhood trauma compared to women. Unfortunately a myth continues to exist in our society that men and boys cannot be victimized and should be strong enough to protect themselves from harm. Challenging myths such as this one is a significant component of the healing process for men in group. Groups also enable men to develop a valuable support network with other survivors and helpers. Men are less likely to come forward and seek help for themselves. Increased government funding and mainstream media coverage have helped reduce some of the barriers for these men accessing groups. Since the program launched we've received a significant response for men seeking service. Most of the men who call for service are apprehensive about participating in a group. Coming to group can be an anxiety provoking experience for the men, however my groups have been fairly small – 6 to 8 guys and these guys usually develop trust and feel safe and comfortable with each other fairly quickly.

Many of these men have experienced harm from a caring adult in their life that they were supposed to trust and who was supposed to protect them. So it's important for me as facilitator to provide them with a different experience of a caring adult - one that's consistently supportive and encouraging and nonjudgmental and demonstrates

kindness. A number of the men may experience triggers or flashbacks during the groups, so it's important to help develop and practice coping strategies so that they're able to revisit painful memories and deal with flashbacks. Helping men maintain personal safety and stability and manage symptoms during the group is very important. There's a number strategies that men can learn and practice. For example, we incorporate the use of relaxation techniques; mindfulness meditation has become a popular technique in trauma work. Teaching men how to meditate, how to ground themselves in the present moment, so that they're able to distinguish between the past and present.

Over my career I've done a number of groups where clients are mandated to attend. One of things that I found refreshing and surprising about doing these groups is how committed and motivated these men are to begin their journey of healing. The average age for the guys coming to these groups is around 40 years old so a lot of them have suffered the impact of trauma for a good portion of their lives. One of the benefits of participating in the group for these men is that they realize that they're not alone, and they also, by hearing about the experience of others, a lot of them make comments that "I thought I was crazy" and they hear about the struggles that other men have had with experience trauma from childhood so they realize that they're not crazy. They're able to let go of the shame associated with the abuse as well, they feel more confident and a lot of them, by the time they complete the process, are motivated to be mentors and to help other men. They want to give back in some way.

One of the nice things about my experience in this program is that I have had the opportunity to meet family members. A number of the spouses, for example, who have been able to share with me the positive changes and impact that participation in the group, has had on both the individual men and the families. Progress has been noted in men feeling more confident about themselves, feeling less shamed, less guilty, more comfortable connecting with people, developing more social networks, feeling happier and able to experience joy in life, relying on substances less, and feeling like they're better partners and better fathers for those of them who have children, better friends.

The end of group is really a celebration for a lot of men it took a lot of courage to seek support and to participate in a group. To finish, has provided them with a sense of accomplishment and they feel very proud. They view it as an important step in their healing process.

I'm proud to say that I help people for a living and that I help people improve their lives and their well-being to help them reach their full potential by providing information, direction, support and understanding. It's important to have an open mind. We must be genuine and kind and caring and empathetic and patient, definitely a good listener is important, to be a flexible and critical thinker, to empower people to help themselves,



FACTOR-INWENTASH
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK

especially in trauma work, you got to laugh. I noticed that a sense of humor has been helpful for the men in the groups, as well as for myself as facilitator doing this work.

My most valuable learning has come from the clients that I've worked with. They've been my biggest teachers. I've always been humbled and privileged by the fact that people trust you enough to share intimate parts of their life with you. The best rewards are in the work itself.

Outro - This is Charmaine Williams from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Thank you for listening to our podcast. In 2014 our school is celebrating 100 years of social work research, teaching and community service. For more information about the faculty and our programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca