



## Behind the Wallpaper

By **Skye Matthews (Pen name)**

### Abstract:

Written by a survivor of extensive childhood rape who is studying to become a counselor herself, this article gives therapists deep insights into the mechanics of dissociation and how to work with these trauma survivors for healing. Hiding strategies are discussed, such as putting on a smile to try to make people think everything is OK. Clues to recognizing survivors are offered, including physical signs, non-verbal body language, the look in their eyes, and how clients use their time. Guidelines follow for building safety into the therapeutic process, including phrases to use and body postures which will help to gain the client's trust. The author addresses the importance of both therapist and client developing emotional intelligence.

### Key Words

Dissociative Identity Disorder, Attachment, Child sexual abuse, Impact of trauma, Incest, Complex PTSD, Coping mechanisms, Rape

### Introduction

We live in a world where many of us feel the need to hide our true emotions. If we feel negative in any way, we can't express this feeling. We use counterfeit emotional language to try and convince others that we're okay. We surface act by wearing a smile. We do this because we fear judgment, betrayal, being viewed as weak, and loneliness. These self-protective behaviors make it difficult to recognize victims of abuse and/or rape. Although they are everywhere, you need specialized knowledge to know how to spot them.

I find the topic of abuse/rape a hard one to communicate about for both the victim and the person wanting to help. It seems most people have a hard time bringing this topic forward. The victims know that the abuse happened, but they just don't want the feelings associated with it. They deny how much the abuse has affected them. Many helpers shut down when hearing reports of sadistic abuse and want to deny its severity. The questions helpers ask sometimes lack emotional intelligence and add to the victims' shame, pain, and blame. This article aims to educate helpers on how they can respond in a supportive manner that will lead to effective change.

When I was a little girl, my parents sold me into sexual slavery. I was placed in a room that had awful, flower wallpaper over the window. Another girl and I decided to peel back that wallpaper. We took a little piece off and were able to see the moonlight shining on our faces. This is symbolic for me of all rape and/or abuse survivors. We need to help them peel back their wallpaper, giving them some light from that night sky. We can do this by recognizing and understanding their non-verbal body language.

My goal is to help you recognize these victims and to gain some insight on how to listen with emotional intelligence, to be able to communicate with the victims. They need to be seen and heard. By using these tools, you could help someone to the road of recovery from their traumas.

Most articles on working with rape and trauma survivors are written from the point of view of the therapist. This article, written from my view as a client, is intended to expand the perspectives and understandings of these traumatized people.

## **Recognizing a victim**

How can we recognize these victims? No one can truly hide what he or she is really feeling. Non-verbal communication reveals many of the underlying issues and dynamics of a person.

Communication is everywhere - what we do, how we walk, what we say and don't say, and how we say it. No matter what we try to hide, we communicate on a second to second basis. This can be summed up in the key principle of communication, "We cannot not communicate (Wood, 2016, p. 28)." Even when we don't say a word, our non-verbal body language speaks loud and clear. According to Ray Birdwhistell, "Scholars estimate that non-verbal behaviors account for 65% to 93% of the total meaning of communication (Wood, 2016, p. 153)." That is a lot of communication.

Body language can also contradict what the person says. When people stomp their feet, saying they aren't mad, they clearly are mad. We tend to believe body language over the people's verbal messages. When speaking to people who appear to be smiling, while their body is guarded, we listen to that body language by giving keeping a safe space between ourselves and them. In rape and abuse victims, you will find this occurs a lot. Their non-verbal communications tend to contradict them because they want others to see them as being "okay."

There are many non-verbal body language cues that offer windows into seeing these victims. Most counselors aren't taught these cues. They may be aware of the startle response, which is a reflex due to a sudden perceived threat that a victim may react to. For an example, when a door closes, a victim may jump because of fear of an attack. While sometimes it may be exaggerated, this startle response isn't always noticeable. It has been my experience that when I perceive a threat, I try to quickly re-adjust and hide it. I go into guarding my body before the reflex completes, giving me time to analyze whether it is an actual threat.

I believe most rape and abuse victims develop this skill, as we don't want to be seen as abnormal. The fact of not wanting to be noticed can explain why victims' body language and verbal messages may contradict each other. When you ask someone who has been traumatized if they are okay, they immediately respond with a smile and a "yes." But you may perceive they really aren't okay because their body tightens, they back away, and their eyes look down. This is how a rape/abuse victim may respond to this question.

Then, there is the familiar face act. When a rape/abuse victim sees family, friends or someone they know, they immediately put on the smile to say "hello." At the same time, they clench their hands or hold their bodies stiffly. These are signs that they want you to see them as happy, but they are really trying to hold themselves together despite their anxieties.

## **Posture**

A more visible, physical appearance that indicates when a person has been abused/raped is when their head appears to be tilted to the side. I learned from my personal observations that prolonged abuse causes one's neck to tilt as a direct result from chronic fight or flight responses. Psychiatrist

John Diamond (1985) correlates a head tilted to the side with an imbalance of the thyroid meridian, which governs the fight-or-flight response. My head tilts to the left, which is most common in victims of these sorts.

When looking for these non-verbal body language cues, another fact to consider are the interactive aspects of emotions. Arlie Hochschild, a professor of Sociology, explains this interactive view as “cultural rules and understandings that shape what people feel and how they do or don’t express their feelings” (Wood, 2016, p. 197). In other words, people express themselves differently, based on where they come from. Different cultures may have different meanings for the same body language. If victims come from families that communicate more directly, they may express themselves in more dramatic and clear ways. For an example, they may demand space and say they don’t want anyone to touch them.

People who have learned to communicate indirectly may slam doors, start arguments over small things in order to discourage other people from coming near them, or might not say a word and just isolate themselves.

Some victims may appear to be angry; others may appear to be happy. People who appear to be angry may walk heavier and voice how they are mad at the world. Some don’t blame the perpetrator and blame themselves instead. The internal emotional chaos created by this self-blame then erupts and the person explodes at others who are trying to be helpful. Those victims with a “happy” façade are trying to blend in and can be difficult to identify. One way to spot this attempted cover-up is that these people tend to have exaggerated body movements, with forced laughter. They are trying to convince others there is nothing wrong.

However, when they believe no one is watching, you see their masks fade. These changes in emotions can be explained by deep acting. According to Hochschild (2011, par.4), “Social rules seem to govern how people try or try not to feel in ways appropriate to the situation.” Basically, different settings set rules on how the person should feel. Victims will wear the smile for peers, professors, and family members because they feel that is what is expected of them. They control their emotions by telling themselves they are okay, which numbs those true emotions of sadness, shame, fear, and guilt.

No matter what mask they try to present to the world, you can see right through this if you look in their eyes. Their eyes will appear to be darker, some with dark circles around them, and they generally look down, never really at you. Rape/abuse victims tend to not have any eye contact. Looking in someone’s eyes can make them feel vulnerable. I believe they do this out of fear that the shame they carry would be exposed. Also, if people came from a history of abuse, they may have been trained not to have eye contact. When I was growing up, eye contact meant I was challenging my abusers. Even today, I still cannot look a man directly in the eyes, and I have a hard time looking anyone else in the eyes. I believe this is due to both of these reasons. I also guard myself and lean my body away from the person I may be speaking to. Many rape/abuse victims feel they need this defense because communication is personal, even if it is just talking about the weather, because you’re still sharing space with that person.

Then there is what is known as chronemics – how victims manage their time. This is a very good indicator for identifying these victims. They may appear to be daydreaming most of the time, when really all they are doing is sitting and staring because they are overwhelmed inside. I have always referred to this as the “zombie tripping on acid phase.” I say this because it feels to the victims as though they are dead, staring into space, with their mind running nowhere but everywhere. This usually occurs after the actual abuse but it could also occur after a flashback.

Another thing to remember is that each victim handles his or her abuse differently. It would be easy to tell them they need to cry about it. They do need that grieving process and some do break down and cry. Others may not, out of fear that when they start, they may not be able to stop. Some victims may just be numb, wanting to block that pain for as long as possible. Also, judging by the way they may have grown up, they may not be able to express this emotion. When I was as little as three years old, I remember being trained not to cry. I had learned to teach myself to laugh instead. No matter how much pain I was in, I laughed my way through it. This makes communicating about my own abuse really hard. I begin talking about it, feeling that sadness and much pain, but then I make a joke and laugh, knowing it's really not at all funny, but laughter is a coping tool. Other victims may use similar coping mechanisms to avoid talking about the pain.

### **Difficulty reporting**

Coming from a background of abuse makes it difficult to report the event. According to RAINN (Rape Abuse & Incest National Network, 2009a), "68% of sexual assaults are not reported to police and 98% of rapists will never spend a day in jail or prison. I believe this is because victims find it hard to trust that they will be believed and/or protected. Society has taught women that they are usually blamed for having put themselves in positions to be abused. There are many stories of victims coming forward and becoming more traumatized throughout the investigative and court processes. Victims are blamed for having worn provocative clothing or because of some other aspect of their past history. So we can't blame these victims for not coming forward to demand justice because they are protecting themselves from anticipated abuse from law enforcement and legal institutions.

We can't judge them based on this behavior. You can tell them that they need to prosecute their abuser(s). The victims want that, as well, but the survivor of abuse needs to weigh the probable costs. If it doesn't seem to be safe to go that route, we have to respect their decisions. They each have to find the best option for themselves. Keeping dual-perspective would help them, as well as you. You can have your ideas and thoughts about how you would handle the situation, but you have to understand where the victims of abuse are coming from, as well. You have to see their side and what emotions are driving them to handle their traumas in the manners they are choosing.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

This brings me to using emotional intelligence to communicate with these victims. According to Goleman, "Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize feelings, to judge which feelings are appropriate in which situations, and to communicate these feelings effectively (Wood, 2016, p. 191)." Basically, each situation elicits its own emotional responses, and you need to know which are appropriate. When speaking with a victim, you need to be aware of their feelings, as well as attending to how you are expressing yours.

When I was seven years old, a teacher reported my injuries to a social service agency. The social worker who investigated saw my face, which was unrecognizable due to bruising and swelling, and marks on my back which were belt marks, burns, and a hole from a hook. She asked me what had happened, and I immediately guarded my body and looked down with fear and shame. She then asked if my parents were responsible for this. I became afraid and immediately said, "Please, don't tell." Then, I said these exact words, "My daddy taught me how to fix my nose." Her response was, "I'm sure they didn't really mean to hurt you and your daddy loves you." I didn't know what to do and just assumed it was my own fault. To make matters worse, she notified my parents and sent me home, where I was punished for speaking out about the abuse I had suffered.

This taught me that I need to keep quiet and reinforced that I wouldn't be believed. Now, looking back, I realize that social worker had no emotional intelligence. The social worker should have seen my fear

and listened more carefully to my words. I should have been removed from the situation without their notifying my parents and should have been placed in a safe environment. I have to guess that I didn't have this outcome because the social worker couldn't accurately assess or comprehend the situation and went into denial, numbing her own emotions regarding the content of the information. She didn't acknowledge my body language or notice that her responses had been very hurtful, and she was therefore unable to respond in an appropriate manner.

### **Looking Behind the Wallpaper**

By Skye Matthews

Peel back the wallpaper.  
Pull open those blinds.  
A lost girl, you will find.  
Seeking a cause,  
For those injustices in her mind.

Surface acting,  
A smile plastered upon her face.  
She loses her place.  
Yet, still manages to say,  
"I'm okay."  
Watch her body language, as it sways.

Numb to all haptics.  
So, please don't touch.  
The physical violence is clear.  
Scars, marking those artifacts of shame.  
Help her not place the blame.

Walking, with her head to the ground.  
Jumping from every footfall.  
The proxemic, she desires,  
Is hard to come by.  
Bracing her self, yet continuing to walk.  
Guarded from any unforeseen threat.  
It is here, you must deflect.

Use your emotional intelligence.  
As she becomes despondent.  
Make her aware; she's safe right here.  
Help her,  
Erase those fears.  
Reach out a hand.  
Let her know,  
She's not alone to take a stand.

Be empathetic,  
Never judge or question why.  
Assure her,  
You're on her side and it's okay to cry.

Use your dual perspective,  
 To understand her reasons why.  
 Her discretion is written in her eyes.  
 Don't use it as a sign,  
 For, her safety isn't one to compromise.

Help her see, there is no time line.  
 She doesn't have to get right back up.  
 She doesn't have to hide.  
 She doesn't have to have it all figured out,  
 In a day's time.

Be with her in the pain.  
 For, there is no shame to frame.  
 Guide her to find her true name.  
 The strength, she has always misspelled.  
 The courage, she had never let down.  
 The worth, that's hard to be found.

Help her see that moon in the night sky  
 The light that reflects in her eyes,  
 She has meaning in this life.  
 Let her know,

This strife will end.  
 A new journey begins.  
 It is here,  
 She can thrive on command.

Recognizing body language with emotional intelligence is essential to understanding what a person is saying, providing insight into what they are really feeling. This enables you to perceive more accurately what is going on and to respond more appropriately to the urgent distress messages.

Similarly, you don't want to convey unhelpful, hurtful or harmful responses or to respond in ways that may be perceived as a threat by the victims of abuse. For example, when someone you are speaking with begins to back away, they are telling you, "I'm uncomfortable with this conversation." This would help you understand that you need to change your delivery. If the message is important and you need this person to listen, you could simply change your tone. By speaking in a lower, non-judgmental voice, you could put the receiver at ease, facilitating getting your message across.

### **The four realms of emotional intelligence**

The four realms of emotional intelligence are important to know, for both the victim and the person wanting to help. The four realms are as follows, "Self awareness, self regulation, empathy, and social skill" (Goleman, 2015, par 1). When these are present in the victims, as natural gifts or through learning, they can be aware of what they are feeling and express that in a safe and clear matter. When caregivers possess these within themselves, they can become better listeners and help in effective ways.

Self-awareness is extremely important for both the victim as well as the receiver. When speaking with victims, you want them to know they are safe. When they go into their memories of abuse and trauma,

you need to be aware when they are going into a flashback of a traumatic memory. Usually, their eyes become glazed and they stare off into the distance. When they do so, you know they aren't with you.

That's when you need to find ways to bring them back. They need to regain awareness of being in the present moment and need to regain their sense of safety. Telling them to look at their surroundings or to tap their feet on the floor are great grounding tools which are useful to bring the person back into the present with you. I would recommend never saying, "You are safe with me" or "I won't hurt you." These words could lead them right into a flashback, as these are lines perpetrators generally use to gain trust. Rephrasing these words could be helpful. For example, you could say, "You're safe *here*." The victim would hear these words and in response would look at her or his surroundings, to verify whether there is truth in what you are saying.

This past year another man used my past against me to abuse me again. A teacher was the only person who asked about the bruises which kept appearing. She told me something that was most helpful. She said, "I'm a safe sounding board." It sounds like "You're safe with me," but it didn't alarm me as being like what my perpetrators had said about my being safe with them. It spoke differently to me, as I had never heard that phrase. It made me aware that this teacher was different, helping me understand that I could talk to her. I even learned to trust her.

### **Gaining trust**

Gaining the victim's trust can be difficult. The victim may fear telling, being judged, and those consequences that might follow which could make it hard for him or her to reach out to anyone for help. Victims tend to blame themselves and question constantly whether others are blaming them, as well. By self-regulating and being empathetic, the helper can begin to dissolve the walls, built in anticipation of further trauma, that are protecting the victimized person. What do I mean by self-regulating? When the victim speaks of something that may be hard to hear, be aware of how you respond. Regulate how you deliver the message. Don't immediately go into questioning and asking for details and elaborations, as if he or she is on trial. Ask questions that would clarify what they mean in a softer, gentler tone. Consider the difference between responding with more of a fact, rather than a question, like, "He did that to you," as opposed to "Why did he do that to you?" You can see how this sort of question can cause the victim to again feel that blame. If that happens, he or she would shut down and not want to share anymore. Remember, having empathy will guide you through this process.

The Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN, 2009a) explains, "Encouraging words and phrases can avoid judgment and show support for the survivor." This is saying that by being empathetic, you can be supportive. If you find the victim biting his or her lips, this means they are trying to hold those words back. They want to share but fear doing so, and are trying to withhold the information. At this time, using encouraging words could prompt them to speak. You could say, "I see you're going through something difficult, and I want to listen." The victim will, then, look up at you to observe your body language. If they sense that you really mean it, by your body being seen as open, they will begin to speak.

When initiating this conversation, be sure that your palms are facing up. It has been my experience that this hand position communicates you are being honest and sincere. When the palms are down, it could communicate you are hiding something or being insincere. Believe me, victims notice these things. They often become very keen readers of non-verbal cues and very intuitive because of their very traumatizing past experiences.

I read body language, even when I don't notice I am. It has been a vital survival tool for me. Reading the body language in past situations, I knew the difference between those men who were mad or who

were evil; I could tell how much I could get away with or if it would be safer to be obedient. Of course, most trauma victims find themselves questioning these body language readings, often thinking they are over-reacting when faced with an uneasy feeling. We trauma victims tend to ignore our feelings by telling ourselves, "We're reading way too much into that or we're just being paranoid." This thought is common, and if a victim voices this, assure him or her it is normal to have these thoughts and feelings and nothing to be ashamed of.

Another consideration to keep in mind is that there are no time limits for dealing with the aftermath of any abuse. Don't tell a victim, "But that happened months or years ago. You're not over that yet?" These words would only reinforce that they should hide and be alone with it. Victims tend to already believe they are exaggerating their feelings; that they should just get right back up and move on with life already.

I have always minimized the abuse I've experienced because I found it easier for others to hear, as well as for me to cope. Although this may sound like a good approach for the trauma victim, it's not very helpful in the long-term. When victims try to minimize the reality of the trauma, they need to face how bad it really was. Your addressing the situation in its entirety will help them understand that their feelings are being validated. This can be very difficult for the victim to hear, causing the person to feel confused, blamed and overwhelmed. As a result, the person may become depressed.

Having cautioned you in these matters, I should also add that although depression sounds like it would be horrible and something to be avoided, it can be a good thing if handled appropriately. When depression sets in, again be empathetic. Stay with them, listen, and remind them they are no longer alone.

Another caution I strongly recommend is not to touch them, unless you first get their permission. Victims generally don't like being touched, and it could cause them to go into those flashback modes.

Also, when going through a depression perhaps as part of the grieving process, the victim often feels extremely dirty. This can be another reason why they don't want you to touch them. They may also try to push you away out of fear that you would see them as being weak because they feel so vulnerable. They may yell at you or just use silence to block you and everyone else out. If they back off and you don't hear from them, the longest I recommend leaving them to their own devices before reaching out to them is two days. It's important that they don't feel alone or like they have to carry this burden themselves. Even though they may be the ones who cut off communications when they were in a triggered state, they may feel rejected by you because they felt threatened or attacked by you. Also, when reaching out to them, remind them that their triggered state will pass. The most helpful words to me have been, "You deserve life and to be safe and happy." Usually, it will be hard for victims to believe these words at first, but if they are repeatedly re-affirmed, they will begin to sink in. Also, reminding the victims, "You don't want him to win by taking your life!" is also a helpful approach. All victims want to be strong. Your reminding them that their successful recovery from their trauma is the best revenge can help them find the strength to achieve their recovery.

### **Peeling back the wallpaper**

Every victim wants to be that survivor. They want to be seen and heard. It's time that we listen and help them find their courage to win the ugly battle that has been forced upon them. Remember, abuse rarely is just a single event. It is usually a prolonged, horrendous experience.

I have always found the aftermath to be harder than the actual abuse. During the event, the abused are often numb from the shock of being attacked, and it isn't until after the trauma that they try to process what happened. We need to be there for them during these times. They need to know they're



not alone. It's important that we peel back their wallpaper and allow that moonlight to shine through the darkness.

Understanding their body language and communicating with emotional intelligence will help guide these victims to the healing light – both external and internal. Encouraging and assuring them that they will get through this, we can help them to find that survivor within, giving them strength to wake each day and to thrive.

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### Corresponding Author:

Edited by Barbara E. Stone, PhD, LISW, DCEP  
 1817 State Route 83, Unit 513  
 Millersburg, OH 44654  
 330-440-4088  
 Email: [contact@souldetective.net](mailto:contact@souldetective.net)

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