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A 34 years old widow and mother in difficult living conditions

A case study from England

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I have selected a client that I have had since December 1991 for this case presentation. Her name is Tina and the study also involves her daughter Sarah. Their story is complex and they have both needed a considerable amount of support and encouragement.

A) Interpersonal communication

Biographical situation

Tina is a widow, she is 36 years old and has one daughter Sarah who is 6 years old. Tina and Sarah live together in a ground floor Council flat in a large block close to the Hospital. Tina is unemployed and does a considerable amount of work for the parent teacher association at Sarah's school. She feels she has a duty of care for her mother, also a widow, who lives in an alms house near the school that Sarah attends. All three members of this family are receiving outpatient care in the hospital each under the care of a different consultant. Tina has a large number of friends locally many of who are single parents and live in rented accommodation. Generally their standards of nutrition are not healthy, many of them smoke cigarettes, though Tina does not, and alcohol is frequently abused among this group.

Biographical processes

Tina has a number of brothers and sisters with whom she has little contact. She has minimal links with her husband's family because two sons from his first marriage physically harmed both Tina and Sarah in a family fight just hours after his death. Tina finds making relationships difficult due to the traumas of her childhood, compounded by the early death of her husband just as she was beginning to trust him and to enjoy caring for their baby Sarah. Currently Tina is tentatively beginning a relationship with John who was widowed some seven years ago. Tina has a number of relationships with other health care professionals particularly a male social worker of whom she is very suspicious, a paediatric nurse who advises her on the care which Sarah needs as she suffers from chronic asthma. Tina

trusts these professionals with only a limited amount of her own feelings and experiences. She has healthier relationships with the other members of the chaplaincy team both men and women.

Emotional relations

Tina sometimes experiences great difficulty in coping with her emotions. She finds anger very hard to bear except from Sarah so she works hard to protect herself from her mother's anger, and will apologize to me before I know what it is she might have to apologize about. Tina was abused by a number of her brothers when she was a child. She continues to feel embarrassed and ashamed of these events and is inclined to blame herself for them. Consequently she has poor self esteem though she is gaining confidence through her work with me and through her friendships, especially with John. She and Sarah sometimes switch roles with Sarah making the adult decisions about how to spend their time and money. On two occasions recently Sarah has had to summon help when Tina has been in severe pain at home.

Roles

Tina's major roles until recently, have been widow and mother. Her husband was twenty seven years older than her, and died at the age of fifty eight, just two days after undergoing major abdominal surgery to remove a cancerous growth. He had worked for many years as a bus inspector locally, and Tina continues to receive free travel on the buses as part of his pension. She is constantly reminded of her state by the comments and questions of those who worked the buses with her husband.

Tina requires a lot of affirmation to help her believe that she is a good mother for Sarah. Sarah enjoys Tina's company and when Tina is free of pain they do many interesting things together. They met John on the first holiday they have ever had, last August, at a holiday camp. Tina tries to be a caring daughter, but feels she fails this because she cannot forget that it was her mother's constant absence from the house that left her brothers with many opportunities to sexually abuse her and her younger sister. Tina was frequently punished by her parents for misdeeds that were later found to have been her eldest brother's fault. Tina's mother has been a heavy smoker all her adult life, now it appears that her mother may have a severe lung disease, possibly cancer. Tina believes she ought to feel sorry for her mother, but actually thinks she is suffering her just deserts.

Tina is tentative in her relations with professional people, both at the hospital and at Sarah's school, though she is gaining confidence and is beginning to articulate her own and Sarah's needs more clearly. She was reluctant to accept a proposal that she be the Chairman of the PTA at Sarah's school, but is fulfilling that role adequately, with support of staff and friends.

B) Personal context

Historic conditions

Tina was the seventh of nine children, two of who died in infancy, leaving four older than her and two younger. She feels that she was never seen as an individual person in that family and made many attempts to run away from home, usually

being found by her eldest brother. She also tried several times to take her life but her attempts went unnoticed.

Tina experienced most affection from her maternal grandmother and later from her father.

She suffered repeated abuse from her eldest brother, sometimes with his friends joining in. When she was sixteen she was assaulted in the street by a stranger who then ran away. The next day a police officer called at her home when she was alone there, saying he had some information about her attacker, but he also sexually assaulted her.

Tina did not achieve very much during the time she was at school, and left at the earliest opportunity to work in a local baker's shop. Her future husband was a regular customer there, and he gradually began to protect her from the inappropriate advances of some of the other male customers.

After their marriage they had some difficulty with Tina's parents who seemed to resent her husband's good influence on her, and her happiness.

Sadly Tina's happiness was interrupted by six deaths in the families in the next three years, including the late miscarriage of Tina's first baby. By the time Sarah was born in 1989 Tina's husband was experiencing some pain from the cancer, and he died when Sarah was fifteen months old, while Tina and Sarah were visiting him in hospital.

Tina did not know how to handle her stepson's anger and after their attack on her she took Sarah to live in her mother's home, thinking this would be a temporary arrangement, but ended up spending four years and six months there, in very cramped conditions.

Economy

Tina's husband left her a share of his pension and the small house that they had lived in together. Tina soon sold this house realising that she could not live alone there as it was so close to the hospital where he died. The sale realized approximately £40,000, which Tina has still got in a Building Society account. Tina and Sarah live easily within Tina's weekly income at present, and Tina frequently buys presents for Sarah. They have meals out places like McDonald's rather than more expensive restaurants, Tina does not smoke, because of Sarah's asthma, and only drinks wine or sherry occasionally.

Societal and political relations

One of the tasks that I have seen as important for Tina, has been to enable her to play a full part in adult life, to make choices for herself and Sarah, to claim what is hers by right, and to use her talents. Tina remains naive politically, and uninformed about wider debates surrounding issues like health care.

Cultural values

I find this a difficult area to comment upon as Tina is not often interested enough to pursue any, conversation in this area except in so far as she takes Sarah to the cinema occasionally. Most books and magazines in their flat are also related to Sarah's needs.

C) Religious and spiritual forces

Tina spent some of the happiest hours of her childhood at Sunday School and later at Girls Brigade at her local Methodist Church. She still regularly visits one of the leaders, now retired. However even those leaders never followed through their promise to support her at home, and despite saying they would visit, they never did. Tina continues to wrestle with ideas of a God of Love who allows children to suffer as she did, and who “allows” her husband to die just at the time she was learning to trust him, and when their daughter was so young. Tina has begun to think about practising and nurturing the little faith she has, and Sarah has begun attending a local Sunday School regularly. I do not know what effect Tina’s new relationship with John will have on her religious and spiritual life.