Denise's Story on post traumatic stress disorder

I was nearing the end of a five week solo journey through Spain and Portugal in May/June 1989 when I decided to take a short-cut through a civic park in the middle of downtown Madrid. Since it was mid-day on a weekday, and the park was neither large nor very forested, I figured it would be safe to take a walk through. Plus, I had become somewhat accustomed to the ‘macho', aggressive approach that most Spanish men used, and felt quite confident that I could handle any problems. I was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and ¾ length leggings despite the hot weather.

Within perhaps 25 metres of the opposite exit wall area, I was approached by a medium-build Hispanic-looking male, probably in his 20s, and dressed quite well. He asked me one of the standard English "pick-up lines", pointing at his wrist, "what time is it? I politely and firmly responded that I didn't know and continued walking towards the park exit. I heard him running behind me, he then quickly picked me up, putting one arm between my legs and up my groin area, and the other completely around my neck. I was suddenly both off the ground and, with my back pinned against his torso, unable to tell if he was holding a knife to my throat.

This few seconds is a little murky still, but I think he started carrying me towards some bushes, and my mind registered that I was probably en route to being raped and/or killed. All that came to my head then was how upset my mother would be. Automatically, my right elbow swung out sharply into his ribcage, and he dropped me. I quickly walked towards the nearby park exit, and once turned around to say firmly and loudly "f..k off", at which point I saw him standing with his trousers around his ankles, masturbating. All this in broad daylight in the city centre.

After a few hours of wandering around in what was probably shock, I returned to the pensione I was staying at, ran to my room and burst into tears. I then realized that I had to report this offence to the police, so that hopefully they could investigate and apprehend him. He was obviously a danger to other women too.

By the time I arrived at the central Madrid detachment, there was a long-ish line of travelers, like myself, waiting to be served. From what I could ascertain, the majority of them were there to report thefts of documents, bags, and so on. As we were shuffling slowly forward, two officers escorted in a very assertive woman who, because of the manner in which she was dressed, led me to think she might have been a prostitute. Once my turn at the counter came, I tried to explain my situation with the aid of an English-Spanish dictionary, but no amount of deciphering worked; the officer refused to give me a statement form to file my report. Involuntarily, I broke into tears again, wandered outside and sat down on the steps. The Spanish woman in flaming fuschia and heels had evidently been released, and though she was unable to speak any English, sat down beside me and gently put her arm around me. I hopped a flight home to London (England) the following day.

In retrospect, while it was probably in part a communication breakdown, I also believe that the culture of ‘maleness' there led that police office to think that whatever happened, I'd asked for it. This refusal proved to be crucial in my "forgetting" the experience for years.

I moved to Vancouver in 1998, from Victoria, BC. May and June of 2000 brought upheaval: I left my job, (mutually) decided to split up with my long-term boyfriend, also gave notice on our shared apartment and went traveling to a world cycling conference in Amsterdam. I'm still unsure

what triggered the symptoms, perhaps too much change, and too much stress. Around August that year I began to have mild panic attacks... except I didn't really know what they were. Shortly afterwards I became very nervous, unable to sleep properly and then not think very clearly. Soon, I started to feel a little ‘crazy', and quite raw, but I had no idea what was causing it.

Luckily, my former boyfriend and I were still quite close; he'd seen an advertisement in the Vancouver Courier which he gave me saying he thought the symptoms matched me. The UBC Dept of Psychiatry was looking for people who had experienced a sexual assault and may have been suffering from ‘Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" to participate in a study, and listed a series of behavioral symptoms. After my initial "denial", I realized that the indicators broadly applied to me.
It was difficult to make that first step towards counseling, in part because I'd never been through any therapy before and had no idea if it really would help.

The "in-take" interview with some of the program's researchers was the most upsetting element of the whole treatment process as it required talking through the experience in detail for the first time since it had happened, about 11 years earlier. It temporarily elevated and escalated feelings of fright, anxiety, panic and distress, which I‘d been unprepared for, and left me in a higher, rawer state of fear than I'd been in since the incident. I learned afterwards that this kind of reaction can be quite "normal" and though it was frightening, it became evident that it was the beginning of the necessary healing process for me---to bring the long-hidden, underlying memories and associated reactions to the surface so that they could be reviewed, gently discussed and slowly mended.

It was a relief to finally be in some kind of structured program that emphasized working through the anxiety and not just covering it up, or sedating it. The psychologist described her method in the first session as being "cognitive behavioral", how that particular system worked and what to possibly expect. Over the next few months she guided me through (I think) weekly sessions of an hour in length where I continued to "talk through" the experience in detail, noting things that came up along the way. Though emotionally and psychologically painful to begin with, her help and support eventually brought me to the point where the experience itself became substantially less problematic and intrusive.

I had also done some ‘discovery' on my own, by approaching the Vancouver Police Department in a similar way to my initial contact in Madrid. Walking in off the street and asking how they dealt with reports of sexual assaults that had just happened. In talking with an officer on the phone with the Sexual Offense Squad, he explained even before I talked about my experience that it was quite common for women (primarily) to wait 5, 10 years or longer before coming forward with reports, and in some cases, showing symptoms. Whether or not this could be proven quantitatively as true or not, at least it helped me to feel a bit more "normal", and not as crazy. As well, a younger woman receptionist and I had a long discussion about the merits of therapy for assault when I walked into the VPD station at Main and Hastings. Her guidance had unfortunately not been as healing a process (another type of therapy) as mine, and so she was still trying to make sense of her experience.

Some types of exercise were also a great complementary healing technique for me. Throughout the most difficult and stressful times of my therapy I continued to cycle to work and back (about an hour and half per day), and on days when I had an appointment, this extra ‘angst' was usually burnt off en route home. As well, I took a few very empowering self-defense courses which were tailored especially for women, ‘WenDo', and incorporated elements of discussion, legal aspects

and theory along with the practical techniques. I found this to be a wonderful, affirming and encouraging part of my rehabilitation and something I would recommend to any woman who would like to build up her own internal strength and self-confidence. Part way through the training I learned that one ‘WenDo' technique, a short sharp elbow to the ribs, was what I had instinctively done to protect myself. For whatever reason, it had definitely worked!

One very important element that was a considerable set-back during this period was a friendship I had been developing with a man, that I had thought might deepen into something more, but for some reason abruptly and brutally changed. The trust I was starting to slowly build up again was shattered, and the timing of his rude and rather cruel behavior pushed me way off course; it was very disorienting and debilitating. Probably in part because of the timing of this episode, it's taken years longer to try and heal what was initially a close-to-mended wound. Most of that growth has occurred through self-exploration, some other types of therapy and substantial help from friends. And, I have since also learned that this man has some very dire emotional, psychological, personal and professional problems to contend with. I hope he has been able to get assistance for his distress.

In retrospect I can see that if it hadn't been for this more recent, damaging interpersonal situation, which was once again compounded by a total refusal to listen or discuss some misunderstandings, I would have come through the initial therapy almost healed. However, even that short period of professional, caring guidance and tentative self-discovery was enough to provide a great boost, shake some things loose and get past a significant subconscious block I didn't even know I had.

The types of treatment (both structured and informal) I chose worked well for me, and may or may not be for everyone. ‘Cognitive Behavioral Therapy' is quite quick, assertive and forces you to confront very directly what may be a very traumatic situation; initially it made me wonder what I was doing, walking back through the difficulty repeatedly. It's so much easier to avoid pain, and very human to want to do so. If actually opening up and trying to heal the wound is important, and this approach sounds possible, I can recommend it with the highest regard. A professional, supportive practitioner can make all the difference too, as can other external activities to complement the healing process. Whatever I chose, I made sure I was relatively comfortable with it and stopped if it became too difficult. Sometimes the need for ‘processing' came at unexpected times, and needed to be honoured. Not once did I use any drugs (other than my morning cup of organic, fair-trade coffee, and the odd glass of Merlot) and am tremendously grateful that this was never necessary.

I'm still tying up one or two loose ends, and a little sore in a few areas, but SO much better off for having recognized the need for treatment and getting it at a crucial time. I feel extremely fortunate that I had access to the psychological therapy and general assistance at and since autumn 2000. In most ways I have been able to lead a happy, productive and healthy life where otherwise I believe I might have required medication, or perhaps even hospitalization to deal with a series of symptoms that were both frightening and incapacitating. If such treatment programs as "cognitive behavioral" therapy were more readily and widely available (funding is crucially short for anxiety disorders), then I firmly believe that many more British Columbians could benefit from the long-term healing it can provide. The kind of difference this care can make is incredible.