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The psychological rehabilitation of victims of modern slavery:

Modern slavery involves the exploitation of human being using varying methods, but the psychological impact on the victim bears similarities. Research into the mental health impact of victims is in its infancy. However, in a systematic review that we carried out in coordination with the Freedom Fund, we found that early psychological research has indicated that there are high levels of traumatic events experienced by victims of modern slavery in many contexts. The conditions in which the survivor was held, the experiences that they went through during their enslavement, and other psychological factors including perception of personal freedom within captivity and support after release influence mental health. High rates of mental health problems have been found in adults, and in children. In children, the psychological literature tells us that early experiences of trauma are more catastrophic than when experienced by an adult. Healthy psychological development in children is dependent on the availability of protective attachment figures. Decades of research into psychological development teaches us that early trauma often has catastrophic implications for mental health. When children become the victims of slave owners, their present and future mental health, their ability to function and fulfil meaningful lives is at significant risk.

In my work with victims of modern slavery with Vivo International and at the Helen Bamber Foundation in London, I have worked with former child soldiers, victims of human trafficking exploited for multiple purposes and those exploited in bonded labour. Whilst these are often described as different forms of modern slavery, in themselves, each category can involve multiple types of exploitation. Former child soldiers may not have necessarily been fighting and may have worked as sex slaves or have been forced to collect food or have duties within the camp, and share commonalities with victims of trafficking who are sexually exploited, and those forced into domestic servitude. In terms of psychological damage, these distinctions between types of slavery do not offer us important insights into the likely impact on mental health. Every survivor is unique, and it is the idiosyncratic experiences that occur within slavery that are important, as well as the person's prior history and the response they receive once they have escaped. Still, research has shown that trauma related disorders are highly prevalent in this group.

So when we are working with survivors of modern slavery, we are working with people who have experienced multiple traumatic events. We know from research that the more traumatic experiences that you have, the more likely you are to suffer from Post-traumatic stress disorder, as the brain struggles to put into context these events. This is true of anyone, and equally applies to victims of modern slavery who experienced trauma. But in my clinical experience assessing and treating victims of modern slavery, there are also other psychological difficulties that need to be resolved as well. Some of the people that I have worked with have been enslaved for years. They have had no control over their basic needs. They have been dependent on those who control them for the basic things they need for survival, food, clothing, shelter. They have not had the choice about whether they can go to the toilet or have a shower. Year after year this has an enormous impact on an individual's sense of self, autonomy, self-efficacy and ability to relate to, and trust others. Clients that I have worked with have struggled to make even simple decisions after years of having no control, choice seems alien. Many survivors who have experienced abusive relationships with slave owners talk about having difficulties trusting others, and yet have significant problems keeping themselves safe, often becoming involved in other exploitative relationships once they have escaped the slavery situation. Psychologists understand this in terms of attachment style, the idea being that

traumatic attachments with abusive partners set templates for future relationships. It is no coincidence that those not born into slavery, but tricked into it, for example victims of trafficking, often have histories of traumatic relationships during childhood. Slave owners are able to select those whose early trauma within relationships with caregivers or others predispose them to an inability to assess risk within relationships, and whose psychological need to receive interest and affection from others means that they are more willing to disregard or fail to notice early warning signs of abuse in a relationship.

So what do survivors of modern slavery need for effective rehabilitation? Firstly, we need to avoid generalisations and assumptions. Every survivor is unique and has different needs. The psychological needs of victims need to be properly assessed by mental health professionals who are trained and experienced in working with those in abusive relationships and trauma, and who are able to take both individual, systemic and cultural factors into consideration. Secondly, survivors of modern slavery, in whatever form, are entitled to evidence based care like anyone else, rather than programmes which are delivered without reference to current research into the impact of such experiences or effective rehabilitation techniques. Survivors can offer key insights and should be consulted about the feasibility and face validity of therapeutic programmes, and be recruited onto research teams investigating the impact of such therapies. Finally, therapy in isolation will never be as effective as holistic packages of care which address the multiple factors which contribute to further enslavement, be that for psychological, economical, or political legal reasons. Former child soldiers, those forced to work as prostitutes or in domestic servitude, are heavily stigmatised within their communities, which can significantly increase their chances of being re-enslaved. In addition to psychological rehabilitation, community, societal and political interventions are required in order to reduce the risk of further exploitation, and finally to bring an end to modern slavery.