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The MASOC/MATSA conference and thoughts on why we do this work

By David Prescott, LICSW

The partnership between MASOC and the Massachusetts chapter of ATSA took place last week in Marlborough, MA. Now in its third decade, this conference has become one of the most successful of its kind in the world. This year's presenters came from as far away as Australia and Sweden. Participants traveled from California and Iceland. Just as significantly, these people were not just coming for the first time; they're regulars.

It's hard to describe what makes the MASOC-MATSA experience work so well. Marlborough is not close to Massachusetts' most desirable destinations. Not only is the hotel not the best in the world; it probably isn't even the best hotel in Marlborough. Outsiders naturally wonder: what is it that makes the experience so special?

In the end, the MASOC/MATSA conference magic comes down to the people who organize and participate in it. Before his untimely passing a few years ago, MASOC founder and pioneer Steve Bengis was the most outward-facing representative of the conference. He would stand for hours at a spot equidistant from the registration tables, hotel elevators, and walkway to the exhibitors, welcoming one and all. As much as Steve is missed, it is remarkable how the conference organizers, almost all of whom have been around since the beginning, continue to create the same atmosphere. It is one that isn't just welcoming, but about coming home.

There were numerous offerings this year. Personally, I attended an excellent intensive full-day presentation by Russ Pratt on adolescents and pornography, in which he described his "savvy-consumer" model. It is a framework for how adults can guide youth through the ubiquitous, porn-related dilemmas and controversies that they experience as they grow up. Robert Kinscherff gave an excellent half-day pre-conference workshop on neurobiology, human development, and attachment. Keith



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SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.

Ramsey presented an excellent overview of mindfulness research and application within broader empirically supported frameworks. Perhaps the most dynamic of all was Laurie Guidry's keynote. Many outside of the Northeastern US don't know just how highly regarded – and loved – Laurie is. She has been a teacher to many up-and-coming professionals. Her keynote focused on the need for all professionals in our field (as she explained it) to build on the #metoo-movement momentum and break through the reactive noise that pervades efforts to inform public conversation and policy. At her invitation, dozens of people who have survived sexual abuse joined her on stage in solidarity.

In the end, the conference experience always comes down to people. For me, the turning point came in a quiet side conversation with Alissa Ackerman at a large dinner gathering. We both agreed that after too many months of working at a breakneck pace, we both felt immensely restored simply being together with so many people united in a common cause.

I then returned home only to engage in dialog with others outside of our field. I took part in a social-media discussion about honoring those victimized by abuse and oppression. One person felt that cultivating compassion for those who have caused harm and oppression sends the wrong message to those who have been abused. My point was that the emerging consensus in research is that they are often the same people. In the end, my thinking about our work, refreshed by my colleagues at the MASOC-MATSA conference is that it is time not only to influence the direction of public dialog and policy, but that we can do so by asking the right questions based on our empirical and practical knowledge. For example:

- Can we reduce oppression and harm by understanding those who cause oppression and harm?
- To what extent are those who have harmed and oppressed others willing to change? How effectively can we help them if we don't work to understand and have compassion for them?
- Are those who harm and oppress ambivalent about their own actions, or at least those actions that are within their awareness?
- Can we improve our understanding and work by developing compassion for them?
- How do we reconcile the disparities when those who have harmed and oppressed have themselves experienced harm and oppression?
- Under what conditions can/should we be compassionate towards those who have harmed or oppressed?
- Do people who harm and oppress also suffer?
- Have those who have harmed and oppressed also experienced harm and oppression as a result of their own actions?
- Should we not use treatment to (at least partially) address this harm?
- Are there some types of human being that are simply irredeemable and with whom we shouldn't use treatment ever? If so, who are they?
- If we decide that there are some human beings to whom we should not provide treatment, at what point do we begin to throw other humans away or kick the solutions further on down the road into the future?
- Under what conditions do we begin to view other human beings as unworthy of assistance? Do we then risk creating our own forms of harm and oppression?