

Greenwich doctor aids trauma victims' recovery

By KERRI A. TOPALIAN

Shortly after her mother's death, a woman in her 20s was having recurring flashbacks of her mother as she appeared shortly before she died. The young woman was also having great difficulty eating, sleeping and was extremely anxious. In an effort to help deal with these difficulties, she sought treat-

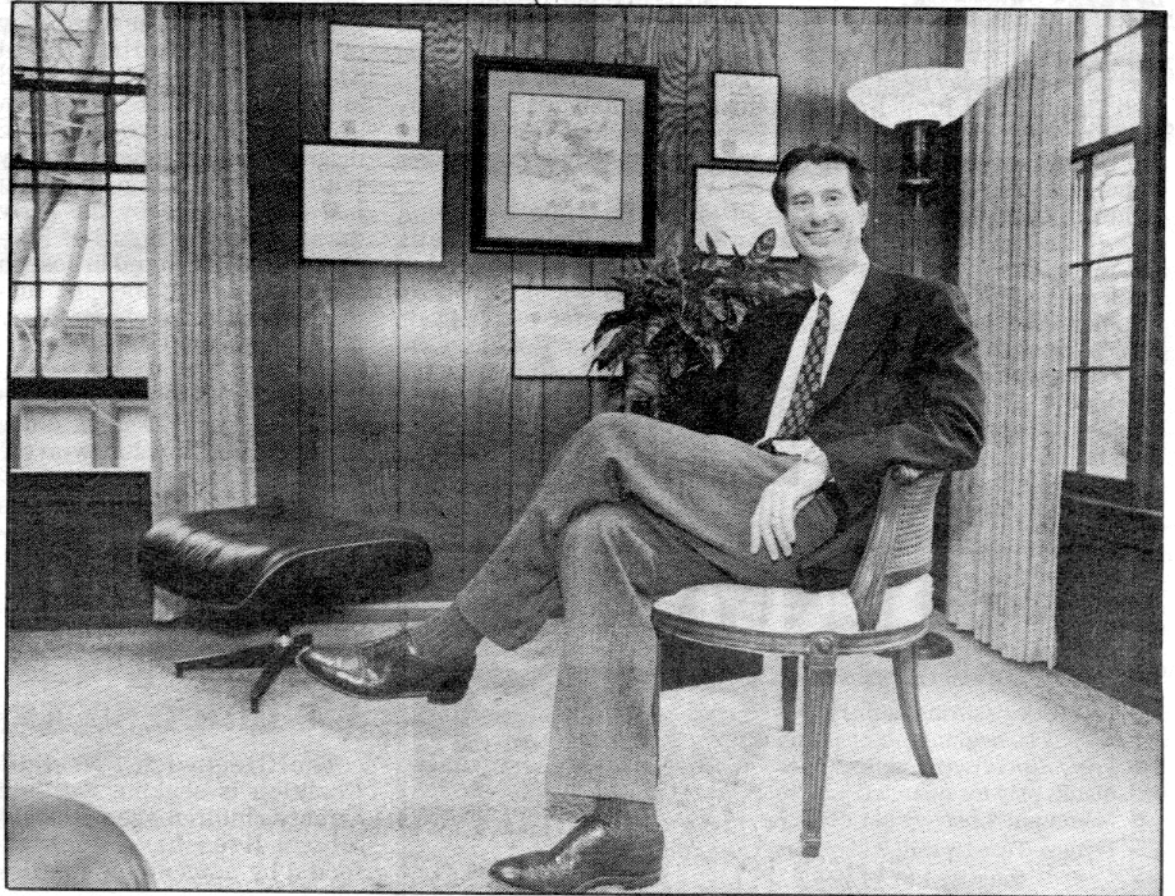
ety: she had been sexually abused by her brother when she was a small child. She recalled that the images of the abuse first surfaced while she was in college but quickly faded and became dormant.

According to Dr. Rousell, it isn't unusual for someone to recall an early traumatic experience after they experience a traumatic event later in life, such as the death of a loved one, rape or a miscarriage.

If they've experienced trauma as children, they could find these adult traumas igniting memories of those childhood experiences. "You find yourself dealing with both at once and you feel totally discombobulated and disconnected with yourself," Dr. Rousell explained.

NECTR was founded five years ago by Dr. Rousell, a psychiatrist with a local private practice. He discovered that there was a need for specialized therapy after learning many of his clients had experienced and survived traumatic experiences, either as an adult or as children.

He realized that the only way his clients could get well and overcome a current condition was to deal with the earlier trauma. "I think if the traumatic origins of the problems are ignored or not dealt with, a person can have partial recovery," said Dr. Rousell. "Complete recovery, in my experience, requires dealing with the traumatic origins, whether the origins are domestic abuse as an adult or sexual abuse as a child that's been repressed."



Dr. Charles Rousell in his office at the Northeast Center for Trauma Recovery.

Photo by David Gunn

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— Dr. Charles Rousell

ment at the Northeast Center for Trauma Recovery, or NECTR, at 38 Lake Avenue in Greenwich.

NECTR is an outpatient facility for survivors of sexual, physical or emotional trauma. It is located across from Greenwich Hospital and offers individual, family and group therapy.

It was during her therapy sessions at NECTR with Dr. Charles Rousell, one of the center's co-founders, that the woman discovered the root of her anxi-

The ages of NECTR's clients range from 13 to 80. Most have experienced sexual, physical or emotional trauma or all three at some point in their lives.

"One of the amazing things is that trauma memories are as vivid today as they were 75 years ago because they don't dim with age. If there's a trigger that resembles to some extent the original abuse, the memory

comes as a flashback, it breaks through," said Dr. Rousell.

He added that sexual abuse as a child is in many ways the most shattering, because that is the time when trust is at its most critical developing stage. Usually when sexual abuse happens at a young age, a child's capacity to trust is destroyed and this will effect the rest of their life. Often therapy

is the most effective way for children to restore their ability to trust others.

Repressed memories of traumatic experiences are not uncommon because the mind, in a protective way, will automatically and naturally disconnect a person from a traumatic experience even seconds after an incident occurs.

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In some cases, Dr. Rousell explained, the mind will partially disconnect a person from an incident, leaving the victim with a hazy or dreamlike memory of something happening.

NECTR offers trauma-focused therapy by skilled professionals to help clarify or bring the hazy details of a traumatic experience to the surface. The memory is enhanced through hypnosis.

Dr. Rousell emphasized that each of the staff members is trained so that they do not implant false ideas as they work with the client to bring memories to the conscious.

"There are a lot of ways the memory can be contaminated. One of the important things about NECTR is all of our therapists are meticulous about this not happening. We keep the process clean and sterile, we do not contaminate it just the way a good surgeon won't contaminate an operation on a physical body with dirt or germs. So what comes forth is actually from the person," he said. "Un-

der those circumstances, if as a child, a person did experience some kind of action that violates their body sexually or physically, studies have shown that the memory of the action perpetrated against them will come through in uncontaminated form. Objective details, like who it was, might be fuzzy or even inconsistent, but knowing that it happened will come through."

There is a staff of eight, including two psychiatrists, three therapists with Masters of Social Work degrees, one psychologist, one therapist with a Ph.D. of Ministry, one art therapist. NECTR is the only such facility located between New York and New Haven.

"One of the reasons I put everyone together rather than continuing to do this work myself is there is such a need for competent, skilled treatment for these problems," he said.

He added that NECTR is in the early stages of developing group therapy for its clients who are adult survivors of childhood trauma and their families, adults with dissociative disorders, which include

most forms of multiple personalities. Currently there aren't any such groups led by specialized therapists with specific therapeutic objectives in lower Fairfield and Westchester Counties.

"Spouses and children of adult survivors can be over-

whelmed and not really know what's going on or how to deal and cope with it, so they need a lot of help from our family therapist. That also helps our survivors, because they are better understood by their spouses, who can then be more of an emotional support. It can

also help survivors handle their own feelings. The marital relationship and the family can be preserved and strengthened," Dr. Rousell said.

For more information about the Northeast Center for Trauma Recovery, call 661-9342.