Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a problem affecting millions of individuals, with a prevalence rate of 28% to 30% for women (Cobia, Sobansky, & Ingram, 2004) and 14% for men (Breire & Elliott, 2003). Because of the psychological trauma associated with CSA and the potential impact on the survivor’s sexuality, a couple’s relationship satisfaction may be reduced and survivors may experience difficulty in maintaining healthy intimate relationships. How CSA impacts an individual has been studied extensively but its effect on committed couple relationships receives much less attention in the literature. Additionally, very few studies have incorporated the non-abused partner’s perspective in the relationship and no current research has been reported on healthy couples with a history of CSA. The following is a qualitative research study exploring how eight couples reporting average to above average dyadic functioning and a history of CSA with one partner, override the potential negative impacts of CSA on their relationship. The experiences of healthy couples were studied through a phenomenological approach gathering data from both partners using dyadic interviews in a semi-structured format.

The major findings in this study include the following: (A) the impact of childhood sexual abuse on intimate relationships; (B) developing and sustaining trust; (C) developing and sustaining communication/working through conflict; (D) developing and sustaining sexual intimacy; and (E) overcoming the impact of CSA. Discussion of findings include a
comparison to existing research on CSA and couple functioning, suggested future research, the clinical implications including how psychotherapists could improve therapy with CSA couples, and the limitations of the study.