



RASASC
rape and sexual abuse
support centre
RAPE CRISIS
SOUTH LONDON

The impacts of childhood sexual abuse

Helpline: 0808 802 9999
Telephone: 0208 683 3311
Email: info@rasasc.org.uk

It is beginning to be acknowledged that childhood sexual abuse happens a lot more frequently than most people believed, or wanted to believe, in the past.

Childhood sexual abuse involves an abuse of power and an abuse of trust - the abuser being an adult, or, sometimes, an older child.

As children we look to adults and older children for guidance about how to 'be' in the world, to show us what is acceptable and what is wrong. If a manipulative adult / older child abuses that trust it is extremely difficult for the child to disobey. Grooming is common practice amongst abusers who will spend time and effort insidiously compelling a child to do as they are told.

Power and Control

Perpetrators sexually abuse others because they want to feel power and control. They know what they are doing is wrong. This is why they might tell you not to tell anyone or try and make you believe that it is OK. Abusers may also use threats, bribes and intimidation to ensure secrecy. He may have been an adult or an older child - a relative, family friend, a neighbour or a peer. More than likely he was someone you thought you could trust. Abusers have had a lot of practice at manipulating other adults into believing that they are really 'nice' guys. This can be very confusing for children who cannot understand that their parent is friendly with the abuser and may result in feeling like you won't be believed.

Common feelings

You may have experienced some of the following impacts of sexual abuse:

- recurrent depression or anxiety
- panic attacks, phobias and/or flashbacks
- anger and feelings of worthlessness
- self-blame and feelings of guilt and shame
- difficulties trusting others
- substance dependency
- eating disorders such as bulimia, anorexia and compulsive over-eating
- difficulties with intimacy and relationships
- sleep disturbance such as nightmares and insomnia

Sometimes, a child who is being abused finds a way to escape in the only way they can: in their heads, where they can escape their physical environment and the abuse by blocking it out, or dissociating. When children dissociate they put the trauma they are suffering into compartments in their minds, and create personalities within themselves to deal with the trauma - to bear the pain the child cannot.

An adult who has learnt to dissociate as a child is likely to experience time loss, memory gaps and a sense of unreality as well as, possibly, alternative states of consciousness or personalities.



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Survivors who dissociate are neither mad nor suffering from schizophrenia - dissociation is a creative attempt at self-protection enabling survival of the trauma of abuse.

Talking about feelings

Surviving childhood sexual abuse means you are likely to find yourself experiencing all sorts of painful and uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. If you have people around you who you trust to be non-judgemental and accepting, try to talk to them. Lots of women find contacting our helpline (0808 802 9999) a useful first step, as they are able to talk through their experience and feelings in a completely confidential and safe space with a trained specialist support worker. Abuse thrives on secrecy and speaking out and acknowledging what happened to you can be a very important part of healing.

Be kind to yourself

It is important to understand that however you have been affected by childhood sexual abuse, and whatever your feelings are, it is okay to feel however you do - your feelings are totally individual and natural. It's important to be kind to yourself, accept whatever support feels right for you. Don't expect too much of yourself and think you should "get over it" or "forget it". You did not deserve to be abused but you do deserve to be nurtured now. Childhood sexual abuse is not something that can be easily forgotten, but if it feels right, you can work through your feelings with a specialist counsellor and learn to put it behind you and recover from this.

The length of time you need to help you recover is personal to you but talking things through with a specialist counsellor is an option for you to consider.

Try to hang on to the knowledge that you will get through this - you deserve to, and you will. Sexual violence is never acceptable; no one has a right over your body. Guilt, blame and shame belong to the perpetrator, not to you. Remember, your needs and feelings are important - look after yourself.

Rape Crisis Centres are a phone call away and will be able to help you recover. You can find your local Rape Crisis Centre at: <http://rapecrisis.org.uk/centres.php>.

Our helpline is open 365 days a year from 12-2.30pm and 7-9.30pm. It is also open Monday to Friday from 3-5.30pm. Call us on 0808 802 9999. Support is here.