

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE AND ITS EFFECTS (Information for supporters of survivors)

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. Sexual Abuse includes the following:

Being cuddled or kissed in a way that left the survivor feeling uncomfortable.

- ◆ Being bathed in a way that felt uncomfortable.
- ◆ Having to look / touch / masturbate other people's genitals.
- ◆ Having their own breasts or genitals touched.
- ◆ Having to pose for photographs/videos of a sexual nature.
- ◆ Being shown sexual films, and/or having to listen to sexual talk.
- ◆ Having their vagina or anus penetrated by a penis, finger or object.
- ◆ Being forced to perform oral sex, or having it performed on them.

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 and coerces a child into a sexual situation, possibly saying it is right, or that something bad will happen if the child does not do as they are told, it is hard, if not impossible for the child to disobey even when it results in distress and confusion in the child's mind. 'Grooming' a child is common practice amongst abusers who will spend time and effort insidiously compelling a child to do as she or he is told. Often bribes or threats are used to maintain compliance.

It is also important to bear in mind that the survivor *may* have experienced sensations of physical pleasure during the abuse because a child's body will react uncontrollably to stimulus and this can add to the feelings of shame, guilt and confusion. The abuse may have been the only source of anything akin to affection that the survivor experienced as a child.

In determining whether the actions of an adult or older child can be defined as sexual abuse, it is necessary to understand the intention and motivation behind the behaviour - watching a child in the bath is not necessarily sexually orientated or abusive. Also, sexual abuse has nothing to do with 'sex play', which can often be indulged in quite normally by consenting same age children, and is a part of their learning experience.

A survivor of childhood sexual abuse will be severely affected if not traumatised by childhood sexual abuse. They may find that they have been affected by some (maybe a lot) of the following:

- Recurrent depression or anxiety; Psychosomatic illnesses
- Memories of the abuse in vivid detail, or blocked memories
- Panic attacks,
- Phobias, Obsessive Compulsive Disorders, Flashbacks,
- Feelings of anger and shame and/or worthless and damaged.
- Self-harming - cutting or burning themselves, drinking too much for example.
- Feeling sick and afraid hearing the abuser's voice or a voice that is similar
- Feeling confused about what or why it happened, perhaps blaming themselves

Other effects of sexual abuse include:

- Substance abuse,
- Eating disorders: bulimia, anorexia, compulsive over-eating,
- Difficulties relating to intimacy and relationships,
- Sexual difficulties,
- Sleep disturbance: nightmares, insomnia, sleep-walking,
- Hyper-vigilance; extremely sensitive hearing and other senses.
- Not trusting other people
- Very low self esteem / feeling worthless

Sometimes a child who is being abused sexually finds a way to escape in the only way she can: in her head she escapes her 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 other personalities within themselves to deal with the trauma that they are undergoing - to bear the pain that the child cannot. An adult who has learnt to dissociate when a child is likely to experience time loss, memory gaps and a sense of unreality, as well as, possibly, alternative states of consciousness / personalities. People who dissociate are neither mad nor suffering from schizophrenia - dissociation is a creative attempt at self protection enabling survival of the trauma of abuse.

If someone you know was sexually abused as a child you may recognise some of the effects mentioned above. Maybe it feels quite frightening, both for them, and for you, to see, written down, all the possible ways that they may have been affected. However, whatever those effects are, it can be possible for the survivor to improve the quality of their life through therapy.

When someone discloses to you that they were sexually abused as a child, you need to be aware that for them to disclose their abuse to you is an enormous step for them. It means that they are trusting you to hold this information and it is important that you offer your wholehearted support **without 'taking over'** - the survivor will be all too familiar with feelings of powerlessness, and they need to feel in control now. Your role is that of empathic enabler offering support and encouragement while the survivor decides what is right for them. Do not assume that you know what is best for them but if they ask for your help give it willingly.

You need to understand that however the survivor may have been affected, and whatever their feelings about the abuse, it is OK to feel whatever they do - *their feelings are personal and normal*. It is also important to believe that the abuse was **never** the fault of the child - the blame and guilt **always** lies with the abuser and they may need to hear that from you, to reassure them.

The survivor also needs to be taken seriously and to be believed. Maybe they will need you to hear shocking and distressing details, maybe they don't want to go into detail. It is important to go along with what they want to do and not expect more than they are able to give and **do not cast doubts upon what they are telling you, or ask them why they didn't tell anyone before now**.

Try to believe that the effects of childhood sexual abuse are severe but with time and careful interventions they *can* be worked through and eventually overcome. In order for the process of healing to be successful the survivor will need a supportive and safe environment because the therapeutic process can be difficult and upsetting if they access past memories. Finding a specialist therapist who the survivor can learn to trust is an important step towards recovery but this must be done in the survivors own time. They will know when they are ready to begin the healing process.

Abuse thrives on secrecy, and speaking out and acknowledging what happened is a very important part of healing. Some survivors find it easier to speak to Helplines to begin with, others find it helpful to read books on the subject - reading the testimonies of other survivors can help them to feel less isolated. As a first step your friend, partner or family member could try talking through their options with one of the workers on our confidential helpline. They would be in control of the call, and can decide what they do or do not want to disclose. It cannot be emphasised enough that it is so important for a survivor to feel empowered by taking control of their recovery and not feeling that they are just going along with what someone else feels would be best, however well-intentioned that someone is.

There are several stages in the process of healing including acknowledging what happened, breaking the silence, believing that they were not to blame, living through and integrating the feelings of grief, pain and anger and, maybe, confronting the abuser. It is hard work and it takes time and it may be painful, but eventually a stage known as 'resolution' can be reached where, at last, they will be free to move on and concentrate on the present and their aspirations for the future.

It is a good idea for you to find someone that you feel able to talk to about your feelings around the sexual abuse of the person you care about - being supported yourself will make you better able to support them. Sometimes you will need space for yourself and your feelings and it is important to acknowledge this.

A survivor of sexual abuse needs to know that you support them in whatever direction they chose to go, that you will be there if they need to talk, that you will not feel guilty yourself or take the blame for what happened, that you will believe them and care for them through this difficult time.

READING LIST - Books for supporters of survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

All of these books can be purchased at www.amazon.co.uk

ALLIES IN HEALING: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child

Laura Davis
ISBN: 0060968834

“Survivors frequently have difficulties with trust, commitment, sex and intimacy, and these problems have direct impact on you and your relationship. This book will encourage you to take care of yourself, teach you to look to your own needs, and show how to support the survivor in your life without selling yourself short.”

LIVING WITH THE LEGACY OF ABUSE: How To Make Your Relationship Work When Your Partner is a Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Beverly Engel, Robin Skynner, Valerie Sinason
ISBN: 0948491531

New UK edition of “Partners in Recover”. A book for mates, lovers and friends of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, to help you learn to support them and cope yourself, as they go through the recovery process. A useful, sympathetic guide.

GHOSTS IN THE BEDROOM: A Guide for Partners of Incest Survivors

Ken Graber
ISBN: 155874116X

A 12 step approach to help partners of survivors cope with their own feelings, support the recovery of their partner and solve relationship problems together.

NO RIGHT WAY: The Voices of Mothers of Incest Survivors

Tracey Orr
ISBN: 1857270878

Voices the often ignored experiences of women whose daughters were sexually abused by their father, and helps us to understand the effect of abuse on their lives and relationships.