

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE AND ITS EFFECTS (Information for 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 you feeling uncomfortable.
- Being bathed in a way that left you feeling uncomfortable.
- Having to look at other people's genitals.
- Having to touch other people's genitals / masturbate other people.
- Having your own breasts or genitals touched
- Having to pose for photographs or videos of a sexual nature.
- Being shown sexual films, and/or having to listen to sexual talk.
- Having your vagina or anus penetrated by a penis, finger or object.
- Being forced to perform oral sex, or to have it performed on you.

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.

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.

As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse it is possible that you will be feeling some (maybe a lot) of the following:

- Recurrent depression or anxiety; you may suffer panic attacks, phobias and/or flashbacks.
- Maybe you are filled with anger and shame and/or feel worthless and damaged. You cry a lot or you find it difficult to show emotion. Perhaps you suffer from disturbing thought patterns and intrusive memories, and your feelings reveal themselves in physical symptoms, unexplained illnesses - maybe you find relief by self-harming - cutting or burning yourself or drinking too much. Feeling sick or afraid when you hear the abuser's voice or a similar voice, seeing an object or place that reminds you of the abuse, feeling confused about what happened, remembering only parts of what happened or remembering it in vivid detail, blaming yourself for what happened.

Other effects of sexual abuse may include:

- Substance abuse, Eating disorders: bulimia, anorexia, compulsive over-eating
- Difficulties with intimacy and relationships
- Sexual difficulties
- Sleep disturbance: nightmares, insomnia, sleep-walking
- Hyper-vigilance; extremely sensitive hearing and other senses
- Not trusting other people
- Not being able to judge safe or unsafe situations
- Low self esteem

Sometimes a child who is being severely 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 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 you have been sexually abused as a child you may recognise that you experience some of the effects mentioned above. Maybe it feels quite frightening to see all the possible ways that you may have been affected written down. Whatever those effects are, there are also ways of improving your life that you can benefit from.

Maybe as you read this leaflet you are thinking about how you can look after yourself now, in the present. It is important to understand that however you have been affected, and whatever your feelings about the abuse, it is OK to feel whatever you do - your feelings are individual and normal.

It is also important to believe that **it is never the fault** of the child when they have been abused - the blame and guilt always lie with the abuser.

Maybe you are only just beginning to remember that you were abused, maybe you are only just now able to acknowledge it. Perhaps everything seems really overwhelming and you are finding it difficult to know how to get help.

Try to believe that the effects of childhood sexual abuse can be worked through and overcome. In order for the process of healing to be successful you will need a supportive, safe environment where you can access helpful information.

You will probably find it helpful to speak to a specialist therapist or counsellor - someone who you can learn to trust, and with whom you can explore the issues involved in your abuse.

Abuse thrives on secrecy, and speaking out and acknowledging what happened to you is a very important part of healing. Some survivors find it easier to speak to people over the phone to begin with; others find it helpful to read books on the subject - reading the testimonies of other survivors can help you to feel less isolated.

As a first step you could try talking through your options with one of the workers on our helpline. You are in control of the call, and can decide what you do or do not want to disclose. It may help you to be clear in your own mind how you want to proceed with your healing. It is completely confidential.

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

It is a case of hanging on in there and believing that you do not have to hurt forever; that you were **in no way to blame** for what happened to you, that you **did not deserve** what happened to you but that you do deserve to reach a place where you will be able to get on with your life.

There is a way out of the past, it may be long, it may be hard - but it will be worth taking that chance to reach a better place.

READING LIST - CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE - (For female and male survivors)

Available from www.amazon.co.uk

THE SURVIVORS GUIDE

Sharice A. Lee
ISBN: 08039 57815

“ ... sexual abuse ... can make a person feel confused, ashamed and all kinds of other things ... If you are a survivor of sexual abuse, you should know that these effects are from the sexual abuse, not from you. It is not because you are bad, it is because what happened to you is bad and the people who abused you should not have done those things to you.” A simple guide.

BREAKING FREE:

Help for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

Carolyn Ainscough & Kay Toon
ISBN: 0859698106

2nd Edition. Full of information about child sexual abuse and its consequences, plus practical suggestions for overcoming the effects of abuse. "...written to share what we have learnt, to reach out to all people who have been sexually abused as children and to help them take their first steps in breaking free from the past."

RESCUING THE 'INNER CHILD': Therapy for Adults Sexually Abused Children

Penny Parks
ISBN: 02856 50890

"The whys and wherefores of sexual abuse will be discussed, but the focus will be 'how to recover'. The message I learned personally, and share with my clients, is this: you will never forget what happened to you, but you can stop hurting." Highly Recommended

THE COURAGE TO HEAL: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

Ellen Bass & Laura Davis
ISBN: 00918 84209

A comprehensive handbook with information about many aspects of sexual abuse, and some self-help exercises. Written for women but helpful for men too. Highly recommended.

THE RIGHT TO INNOCENCE: Healing the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Beverly Engel
ISBN: 08041 05855

Her exercises, visualisations, and techniques will support you through a 7-step program for recovery: Facing the Truth; Releasing Your Anger; Confronting Those Responsible with Facts and Feelings; Resolving Your Relationships; Rediscovering Yourself; Learning Self-Care; Forgiving Yourself. You don't have to remain a victim.

MY FATHER'S HOUSE - A Memoir of Incest and of Healing

Sylvia Fraser
ISBN: 0860681815

From the age of seven Sylvia shared her body with a 'twin' who lived a separate life from her. This twin was created to do the things Sylvia was too frightened, too ashamed, too repelled to do - the things her father made her do. As an adult she had no recollection.

FEMALE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN -The Ultimate Taboo

Ed. Michele Elliott
ISBN: 05822 14971

A powerful new study - "a first step in bringing the subject into the open" - consists of contributions by professionals who have worked with survivors and with abusers, and of testimonies from male and female survivors, all of whom have been abused by women. "Finding survivors willing to talk was no problem, finding people willing to listen was."

THE MEMORY BIRD: Survivors of Sexual Abuse

Ed. Caroline Malone, Linda Farthing & Lorraine Marce
ISBN: 18538 18593

This unprecedented anthology is made up of hundreds of contributions from survivors of sexual abuse. Recurrent themes such as anger, pain, confrontation and responsibility arise; it is "... a tribute to our collective strengths while recognising our differences; it is a signal of the pain we continue to suffer, it speaks of our healing - and lack of it ..." Important and positive.

OUT IN THE OPEN:

A Guide for Young People Who Have Been Sexually Abused

Ouaine Bain & Maureen Sanders
ISBN: 18538 1184X

"The most surprising thing for me was to find out that it wasn't some weird thing that happened just to me." Plain-speaking and sympathetic, it talks frankly about the range of feelings sexually abused young people experience.

CROSSING THE BOUNDARY : Black Women, Incest and Survival

Melba Wilson
ISBN: 18538 14296

"Society keeps abuse hidden. Keeping it hidden, to me is the biggest cause of all."