

Surviving Sexual Abuse

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1. Introduction

The term sexual abuse most commonly refers to the involvement of a young person below the age of sixteen in sexual activity with a significantly older person. It is referred to as abuse since it is assumed in our society that the older person must by definition be taking advantage of the younger one since a person under sixteen cannot give informed consent to sexual activity. Usually the victim of the abuse cannot understand fully the implications of what is happening at the time; therefore although he or she may appear to consent to the activity, the consent is not truly informed. Although the abuser may also be young, there is usually a significant age difference and difference of status between the parties which puts the abuser in a position of power. This power difference means that even where there is apparent acquiescence, this is usually based on fear of the consequences of refusal and so is not true consent.

The term sexual abuse may also be applied when one person uses the power they have over another adult - usually because they are in a position of trust or influence - to take advantage sexually.

Sexual abuse can be an isolated or a recurrent event. The activities involved can range from inappropriate touching to sexual penetration. The abuse can be disguised as play or it may be a more overt assault. The abuser may be a relative, an acquaintance or a stranger. While the abuse is often frightening and traumatic at the time it occurs, some feelings may not fully impact until a later date when the occurrence is better understood.

In this leaflet we concern ourselves mainly with the effect on students of having been a victim of sexual abuse when they were younger. However, we hope that this information and the information on rape and sexual assault will also be of help to those who have experienced abuse in other situations.

Commonly those who are currently experiencing abuse are referred to as victims of sexual abuse; those whose experience of abuse is in the past are referred to as (adult) survivors of sexual abuse.

Examples of Sexual Abuse

- A girl who was sexually abused by her father until her teens when she eventually reported what was happening with the result that her father was tried and imprisoned.
- A boy who was abused by his football coach and thought he was alone with the experience until a number of boys reported being similarly abused several years later.
- A young girl whose teenage step-brother used to play games with her at an early age which she realised when she reached puberty had been sexually intrusive.
- A boy who was regularly abused by a trusted uncle and aunt with whom he was often sent to stay. This abuse took place over a number of years during which he was unable to say why he did not wish to visit these relatives.
- Two sisters who both suffered abuse at the hands of a grandfather but who never spoke about it until many years later.

The experience of abuse is not restricted to one sex and indeed abusers are not invariably male. Most recent estimates in Britain suggest at least 10% of children suffer sexual abuse at some time, with two thirds of the victims being girls. In over 90% of the cases the perpetrator of the abuse is male.

2. The Victim's Experience at the Time of Abuse

- Victims frequently report feeling very alone with the experience of abuse. Often they are afraid of telling, because of fear of retribution or the consequences for the family.
 - Victims frequently feel they will not be believed or taken seriously if they tell of what has happened, and this fear can be confirmed when they do try to raise the matter.
 - Victims frequently feel guilty. The abuser may suggest they are to blame for the abuse or they may take responsibility upon themselves. Children naturally tend to assume responsibility for events that are not of their making, and this is particularly true in the case of abuse. The guilt is increased if the child has found any aspect of the abuse gratifying.
 - Victims commonly report feeling extremely scared and confused by the abusive experience.
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3. The Survivor's Experiences in Later Life

Sometimes the experience of abuse appears to be wholly or partially forgotten for some years while the survivor continues with their life. Memories may resurface however when the person is settled in a safe environment, or may be triggered by specific events such as beginning a sexual relationship or becoming a parent.

The memories can bring intense feelings and experiences:

- Flashbacks and nightmares. Recollections of the abusive experience may intrude into the waking thoughts or may recur in dreams.
- Shame and guilt. The survivor may blame themselves; may suffer from low self-esteem or may feel deeply embarrassed about seeking help. They may become depressed, harm themselves and have thoughts of suicide.
- Intense anger. This may be directed at the abuser, and may be linked with a wish to confront or to completely avoid them. It may also be directed at others who seem to have colluded with the abuse or may be more general
- Disrupted relational patterns. Some survivors find they tend to avoid intimate relationships and are distrustful of the motives of all other people. Others may find they tend to form very intense intimate relationships which can be emotionally draining
- Fear of the consequences of the abuse. Survivors may wonder whether they will be able to form normal relationships or whether they might become abusers themselves. There may be difficulties in enjoying normal sexual activities.
- Isolation and stigmatisation. Survivors may feel they are totally alone with their experience. They can feel that they have been marked out and that somehow others know of their history without being told and so treat them differently.

As with human response to any trauma, the degree of the reaction can vary widely between individuals. Some people apparently come to terms with very severe abuse comparatively easily; others find the abuse has a lasting effect on them. Neither of these responses is more correct or healthier than the other.

4. Helping Yourself

Try not to blame yourself

No matter what the circumstances of the sexual abuse of a child, it is never the fault or responsibility of that child. Even if you are aware that there was some degree of collusion or you feel in hindsight that you wish you had been able to act differently, this does not lessen the absolute truth that is the duty of adults to care for children and protect them from exploitation. Some survivors find it helpful to observe children who are the same age that they were when the abuse took place in order to underline for them how great the power difference between adults and children really is and how easy it is for an older person to manipulate the trust, innocence and vulnerability of a child.

Take care of yourself now

The fact that something bad has been done to you is not a reason to deny yourself pleasure, or to punish yourself. It is in fact a reason to care for yourself. If you can learn to treat your body with respect and kindness, you will help the healing process. Therefore look for simple ways to show care for yourself and kindness to your body. If you find you are tempted to harm yourself - for example by starving or overindulging, by cutting yourself or even by attempting suicide - seek help and support so that you can begin to bring this behaviour under control.

Find appropriate outlets for your feelings

If you have been abused you have a perfectly good reason to be very angry and full of grief. It can be hard to know what to do with these feelings. It may not be possible or helpful to express them to the person responsible. Even if you do, he or she may well fail to accept responsibility. Feelings can be helped by finding others who will listen to your story sympathetically and help you express yourself. Writing down what you feel can help - many survivors find it helpful to write down their feelings in the form of a letter - you don't have to send it. Many activities can help relieve pent up feelings of anger - exercise, sport, or simply going somewhere private or noisy and shouting. Grief can be relieved by allowing time to reflect and by expressing the sadness. You may fear that once you allow these feelings to emerge they may take you over. This is a natural fear; however in fact the opposite tends to be the case - once a feeling is allowed adequate expression it becomes more easy to control.

Try and find both support and privacy

Abuse can be a profoundly isolating experience. Even when you do speak about it, people may either dismiss what you tell them or they may over-react. However as is now recognised, abuse is an all too common experience, so

you are certainly not alone in what you have suffered. There are now many agencies which will offer appropriate support and have much expertise in helping survivors heal themselves. We list some below.

Some people have the opposite experience and find that the abuse which has happened to them has become common knowledge, and as a result feel that their privacy has been invaded. Remember you only need to tell the people who you want to tell and it is up to you to decide how much you want to tell them. Certainly no-one will be able to guess what has happened to you if you decide not to tell them and no-one has the right to force their opinions or their advice on you.

Do not despair

Human beings are remarkably resilient and have a vast capacity for healing themselves. You may well feel that you have been irreversibly damaged emotionally or even physically; that you may not ever be able to form a functioning relationship or have an enjoyable sex-life; that you will never recover. However this is not likely to be the case. Although you can never change your history, with time and care you can make sense of what has happened to you and can minimise the negative effects.

5. Further Help

If you have been abused as a child, you might want help to make sense of your feelings and worries. This may be even more true if the abuse is continuing.

Many excellent books have been written on the subject - some are listed below. There are also many sites on the Web that are committed to supporting survivors.

It can be very difficult to trust someone with something as personal as this and may require a lot of courage. It may be easier to share your feelings with a stranger rather than a friend.

Professional counselling agencies such as the University Counselling Service employ counsellors who are trained to work with the effects of child sexual abuse and who will not be shocked or embarrassed by anything you may tell them. Your preference for a male or female counsellor will be respected.

There are also many self-help groups where survivors of abuse share their experience in safety and learn to deal with the resulting emotions. Some initial contact addresses are listed below.

You will know when you are ready to read a book, join a group or talk to someone alone. Trust your instinct and seek help when the time is right for you.

Books

Breaking Free, Carolyn Ainscough & Kay Toon, Sheldon Press

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou, Virago

My Father's House, S Fraser, Virago

Personal accounts which survivors have found helpful

The Courage to Heal, Bass and Davis, Harper and Row

The most common book which many have found useful but which has been criticised in light of the false memory debate for treating many everyday personality traits as though they were clear evidence of past abuse

Helplines and Agencies

The following agencies maintain lists of survivors groups and other sources of help

- Samaritans 08457 909090
- NSPCC 0800 800500
- Childline 0800 1111

Local agencies offering counselling and support to survivors: Sheffield Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Counselling Service, offers telephone and face to face counselling and organises support groups. Phone: 0114 2447936 or email info@srasacs.org.uk

Sheffield Women's Counselling and Therapy Service offers free counselling to women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Phone: 0114 275 2157.

Survivors, Sheffield - offers counselling and support to male survivors of rape and sexual abuse, and their partners if appropriate. Phone: 0114 279 6333 (help-line Mon 6-8pm, answerphone at other times).

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