

SURVIVING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is any sexual behaviour directed toward a child by a person who has power over that child. Such behavior always involves a betrayal of the child's trust.

Some forms of sexual abuse involve physical contact. These include masturbation, intercourse, fondling, oral sex and anal or vaginal penetration with objects. Other types of sexual abuse, such as exhibitionism, leering and sexual suggestiveness, do not involve physical contact.

People who sexually abuse children do so in order to meet their own needs. Abusers do not have the child's best interest in mind. Abusers need not be strangers. They can be anyone in a position of power or trust: fathers, uncles, cousins, stepfathers, siblings, mothers, teachers, babysitters, neighbours, grandparents, peers, clergy or doctors.

How prevalent is child sexual abuse?

It has been estimated that 20-40 percent of girls and 2-9 percent of boys are sexually abused by the time they reach eighteen. These are probably conservative estimates since many incidents of sexual abuse are never reported.

How can I know if I was sexually abused?

If you remember being sexually violated as a child, trust your memories, even if what you're remembering seems too awful to be true. Children simply do not make things up. It is common, however, for individuals who have been abused not to have clear memories.

One way of coping with sexual abuse is to repress or forget that it ever happened. Even in the absence of conscious memories, certain experiences can trigger intense feelings of fear, nausea and despair. Some of these "triggers" include specific sounds, smells, tastes, words and facial expressions.

Whether or not you have specific memories, if you suspect that you were sexually abused, you probably were. Often the first step in remembering involves having a hunch or a suspicion that some type of violation occurred. Pay attention to these feelings, for people who suspect that they were sexually abused generally discover that this has been the case.

If it happened back then, why deal with it now?

There are many factors that make it impossible for children to receive the help that they need at the time of the abuse.

Unfortunately, many children who do seek support are met with reactions such as disbelief, lack of concern and even blame. Despite efforts to seek help, the abuse may continue or even get worse.

There are many understandable reasons why children do not seek help at the time of the abuse. Abusers often scare children by threatening to retaliate or by insinuating that the child will not be believed. The abuser may also confuse the child by implying that the abuse is the child's fault.

Comments such as "You asked for it", "You were all over me" and "I know you enjoyed it" are often used to blame and to silence the child. Sexual abuse of a child can never be the child's fault.

For whatever reason, if the abuse is not dealt with at the time, its damaging effects will still be present years later.

What are the effects of child sexual abuse?

There are many ways that people experience the harm that results from having been sexually abused. Consider the following questions (Bass and Davis, 1988):

Self-Esteem

- Do you often feel that you are not a worthwhile person?
- Do you feel bad, dirty or ashamed of yourself?
- Do you have a hard time nurturing yourself?
- Do you feel that you have to be perfect?

Feelings

- Do you have trouble knowing how you feel?
- Have you ever worried about going crazy?
- Is it hard for you to differentiate between various feelings?
- Do you experience a very narrow range of feelings?
- Are you afraid of your feelings? Do they seem out of control?

Your Body

- Do you feel present in your body most of the time?
- Are there times when you feel as if you've left your body?
- Do you have a restricted range of feelings in your body?
- Do you find it difficult to be aware of what your body is telling you?
- Do you have a hard time loving and accepting your body?

- Do you have any physical illnesses that you think might be related to past sexual abuse?
- Have you ever intentionally hurt yourself or abused your body?

Intimacy

- Do you find it difficult to trust others?
- Are you afraid of people?
- Do you feel alienated or lonely?
- Do you have trouble making a commitment?
- Do you panic when people get too close?
- Do you expect people to leave you?
- Have you ever been involved with someone who reminds you of your abuser or someone you know is not good for you?

Sexuality

- Do you try to use sex to meet needs that aren't sexual?
- Do you ever feel exploited sexually or use your sexuality in a way that exploits others?
- Are you able to "stay present" when making love?
- Do you go through sex feeling numb or in a panic?
- Do you find yourself avoiding sex or pursuing sex you really don't want?
- Do you experience flashbacks during sex?

Will I Ever Feel Better?

The devastating effects of sexual abuse do not need to be permanent. You can heal! You have already survived the worst part, the abuse itself. You have choices now that you didn't have then.

If you choose to commit to your own healing process, have patience with yourself and let others support you along the way. You can learn that it is possible not only to "survive" but to experience what it means to be truly alive.

Where Do I Begin?

If you think that you may have been sexually abused, speaking with a trained professional can be extremely helpful.

You don't need to be alone in your pain. In fact, "breaking the silence" is one of the most important components of the healing process.

Make an appointment with a professional who will understand what you have been through.

Need Additional Help?

The following are excellent sources of information on child sexual abuse:

1. ***The Courage to Heal.***
By Ellen Bass and Laura Davis.
New York: Harper and Row, 1988.
2. ***The Courage to Heal Workbook.***
By Laura Davis.
New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
3. ***Victims No Longer.***
By Mike Lew.
New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
4. ***Outgrowing the Pain:
A Book for and about Adults Abused as Children.***
By Eliana Gil.
San Francisco: Launch, 1983.
5. ***Incest and Sexuality:
A Guide to Understanding and Healing.***
By Wendy Maltz and Beverly Holman.
Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987.