

Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is a topic rarely discussed in our society. This can make it difficult for survivors of child sexual abuse to understand and overcome what has happened to them. It is estimated that 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused by age 16.¹ Both males and females are susceptible to child sexual abuse by offenders who are most often male and known to the child. Understanding the definition, impact, and recovery process of childhood sexual abuse can be helpful for individuals as they move through the healing process.

What is Child Sexual Abuse? Child sexual abuse is the improper exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity, or behavior, which can include exhibitionism, exposure to pornography sexual touching, and/or penetration. According to the Criminal code of Canada, a person under the age of 12 cannot consent to any kind of sexual activity with anyone at anytime. Youth aged 12-13 cannot consent unless the person is less than two years older than them. Youth aged 14-15 cannot consent unless the person is less than five years older than them. Up until 18 years of age, youth cannot consent if the other person is in a position of power, trust or authority (e.g. teacher, family member, babysitter, coach). Sexual abuse may occur on a regular basis over many months or years by one or several abusers, or it may happen on one occasion only.

Children who are sexually abused often do not tell anyone that the abuse is happening, and may only reveal that they have been abused after many instances of abuse or even long after the abuse has stopped. Some people never tell what happened. There are many reasons why a child may not have told someone about the abuse at the time they were experiencing it. Possibly the child was too young to understand what was going on, or lacked the vocabulary to be able to talk about it. But most often, the child does not tell about the abuse because they feel ashamed, or because the abuser has worked to ensure that the child does not talk about what is happening.

Most commonly, the abuser will manipulate the child into thinking the abuse is acceptable, deserved, or even a sign of love. Sometimes abusers ensure that the child feels pleasure during the abuse as another means of keeping the child from resisting or talking about it, as the child may become confused about whether it was really wrong if it felt good. A child may think they invited the abuse by wanting the affection or pleasure associated with it. No matter the child's feelings, the child is never responsible for the abuse. The abuser, unlike the child, is responsible for knowing and respecting the sexual boundaries of being a child.

¹Child Sexual Abuse (The Canadian Badgley Royal Commission, Report on Sexual Offenses Against Children and Youths), 1984. (pg 175)

IMPACT OF THE ABUSE

Survivors of child sexual abuse may remember their abuse in various ways. Memories can range from remembering feelings of sadness and fear without remembering the actual abuse, to remembering specific incidents of abuse. It is normal for survivors to remember more of the abuse as they go through their healing process. Often children will block out memories that are too traumatic for them to cope with but as an adult, these memories may resurface when the individual has more resources and coping skills. However, remembering every aspect of the abuse is not necessary for recovery. Moreover, not remembering details of the abuse does not mean that it had no impact on the survivor's life.

One of the most intense ways of remembering is through flashbacks. Flashbacks are memories which are so vivid that it seems as though the person is re-experiencing the abuse in the present moment. Although flashbacks can happen anytime and anywhere, they are often triggered by something that reminds the survivor of the abuse. Examples include a sight, smell, or taste associated with the abuser or a physical sensation or emotion related to the abuse. Flashbacks can be very frightening, but survivors can learn to gain control over them. A useful method is to ground oneself by taking deep breaths and focusing on the current physical environment and/or their own bodily sensations. In this way, the survivor can assert that they are in the present moment, rather than back in the time of abuse.

It is common for individuals to seek support once they start experiencing flashbacks, panic attacks, or intrusive thoughts, or once they begin remembering more of the abuse or realizing that it is affecting them in negative ways. There are countless physical and emotional ways that survivors may respond to previous abuse, including anxiety, difficult with self esteem, depression, and eating disorders. Acknowledging the various effects of the abuse on the survivor's life is a significant step toward healing from child sexual abuse.

For many people, trust, relationship, and sexual issues are a normal and understandable response to child sexual abuse. Relationships and intimacy may be difficult for some survivors as hurt and shame from their past results in protective coping mechanisms such as emotional walls, defensiveness, or approval seeking from others. Although understandable, many individuals find these protective patterns come to interfere with their ability to establish open and authentic relationships with others.

Survivors may also experience sexual issues due to their confusing and traumatic introduction to sexuality. These issues can range from avoiding sex to engaging in abundant sex. Learning about healthy relationship boundaries and personal boundaries can help survivors establish trusting relationships and explore more healthy ways of sexual expression. There is no right or wrong way to approach relationship or sexual issues. Survivors have the right to decide who they wish to trust and how they wish to approach sex. By respecting their own comfort levels, survivors can work toward satisfying relationships and sex lives.

Each survivor's experience is unique and each person will be affected by sexual abuse in very individualized ways. As a survivor deals with his/her abuse and what it means for him/her, the effects will become less disruptive and harmful.

HEALING / RECOVERY

Healing from child sexual abuse is an empowering experience but often a draining and stressful process. Everything from going to work to sleeping and eating can become difficult during recovery. Survivors may be overwhelmed with feelings of guilt, anger, shame, sadness and fear, along with feelings that they will never be able to reach a point where they will be “normal” or not constantly thinking about the abuse. These are typical reactions and feelings to experience during the healing process, as the survivor is not only dealing with the impact of the abuse, but with all of the beliefs and ideas that he/she may have held about themselves as a result of the abuse.

One of the most difficult and important steps in the recovery process is for the survivor to be able to acknowledge that she/he was sexually abused and to tell someone about the experience. The support provided by friends and family can be very helpful but many survivors also benefit from enlisting the support of a counselor or other skilled professional. A good counselor is able to offer support, encouragement, hope, and insights that are helpful for healing.

Through the counselling process, many individuals gain insight into the ways they have learned to cope with their past experience(s). These ways of coping, or coping mechanisms, often have one of two goals: to dissociate from the experience or to block the experience. Dissociating is a normal survival technique that children use to cope with sexual abuse. For survivors, it may feel like stepping outside their bodies and watching the abuse as if it's not happening to them, or it could mean inventing a fantasy world to retreat to during abuse. After the abuse is over, survivors may continue to cope with memories and emotions surrounding the abuse by using dissociation. Blocking is a technique in which survivors use strategies to block out memories or feelings of the abuse. It could involve minimizing the impact of the abuse, denying it, withdrawing from friends and family, sleeping excessively, self-harming, or using drugs and alcohol. Although these coping techniques are often essential survival mechanisms for the survivor, they do not allow the survivor to face the underlying issue of abuse and they delay the healing process.

During recovery, as individuals heal the shame and confusion of their past, healthier, more positive coping mechanisms will emerge. These can include expressing feelings and memories through talking, painting, writing, dancing, singing, sculpting, and/or listening to music. Many survivors also find liberation in self-care techniques, such as taking nature walks, getting a massage, resting when physically or emotionally tired, or engaging in activities that are calming or enjoyable. Taking care of oneself and reconnecting to oneself are important components of healing. Reaching out to friends, family, or professionals is also a form of self-care and the enjoyment that comes with open, authentic relationships with others is a very important part of many people's healing journey.

Some people may ask “when will I be healed?” Although the process can vary in length, individuals will notice an increased ability to manage their memories, emotions and/or behaviour throughout healing. They will experience a growth in self-respect and a commitment to their own self-care and will begin to establish safe and healthy relationships. They will begin to see their experience as something that has helped shape who they are today and move on to a healthier, happier future.