

Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

A sexual assault violates one's most intimate and personal boundaries and triggers a wide range of issues that survivors must confront, on some level, for the rest of their lives. One of the most difficult issues facing survivors of sexual assault is the realization of their vulnerability and powerlessness

to protect themselves from such an intimate invasion. This issue of powerlessness is perhaps most profound for the child victim. Sexual abuse, especially during the developmental stages of childhood, can have devastating and long-lasting effects on the child's growth physically, emotionally, and mentally. Issues concerning trust, self-esteem, and forgiveness can run quite deep and present significant challenges into adulthood.

If your perpetrator was someone you knew and trusted as a child the effects may be particularly painful. The fact that someone who was supposed to love and protect you caused the violation can be quite frightening.

The powerlessness and shame can sometimes be too difficult to bear. Consequently, some children may successfully bury the memory of the assault until something happens to trigger that memory.



As A Survivor Of Childhood Sexual Assault You May Experience...

Difficulty Setting Limits and Boundaries

Past experiences may have given you little hope of having control over what happens to you. However, it is important that you understand that you are no longer a child who is powerless to stop the abuse that was perpetrated on you by the adults in your life. You have more power now, but more importantly you have the right to control what happens to you and to choose your sexual partners.

Memories and Flashbacks

You may experience disruptive memories surrounding the assault. A sudden occurrence of a visual memory is called a flashback. If you have a flashback you may not only "see" what happened but also experience all of the emotions and feelings that you had at the time of the assault. A flashback can be very frightening and even trigger a panic response. Sounds, smells, people, and places associated with the assault can trigger memories and flashbacks. Remind yourself that these are only memories. You are safe now and have the power to choose if and when you wish to review these memories. When you begin to recognize your personal empowerment these memories will lose their power.

Grieving and Mourning

Victims of childhood sexual abuse experience many losses. There is a loss of innocence, loss of a care-free childhood, loss of security and trust to name a few. There may have been the loss of a normal relationship with parental figures, loss of the opportunity to choose your own sexual experiences and partner, and loss of nurturance. All losses need to be mourned in order to bring the grieving to closure. It is time to name your losses, grieve over them, and put them to rest.

Anger

Although this is one of the most common issues for a survivor of sexual assault it can be one of the most difficult for the adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse to get in touch with. You have probably spent many years covering up your true emotions. You may have felt powerless to acknowledge and act on your anger and therefore learned to suppress it. The healing process necessarily involves getting in touch with your feelings of anger.

It is important to acknowledge the anger you felt and probably still feel toward the perpetrator and the other adults who were supposed to protect you. You have a right to feel angry and there is nothing wrong with expressing anger in constructive ways. Unexpressed anger can lead to depression.

Guilt, Shame, and Blame

Many survivors experience feelings of guilt and shame. You may feel guilty that you did not stop the abuse. You may have been afraid to disclose what was happening for fear of not being believed. You must remember that a child can never be responsible for being sexually assaulted. What happened was not your fault. The blame must be placed exactly where it belongs, with the perpetrator. An adult abused their position of authority and must be held accountable.

You may feel ashamed because your body responded to sexual stimulations. You must realize that while the body will respond to certain stimulations this is no indication that you liked or wanted the abuse. Further, children often seek affection from adults and accept any demonstration of affection as affirmation that they are loved. It is the responsibility of the adult to practice and teach appropriate boundaries to the child

Trust Issues

Adults who were victimized as children may find it difficult to trust others. You may feel that if you trust and let people near, you will be vulnerable to being hurt and victimized again. This fear is understandable, especially if the person who abused you was someone who you knew and trusted.

Trust does not come automatically. It must be earned. Remember that as an adult you have the power to choose your own relationships. You may choose who you allow to be close to you. You may also choose to stop trusting that person if that trust is violated.

Intimacy Issues

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse may have difficulty establishing intimacy or a close bond with another person. Intimacy requires trust, respect, love, and sharing. These things can be frightening because of your perceived vulnerability. Or you may find that you cling too tightly to a relationship that makes you feel safe for fear of losing that person. These are difficult issues and many survivors find it helpful to talk with a counselor that can help them develop skills and find the confidence needed to engage in a healthy intimate relationship.



Sexuality Issues


Survivors of childhood sexual abuse must deal with the difficult fact that their first sexual experiences came as a result of rape or incest. As an adult, these painful memories may be triggered by sexual activity with your partner. This can be disappointing and frustrating since it can interfere with your ability to enjoy your sexuality and engage in consensual sexual relationships. Remember that you are now in control of your body and how you choose to experience your sexuality. You can say no or stop if you begin to feel uncomfortable. Communicate your feelings and your needs with your partner. Be clear about what you are and are not comfortable with. However, it is important to remember that sexuality, itself, is not shameful. It can be a beautiful expression of intimacy and affection when two adults with equal power choose to share this experience.

Moving Forward

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse often struggle with the question of forgiveness. You may have asked yourself, "Do I have to forgive the perpetrator." There is certainly no rule that you must forgive in order to heal. However, fixating on the injustice of the violation, the pain that you have endured, and fantasies of revenge can be damaging. These obsessive thoughts, left unchecked, can become very self-destructive. You may feel that you are not ready, and may never be ready, to forgive. This is fine as long as you do not allow yourself to become consumed with bitterness. This is not helpful and serves no purpose. Every victim must arrive at a place where they are able to "let it go." It may be helpful to seek professional counseling for assistance in putting these issues to rest. Most importantly, forgive yourself. What happened was not your fault.

Adults Molested As Children



 *The voice of sexual violence survivors in Texas.*



6200 La Calma
Suite 110
Austin, Texas 78752

www.taasa.org

National Sexual Assault Hotline
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