

LifeSkills

Childhood sexual abuse: the adult survivor's challenge

Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse experience personal difficulties related to the abuse when they are adults. Here is some information on the challenges facing the adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

People may be affected in different ways

The following are some of the reactions that might surface as a consequence of childhood sexual abuse.

Dissociation

This is a term counsellors use to describe a mental condition of not being fully present, or "zoning out." It can take various forms. Daydreaming is probably the most common and familiar example, and is usually a healthy behavior. However, dissociation can also refer to actual altered states of consciousness, memory, identity or perception of the environment.

A survival reaction

Many sexual abuse survivors use dissociation as a survival technique.

They pretend the abuse is not really happening to them or that they were not really there when it took place. Some victims compare the dissociation process to watching themselves from a distance.

The downside of dissociation

While dissociation may help some people survive a traumatic experience in childhood, its continued use as a coping technique in adulthood can be counter-productive.

Coping by dissociating as an adult may result in keeping you in a bad situation by ignoring or being blind to danger signs. The result is you remain stuck in the abusive situation rather than taking the necessary steps to remove yourself from it.

Self-blame

Another common response is for the victim to blame himself or herself. They feel ashamed, and consider themselves somehow responsible for the abuse they have suffered.

Adult survivors need to understand that it is easy for a child to be sexually abused by an adult.

Not only are children innocent, they see the adult or an older child as an authority figure.

No shame, no blame

Survivors need to be reminded how few options children have in such a situation and that the abuser alone, and not the child, is responsible for the abuse.

Denial and Minimization

A survivor's denial often resembles the layers of an onion. As the layers are peeled away, the denial decreases.

The survivor may start out claiming "it was only a few times," or "it wasn't that bad," or "it was a long time ago." This may become "at least it wasn't rape," or "not every night," or "not my real father."

The attempt to minimize the abuse, or to claim that others had it much worse is not very useful; you are entitled to your feelings.

Pressing charges

Sexual abuse is a crime and victims have the right to press charges. Going to court has the advantage of showing that what was done to you was wrong and is clearly seen as wrong by the community. It can give you a feeling of empowerment even if the sentence isn't what you had hoped. On the other hand, the process may raise issues of shame and self-blame. Having support through this process is important.

Forgiveness

In order to forgive, you must be clear as to exactly what it is you are forgiving. Working this out often means first having to move through a great deal of anger. This is not a bad thing. Feeling angry may be the most healing thing at this point.

People who forgive before being clear what it is they want to forgive, end up trying to forget, or minimizing or denying what happened or how bad it was.

Professional help

It is important for the victim to break the silence and tell someone.

This can be extremely difficult and individual therapy may be a good place to start. In individual therapy, you as a survivor can begin the process of trusting someone and letting someone help.

Suggested readings

If you would you like to read more on this topic, we recommend the following books:

Bass, E., and Davis, L. *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. San Francisco: HarperCollins 1992.

Lew, Mike. *Victims no longer: men recovering from incest and other sexual child abuse*. New York: Nevraumont Pub. Co. 1988.

La version française de ce document sera disponible sur Internet sous peu. Vous pouvez vous la procurer en composant le 1-800-668-4125.

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