



## **Childhood Sexual Abuse and Its Effects**

### **Information for Survivors**

It is beginning to be acknowledged that childhood sexual abuse happens a lot more frequently than most people believed or wanted to believe in the past. Sexual abuse includes the following:

- Being cuddled or kissed in a way that left you feeling uncomfortable.
- Being bathed in a way that left you feeling uncomfortable.
- Having to look at other people's genitals.
- Having to touch other people's genitals/masturbate other people.
- Having your own breasts or genitals touched.
- Having to pose for videos or photographs of a sexual nature.
- Being shown films and/or having to listen to sexual talk.
- Having your vagina or anus penetrated by a penis, finger or object.
- Being forced to perform oral sex, or to have it performed on you.

### **Sexual Abuse Involves an Abuse of Power and an Abuse of Trust**

The perpetrator, being an adult or sometimes an older child, abuses their position of power and trust. As children we look to adults and older children for guidance of how to 'be' in the world, to show us what is acceptable and what is wrong. If a manipulative adult/older child abuses that trust and coerces a child into a sexual situation, possibly saying it is right, or that something bad will happen if the child does not do as they are told, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the child to disobey even when this results in confusion and distress in the child's mind.

'Grooming' a child is common practice among abusers who will spend time and effort compelling a child to do as he or she is told. Often bribes or threats are used to maintain compliance. The effect of this manipulation and control can be to create very negative beliefs in the

child about themselves and about relationships. These beliefs can take time to overcome.

## **The Effects**

As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse it is possible that you will be feeling some (or maybe a lot) of the following:

- Recurrent depression or anxiety: you may suffer panic attacks, phobias and/or flashbacks.
- Maybe you are filled with anger and shame and/or feel worthless or damaged.
- You cry a lot or find it difficult to show emotion.
- Perhaps you suffer from disturbing thought patterns or intrusive memories, and your feelings reveal themselves in physical symptoms or unexplained illnesses.
- Maybe you find relief by self-harming – cutting or burning or drinking too much.
- You may feel sick or afraid when you hear the abuser's voice or a similar voice, or see an object or place that reminds you of the abuse.
- Perhaps you feel confused about what happened, remembering only parts of what happened or remembering it in vivid detail.
- Maybe you blame yourself for what happened.

Other effects of sexual abuse may include:

- Substance abuse, eating disorders: bulimia or anorexia or compulsive over-eating.
- Difficulties with intimacy and relationships.
- Sexual difficulties, sleep disturbances: nightmares, insomnia, hyper-vigilance: being extremely sensitive to sounds or other senses.
- Not trusting other people, not being able to judge safe or unsafe situations.

## **Dissociation**

Sometimes a child who is being severely abused finds a way to escape in any way they can - in their heads, where they can escape their physical environment and the abuse by blocking it out, or dissociating. When children dissociate they put the trauma they are suffering into

compartments in their minds, and create other parts or personalities within themselves to deal with the trauma - to bear the pain that the child cannot.

An adult who has learned to dissociate as a child is likely to experience time loss, memory gaps and a sense of unreality, as well as, possibly, alternative states of consciousness or personalities. People who dissociate are neither mad nor suffering from schizophrenia - dissociation is a creative attempt at self-protection enabling survival of the trauma of abuse.

### **What Can I Do Now?**

If you have been sexually abused as a child you may recognise that you experience some of the effects mentioned above. Maybe it feels quite frightening to see all the possible ways you may have been affected written down. Whatever those effects are, there are also ways of improving your life that you can benefit from.

Maybe as you read this leaflet you are thinking about how you can look after yourself now, in the present. It is important to understand that however you have been affected, and whatever your feelings about the abuse, it is ok to feel as you do - your feelings are individual and normal. It is also important to believe that it is never the fault of the child when they have been abused- blame and guilt always lie with the abuser.

Maybe you are only just beginning to remember that you were abused, or maybe you are just beginning to acknowledge it. Try to believe that the effects of childhood sexual abuse can be worked through and overcome.

### **Counselling**

In order for the process of healing to be successful you will need a supportive, safe environment where you can access helpful information.

You have already taken a courageous first step in asking for counselling. This will be someone who you can learn to trust, and with whom you can explore the issues involved in your abuse. Abuse thrives on secrecy, and speaking out and acknowledging what happened to you is a very important part of healing. You might find it helpful to call our helpline

while you wait for your counselling to start, or you might find it helpful to read books on the subject - reading the testimonies of other survivors can help you to feel less isolated.

Remember that you are in control of your counselling and you can decide what you do or do not want to disclose. You can go at your own pace. It is confidential, and will involve you receiving understanding and warm acceptance from your counsellor.

### **The Recovery Process**

There are several stages in the process of healing including acknowledging what happened to you, breaking the silence, believing that you were not to blame, living through and integrating the feelings of grief, pain and anger, and coming to understand the meaning of the abuse as one part of your past.

The beliefs created by the abuse may be deeply ingrained and buried, and it may take time to identify them and begin to challenge them. It is hard work and it takes time and may be painful, but eventually you may reach what is known as the stage of resolution, where, at last, you will be free to move on and concentrate on the present and your aspirations for the future. It is a case of hanging on in there and believing you do not have to hurt forever; that you were in no way to blame for what happened to you, that you did not deserve what happened to you but you do deserve to reach a place where you will be able to get on with the rest of your life.

There is a way out of the past, it may be long, it may be hard - but it will be worth taking that chance to reach a better place.