

Why Can't I Forget?

Information for Men who were Sexually Abused in Childhood

It is often not recognised in society that men can be sexually abused as children. It has been estimated that at least 1 in 9 boys are sexually abused in childhood - from infants through to adolescents - by both men and women. In most cases, the child knows the abuser.

Children are very trusting, and have a natural need for affection and approval. They are taught to obey adults and have little power over what happens in their lives. Child Sexual Abuse is:

- a misuse of power
- a betrayal of a child's trust and affection
- a denial of a child's right to feel safe and valued
- a violation of a child's personal boundaries and sense of self

Sexual Abuse is a Crime – the Victim is not to Blame

An adult who abuses a child knows that what he or she is doing is wrong – that's why they make it a secret. The abuser may keep a child silent by making him feel responsible for what is being done to him, or by making threats about what will happen if he tells anyone. The child may think that he would be blamed, or that no one would believe him – and adults often don't want to hear when a child tries to tell them.

In our society, men are not often seen as victims. There are beliefs about masculinity and men's sexuality that support the myth that male child sexual abuse does not occur. There are also ideas about femininity that mean that women are not often seen as perpetrators.

If you were sexually abused as a child, you have lived through a traumatic experience which can have lasting effects. Some of the effects described in this pamphlet may apply to you, others may not. Regardless of the effects or the coping patterns you have adopted as a result of the abuse – it is possible to heal.

Self Esteem

Being sexually abused may have given you the message that what you wanted or how you felt didn't matter. The abuser may have blamed you for their behaviour, or you may have felt responsible, even though you were powerless to stop the abuse. As an adult you may feel that:

- you have no rights
- you have no control in your life
- you're a bad person

This fact sheet has been developed to provide general information to victims of crime. It is not intended as a replacement for medical, therapeutic or legal advice. If you have particular concerns please contact your general practitioner, counsellor or Victim Support Service.

Feelings

Sexual abuse can produce a range of emotional reactions, including confusion, fear, betrayal, guilt, anger and grief. Because these feelings are difficult for a child to deal with, they are often blocked out. Our society does not encourage men to talk about their feelings, so it can be even harder for someone who was sexually abused as a child to talk to others about their experience. As an adult you may:

- have difficulty identifying or expressing feelings
- not trust your feelings
- feel that you cannot tell others about the abuse
- feel like your emotions are out of control

Your Body

The experience of sexual abuse can produce confusing, frightening and possibly painful bodily sensations in a child. One way that children cope with this is by learning to go numb or by detaching themselves from what is happening physically. As an adult you may:

- be disconnected from your bodily sensations
- feel bad about your body
- inflict pain or injury on yourself
- abuse alcohol, drugs or food
- have problems sleeping

Relationships

Sexual abuse betrays a child's trust, and may impact on his ability to experience intimacy in other relationships. As an adult you may:

- avoid closeness to avoid betrayal
- feel you cannot trust others
- become involved with abusive people
- cling to people for approval and love
- fear becoming abusive

Sexuality

A child who has been sexually abused has had an adult's sexual knowledge and needs imposed upon him. He has been denied the opportunity to develop and explore his own sexuality. Sexual behaviour becomes linked with powerlessness and confusion. It may also be the only source of affection and approval the child experiences.

Boys may get an erection and experience some feelings of sexual pleasure during the abuse. This is a normal physical response to stimulation and it does not mean that you were responsible. As an adult you may:

- go numb during sex
- avoid sex
- seek sex to meet other emotional needs
- suffer sexual dysfunction
- be concerned about your sexual orientation

Parenting

A child who is abused may have no experience of appropriate parenting or healthy family life. As an adult you may:

- find it hard to balance your needs with those of your children
- be over-protective
- find it hard to show affection appropriately – fear becoming an abuser

Was I Sexually Abused?

When you were a child or teenager, did an adult (or someone older or more powerful than you) use their position of authority or trust to involve you in any sexual activity? The sexual behaviour might have been:

- showing you the sexual parts of his body
- touching sexual parts of your body
- making you touch sexual parts of his body
- putting his penis in your anus or mouth
- putting his fingers or objects in your anus
- making sexual comments or suggestions
- making you watch sexual acts
- watching you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable - like when you were getting undressed or having a bath
- taking pornographic pictures of you
- showing you pornographic photos or films
- making you have sex with other people

The abuser was probably someone you knew and trusted, and was probably male. Contrary to popular belief, most abusers are heterosexual and appear to lead normal lives in the community.

This pamphlet refers to abusers as “he” because most are male, but the information is just as relevant to you if you were sexually abused by a woman.

There is no evidence to suggest that your sexual orientation has resulted from your abuse - whether you identify as heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual.

Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse fear that they will in turn become abusers. It is important for you to know that most survivors do not choose to go on to abuse others and may in fact be very protective of children. However, if you have thoughts about abusing a child it is important that you seek appropriate help.

Choosing a Counsellor

If you are going to work on issues related to past abuse you have a right to informed and appropriate support in doing so. An appropriate counsellor must:

- believe that you were abused
- believe that it was not your fault
- have information about the healing process for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse
- be willing to hear about and believe your experiences
- never minimise your experience or the pain it's caused
- keep the focus on you, not the abuser
- not pressure you to forgive the abuser
- respect and allow you to experience the whole range of your emotions
- respect your strength as a survivor
- teach you skills to take care of yourself
- encourage you to build a support system
- respect your decisions and needs

Individual counselling can be extremely helpful in working through the issues involved with child sexual abuse. Involvement in a support group with other survivors can help break down the feeling of isolation and shame that many survivors feel.

Further Information

If you would like more information, please contact Victim Support Service on (08) 8231 5626 or view our website at www.victimsa.org