



Childhood Sexual Abuse

Information Booklet for Women Survivors

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About the Rape Crisis Centre

Women and girls of all ages and backgrounds experience rape and sexual abuse, and it can happen at any time in their lives. Because this is usually perpetrated by men they know, women and girls often don't report the abuse due to fear, shame or the feeling that they will be blamed or not believed.

It's important to understand that rape and sexual abuse is not about sex. It's about power. It is any unwanted sexual behaviour that causes humiliation, pain, fear or intimidation and includes rape, sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse and unwanted touching or kissing. It also includes behaviour that doesn't involve actual touching such as forcing someone to watch sexual acts, pornography or sexual harassment.

Since 1976 the Rape Crisis Centre has been providing free and confidential support to women and girls who have been raped, sexually assaulted or sexually abused at any time in their lives.

We are based in Glasgow but also offer services to women in Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire, East Dunbartonshire, West Dunbartonshire and Inverclyde, and those services include telephone support, face to face support, letter and email support, groupwork and links to complimentary therapies. We have also developed a range of information booklets and leaflets covering issues such as Rape and Sexual Assault, Child Sexual Abuse, Self Harming, Ritual Abuse. All of our publications are free to women survivors of sexual violence.

This booklet is for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse and gives information on the most common feelings expressed by women. We also have a library of publications that women can borrow from us, free of charge.

Rape Crisis Centre

October 2006

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse of children involves any sexual activity with a child under 16 years of age. This can involve a range of behaviour including:

- Rape
- Oral sex
- Touching a child, or inviting a child to touch in a sexual manner
- Masturbation
- Involving children or young people in looking at or making pornography
- Prostituting children or young people
- Forcing children or young people to behave inappropriately with each other

(this list is not exhaustive)

Sexual abuse can start when children are babies and can continue on into adulthood. It is most often carried out by a person who is well known to the child, often within the family or in another position of trust.

Sexual abuse of children is not about uncontrollable desire – it is a desire to exert power and control over a young person for sexual gratification.

It's impossible to give a description of what a sexual abuser will look like; if it was so easy then children could be much more easily safeguarded. The reality is that sexual abusers are fathers or stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, teachers, priests, the man next door, care workers – in fact it could be anyone.

The one common thread across the range of sexual abuses is that it is a desire for power over the young person; it is a betrayal of the young person's trust in that adult. Very often the abuser will turn the blame onto the young person, accuse them of instigating the abuse, blame

them for being 'flirtatious' or looking 'sexy'. The grooming process can encourage the secrecy, make the young person feel 'special' and further compound the guilt and shame for that young person with gifts or money.

All of this helps to create and encourage feelings of shame and self blame in the young person, silences them and further protects the abuser.

Grooming is a way abusers gain the trust of the child or young person, and sometimes the trust of the whole family. We have often heard news reports of trusted family friends or babysitters being uncovered as abusers, sometimes having groomed the child and other family members for several years before the abuse begins. This shows that there is no credence to the theory that abusers are 'sick' or have uncontrollable urges.

Women Writing

Intimate Intrusions

This woman's experience of childhood sexual abuse shows the terror and the confusion of experiencing incest. It also shows how silence is the response.

"Early childhood by most standards was pretty ideal. Raised in the midst of an old established family, we had a fairly traditional upbringing. It was clearly child centred and our world was protected to the point of being sheltered. We all had our own childhood battles to fight, but it was safe, and we never doubted that we'd win.

Basic background stuff included prominent lawyer father, college professor mother and three younger brothers. We all did the private day school, summer camp and boarding school number: I have just finished my third year at a small, liberal arts, women's college.

The times are hazy, but Daddy had always come by to kiss us goodnight. At some point I woke up and realized that he was sitting on the side of my bed, had pushed my night-gown up and was touching me, more or less all over. I foxed sleeping and after a while he left. These visits grew more frequent and longer. He always came in long after I was supposed to be asleep and never spoke. I was always awake when he arrived although I was pretending to be asleep (I wonder now if he knew). These encounters were obviously clandestine, and there were a whole other set of visits, right at bedtime, that were actively physical, but in some ways more pressurised. At these points, Daddy would ask me to do something for him and would be displeased if I balked. In some ways they bothered me more than the other visits because I was awake and he knew it and I felt, therefore, responsible.

During this time Daddy and I were fighting like cat and dog – tooth and nail, which at the time I did not connect with our evening encounters. By the time I left for boarding school, I couldn't wait to go. Until that time I was deadly afraid of becoming pregnant, because then everyone would know. I never told anyone, but fought with the world. My grades dropped for the first time in my life; I hated my teacher (although that was legitimate in and of itself); I hated school, friends, everything. It took me years to connect all this stuff with Daddy and that time period. Mom said I arrived home from school every day in tears (and that she dreaded it).

Until about a year ago I had no awareness that any of it had happened. I completely removed it from any form of consciousness. Until that point I had not come near to having a relationship even as close as a best friend.”

**Extract from
'Intimate Intrusions' by E A Stanko**

Common feelings experienced by survivors and some coping strategies

Child sexual abuse can have an impact on a woman's ability to trust and to develop intimate relationships in adult life. Women may experience depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress, lack of confidence and low self esteem.

Other common feelings are:

Blame

When someone we have loved and trusted betrays us we look for a reason, for someone or something to blame. This is a way of justifying their behaviour, of trying to explain why they would hurt us in this way. Often we will say:

“My mother rejected him. He had to turn to me for love.”

Abuse is not an expression of love. It hurts the person who is abused, mentally, emotionally and sometimes physically and it can have long term effects such as anger, fear, shame, guilt and self hatred.

Also, abuse is the responsibility of the abuser – it can't be blamed on the behaviour of someone else. Someone who sexually abuses a child does so because he chooses to. Only he is to blame.

“He told me I was his special girl. I liked being the special one. I must have wanted it.”

No one wants to be abused, but we all want to be loved. We need attachments: we can't survive without them. Abusers are very skilled at maintaining that culture of silence – it allows the abuse to continue. If a child is drawn into the abuse and made to feel that she is a willing participant, then the silence is assured.

This is a real betrayal of a child's feelings and need for affection.

“I used to get aroused by him. I had orgasms – how could it be abuse when I got pleasure out of it?”

Sometimes our body responds to stimulus in a way that we don't want it to and abusers make the most of this. We can't control our body's reactions and as children we are inexperienced in sexual matters. Orgasm can be a response to fear and hyper arousal, it does not matter if you experienced pleasure, this doesn't mean that you wanted the abuse to happen.

We feel that for it to truly be abuse we must have hated and despised every moment of it but for some women, feeling that closeness and intimacy with someone who says he loves you can feel very good. We then blame and hate ourselves for all these mixed up feelings.

Abusers use this against us; tell us that we 'asked for it' and that the abuse continued 'because we wanted it'.

“I was a bad child. I needed to be punished.”

Abuse is not punishment for being naughty. No matter how 'bad' a child is, she does not deserve to be sexually abused as punishment. This is yet another excuse used by abusers to justify their behaviour.

“He was a sick man. He needed psychiatric treatment.”

Only around 2% of sex offenders are referred for psychiatric treatment. It's often assumed that you can spot a sex offender by the way he looks or behaves but most abusers are perfectly normal men. This is the most widely accepted myth around sexual abuse of children.

Anger

Firstly, it's OK to be angry with this person, or people who abused you. Anger is a very normal reaction to hurt and pain but we're raised to believe that it is a bad thing and that we should suppress it. Often our anger and our aggression are used against us as an excuse not to deal with the abuse as the anger is all people see, not the pain behind it.

People are scared of anger, and we can be scared of it when it's inside ourselves: we may feel that if we let it out it may overwhelm us and we won't be able to control it. So very often we turn it in on ourselves, blame ourselves, hurt ourselves, or just swallow it and try to block it all out.

In their book, **‘The Courage to Heal – A Guide for Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse’**, Ellen Bass and Laura Davis talk about ‘getting in touch with your anger’ and ‘directing it where it belongs’. They give examples of some exercises you can do to release some of that anger safely, so that you don’t hurt yourself. These include positive expressions of anger such as:

- Writing a letter – either to send to your abuser or just to let your feelings out
- Pounding on the bed with a tennis racquet or some other object
- Screaming – and maybe getting a friend to scream with you

One woman interviewed for the book stated:

“I felt incredible anger, but I never allowed anger my whole life. It was really a difficult thing to let out. One day my therapist got up out of her chair and she said, “Your father’s in that chair,” and she handed me a rolled up towel and she said, “I want you to hit your father.”

It took me a long time to psych myself into doing that, but once I started I couldn’t stop. I pounded and screamed until I couldn’t move any more. It was such a relief.

That was an important turning point for me. After that, I did a lot of pounding on beds and screaming and writing angry letters to my dead father. I even worked with a punchbag.”

Experiencing Flashbacks

Flashbacks are a natural reaction to the trauma of sexual abuse but they can be very frightening and women often describe feelings of fear, confusion, panic, being out of control, terror. This is because they can happen when you least expect them and can be triggered by a noise, a smell or by seeing something that reminds you of your childhood or the abuse.

No, you are not crazy. You may feel that you can't speak to anyone about your flashbacks because you think you are going crazy, but it's a natural part of the healing process.

**I've found it helps to go out and walk
I've found it helps to sit and talk
I've found some days I am so sad
I've found some days I am so mad
I've found that it is right to cry
I've found the strength in me to try**

Kerry (from 'A September Poem – A Woman's Anthology' 2003)

Sometimes women will try to avoid all the things that trigger flashbacks but the down side of this is that it can really limit what you do and where you go. There are other ways to help alleviate the fear and panic that flashbacks cause.

- Tell yourself that it's a flashback and that, scary as it is, you are now safe.
- Breathe. When you are having a flashback you stop breathing normally and this can cause a pounding in your head, dizziness, shaking, sweating, and feeling faint. If you can start breathing normally the feelings of panic will lessen.
- Take time to recover. It will take a while for you to feel yourself again so give yourself permission to take some time to get back to your normal activities.
- Get some support. You might want to be on your own when the flashbacks happen but if you have someone who knows about them, you can choose to talk about your feelings anytime you need to.
- Remind yourself you're in the real world. Stamp your feet or clap your hands loudly.
- Remember that you survived a terrible and frightening experience when you were young. This is part of your healing process and you are a survivor.

Panic

Panic attacks are sudden, unexpected anxiety attacks that can include sweating, tightening of the chest, shortness of breath, numbness, tingling of the hands and feet or needing to go to the toilet, your mouth may dry up and you may jump at even the slightest noise.

When you first experience a panic attack you may be confused, not sure of what is happening to your body and frightened that you can't control it. But panic attacks are another way your body has of coping with the abuse you experienced. If your body feels threatened, it responds with the 'fight or flight' response and a panic attack is an exaggerated form of this.

Although panic attacks are your body's way of coping with the memories of your abuse, there are some things that can make it worse. These include:

- Alcohol, nicotine and caffeine and some drugs can make panic attacks worse. Also some prescription drugs can bring the attack on more severely. Withdrawal from some sedatives can have the same effect.
- Your blood sugar levels being too high – this can be caused by junk food, overeating or too much fasting.
- Hyperventilating caused by stress can make a panic attack worse.

Self Injury

There are a number of myths around self injury – such as, 'it's a suicide that failed' or 'it's attention seeking'. This is not the case. Self injury is a way of coping with emotional pain, it's a release when the pain becomes too much to bear.

Women survivors who self injure are not insane or dangerous, they are just trying to cope with the pain in their lives without hurting anyone else. It's important to recognise that women who are self injuring need to have space to talk about their experiences, need to be believed and most importantly, need to be free of judgment.

There are a number of good publications about self harm that can be obtained from book shops or on loan from the Rape Crisis Centre library.

There are also a number of ways to keep yourself as safe as you can when you are self injuring:

- Use clean blades if you are cutting and never share with anyone else.
- Have a well stocked first aid box where you can get at it easily.
- If your wounds become infected, get to your doctor as soon as you can.
- If you've cut too deeply or cut a vein or artery by mistake, get help immediately.
- If you have burned yourself, dress the burn as quickly as you can. If it's a large burn, get medical help as quickly as you can. Put the burn in cold water as soon as possible.

Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol or prescription or non-prescription drugs are often used by women survivors as a way of coping with memories of sexual abuse. Often drugs can be prescribed to assist the woman to cope with how she is feeling or to improve sleeping. Whilst this can be a very effective short term support it should be remembered that it is easy to become dependent and reliant on medication which numbs the pain. Open discussion with your GP will allow you to determine what the best treatment plan is for you. Sometimes illicit drug use and/or excessive drinking is a problem for women who have abuse issues, again, these mask the pain and stop women remembering and experiencing their feelings.

If heavy drinking or drug use is a factor it may be better that this is addressed prior to entering into any kind of therapy or counselling. Whilst feeling the emotions and experiencing and acknowledging the pain you are in are extremely difficult it is a vital part of the healing process.

Eating Disorders

Many studies have shown that a high number of women who have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse, have eating disorders. For some women, control over their eating is a way of coping and expressing their emotions. Some women who are bulimic or compulsive eaters reveal that bingeing is their way of stuffing down the emotions they feel. Food becomes their only source of comfort and it can help to numb their feelings.

Some women who have been abused believe that if they are too thin or too obese, it will make them unattractive and the abuse will stop. Some believe that by not eating they can just fade away and die and the abuse will have to end. Others have expressed a need to be in control in the area of food. Purging is a way for some to release their emotions. If they believe they cannot tell anyone about the abuse and express the emotions they are experiencing, purging may be the only way they know how to get those feelings out. Many feel relieved and calm after purging.

The binge/purge cycle may serve a protective purpose; in particular, it seems to reduce the intensity of intolerable emotional stress, and provides an outlet for:

- expression of anger
- regaining sense of self
- ensuring predictability
- cleansing oneself of the abusive experience
- relieving stress and tension
- establishing control
- developing a sense of personal space
- an opportunity to refocus

If you are a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, dealing with memories of the abuse can be very painful and difficult. At times you may feel like you are reliving the abuse. If your memories are flooding back and you feel like you are re-experiencing the abuse, you may feel like you are

going crazy and want to die. You will probably want to isolate yourself and not talk to anyone. It is good to have someone to talk to and help you through it, rather than having to experience the feelings, emotions and pain all alone. Having someone to turn to and support may help you feel less alone and make the difficult times a little easier to get through.

Working with a support agency can help you come to terms with the abuse.

There are two things it is important for all survivors' of abuse to remember. Firstly, it was not your fault, you did nothing wrong and you did not deserve it. Secondly, you do not have to keep secrets anymore because it really is okay to talk about it.

Women Writing

When I was seven years old, a man who was about thirty raped me. He was my mother's boyfriend. I didn't understand what was happening to me then, but now that I am almost thirteen years old, I do.

It all started when my mother's boyfriend came over to visit her and she was in the shower. I was in my T-shirt and underwear, which were kind of holey in the bottom. Freddie noticed and stuck his finger up my vagina and it hurt. I said, "Quit!" and pushed him away. He did it again and then he quit.

Then Freddie went into my mom's bedroom and started stripping off his pants and shirt. He pulled down his underwear a little. I passed by the bathroom and said goodnight to my mom. Then I went to the door of my mom's bedroom and said goodnight to Freddie. Freddie told me to come into the bedroom to get a dollar he had for me in his hand. I stayed in the doorway, afraid: I thought he would try to put his finger in my underwear again. I told him my mother had told me never to take money from people unless she

was there. He stretched out on the bed and leaned toward me, grabbed my hand and pulled me into the bedroom. Then he said, "I'll give you a dollar if you touch this." He was holding his penis in his hand. It was big and looked hard. I was very scared and backed into my mother's closet. He told me to come out of the closet. By now he was sitting on the edge of my mom's bed, still holding his penis. Thick, clear white sticky stuff was coming out of it. He said, "Let me put my penis in your vagina and I'll give you a dollar."

I tried to run out of the room, but he grabbed my hands and pulled me real close to him and took down my underwear. Then he pulled me on top of him and grabbed my bum and rubbed his penis between my legs, holding me by the bum. I felt sticky stuff all over me and it hurt real bad. I don't know if his penis went in but it felt like it did – like something stretching down there.

My vagina hurt for three days afterward. It was all red and swollen. I showed my mom because I was real worried and she wondered what I had been doing. I was afraid to tell her what Freddie had done because I didn't know what had happened to my vagina, whether or not it had been injured.

Now that I am older, I wish Freddie would be thrown in jail for what he did to me, or his penis cut off since he doesn't know how to use it. Grown men shouldn't be allowed to go around hurting little girls with their penises.

Extract from 'I Never Told Anyone – Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse' : edited by Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton.

Ways of looking after ourselves

When we are going through a particularly difficult time, we can often neglect ourselves. If we neglect ourselves physically however, it can make it even harder to deal with the emotional pain we are experiencing. Below is a list of 'self help' tips you can use to help you look after yourself.

- Remember what you are feeling is OK and normal
- Stay warm
- Eat if you can. If you can't eat, remember to drink fluids and maybe a little fruit juice to get some vitamins
- Have friends around you if you can
- Try to find ways of expressing your anger which work for you e.g. screaming, shouting, running, writing, painting
- Take some exercise: walk as much as you can
- Try not to drink alcohol or take drugs as they might intensify the feelings you are having
- Try painting or drawing your feelings. It doesn't have to be good – no one will see it if you don't want them to. It's just for you.
- Write down your feelings. Don't worry about grammar or spelling or what the writing looks like. Just express your feelings.
- Buy yourself something delicious to eat. Allow yourself to really enjoy it.
- Try not to spend too much time in crowded situations
- Have a big warm bath with something extravagant in the water like lavender oil or bubble bath. Make the bathroom safe, lock the door, light some candles and play soft music. If you can, allow yourself plenty of time to really enjoy this.

- Take some time just for you. Do what you want to do – read, draw, do nothing, go to the pictures, or meet a friend.
- Take care of yourself first and others later if you need to
- Recognise how special you are and try to realise that you are worth looking after.

Recommended Reading

The Courage to Heal – A Guide for Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

Vermillion Books: 2002

An excellent all round resource with many first person accounts as well as suggestions for useful exercises on ways of dealing with different feelings.

Copies of this book are available for loan from the Rape Crisis Centre library

Beginning to Heal: A First Book for Men and Women Who Were Sexually Abused as Children

by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

Harper Collins: 2003 (Revised Edition)

By the authors of 'The Courage to Heal'. Looks at how sexual abuse affects you and working out ways to heal from it.

The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

Harper Collins: 2000

To be used alongside 'The Courage to Heal'. Includes checklists, writing exercises, activities etc. Intended to help adult survivors overcome the effects of child sexual abuse.

Breaking Free Workbook: Practical Help for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

by Carolyn Ainscough and Kay Toon

Sheldon Books: 2000

Based on 'Breaking Free' and on the authors' years of experience of working with groups of women survivors of child sexual abuse.

See: Rape Crisis Centre Booklist – for information on the most up to date list of books that can be borrowed from the Rape Crisis Centre.

Have you had a good service from us?

We try at all times to ensure that the service we give to women is of the highest quality and to do this we have developed a clear and easy to use Complaints Policy.

If you are unhappy about any aspect of the service we have delivered, please do not hesitate to contact the Centre Manager to discuss this.

If you would like to make a formal complaint to the Rape Crisis Centre, please contact us for a copy of our Complaints Procedure.

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