

Surviving Child Sexual Abuse

Thousands of men and women throughout Australia and the world experience sexual abuse as a child. Sexual abuse refers to a range of sexual acts that include touch and no touch. Some people experience child sexual abuse perpetrated by a friend, family member or relation, others by a stranger. Many children experience sexual abuse by more than 1 perpetrator.

All forms of child abuse are a crime and are never the fault of the victim

As a Child

As a child, victims can be left with a range of feelings following sexual abuse. These can include intense fear, anger, disgust, shame, powerlessness and other feelings. Many children also experience behaviour changes at this time.

Many people who experience child sexual abuse feel unable to tell anyone about the abuse until much later in life. There are many reasons for this. Reasons may include:

- Fear of the perpetrator harming them, a family member, friend or pet
- Thinking they will not be believed
- Thinking the abuse was their fault
- Thinking the abuse was 'normal', particularly if told this by the perpetrator
- Shame and embarrassment

Sometimes, a child does tell an adult, but the response they receive is not helpful. When adults don't understand about child sexual abuse themselves, they can cause more harm to children by what they say and do, or by doing nothing about the abuse.

As an Adult

As adults, many survivors question themselves about not telling anyone about the abuse earlier or not doing more to prevent it. Whether the child tried to tell anyone about the abuse or not, the abuse was not their fault. The abuse is the responsibility of the perpetrator and no matter what a child does or doesn't do, they are not responsible for it occurring.

Some people receive help early and heal quickly from their abuse experiences. Other people adopt different ways of coping with their experiences. These ways can include:

- Blocking it out
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Self-harming
- Gambling
- Becoming a workaholic or perfectionist

Sexual abuse is a traumatic experience and the impact of the trauma on the survivor can last long after the trauma experiences stop. Common experiences for adult survivors of child sexual abuse can include:

- Low self esteem
- Guilt, shame and self-blame
- Sleep disturbances
- Re-entering abusive relationships
- Dissociation
- Difficulties with sexual relationships and intimacy
- Depression and anxiety
- Feeling alienated and alone
- Lack of trust for others
- Flashback & nightmares
- Feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness

Reminders It is normal for survivors of trauma to have their memories of the trauma 'triggered' by a trauma reminder. Different people can be reminded of the trauma by different things. For example, it may be a sound, a smell, a touch, or hearing a story. For some women who have experienced child sexual abuse, pregnancy and birth of a child can be a challenging time. With help, most trauma survivors learn to recognise what triggers them, and over time, manage their responses to the reminders.

Trust Survivors have been betrayed by and harmed by adults in the past, and often these were adults who were meant to protect and care for them. Because of this, survivors can find it difficult to trust others. This can get in the way of forming and keeping positive relationships.

Self-worth It is common for adult survivors to experience feelings of low self-worth and poor self confidence. Many survivors believe they are worthless, particularly if they were told this by the abuser. Rebuilding self esteem can take considerable time, but it is crucial for survivors to know that they **are** important, valuable people.

Physical effects Not only do childhood trauma experiences often have psychological effects, they can also have physical effects. The survivor is frequently more alert and on the look-out for danger, even if they don't realise they are. This can heighten emotions and 'jumpiness'. Over time, this can result in difficulty sleeping, low immunity and serious health issues.

It is common for trauma during childhood to effect many areas of life as an adult: self esteem, relationships, coping, learning, even physical health

Many survivors of child sexual abuse seek support and heal from their trauma. Healing can take a long time for some survivors. It is important to find someone supportive to talk to. This can be a friend, family member or counsellor. Learning about the psychological effects of child abuse can help a survivor start to make sense of their feelings and actions. They can also start to recognise their strengths, learn new ways of coping and move forward in life.

Some people consider reporting the child sexual abuse to Police, even years later. There is no time limit on reporting abuse in Australia. This is a decision for the survivor to make. It may help to talk the situation through with a counsellor to help make the decision clearer.

Counselling

Counselling can provide an opportunity to talk to a supportive, non-judgemental person about what happened and how it has affected the person. It can help the survivor to manage their feelings and recover from the experience. It is usually best to see a counsellor who is knowledgeable about trauma and has experience in working with people who have experienced child sexual abuse. If the survivor is not satisfied with the first response received, it is okay to try somewhere else.

The Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)

SARC offers support services for both recent and past sexual assault and sexual abuse.

The SARC 24-hour Emergency Telephone Line provides access to an experienced counsellor and doctor for people who have been sexually assaulted during the past 14 days.

Free counselling is available for past sexual assault and sexual abuse
(08) 6458 1828 or 1800 199 888 (freecall from a landline)



Government of Western Australia
North Metropolitan Health Service



Tel: (08) 6458 1828
Or Freecall 1800 199 888