



## Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

By

**Randy Brazzel MA, LPC, LMFT**

Sexual abuse is a violent crime that happens to both males and females. Current estimates are that over 25% of females and 10% of males experience some form of sexual abuse in their lifetime. Unfortunately, because many people are either unable to or are reluctant to report abuse, these estimates most likely underestimate the true numbers of people that have experienced sexual abuse trauma.

A common misperception is that sexual abuse is mostly perpetrated by male strangers in poor, inner-city areas. The reality is very different. In fact, the most common perpetrator of sexual abuse is someone that the victim knows. The perpetrator may be male or female and may be a family member, a trusted friend, a neighbor, a spouse, or some other trusted adult. Sexual abuse also occurs across a range of cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and communities. Sexual abuse can also happen to a person regardless of their age.

### **Common Issues Faced by Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Incest**

Sexual abuse can have a profound impact on a child, especially if the abuse is perpetrated by someone close to the child. The effects of the abuse often linger into adulthood and can lead to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders and other mental health and behavioral health issues. Some of the more frequent issues associated with incest and abuse are:

- Trust Issues - Incest and abuse are a violation of the bond of trust. The closer the relationship the greater the sense of betrayal of

trust. This betrayal of trust often leads to conflicted relationships in adulthood.

- Feelings of Hopelessness, Powerlessness, and Helplessness - There is an imbalance of power between a child and a perpetrator. As a result, the best that a child can do is "survive" the abuse, since they have no power to stop it. This imbalance often leads the survivor to feel powerless, hopeless, and helpless.
- Conflicted feelings - Children who are being abused often have feelings of love and attachment that get mixed in with their feelings of hurt and betrayal. This can create significant relationship issues for survivors when they become adults.
- Feeling trapped - Because a child who is being abused may have to rely on the perpetrator for food, shelter, clothing, or nurturing, they often feel trapped. In addition, sometimes when there is physical abuse or abandonment by other care-givers, the perpetrator may become the child's only ally in the home. It becomes a no-win scenario when you have to depend on the person who is hurting you. This can have a profound affect on how an adult survivor views relationships.
- Secrecy Issues - Perpetrators often use threats, intimidation, physical violence, withdrawal, and manipulation to compel abuse victims to keep the "secret." Many survivors struggle with telling the "secrets" even when they become adults.

- Victims tend to blame themselves - Perpetrators often blame their victims for the abuse. As a result, survivors often learn to blame themselves for being abused.
- Self-loathing and self-harm - Survivors often feel betrayed by their own body and as a result they may begin to hate themselves and their body.
- Repressed Memories - Sometimes, abuse victims learn to block out the trauma from their memories. This often occurs when abuse victims learn to dissociate during the abuse. As a result, survivors often feel disconnected from themselves and their own feelings.

### **Understanding Dissociation**

Most people have the ability to emotionally detach from situations and events that are difficult or unpleasant. For example, a teenager who watches his parents repeatedly argue often finds ways of detaching from this conflict. If they don't, they may get pulled into their parent's conflict and become the dumping ground for their animosity toward each other. This ability to detach can thus be a healthy coping strategy to manage difficult situations that you have no control over.

A way to think about dissociation is that it is an extreme version of emotional detachment. When someone is repeatedly sexually abused, they frequently develop an ability to detach from their body and "pretend" like the abuse is happening to someone else. While their body is being

### **New Dimensions Can Help If You or Someone You Know Is:**

- Depressed or Suicidal
- Stuck and having difficulty making changes
- Dealing with trauma
- Struggling with Panic Attacks
- Having difficulty working or going to school
- Struggling with addictions or substance abuse
- Cutting or doing other self-destructive behaviors
- Struggling with anger issues
- Struggling to get their medications stabilized

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abused, their mind is somewhere else. Since they can't physically escape from the abuse, sexual abuse survivors dissociate in order to protect their own sanity and maintain their ability to function in the world around them. Unfortunately, this coping strategy of dissociation can have unintended side-effects that can last for years if not appropriately addressed.

### **Psychotherapy Can Help!**

Psychotherapy can help a person overcome the effects of trauma and reclaim their own sense of self-worth. Therapy can also help a survivor develop new coping skills so that they can successfully manage relationships and the normal stressors of life.



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1345 Space Park Dr., Ste. C  
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**Common side effects of sexual abuse trauma**

- Crying during or after sex.
- Desire to change one's name.
- Avoidance of mirrors.
- Feel dirty, damaged, diseased, and/or different.
- Strong compulsions around particular sex acts.
- Feeling betrayed by one's own body.
- Easier to have sex with someone you don't know than to have sex with someone you are intimate with.
- Feeling crazy or fear of going crazy.
- Blocking out a period of one's life, especially before age 12.
- Unexplained body sensations (i.e. sharp pains in stomach area, feeling like skin is crawling, etc.)
- Fear of being alone in the dark.
- Nightmares
- Repression of memories.
- Pattern of being a victim.
- Swallowing or gagging sensitivity
- Self-harming behavior such as cutting. Some survivors cut for years, especially around the inner thighs or genital regions.
- Feeling alienated from one's own body
- Trust issues.
- Boundary issues.
- Feeling emotionally numb.
- Dissociation.
- Suicidal thoughts and/or attempts.
- Substance abuse or other addictions.
- Eating disorders.
- Feelings of guilt and shame.
- Fear of being trapped or closed in.

**How to Build Resilience and Overcome the Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse**

Incest and sexual abuse do not have to define your life. The abuse may have happened to you, but it is not who you are. You can heal the trauma and reclaim your life. Below are some steps to take to begin the process of recovery.

- **Heal the pain from the past** - Most survivors carry a lot of pain from the past trauma. It is often helpful to work through this pain rather than keeping it locked away inside. Remember that if you can live through the trauma, you can certainly live through the healing of this trauma.
- **Change your self-perceptions** - It is important to realize that a survivor's self-perceptions are distorted because of the trauma. When your trust is betrayed and you get blamed for being

abused, it takes a toll on your view of yourself. To overcome the abuse, you have to realize that you are a survivor of the abuse, not the cause.

- **Reconnect mind and body** - Many survivors feel like their mind and body are disconnected. Learn to pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, perceptions and body sensations. The more aware you are, the better decisions you will make.
- **Learn to trust yourself again** - Because many survivors learn to dissociate, they frequently quit trusting their own perceptions. Learn to trust your own instincts, they will serve you well.
- **Learn to manage the intensity of your emotions** - Survivors

are often left with intense feelings that are disconnected from the memories of the abuse. These intense feelings often get triggered by events in the present. A survivor's feelings may match the current situation, but the intensity may not. Learn to manage the intensity of your feelings without impulsively acting on them.

- **Reclaim your own power and let go of the identity of being a victim** - You may have been powerless to stop the abuse when you were a child, but you have the power now to make your life what you want it to be.
- **Learn to forgive yourself** - The abuse was not your fault. Quit blaming yourself.

- **Learn to nurture yourself** - Set healthy boundaries and be kind and loving toward yourself. Treat yourself the way you want to be treated, not the way you were treated when you were being abused.
- **Develop healthy relationships** - Healthy relationships provide support, love, respect, and nurturing. Be kind and respectful to others and expect the same in return from them. Don't tolerate the intolerable. Instead, seek out relationships that build you up rather than tear you down.
- **Seek help** - You don't have to do it alone. Get professional help when needed.