

Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse

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Please note, the information within this document contains information which may act as a trigger for those who have experienced sexual abuse. If you would prefer to just read the information on receiving help, please click here and it will take you straight to the "[Helping yourself](#)" section.

About childhood sexual abuse

The term sexual abuse most commonly refers to the involvement of a young person below the age of sixteen in sexual activity with a significantly older person. It is referred to as abuse since it is assumed in our society that the older person must, by definition, be taking advantage of the younger one since a person under sixteen cannot give informed consent to sexual activity. Usually the victim of the abuse cannot understand fully the implications of what is happening at the time; therefore, although they may appear to consent to the activity, the consent is not truly informed. Although the abuser may also be young, there is usually a significant difference in age and of status between the parties which puts the abuser in a position of power. This power difference means that even where there is apparent acquiescence, this is usually based on fear of the consequences of refusal and so is not true consent.

The term sexual abuse may also be applied when one person uses the power they have over another adult - usually because they are in a position of trust or influence - to take advantage sexually.

Sexual abuse can be an isolated or a recurrent event. The activities involved can range from inappropriate touching to sexual penetration. The abuse can be disguised as play or it may be a more overt assault. The abuser may be a relative, an acquaintance or a stranger. While the abuse is often frightening and traumatic at the time it occurs, some feelings may not fully impact until a later date when the occurrence is better understood.

Within this document we have mainly given information about the effect on students of having been a victim of sexual abuse when they were younger. However, we hope that this, alongside the information on rape and sexual assault will also be of help to those who have experienced

abuse in other situations. You may also find it helpful to look at our PDF on Rape and Sexual Assault.

Commonly those who are currently experiencing abuse are referred to as victims of sexual abuse; those whose experience of abuse is in the past are referred to as (adult) survivors of sexual abuse.

As a trigger warning the next section will give examples of sexual abuse. If you would prefer to skip over this section, please [click here](#) to go to “The victims’ experience at the time of abuse”.

Examples of sexual abuse

- A girl who was sexually abused by her father until her teens when she eventually reported what was happening with the result that her father was tried and imprisoned.
- A boy who was abused by his football coach and thought he was alone with the experience until a number of boys reported being similarly abused several years later.
- A young girl whose teenage stepbrother used to play games with her at an early age which she realised when she reached puberty had been sexually intrusive.
- A boy who was regularly abused by a trusted uncle and aunt with whom he was often sent to stay. This abuse took place over a number of years during which he was unable to say why he did not wish to visit these relatives.
- Two sisters who both suffered abuse at the hands of a grandfather but who never spoke about it until many years later.

The experience of abuse is not restricted to one sex and indeed abusers are not invariably male. [Recent statistics](#) in the UK estimate that 1 in 20 children have been sexually abused, and the vast majority of children who experience sexual abuse were abused by someone they knew.

The victims’ experiences at the time of abuse

- Victims report feeling very alone with the experience of abuse. Often, they are afraid of telling, because of fear of retribution or the consequences for the family.
- Victims frequently feel they will not be believed or taken seriously if they tell of what has happened, and this fear can be confirmed when they do try to raise the matter.
- Victims frequently feel guilty. The abuser may suggest they are to blame for the abuse, or they may take responsibility upon themselves. Children naturally tend to assume responsibility for events that are not of their making, and this is particularly true in the case of abuse. The guilt is increased if the child has found any aspect of the abuse gratifying.
- Victims commonly report feeling extremely scared and confused by the abusive experience.

The survivor’s experiences in later life

Sometimes the experience of abuse appears to be wholly or partially forgotten for some years while the survivor continues with their life. Memories may resurface however when the person is settled in a safe environment or may be triggered by specific events such as beginning a sexual relationship or becoming a parent.

The memories can bring intense feelings and experiences -

- **Flashbacks and nightmares.** Recollections of the abusive experience may intrude into the waking thoughts or may recur in dreams.
- **Shame and guilt.** The survivor may blame themselves; may suffer from low self-esteem or may feel deeply embarrassed about seeking help. They may become depressed, harm themselves and have thoughts of suicide.
- **Intense anger.** This may be directed at the abuser and may be linked with a wish to confront or to completely avoid them. It may also be directed at others who seem to have colluded with the abuser or may be more general.
- **Disrupted relational patterns.** Some survivors find they tend to avoid intimate relationships and are distrustful of the motives of all other people. Others may find they tend to form very intense intimate relationships which can be emotionally draining.
- **Fear of the consequences of the abuse.** Survivors may wonder whether they will be able to form normal relationships or whether they might become abusers themselves. There may be difficulties in enjoying normal sexual activities.
- **Isolation and stigmatisation.** Survivors may feel they are totally alone with their experience. They can feel that they have been marked out and that somehow others know of their history without being told and so treat them differently.

As with human response to any trauma, the degree of the reaction can vary widely between individuals. Some people apparently come to terms with very severe abuse comparatively easily; others find the abuse has a lasting effect on them. Neither of these responses is more correct or healthier than the other.

Helping yourself

Try not to blame yourself

No matter what the circumstances of the sexual abuse of a child, it is never the fault or responsibility of that child. Even if you are aware that there was some degree of collusion or you feel in hindsight that you wish you had been able to act differently, this does not lessen the absolute truth that is the duty of adults to care for children and protect them from exploitation. Some survivors find it helpful to observe children who are the same age that they were when the abuse took place in order to underline for them how great the power difference between adults and children really is and how easy it is for an older person to manipulate the trust, innocence and vulnerability of a child.

Take care of yourself now

The fact that something bad has been done to you is not a reason to deny yourself pleasure, or to punish yourself. It is in fact a reason to care for yourself. If you can learn to treat your body with respect and kindness, you will help the healing process. Therefore, look for simple ways to show care for yourself and kindness to your body. If you find you are tempted to harm yourself - for example by starving or overindulging, by cutting yourself or even by attempting suicide - seek help and support so that you can begin to bring this behaviour under control.

Find appropriate outlets for your feelings

If you have been abused, you have a perfectly good reason to be very angry and full of grief. It can be hard to know what to do with these feelings. It may not be possible or helpful to express them to the person responsible. Even if you do, they may well fail to accept responsibility.

Feelings can be helped by finding others who will listen to your story sympathetically and help you express yourself. Writing down what you feel can help - many survivors find it helpful to write down their feelings in the form of a letter - you don't have to send it. Many activities can help relieve pent up feelings of anger - exercise, sport, or simply going somewhere private or noisy and shouting.

Grief can be relieved by allowing time to reflect and by expressing the sadness. You may fear that once you allow these feelings to emerge, they may take you over. This is a natural fear; however, in fact the opposite tends to be the case - once a feeling is allowed adequate expression it can become easier to control.

Try and find both support and privacy

Abuse can be a profoundly isolating experience. Even when you do speak about it, people may either dismiss what you tell them, or they may overreact. However as is now recognised, abuse is an all too common experience, so you are certainly not alone in what you have suffered.

There are now many agencies which will offer appropriate support and have much expertise in helping survivors heal themselves. We list some [below](#).

Some people have the opposite experience and find that the abuse which has happened to them has become common knowledge, and as a result feel that their privacy has been invaded. Remember you only need to tell the people who you want to tell, and it is up to you to decide how much you want to tell them. Certainly, no-one will be able to guess what has happened to you if you decide not to tell them and no one has the right to force their opinions or their advice on you.

Do not despair

Human beings are remarkably resilient and have a vast capacity for healing themselves. You may well feel that you have been irreversibly damaged emotionally or even physically; that you may not ever be able to form functioning relationships or have an enjoyable sex-life; that you will never recover. However, this is not likely to be the case. Although you can never change your history, with time and care you can make sense of what has happened to you and can minimise the negative effects.

Further help

If you have been abused as a child, you might want help to make sense of your feelings and worries. This may be even truer if the abuse is continuing.

It can be very difficult to trust someone with something as personal as this and may require a lot of courage. It may be easier to share your feelings with a stranger rather than a friend. Professional counselling agencies such as the University's Counselling Team employ counsellors who understand the effects of child sexual abuse and who will not be shocked or embarrassed by anything you may tell them. Your preference for a male or female counsellor will be respected.

There are also many self-help groups where survivors of abuse share their experience in safety and learn to deal with the resulting emotions. Some initial contact addresses are listed below. You will know when you are ready to read a book, join a group or talk to someone alone. Trust your instinct and seek help when the time is right for you.

Further help

Helplines

- **[Loughborough University Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity](#)**: 01509 228338
studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk
To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).
- **[National Self Harm Network](#)**
info@nshn.co.uk
Supports individuals who self harm and their families and friends to reduce emotional distress and improve their quality of life.
- **[Samaritans](#)**: 116 123
jo@samaritans.org
Samaritans can be contacted at any time. They have a 24-hour listening service for emotional support including crisis support. Their service is entirely confidential. Emails will be replied to within 24 hours and your email address will not be shown to the volunteer.
- **[Safeline](#)**: 0808 800 5008 (General Helpline)
Male Helpline: 0808 800 5005
Young people's Helpline: 0808 800 5007
Text Helpline and Online Advisors: 07860 027573
Safeline is a specialised charity working to prevent sexual abuse and to support those affected in their recovery.
- **[NAPAC](#)**: 0808 801 0331 (Calls will not show on your bill)
10am-9pm Mondays to Thursdays & 10am-6pm on Fridays
support@napac.org.uk
Supporting recovery from childhood abuse
- **[NSPCC](#)** - 0808 800 5000 (24 hours, every day).
UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children.

- **Quetzal**: 0116 253 3383 (helpline 10-12 am, 7-9 pm)
0116 253 9103
Support for women recovering from childhood sexual abuse
- **Rape Crisis England and Wales**
Exists to improve services and promote the needs and rights of women and girls who have experienced sexual abuse, rape and all forms of sexual violence. Raises awareness and understanding of sexual violence and abuse in all its forms.
- **Survivors Manchester**: 0808 800 5005
A survivor-led/survivor-run voluntary organisation that aims to create and facilitate a safe space for male survivors of sexual abuse and rape to work through personal and sometimes painful issues.
- **Childline** - 0800 1111
Childline is here to help anyone under 19 in the UK with any issue they're going through.
[Email service](#)

Further websites and resources

- **The Survivors Trust**
The Survivors Trust has 129 member organisations based in the UK & Ireland which provide specialist support for women, men & children who have survived rape, sexual violence or childhood sexual abuse. The Survivors Trust has also created six booklets for survivors:
 - [Survivors?](#)
 - [Was it really abuse?](#)
 - [It wasn't your fault.](#)
 - [You are not alone.](#)
 - [Untangling the confusion.](#)
 - [Healing at your own pace.](#)
- **Recovering from Childhood Sexual Abuse**
An online book written by survivors for all survivors who experienced any form of abuse or neglect in childhood and for those who provide support.
- **Befrienders**
An expanding global network of 349 emotional support centres in 32 countries providing an open space for those in distress to talk and be heard. This is via telephone helplines, SMS messaging, face to face, internet chat, outreach and local partnerships and is available in many different languages.