

Fact Sheet



Surviving Child Sexual Abuse

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

All forms of child sexual abuse are a crime and 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 fear, anger, powerlessness, shame and disgust. 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 including:

- Fear of the perpetrator harming them, or someone close to them;
- Thinking they will not be believed;
- Thinking the abuse was their fault;
- Thinking the abuse was 'normal';
- Shame and embarrassment.

Sometimes, if a child does tell an adult and the response is not helpful, they can cause more harm to children by what they say and do. This is more likely to happen when the adult doesn't understand about child sexual abuse themselves.

As an Adult

As adults, survivors can question themselves about not doing more to prevent, or informing anyone about the abuse. Whether or not the child tried to tell anyone, the abuse was not their fault. Abuse is always the responsibility of the perpetrator, the child is never responsible for it occurring, no matter what they did or didn't do.

Some children receive help early, healing quickly from their abuse experience. Others adopt ways of coping with their trauma which include:

- Using Drugs or Alcohol
- Self-harm
- Becoming a workaholic or perfectionist
- Blocking it Out
- Gambling

Although these may be 'negative' coping mechanisms, they help the person survive and be here today.

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No matter the impact abuse has had, nothing is wrong with the survivor; instead, something has happened to them.

Impact of the trauma of sexual abuse on the survivor can last long after the trauma experiences stop. Common experiences for adult survivors can include:

- Low self-esteem
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Self-blame
- Feeling alienated and alone
- Dissociation
- Feeling powerless
- Depression
- Shame
- Sleep disturbances
- Inability to trust others
- Re-entering abusive relationships
- Nightmares
- Difficulties with intimacy

Reminders

It is normal for survivors of trauma to have memories of the trauma 'triggered' by certain reminder. These may be a sound, smell, touch or hearing a story. Pregnancy and childbirth can be a challenging time for some women who have experience child sexual abuse. With help, the majority of trauma survivors can learn to recognise what triggers them and be able to manage their responses to the reminders.

Trust

Many survivors have been betrayed and harmed by adults who were meant to protect or care for them in the past. Because of this, survivors can find it difficult to trust, which can prevent them forming and keeping positive relationships.

Self-Worth

It is common for adult survivors to experience feelings of low self-worth and poor self-confidence. If the survivor was told they are worthless by the abuser, many survivors can believe this long into the future. It is important for survivors to rebuild self-esteem, which can take considerable time, but it is crucial for survivors to know that they are important, valuable people.

Physical Effects

Survivors of childhood trauma can often experience both psychological and physical effects. The survivor can be unaware that they are frequently more alert and on the lookout for danger. This can heighten emotions and jumpiness, over time resulting in difficulty sleeping, low immunity and serious health issues.

It is common for trauma during childhood to affect many areas of life as an adult including self-esteem, relationships, coping mechanisms, learning and physical health.

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The Healing Process

Healing can take a long time for some survivors, although many survivors of child sexual abuse seek support and healing from their experience. 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, start to recognise their own strengths, learn new ways of coping and move forward in life.

As there is no time limit on reporting abuse in Australia, survivors can still consider reporting the child sexual abuse to police years after it occurred. 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 the opportunity for survivors to talk to a supportive, non-judgemental person about what happened and how it has affected them. 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.

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

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