HEALING FROM CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

Healing can begin at many starting points and everyone’s journey is different. With many survivors breaking the silence, we have learned that there are shared reactions and experiences as survivors heal from childhood sexual abuse. It is important to find someone to talk to about your experiences and feelings, either someone you know and trust, or a counselor.

Why Do I Have To Deal With It Now, If It Happened Back Then?

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse may believe that since the abuse happened so long ago it would be better not to rehash the past. They may avoid feelings and memories in order to function in their day-to-day lives. However, the abuse may still be affecting them. Triggers (internal or external reminders of the trauma) may bring up unresolved emotional issues. Some common situations survivors may find themselves in that make them realize they should seek support include:

- I am reacting unusually to situations differently than before.
- I am having emotional or sexual problems that are not getting any better.
- New circumstances have made me more aware of past experiences.

If you are a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, know that you are not alone. Survivors have found that recognizing what has happened to them and speaking about their experiences can be one of the most vital components in the healing process. Below is a list of common affects of sexual abuse that may linger with survivors in their adult lives.

Common Challenges for Adult Survivors

Intimate Relationships and Personal Boundaries

Trust is a crucial issue for many survivors throughout their lives because it was broken as such a young age by the very people who were supposed to care the most for them. Because survivors of childhood sexual abuse may have had to keep the abuse a secret in order to protect the family, as a result, many survivors may feel they have to put the needs of others above their own. Because their personal boundaries were invaded when they were young, adult survivors may have trouble understanding that they have the right to control what happens to them.

Anger

Some adult survivors report problems with anger. It may be anger against a particular person, fate, or a higher power. They may even feel angry with themselves for not being able to stop the abuse, angry with the abuser, or angry with parents or care givers for not protecting them. These emotions need to be acknowledged and validated.

Depression

Many adult survivors suffer from depression as a result of childhood sexual abuse. Research shows, in fact, that depression is the most frequently reported symptom.
Grieving/Mourning
Being abused as a child means the loss of many things—childhood experiences, trust, innocence, normal relationships with family members (especially if the abuser was a family member). Survivors must be allowed to name those losses and grieve them.

Fear, anxiety, and being 'always on guard' and the Art of Remembering
Fear and anxiety are normal responses to trauma. Some survivors have experienced traumatic amnesia or delayed recall of memories of child sexual abuse. Traumatic amnesia is a particular response of the brain that prevents a child from having any conscious recall of the abuse. It is associated with extreme emotional trauma. Memory loss has a reason: we may have been so young when abused that we were unable to form thoughts or put our feelings into words. Memories can’t be forced; they will come back when the brain is ready to handle them.

Experiencing 'triggers'
If you were sexually abused in childhood there may be things that bring back or 'trigger' memories. These include not only obvious things like childbirth, Pap smears or the way your partner touches you sexually, but also everyday things such as colors, kinds of furniture or vehicles, sounds, or smells, which bring back memories or feelings associated with the abuse. These experiences can trigger a flashback, which is a re-experiencing of the abuse as if it were occurring at that moment. It is usually accompanied by visual images, or flashes of images, of the abuse. This is one of the ways of remembering the abuse.

Coping and Self-Care
Coping mechanisms can also be described as Survival Strategies. Every survivor needs a toolbox of coping strategies to help with flashbacks, memories and the hard days where anxiety, depression and other feelings seem overwhelming. Some coping strategies are healthy (exercising, eating comforting foods in moderation, spending time with safe people, seeking out counseling, etc.) and some are not (self-harming, consuming alcohol or drugs, attempting suicide, promiscuous sexual activity, etc.).

Positive coping and self-care is incredibly important in the healing process. Below are some suggestions for taking care of yourself from the Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN). More information can be found on their website www.rainn.org.

Physical
• Food is a type of self-care that is often overlooked. Make sure that you are getting adequate nutrition, and let yourself have a few favorites in moderation!
• Exercise! Exercise has been found to help combat feelings of sadness or depression.
• Make sure you are getting 7-10 hours of sleep each night.

Emotional
• Counseling. This could mean seeing a psychologist, social worker, or therapist, or speaking to someone on a crisis line or at a women’s center. You will find resources at the end of this document.
• Keeping a journal. Some survivors find that recording thoughts and feelings in a journal or diary helps them manage their emotions.
• Connecting with others. Nurture relationships with people who make you feel good about yourself and make it a priority to spend time with friends and family. Consider joining a support group for survivors.
Relaxation techniques or meditation. Here is one to try:
  o Sit or stand comfortably, with your feet flat on the floor and your back straight. Place one hand over your belly button. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose and let your stomach expand as you inhale. Hold your breath for a few seconds, and then exhale slowly through your mouth, sighing as you breathe out. Concentrate on relaxing your stomach muscles as you breathe in. When you are doing this exercise correctly, you will feel your stomach rise and fall about an inch as you breathe in and out. Try to keep the rest of your body relaxed—your shoulders should not rise and fall as you breathe! Slowly count to 4 as you inhale and to 4 again as you exhale. At the end of the exhalation, take another deep breath. After 3-4 cycles of breathing you should begin to feel the calming effects.

Leisure
  • Find time to do activities you enjoy.
  • Get involved in a sport or hobby. Join a group and connect with others!

Reclaiming Your Sexual Self after Abuse

Healing begins at different stages for different people. Sexual abuse influences a survivor’s ability to establish and maintain healthy sexual relationships. Sexual concerns often emerge naturally after survivors have resolved feelings of anger and fear about the abuse, and begun to feel better about themselves. For many therapists and survivors, addressing sexual issues is seen as a final stage in sexual abuse recovery, but sexual concerns come up at all points in sexual abuse recovery.

You may want to work with a therapist who specializes in sexual abuse treatment. Survivors can greatly benefit from joining a therapy or support group and spending time with friends who are familiar with healing from sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse can disrupt many facets of our sexuality, including:
  • How we feel about our gender
  • How we feel about our bodies, sex organs, and bodily functions
  • How we think about sex
  • How we express ourselves sexually
  • How we experience physical pleasure and intimacy with others

It takes time and effort to develop a positive sexual self-concept. Not only do we have to watch for the false conclusions and negative beliefs about ourselves that resulted from the abuse, we also need to replace old ways of thinking with new, healthy ones.

Begin your journey only when you feel ready for it. Go slowly and trust yourself. Sexual healing is usually never as fast as survivors and intimate partners would wish. Sexual healing is a profound personal growth work. During the process you will probably look closely at who you are, how you feel, what has happened to you in the past, and how you now take care of yourself and relate to others. (taken from The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse, Wendy Maltz, 2001)
Campus Resources

Office of Women’s Programs and Studies
PH: (970) 491-6384

Trained Advocates are available to provide emotional support and information to survivors of sexual assault. Advocates are volunteers (students, staff, and faculty) who complete an extensive training program. They understand the complexity of the aftermath of sexual assault and can assist students in making decisions and obtaining resources. They are educated about legal, university, medical systems, and the psychological ramifications of sexual assault. Calling for an advocate does not obligate reporting anything to the police.

Emotional Healing - University Counseling Center
PH: (970) 491 – 6053 After Hours: (970) 491 – 7111 *ask to speak to a UCC counselor

The University Counseling Center offers a number of programs including individual therapy and 24-hour emergency services. These services are free of charge for students. Call or stop by Hartshorn Health Services to speak with a counselor.

Academic Concerns
When you are healing from abuse, it is important to be patient and gentle with yourself. If you are having trouble concentrating and fulfilling your academic commitments, contact an advocate in the Office of Women’s Programs and Studies about your options.

Legal Options
Choosing to report sexual assault crimes is not an appropriate option for everyone, and a trained advocate can help you navigate through your options. Investigations are often very difficult, long, and painful processes for survivors. Some survivors find they want to seek resolution through the legal system, and others do not. Deciding to report does not mean agreeing to testify; a survivor can always make the decision about testifying later. In Colorado, victims don’t “press charges” – they are considered witnesses to a crime. They can decide not to participate at any point in the investigation and, upon choosing to make a police report, have rights as a crime victim under Colorado law.

An investigation can take from several weeks to several months. When the investigation is complete, it will be sent to the District Attorney’s Office for a decision about filing charges. The victim has the right to be informed about this decision and to share their feelings and wishes with the District Attorney’s office. A victim advocate through the DA’s office will be assigned to each crime victim. This person is an excellent resource for information about the legal process.

Police Resources
Police Emergency (on or off campus) – 911
CSU Police Department - Non-Emergency (970) 491-6425
Fort Collins Police Department Non-Emergency (970) 221-6540
Fort Collins TTY (Deaf Accessibility Line) Emergency (970) 221-3490
Larimer County Sheriff's Department Non-Emergency (970) 498-5141
Larimer County District Attorney’s Office Victim/Witness Division (970) 498-7285
Other Community Resources

- Non-profit agencies such as Sexual Assault Victim Advocate Center in Fort Collins also provide community advocates and counseling to survivors of sexual assault. 24-hour hotline (970) 472-4200; office (970) 472-4204.
- National Sexual Assault Hotline (24-hour, confidential counseling and referral service): 1-800-656-HOPE or www.rainn.org

Books, Videos, and Online Resources

Books Available for Checkout in the OWPS Library

Other Suggested Readings Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Assault.
- Don’t, a woman’s word. Elly Danica (1988).

Videos Available for Checkout in the OWPS Library
- Breaking the Silence (2002) 20 mins
- Men, Sex, and Rape (Peter Jennings Reporting) (1991) 50 mins
- Rape Is... (2003) 32 mins
- Sex Without Consent- "When a Kiss is Not Just a Kiss" (1994) 36 mins
- Someone You Know- Acquaintance Rape (1986) 30 mins

Websites
- Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network: http://www.rainn.org
- Friends and Family Allies Support: http://incestabuse.about.com

Hotline:
- National Sexual Assault Hotline (24-hour, confidential): 1-800-656-HOPE,