

Sexual Abuse/Other Abuse

Few things leave a mark on someone's life more than sexual abuse or other severe emotional or physical abuse. We tend to fall apart, numb out, withdraw, or attack. We learn a very defensive approach to the world that can be difficult to alter later. We become afraid of others, ourselves, and/or our environment.

Undoing these patterns takes awareness and work. But it can be done. Therapy and support groups can provide a "safe place" to talk about ones experiences and to learn that one was not at fault for the abuse. Self esteem can be developed and self-confidence increased. Anxiety and other symptoms of posttraumatic stress can be lessened. Life can become much more enjoyable and meaningful.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse can be overt and blatant (molestation) or covert and subtle (being dressed as a child in provocative clothing.) It "explodes" the feelings of a child. The following information is provided to give the lay person some idea about the nature of sexual abuse.

What are the general signs of sexual abuse?

Depression

- Feelings of loss and grief
- A lack of energy
- Problems with memory
- Poor self esteem
- Excessive worry about ones body and appearance
- A feeling of being powerful in a malignant way

- Wanting to die

Anxiety

- Fear of authority
- Fear of being touched
- Fearfulness of perpetrator
- Need to be in control
- Regressive behavior
- Fear of intimacy
- Dissociative symptoms
- Feelings of detachment
- Excessive time spent in fantasy
- In severe situations, multiple personality, post traumatic stress, etc.
- Keeping unnecessary secrets
- SHAME (the feeling of not "measuring up")

Physical problems

- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Bleeding
- Sexually transmitted diseases

Sexual symptoms

- Sexual preoccupation in thought and conversation
- The need to reenact event--repetition compulsion
- Sexually precocious behavior

How do these symptoms look during childhood and adolescence?

In infancy

- Failure to thrive
- Withdrawal

- Fretfulness
- Whining, crying
- Clinging
- Speech problems

During early childhood

- Thumbsucking
- Scratching, picking
- Self-injurious behavior
- Conduct disturbances
- Sleep difficulties
- Compulsive or inappropriate sexual behavior/seductiveness
- Excessive sexual knowledge

During middle childhood

- Sexual symptoms as above
- Depression, suicidality
- Nightmares, insomnia, night terrors
- Pseudo mature behavior
- Fears and phobias
- School and social functioning impaired
- Startle responses (being "jumpy" and easily surprised)

During early adolescence

- Acute anxiety
- Rage
- Sexual promiscuity
- Social withdrawal/good girl behavior

What factors influence severity of disturbance?

- Duration and frequency of the abuse
- The age of victim at time of abuse

- The type of sexual activity involved
- Overt
- Covert
- Penetration of body parts
- Use of force/violence
- Age, gender, and relationship of perpetrator
- Response of responsible others--parents, teachers, law enforcement officers

What type of people tend to abuse?

- Those who were made into adults during childhood
- Those who feel like they can't allow themselves to be nurtured
- Emotionally undeveloped and starved adults
- Morally rigid individuals
- Those who feel the need to lead to control their feelings
- Those with poor interpersonal skills
- Both men and women
- Those who were abused
- Those who struggle with shame/anger/rage related to sexual issues

Who do the victims tend to be?

- The more vulnerable child (the child who is more emotionally and/or circumstantially dependent)
- The more accessible child
- Often, family members

Preventative measures for anyone who works with children or families

- Evaluate your own general comfort with interpersonal relationships..work on your acceptance of your emotional needs
- Be aware of especially intense feelings for any particular child
- Be careful of any relationship with a child that you feel the need to keep secret in any way

- Watch out for "grooming" behaviors
 - Developing a relationship with a family in order to be near one of the children
 - Spending significant periods of time alone with any child
 - Doing special favors for a child
 - Seeking to establish yourself as an emotionally important person to one particular child
 - Listen to the feedback of others - to their comments about your relationships with children or a particular child
 - Be honest with yourself about your fantasies
 - Don't be afraid to seek out help way earlier than you may feel necessary - start with a peer consultation if you have to when you begin to feel anxious
 - Address the issue of embarrassment and shame quickly before it ties you up in knots
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**The person who has experienced sexual abuse
should seek professional help.**

**The person who feels tempted to abuse
should seek professional help.**

Period.

Other Forms of Abuse

Other forms of abuse can have similar symptoms, though they will tend to be more like the original form of abuse or its opposite. Violence leads to violence or extreme passivity, etc.

Adult Children of Alcoholics

Children who grew up in homes where there was alcoholism were typically exposed to one form of abuse or another. Even the "quiet" alcoholic--the one who never yelled or threw a lamp--often deprives a child of any interaction and leaves a serious wound.

For More Information

- [Sidran Foundation - a very good resource for trauma/sexual abuse](#)
 - [Facts for Families pamphlet on childhood sexual abuse](#)
 - [Another Facts for Families pamphlet on responding to childhood sexual abuse](#)
 - [A helpful list of resources for survivors of abuse](#)
 - [Research results about sexual abuse of boys](#)
 - [Information about Dissociative Identity Disorder \(multiple personality\)](#)
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A healthy mind says:

You are important, not
because you are right or wrong,
but because you are you!

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