

PROUD TO BE ME

A survival guide for victims
of childhood sexual abuse



supporting victims on sexual abuse

www.survivorslantern.org
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THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE



1 out of every four children
in the UK has been abused

38% of girls are sexually
abused before the age of 18

16% of boys are sexually
abused before the age of 18

90 -95% of all sexual abuse
cases go unreported to police

The majority of victims do not
report the abuse for fear of not being
believed

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The hardest part
is knowing where
and how to begin

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Introduction

My name is Graham Wilmer. I was sexually abused as a child. I was 13 when it began. I was 18 when I thought it had stopped, but it hadn't stopped. The abuse was just the beginning. What followed was its legacy; a nightmare created from fear, shame, guilt, confusion and self-loathing. It lasted for the next 30 years of my life until, finally, with the help of someone who loved me, I escaped from the nightmare; disclosed what had happened, and the truth set me free. I have compiled this booklet from a range of information sources so that you too can be set free. You are not alone; it was not your fault and you can survive.

Making the journey from being a victim to becoming a survivor is a long one and it is not easy, but nor is it impossible. I know from my own experience that we all have within us the strength to make that journey. The hardest part is knowing where and how to begin. So, let me be your journeyman and guide you along the path that I have stumbled down, at the end of which you too will be able to hold your head up high and say 'I am proud to be me'.

Graham Wilmer
Founder - The Lantern Project



Proud to be me.



CHAPTER ONE

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

There are four kinds of child abuse: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. They are all dangerous to children and they all leave an indelible mark that lasts for the lifetime of the individual, which, in some cases, is cut tragically short as a direct result of the abuse they suffered. In this booklet, we will concentrate on sexual abuse in an attempt to understand what it is; the harm it does and how to recover from its lasting impact.

In the majority of cases of child sexual abuse, the sexual abuse itself doesn't start straight away. Perpetrators employ a process of subtle manipulation called 'grooming' that entraps the child over a period of time into a secret relationship, designed for one purpose only - the sexual gratification of the perpetrator.

This process starts with the development of a 'friendship' that gradually becomes sexualised. When the perpetrator feels their victim is sufficiently groomed, he or she will begin to expose the child to the subject of sex; talking about it at first, then showing them sexual material such as pornographic magazines and videos. This then leads to increased displays of affection and touching. Eventually, the sexual nature of the grooming process becomes more overt, involving looking at the child's sexual organs and showing the child the perpetrator's sexual organs.

Sexual contact will then follow. This will include touching the child's genitals by hand, kissing or sucking the child's genitals, placing objects against or into the child's genitals and, finally, vaginal or anal intercourse. The child is usually persuaded to do the same thing to the perpetrator, with the exception of intercourse, which can only happen if the child is male and old enough to have an erection.

Once the sexual activity has begun, subtle or even not so subtle demands for secrecy increase, underpinned by implied or direct threats. The perpetrator will tell the child that they may be harmed if they say anything to anyone. They will be told that members of their family or perhaps their pet may also be harmed. They may also be told that they will be taken away from their family if they tell. Finally, they will be told that because they too took part in the 'secret', they will be held responsible, and great punishment will follow. It is this last piece of the process that locks the child into secrecy through guilt. It is probably the most destructive part of the process in terms of the lasting psychological damage it causes.

Once the abusive relationship has reached this point, the child has become completely trapped by the perpetrator, both physically and psychologically, and they will become overwhelmed by feelings of emotional confusion. As these feelings develop, the child will start to display a deviation in its normal behaviour. This is because on the one hand, the child's mind wants to avoid the distress caused by the emotional confusion, but on the other hand, the child is unable to tell anyone about the abuse, either through fear of being harmed or blamed or both. Consequently, the child will begin to act out their distress which will show itself in a number of ways such as a marked decline in school performance, increasing bad behaviour and truancy. The child may also complain frequently of headaches and stomachaches. This may be followed by the onset of psychological problems such as eating disorders, depression, anxiety and attention deficit disorder.

The impact and consequences of the abuse can be measured in two parts. The first is the impact on the child at the time, which takes the form of a gradual decline in the psychosocial functioning of the child. As the child grows up, they will experience difficulties in developing interpersonal relationships, often leading to either a complete withdrawal from intimate relationships or, alternatively, compulsive sexual addiction. In some cases, both behaviours can be displayed.

As the individual becomes an adult, they will begin to suffer from a range of complex and damaging psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorders and personality disorders, any one of which, depending on the degree of severity, can result in major problems with relationships, and make tasks such as parenting and going to work almost impossible. Once it starts, the deterioration in physical and mental health will continue until the individual finally suffers from some form of traumatic breakdown, often diagnosed as a post-traumatic stress disorder, and usually accompanied by a depressive illness. Unless treated, this degree of mental decline can lead to the individual taking their own life, as they perceive suicide to be the only way of escape from the torment and confusion they feel.

However, as dark and as awful as the problems may seem at the time, victims of child sexual abuse can recover, regardless of age, and go on to live happy and fulfilled lives. The recovery process begins when the victim finally discloses what happened to them. From then on, with the support of counselling from a trained professional, they will be able to re-build their lives, reclaiming their lost childhood in the process and discharging themselves from the burden of guilt, shame and self-loathing that will have inevitably been a major part of their lives up to that point.

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CHAPTER TWO - The facts and myths about child abuse

How sexual abuse affects women

As a male, I can't know from personal experience exactly how sexual abuse affects women, and it would be wrong of me to tell you otherwise. However, I do know that all victims of sexual abuse suffer, and that suffering lasts for a very long time.

To understand the nature of that suffering, from a women's point of view, I asked my friend Zoe to explain her experiences. Zoe was abused from the age of seven by her father. The abuse went on for many years, until he died. But Zoe is a strong person, and she went on to become a counsellor, helping other women who have been abused. She has been supporting victims of abuse for the past twenty years now, so there is not much she does not know about the impact of sexual abuse on women, which means we can trust what she says. So, this is what she told me:

Childhood sexual abuse affects women in many different ways, all of which are harmful, and most can have a life-long impact unless some form of healing process is employed. Women who have been abused often suffer from a negative self-image. We can struggle to see ourselves as we really are. We can be afraid to see ourselves as being attractive, feminine and healthily, sexually attractive. This can cause us problems in accepting ourselves as the women we really are. We may reject our femininity, so we try to avoid it by gaining or losing weight so we are not seen by others as we really are. Abuse can also cause us to see our womanhood and our sexuality as the most important thing about us, and because of this we tend to use it as the only way to relate to men.

We can often find it very hard to believe that other men and women want to be with us, or have loving relationships with us. We struggle to like ourselves, so we can't understand why other people would like us.

Studies show that long-term effects are quite damaging for either sex

We become very confused about love and relationships. This is because the sexual abuse we suffered often occurs within a loving, known relationship such as within a family. It is not surprising then that we find becoming involved in close, emotional and satisfying relationships very difficult, scary and frightening as we the level of mistrust we feel usually leads to the fear of being hurt again.

Sexual arousal, which is naturally felt as your body responds to stimulation when you are being abused, is incredibly hard to understand and come to terms with, leading to the link in our minds that the feelings we experience in sexual arousal are something bad. The damage this does is very severe as it colours any future sexual arousal we may experience, especially in a healthy, loving relationship. Such confusion creates huge conflicts within us, denying us the rich and wonderful enjoyment that sexual contact is meant to create. We are effectively robbed of the most powerful, natural emotions the human body was designed to experience, causing us to reject our own bodies and find ways to avoid natural sexual feelings, most commonly by blocking out the feelings during sexual contact.

Such disassociation between our brain and our body inevitably leads to us treating our bodies in dangerous and harmful ways, often through sex addiction, which is where we use sex to 'punish' others for the problems we have suffered, or we simply crave sexual contact, but we avoid at all costs linking it with loving relationships; frequent, casual sex and 'selling' our bodies for sex being common factors with abused women.

Sexual abuse occurs most frequently in childhood, and the younger the child, the greater the impact and damage it causes, particularly in later life. The greatest damage sexual abuse does to a child, and this is true for both males and females, is that it distorts the way we see our selves, and the way we relate to others around us, putting us at a serious disadvantage in our development into adulthood.

We learn to link pleasure with pain and fear with hope. We grow up trusting no one and nothing, not even ourselves. We fear men in general, especially dominant men and men in positions of authority. We see all such men as likely 'abusers', which is hardly surprising because all sexual abuse, whatever form it takes, involves betrayal. It is this betrayal that eats away at the subconscious, creating very strong reactions within us to anything that threatens us or cause us difficulty, which is the primary factor that leads so many women who have been abused into offending behaviour and harmful, addictive lifestyles.

The common myths about female victims of sexual abuse

1. Sexually abused children will grow up to abuse their own children or other children.

The facts do not support this at all. True, some people who abuse children were themselves abused as children, but not all victims of abuse become abusers. Current studies among convicted male sexual offenders indicate that only one-in-eight were sexually abused as children themselves - that means seven out of eight were not!

2. We were sexually abused because we were 'sexually attractive'.

Young children are not sexually attractive. It is a distorted view of the child within the abuser which leads them to develop a perverted sexual attraction to them. Even if the child is of the age where they have begun to become sexually mature, it is still the abusers distorted and wrong view of the child's immature, vulnerable developing sexuality that is at fault, not the child.

3. We were sexually abused because we acted in a way that aroused our abusers - therefore it must have been our fault.

We were children - they were adults. It is always the adult who has responsibility for the well-being of children they are with, regardless of the situation. It is always the fault of an adult who abuses a child.

The consequences of believing these myths

Such myths can mean that women who have been abused as children grow up believing that we could go on to abuse our own or other people's children. Inevitably, this makes it very hard to form loving bonds with children, limiting our ability to hug them and feel free to touch them, as a mother naturally wants to do.

It also leads to us to constantly feel afraid that our children will also be abused, forcing us to be overprotective, especially when leaving our children in the care of someone else. We have a heightened sense of danger about letting our children go out to play, or stay over with their friends, all of which denies our children opportunity to develop naturally.

Attractiveness is bad?

We can also believe that we were abused because of our natural feminine attractiveness. We feel afraid to show our femininity in case it might be seen as an open invitation to other abusers. This affects the kind of clothes we chose to wear, and how we behave in relationships with others, particularly men. We can even hate being a woman to the point that we try hard not to look female or behave in a feminine manner. We can also feel that we are only of value sexually, leading to promiscuity.

It is not surprising then that sex can easily be confused with love, making it the most important aspect of any relationship with a man. Alternatively, it can have the opposite effect, making us hate sex to the point that we want no sexual contact whatsoever. Either way, it destroys our natural feminine instincts, often leading to us seeking out other ways to replace our natural sexual desires with some other form of stimulation, such as through drugs, alcohol, self harm and other addictive behaviour.

All sex is bad?

Sexually abused women can feel that all sex is bad, so we struggle with healthy, normal sexual relationships. Sometimes this can go as far as completely switching off our sexual feelings, even when we try to have a sexual relationship. We see the feelings of arousal as dangerous because, if we allow our natural feelings to develop, we will not be able to control them, inviting more abuse.

Touch is bad?

Sexual abuse also creates confusion about touch because it is the wrong kind of touch. It creates a fear of physical contact, which is very destructive for human beings as we are naturally tactile. Touch is essential to our lives. It is the most common form of expressing how we feel about a wide range of emotions. We touch people to express care, sympathy, congratulations, joy, happiness, concern, and, of course, love. It is such an important part of the human condition that to be denied our need to touch or be touched is very harmful.

Powerlessness

Sexual abuse takes away our ability to make choices, creating a deep sense of powerlessness, which drives us to avoid any situation which makes us feel so isolated and vulnerable.



The most common way this manifests itself, in both men and women who have experienced sexual abuse, is to develop a strong need to always be in control, regardless of the context. Such behaviour can quickly become our 'default' mode, which leads to serious problems in the way we interact with other people. We are seen as pushy, demanding, and selfish, whereas all we are really trying to do is protect ourselves - but no one sees it like that.

Ambivalence

Ambivalence is when you are introduced to two experiences at the same time that contradict each other. These are usually experiences that were never meant to be associated with each other. Sexual abuse predominantly occurs within established relationships, such as within a family. When it happens, we experience two contradictory feelings - love and fear, causing us to associate all love and affection with fear, making us grow into adults who are always suspicious of love and affection.

Children are not meant to experience sex. They are not ready or mature enough to understand sexual feelings - their brains simply cannot process the signals generated in their bodies by sexual stimulation, although their bodies are still able to physically feel that stimulation.

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Exposing the seven myths about the sexual abuse of males

Myth No. 1 - Boys and men can't be victims.

This myth has been created through masculine gender socialisation. Often referred to as the 'macho image,' it declares that males, even young boys, are not supposed to be victims or even vulnerable. We learn very early in life that males should be able to protect themselves. The reality is that boys are children - weaker and more vulnerable than their perpetrators - who cannot really fight back. Why? Because the perpetrator always has greater size, strength, and knowledge. This power is always exercised from a position of authority, using money or other bribes, or threats of trouble to come or even violence. The perpetrator will use whatever advantage they can to use a child for sexual purposes.

Myth No. 2 - Homosexual males perpetrate most sexual abuse of boys.

Paedophiles who molest boys are not expressing a homosexual orientation any more than paedophiles that molest girls are practicing heterosexual behaviours. While many child molesters have gender and or age preferences, the vast majority of those who seek out boys are not homosexual. They are paedophiles.

Myth No. 3 - If a boy experiences sexual arousal or orgasm during abuse, this means he was a willing participant or enjoyed it.

In reality, males can get an erection even in traumatic or painful sexual situations. Therapists who work with sexual offenders know that one way a perpetrator can maintain secrecy is to label the child's sexual response as an indication of his willingness to participate. They'll say 'You liked it; you wanted it.' Many survivors feel guilt and shame because they experienced physical arousal while being abused, but physical (and visual or auditory) stimulation is likely to happen in a sexual situation. It does not mean that the child wanted the experience or understood what it meant at the time.

Studies show that long-term effects are quite damaging for either sex

Myth No. 4 - Boys are less traumatised by the abuse experience than girls.

While some studies have found males to be less negatively affected, more studies show that long-term effects are quite damaging for either sex. Males may be more damaged by society's refusal or reluctance to accept their victimisation, and by their resultant belief that they must 'tough it out' in silence.

Myth No. 5 - Boys abused by males are or will become homosexual.

While there are different theories about how the sexual orientation develops, experts in the human sexuality field do not believe that premature sexual experiences play a significant role in late adolescent or adult sexual orientation. It is unlikely that someone can make another person a homosexual or heterosexual. Sexual orientation is a complex issue and there is no single answer or theory that explains why someone identifies himself as homosexual, heterosexual or bi-sexual. Whether perpetrated by older males or females, boys' or girls' premature sexual experiences are damaging in many ways, including confusion about one's sexual identity and orientation.

Many boys who have been abused by males mistakenly believe that something about them sexually attracts males, and that this may mean they are homosexual or effeminate. Again, not true. Paedophiles who are attracted to boys will admit that the lack of body hair and adult sexual features turns them on. The paedophile's inability to develop and maintain a healthy adult sexual relationship is the problem - not the physical features of a sexually immature boy.

Myth No. 6 - The 'Vampire Syndrome' - Boys who are sexually abused, like the victims of Count Dracula, go on to 'bite' or sexually abuse others.

This myth is especially dangerous because it can create a terrible stigma for the child, i.e. that he is destined to become an offender. Boys might be treated as potential perpetrators rather than victims who need help. While it is true that most perpetrators have histories of sexual abuse, it is NOT true that most victims go on to become perpetrators. Research has found a primary difference between perpetrators who were sexually abused and sexually abused males who never perpetrated. The difference was that non-perpetrators disclosed the abuse, and were believed and supported by significant people in their lives. Again, the majority of victims do not go on to become adolescent or adult perpetrators; and those who do perpetrate in adolescence usually don't perpetrate as adults if they get help when they are young.

Myth No. 7 - If the perpetrator is female, the boy or adolescent should consider himself fortunate to have been initiated into heterosexual activity.

In reality, premature or coerced sex, whether by a mother, aunt, older sister, baby-sitter or other female in a position of power over a boy, causes confusion at best, and rage, depression or other problems in more negative circumstances. To be used as a sexual object by a more powerful person, male or female, is always abusive and often damaging.

CHAPTER THREE

Those 'difficult questions'

Since I established The Lantern Project, many victims of child sexual abuse, both male and female, have contacted me. They have asked me searching questions, some of which I found very difficult to answer. Fortunately, I have made many friends along my journey who I have been able to share my ideas and experiences with. One of these friends, Jamie Harms, is also a founder of a Survivor's organisation. His organisation, HAVOCA, has been a great help and an invaluable source of information. What follows are those 'difficult questions,' from survivors and from their partners, together with Jamie's thoughtful answers. We are all grateful to you Jamie for your wisdom.

Questions from a survivor

Difficult Question No 1 - How do I tell the people in my family as well as my doctor or the police that I have been sexually abused?

Deciding to tell another living being that you were abused is a difficult part of the healing process. The dark secret lurks within us; bringing shame and pain to our shattered lives. The hurt builds up like a huge weight on our chests making us feel like we are gasping for our life's last breath. We are ashamed but sometimes that little thought creeps into our heads "If only someone else knew, I wouldn't feel so all alone" It is this thought and the need to release this dark secret that compels many of us to tell. The question is. "How do I tell such a horrible secret?" and "Who can I trust to tell?"

Who to tell....

Sharing your experience is an important and possibly anxious moment for you in your healing. Choosing whom to tell is a big step for everyone. The feeling of safety in the person you are telling is a good start. Questions will race through your mind like "Will they believe me?" or "Will they hate me for what happened?" or worse yet "Will I be blamed for what happened?" You can answer these questions before you even share your experience by asking yourself these questions...

1. Has this person been supportive to me at other times in our relationship?
2. When I observe this person interacting with others, is there a degree of compassion and understanding they show to others?
3. Do you know this person to be non-judgmental and accepting of different points of view?
4. Have you ever known this person to make statements like "I told you so" or other accusatory comments?

Upon weighing the answers to just one or more of these types of questions... you can relieve some of the anxiety of telling. There are many different scenarios about how people acquire the knowledge of your abuse. An unfortunate truth at times is that others know because of being reported to the authorities. That's when things can get messy and it seems that EVERYONE knows your business.

This tends to create a great deal of shame for the survivor and you just wish you could crawl under a rock and be forgotten. Alas that does not feel like it is ever going to happen and you feel even less empowered than ever before. But, there is hope here too. Now you know who knows...you've seen their reactions to the news...they know the facts about your abuse, but they don't know your feelings... use the above criteria for choosing someone to talk to, then take the time to discuss your feelings and you've taken another step on your path to healing.

Choosing how you will tell...

After you have determined who a safe person is for you to share your experience with...it is time to choose how you are going to tell. There are many different ways to tell that involve a number of medias or good old face-to-face contact. When I speak of different medias I am mostly talking of writing letters by phone, or the old fashioned postal service or by electronic mail. There of course are videotapes and audiotapes if you care to make use of these medias.

The use of these the different types of medias may have a few disadvantages to face to face contact...first you do not see the initial reaction of the person, secondly, the person you sent the media to will more than likely want to talk to you about your experience in person...this leaves you wondering when they will call or show up on your doorstep...you may find it more empowering to be able to choose when to talk about things when you are prepared instead of sitting around wondering when you will be approached by others.

Telling....

Choose how you want to tell by whatever method feels most safe to you. Telling becomes more comfortable after you have told more than once. You might want to try calling your local abuse crisis centre to tell for your first time. You are not required to give your name or any other personal information about yourself. i.e. where you live, how old you are, etc. The advocates at a abuse crisis centre are not there to judge you, make fun of you, or call the police on you...they are there to listen to you and all you say to them is confidential.

Also, when you speak to a trained advocate you can even ask many of the questions which have been racing through your mind and the advocate can help you to figure out the answers to your questions.

An advocate can help you to think of ways to tell others too. If calling a abuse crisis centre is not your cup of tea...you could try rehearsing what you are going to say to the safe person you have chosen by either talking to yourself in a mirror or setting up a stuffed animal or doll as your audience. Your real life listener will probably have questions for you. You may want to write down as many of the questions you think they may ask and try to answer them before you are in face-to-face contact with them.

When you have gotten together your courage and what you are going to say, choose a safe place for you to meet with your safe person. A nice cup of tea for both of you many help you feel a little more relaxed or you may want to have an object that feels safe to you close by or in your hand (i.e. grandma's locket that is very dear to you and brings you a feeling of warmth) before you begin.

You may want to tell your listener that you would like them to listen to all you have to say before they respond to you or you may invite them to ask questions when you pause between the things you have to say. You should let them know that what you are about to say is difficult for you to tell and could be difficult for them to hear. This will clue your listener in on the difficulty and importance of what you are about to tell them.

You may tell your listener as much or as little about your attack as you feel comfortable in sharing. If your listener asks questions that you are uncomfortable in answering, tell them that at the moment you are unable to answer this question. Remember, this moment is about you and your need to talk, your listener can wait until you are ready for some answers. Telling others about your abuse is a difficult but courageous task.

It can be as much empowering to you, as it seems frightening. Best of all, telling a safe person allows you to get your experience out into the open and not still bottled up inside of you. Silence is a dangerous thing; it is a stumbling block in the healing process. With courage and hard work, you too can remove all the stumbling blocks on the path of healing and reclaim your life.

Some more information to help you decide on the next page:

WHY TELL

I told someone about the sexual assault because . . .

- I didn't want this to happen to me again
- I didn't want this to happen to someone else
- The feelings kept building up inside of me, making me feel worse
- I wanted to take action against the person that assaulted me
- I was behaving differently at home and my parents kept asking what was wrong
- I realized that the problem was too big for me to deal with alone and I needed help
- I was having trouble eating
- I kept thinking about what happened and couldn't concentrate
- I was having trouble sleeping
- My friends couldn't figure out why I was acting different
- I hoped that by telling someone I would feel better
- I kept crying and my friends encouraged me to talk
- I needed some help deciding what to do

WHY NOT TELL

Here are some reasons individuals who have been sexually assaulted didn't want to tell . . .

- I thought it was my fault
- I was too embarrassed
- I thought people would talk about me if they knew
- I was afraid. He said he would come back and hurt me if I told
- I thought no one would believe me
- I just want to forget about it
- I want to deal with this myself
- I was afraid to tell the police
- My parents have enough to deal with
- My parents might get mad at me
- I was afraid of what my father may do
- I can't let my boy/girl friend find out

Here are some reasons specific to guys . . .

- I was afraid people will think I'm a "wuss"
- I thought people might think that I'm gay
- I'm embarrassed that another guy touched me sexually
- The offender threatened to beat me up if I said anything
- I didn't realize what was happening
- I thought this person was my friend
- I could lose my place on the team if I told on the coach
- What if girls won't like me anymore

WHERE TO TELL

Choosing a place is also very important. Consider finding . . .

- A quiet place where there are no distractions
- A place where you will not be interrupted
- A place where you feel safe
- A place where you can cry if you want to, shout if you want to, and not feel ashamed

WHO TO TELL

Choosing the right person to tell can help you feel better. It is important to tell someone that you trust. This can be your . . .

- Parents
- Teacher
- Friend
- Police
- Religious Leader
- Someone that you know who will help you
- Someone in your family
- Doctor/Nurse
- Sexual Assault Care Centre
- Counsellor

WHEN TO TELL

The decision to tell someone becomes easier . . .

- When you feel ready to talk about it
- When you are strong enough to talk about it
- When you find the right person to talk with
- When you feel safe and supported

Difficult Question No. 2 - Will I ever be able to trust anyone again?

Learning to trust starts with trusting yourself. You need to trust and believe in your feelings, needs and emotions. You need to be able to express them and you need them to be responded to.


You may not be able to trust yourself to choose trustworthy people. Or your lack of trust may manifest itself in not setting realistic limits within the relationship. Trusting your perceptions of others and of your own needs and limits is crucial to having self-esteem and, ultimately, healthy relationships. Otherwise you could find yourself constantly taking care of others at the expense of your own needs. It is also important to verbalize these needs so others do not have to mind read. You have to learn to trust your gut feeling response and then honour it. This means learning to say no when your gut feelings says no and learning to speak up when the little voice inside you says, Hey, you, wake up!! I need something. Lack of trusting yourself can manifest itself in a lack of trusting others and ultimately a lack of trust in your relationship.

Many victims of child abuse are fearful of expressing their emotions, inner needs and feelings. As a result there is a lack of communication. This includes not talking about the abuse and results in that veil of secrecy being extended and reinforced. Perhaps it is because to show emotions is like a show of weakness, perhaps you are afraid of complete rejection. Do you think your partner has the time to deal with the abuse you suffered?

Don't underestimate the strength of your relationship. If there is a foundation of caring, love and mutual respect then the relationship will be able to withstand a problem such as this. There will inevitably be times when you regret having said anything at all, but really the whole thing will bring you closer together and cement your bond. If your partner is interested in you then they will take the time to listen and deal with your problems and feelings. Don't use your fears as an excuse not to take the first step to develop trust in your relationship.

Learning to trust yourself and others is a big step - it takes time and practise - don't expect just to be able to start trusting people because you have changed your mind set (although that is a good start!). These are the steps you need to take:

- Listen to your feelings and honour them.
- Communicate these feelings either to your partner, close ally or write them into a journal.
- Listen to the voice within, it will tell you how you are feeling, but learn not to listen to it when it puts you down or tells you that you are stupid or unimportant. This is the work of your inner abuser
- Challenge the Inner Abuser, combat his negative messages with positive, realistic ones
- Use positive affirmations to challenge these negative thoughts.
- Take risks: act as though you do trust - be very guarded and then see the result. If you find out you can't trust that individual then you have learnt from the experience and will be unlikely to repeat the mistake again with the same individual.



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Difficult Question No. 3 - Will I ever get over my abuse?

I was asked not long ago if we Survivors ever come to the place in our recovery where we can put the abuse behind us and get on with our lives. I have been asked this question in many forms from my abusers, from friends, and from other family members. The questions left me quite defensive because it was implied I was doing something wrong by bringing up the past and dwelling on it. It was also implied that I was getting worse, or was stuck. But this time, I felt the question was out of genuine concern, and I realized that people who are not familiar with the recovery process don't understand it, and we can use this opportunity to educate them.

If you have a Survivor in your life, you may have wondered or even asked a similar question. I would like to answer this question out of my own life experience and from what I've gleaned from the experiences of other Survivors who have touched my life. Most people have no idea what goes on behind the closed door of a therapist's office between a client and therapist or in a support group setting. My hope is that you will have a better understanding of what abuse therapy is all about after reading the information.

One misconception some have is that we sit week after week in the therapist's office and talk about our abuse and our abusers. At some point in the process, we usually do talk about incidents of abuse. For some it can take years to feel safe enough to confide their abuse to someone. Some of us went into the therapist's office after having memories return or after realizing the significance of the abuse and disclosed fairly soon in the counselling sessions. For myself and other Survivors I know personally, talking about our abuse is very difficult, especially the first time. There is a lot of shame attached to each memory of abuse, and that has to be worked through. With each incident there may be feelings of "I asked for it. It was all my fault." That may come from a Survivor who sat on her daddy's lap and was fondled while doing so. He may have even told her she wanted it. These mixed messages lead to profound inner turmoil.

Some may only talk of the incident(s) one time, others may have a need to talk about it a lot until they've worked it through—that means they've remembered, put the guilt on the abuser and off themselves, and let the trapped anger, fear, and hurt out.

Abuse recovery is recognizing our many losses. Survivors have lost their childhood, their innocence, and their sense of value. Many have lost the father or mother relationship so needed by children. If a Survivor chooses to confront an abuser, often, instead of working out the issues involved, admitting the abuse, and getting help, the Survivor is further victimized. What semblance of relationship there once was is gone. All of these things need to be worked through. Survivors often don't have the skills or the tools to know how to work through these issues without help.

In my own therapy and in the six groups I have now been a part of over the last five years, both as participant and facilitator, most of the time is spent learning how to cope with the life we now live in a healthy fashion, learning how to take charge of our own lives, changing destructive behaviour patterns, learning to set boundaries, recovering from addictions and compulsive behaviour, learning how to live with our spouse, children, and friends, learning how to feel and express those feelings in a healthy, safe way instead of stuffing them or having them spill out everywhere, learning how to let go and move forward when our parents are no longer in our life, and learning how to deal with the day to day struggles that emotionally healthy people seem to do naturally. It took many years to get messed up inside, and it may take many years to undo all the damage and to heal.

But there is hope, and to answer the question, I would have to say we do get on with our life—in fact those of us in recovery are getting on with our lives everyday we hang in there. We may look pretty bad for a while, but so do people going through any other grieving process. The end result is worth it.

As Survivors come to the close of their recovery, they will be able to let you into their life in a closer, more intimate way. They'll come to the place where they can let it go because they will have gone through the pain, felt the feelings (including anger and forgiveness), and finally will be able to come to an acceptance of the events of their past.

With that acceptance will possibly be a sense of "wellness"—the realization that, "I am a better person because of what happened. I am more sensitive to other people's pain, I can help others, I'm more creative," etc.

Trust the Survivor in your life to know when it's time. If done prematurely, a Survivor can still suffer after-effects and symptoms as before. The time will come when there will be no more haunting memories to sort through, no more re-victimization going on. Tools will be ingrained to help through the difficult times. There will be a good support system in place and an ability to utilize that support. There will be an awareness of distorted thinking and the skills to combat it. The Survivor will be ready to face life boldly and confidently because she or he has faced the ugly demons of the past and won. It will come.

You can help, too. Give the Survivor time and space. Don't worry about the different stages you see her or him in. Survivors can get stuck at times or reach a plateau, but I haven't seen them stay stuck as long as they continue their recovery work and have the needed support. Plateaus can be an important part of the process to give time for reflection or changing focus. Also, you might experience this time as a relief.

It helps to remember that you don't have to fix the Survivor. That will only frustrate you both if you try. Just be there. Let the Survivor guide you in what is needed. It may be just listening, holding, or encouraging. You can facilitate in the healing process by sharing in the pain and rejoicing in the victories.

Finally, you can use this opportunity to get in touch with your own issues as well. As the Survivor lets you in on the pain, struggles, and the victories, it may bring up things for you. Grow along with your loved one. When the Survivor is no longer in crises, let her or him help you with your struggles. This will help keep balance in the relationship and will also help in the Survivor's own healing.

Being a part of a Survivor's life can be a rewarding opportunity as you watch and participate in the miracle of healing in a life that has been damaged by childhood abuse.

Difficult Question No. 4 - The sexual abuse I suffered left me feeling confused about my sexuality. Does the abuse mean that I am gay?

Sexual abuse in childhood is a very serious issue with all victims. All attitudes and thought process, particularly to do with self-esteem, trust and sexual attitudes are formed early on in life during childhood.

If your early thoughts and memories contain abuse in any form your attitudes are adjusted to compensate for this early encounter with feelings and emotions that are actually well out of your league! This in turn may well affect your whole life and determine how you relate to sexuality later in life.

You must remember, now as an adult, that you had no responsibility over the abuse. Therefore you had no choices, or decisions to make. The responsibility rests entirely with the abuser.

Many sexual abuse victims are confused about their sexual orientation. It's hardly surprising that this happens. In many cases the abuse takes place during a time in the victim's life when they are developing, both physically and mentally. Any intrusion from the outside makes a marked affect, no matter how small or insignificant.

Therefore when the victim has to deal with the emotional and physical consequences of sexual abuse they can become confused and disorientated. Some victims who were sexually abused by offenders of the same sex confuse the sexual pleasure they got from the physical aspect of the abuse with the fact that they must be homosexual. In this case the victim must try to separate the two issues. Firstly the physical pleasure they may have derived from the abuse, is caused by their body's completely natural reaction to sexual stimulation. It's a bit like the feelings a child gets when they innocently touch themselves, or experiment with each other in a completely innocent way. When an adult perpetrates the abuse, although the psychological aspects are far more intense and the motives are completely different, the actual physical acts still produce the natural arousal. The victim should not be ashamed of these perfectly natural feelings. The confusing part is when the nice feelings are either mixed with pain or the mental scars of the abuse.

Difficult Question No. 5 - What are people going to think? Will their opinion of me change if I tell them?

No, society shouldn't think any different of you. In fact in my experience people generally hold you in higher regard. They are hugely respectful and can see the trauma you have survived.

There will always be some individuals who look upon you in a different light. These are the people that are highly prejudice and eccentric in other parts of life. They are hard to spot, but are in a minority. The good thing about this group of people is that nobody with any sense listens to their views anyway!

Questions from a survivor's partner

Difficult Question No 1 - Why is there such a stigma attached to those who have suffered at the hands of a child molester? It's as though some people have this misinformed assumption that 'those who have been abused go on to abuse others'.

There have been many reports written on victims who then go onto abuse. These reports were written in the 'early' days when childhood abuse was getting more and more publicity. It is true that there is proof to suggest that out of a number convicted child abusers, 75% were abused themselves. The press have jumped straight onto this bandwagon and massaged these figures to create public hysteria.

If you read the statement again 'It is true that there is proof to suggest that out of a number convicted child abusers, 75% were abused themselves'. You'll probably notice the word convicted. It is highlighted in bold to make the point that there are a far larger number of people who have not been convicted, charged or been any part of abuse, that have still been abused as children. In other words, there hasn't been a survey done throughout the world, that reports on the number of abused victims who have gone onto abuse children. If there were I am sure it would be only a very tiny percentage of victims who go onto to abuse others.

In fact, therapists report, that most of their clients who have suffered from abuse as child, are overly protective towards their children and with the right help they also go onto to make the best parents.

Difficult Question No. 2 - How can I really help my partner through a crisis?

You need to be a good listener. Here are some points that will help you be a good supporter:

Educate yourself about abuse/rape and the healing process.

If you have a basic idea of what the survivor is going through, it will help you to be supportive. There are many good information sites on the Internet, as well as the information you will find in this booklet. Talk with other survivors and supporters of survivors. Many are willing to share what has helped them, or can give you ideas on how to deal with a certain situation. If you need help to do this then try and join a mailing list that will provide you with support and information whilst maintaining your anonymity.

Believe the survivor.

Even if they sometimes doubt themselves, even if their memories are vague, even if what they tell you sounds too extreme, believe them. Survivors don't make up stories of sexual abuse or rape. Let them know that you are open to hearing anything they wish to share, and that although it's painful and upsetting, you are willing to enter those difficult places with them and to receive their words with respect.

Validate the survivor's feelings: their anger, pain, and fear.

These are natural, healthy responses. They need to feel them, express them, and be heard.

Join with the survivor in validating the damage.

All sexual abuse & rape is harmful. Even if it's not violent, overtly physical, or repeated, all abuse & rape has serious consequences. There is no positive or neutral experience of sexual abuse or rape.

Be clear that the abuse or rape was not the survivor's fault.

No one asks to be abused or raped. The survivor did what they had to do to survive. It is always the fault of the perpetrator.

Don't sympathize with the abuser.

There is never any excuse for abuse an adult does to a child. The survivor needs your absolute loyalty.

Express your compassion.

If you have feelings of outrage and compassion, for their pain, do share them. There is probably nothing more comforting than a genuine human response. Just make sure your feelings don't overwhelm theirs.

Respect the time and space it takes to heal.

Healing is a slow process that can't be hurried.

Encourage the survivor to get support.

In addition to offering your own caring, encourage them to reach out to others. Get support for yourself. You will have many feelings about the abuse or rape also. Get support for yourself. You need to take care of yourself so you can be there for the survivor.

Get help if the survivor is suicidal.

Most survivors are not suicidal, but sometimes the pain of the abuse or rape is so devastating that the survivors may want to kill themselves. If you are close to a survivor who is suicidal, get help immediately.

Resist seeing the survivor as a victim.

Continue to see them as a strong, courageous person who is reclaiming their own life.

Accept that there will very likely be major changes in your relationship with the survivor as they heal.

They are changing, and as they do, you may need to change in response.

We have got two kids. Is it best they know about their dad's past, and how do we tell them?

It really depends how old they are. I personally would wait until they are nearly adults. I would only tell them if you think that it might help them understand their lives a bit better. For example, did you prevent them from seeing their Grand Parents, or did you move them away from the rest of the family, or away from a certain area.

The best way to tell them is to be completely truthful and honest. Tell it like it was. BUT, remember you have lived with the abuse and its affects for all this time. You have had much longer to come to terms with things in your own way.

When you tell your children for the first time, they will be in shock and feel lots of different emotions. You must give them time to adjust and be there for them throughout the period. Like all of these things I would seriously recommend you had professional help to make this decision and also available for your children after you had told them.

Difficult Question No. 4 - My partner's self-confidence was so destroyed that he does not want to confront someone when it is appropriate? He becomes extremely intimidated when he is being confronted. Is it possible that he can win back his confidence?

It isn't surprising that a victim tries to avoid confrontation, especially if they were intimidated during the abuse. It is a natural response to shy away from more confrontation, as the mind sees that it is protecting itself from possibly more abuse.

It is possible to overcome this. Re-building self-confidence can be done through role-play and gradual introduction to confrontation. The best way to confront someone legitimately is to plan exactly what you want to say, gauge the likely answers and plan replies to their comments.

The first couple of times it is useful to take someone with you so that they can take over if the going gets tough. Set yourself limits, for example plan to say the opening line, and then slowly build to replying to the argument. Take things slow and don't expect too much.

Never be afraid of taking control back, by simply saying, 'you aren't making any sense to me, I am going to walk away, this conversation is over'.

CHAPTER FOUR

'My head's done in'

As it says earlier in this guide, adults who have suffered child sexual abuse can develop serious mental health problems in later life. A common problem is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can affect you at any time, and often without much warning. It can be difficult to diagnose because adult victims of child abuse do not always connect the problems they have in later life with the abuse they suffered in childhood.

If you are suffering from PTSD, you will be at a very low point and find coping with even the most basic tasks a major problem. You will be tearful, jumpy, have anxiety attacks, hot flushes, sleep problems, sexual dysfunction, short-term memory loss, eating problems and depression.

If you have any of these symptoms, answer the following questions and take them to see your Doctor.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Self-Test

1. Have you experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event that caused intense fear, helplessness or horror? This includes sexual abuse. Yes/No
2. Do you re-experience the event in at least one of the following ways?
 - 2.1. Repeated, distressing memories and/or dreams? Yes/No
 - 2.2. Acting or feeling as if the event was happening again? (flashbacks or re-living it). Yes/No
 - 2.3. Intense physical and/or emotional distress when you are exposed to things that remind you of the event? Yes/No
3. Do you avoid reminders of the event and feel numb, compared to the way you felt before? Yes/No
4. Do you avoid thoughts, feelings and conversations about the event? Yes/No
5. Do you avoid activities, places or people who remind you of it? Yes/No
6. Have you blanked on parts of the detail? Yes/No
7. Are you losing interest in significant activities in your life? Yes/No
8. Are you feeling detached from other people? Yes/No
9. Do you feel as if your range of emotions is restricted? Yes/No
10. Do you feel as if your future is diminished in terms of marriage, children or a normal life span? Yes/No
11. Are you troubled by two or more of the following:
 - 11.1. Problems sleeping? Yes/No
 - 11.2. Irritability or outbursts of anger? Yes/No
 - 11.3. Problems concentrating? Yes/No
 - 11.4. Feeling 'on-guard'? Yes/No
 - 11.5. An exaggerated startle response? Yes/No

Having more than one illness at the same time can make it difficult to diagnose and treat the different conditions. Illness that sometimes complicate an anxiety disorder include depression and substance abuse. With this in mind, please take a moment to answer the following:

- 12.** Have you experienced changes in sleeping or eating habits? Yes/No
- 13.** More days than not, do you feel:
 - 13.1.** Sad or Depressed? Yes/No
 - 13.2.** Disinterested in life? Yes/No
 - 13.3.** Worthless or guilty? Yes/No
- 14.** During the last year, has the use of alcohol or drugs:
 - 14.1.** Resulted in your failure to fulfill responsibilities with work, school or family? Yes/No
 - 14.2.** Placed you in a dangerous situation, such as driving a car under the influence? Yes/No
 - 14.3.** Been responsible for you being arrested? Yes/No
 - 14.4.** Continued despite causing problems for you and your loved ones? Yes/No

Show these answers to your Doctor and tell him how you feel. Ask for help.

What next?

Now that you have read this guide, you have already begun your journey and you can be proud of that. However, you will probably have a lot more questions to ask, and you want to get in touch with a survivor's support group in your area.

If you have access to the internet, you should look at the Lantern Project web site, which you will find at www.survivorslantern.org and the HAVOCA web site, which you will find at www.havoca.org. Both sites contain a comprehensive range of helpful information plus the contact details of other support groups in the UK. You can also leave messages on both sites, which will be answered.

If you have any questions you want to ask us in confidence, please e-mail me at lanternproject@yahoo.co.uk or e-mail Jamie at trustee@havoca.org. We will be there to help you. Take care and remember, you are not alone anymore and you can survive.

**Remember, you are not alone
anymore and you can survive**

The Lantern Project 



