

## Why Can't I Forget?

*Information for Women who were Sexually Abused in Childhood*

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Children are very trusting, and have a natural need for affection and approval. Children also have very little power over what happens in their lives – they are taught to obey adults and look to them for guidance.

### Child Sexual Abuse

- is a misuse of power
- is a betrayal of a child's trust and affection
- is a denial of a child's right to feel safe and valued
- is a violation of a child's personal boundaries and sense of self

### Sexual Abuse is a Crime – the Victim is not to Blame

An adult who abuses a child knows that what he is doing is wrong – so he makes her keep his secret. He may keep her silent by making her feel responsible for what he is doing to her, or by making threats about what will happen if she tells anyone. She may think that she would be blamed or that no one would believe her – adults often don't want to hear when a child tries to tell them.

If you were sexually abused as a child, you have lived through a traumatic experience which can have lasting effects. You are also a strong, resourceful and courageous person who has survived and coped in whatever ways have been available to you.

Some of the effects of childhood sexual abuse described in this pamphlet may apply to you, some may not. Whatever the effects, whatever patterns or coping strategies you have developed as a result of the abuse – it is possible to heal from childhood sexual abuse.

### Self Esteem

Being sexually abused may have given you the message that what you wanted or how you felt didn't matter. The abuser may have blamed you for his behaviour, or you may have felt responsible, even though you were powerless to stop the abuse. As an adult you may feel that:

- you have no rights
- you have no control in your life
- you're a bad person

*This fact sheet has been developed to provide general information to victims of crime. It is not intended as a replacement for medical, therapeutic or legal advice. If you have particular concerns please contact your general practitioner, counsellor or Victim Support Service.*

## **Feelings**

Sexual abuse can produce a range of emotional reactions, including confusion, fear, betrayal, guilt, anger and grief. Because these feelings are difficult for a child to deal with, they are often blocked out. As an adult you may:

- have difficulty identifying or expressing feelings
- not trust your feelings
- feel like your emotions are out of control
- feel that you cannot tell others about the abuse

## **Your Body**

The experience of sexual abuse can produce confusing, frightening and possibly painful bodily sensations in a child. One way that children cope with this is by learning to go numb or by detaching themselves from what is happening physically. As an adult you may:

- be disconnected from your bodily sensations
- feel bad about your body
- inflict pain or injury on yourself
- abuse alcohol, drugs or food
- have problems sleeping

## **Relationships**

Sexual abuse betrays a child's trust, and may impact on your ability to experience intimacy in other relationships. As an adult you may:

- avoid closeness to avoid betrayal
- feel you cannot trust others
- become involved with abusive people
- cling to people for the approval and love you didn't get as a child
- put other people's needs first because you feel like you don't deserve to have your needs considered

## **Sexuality**

A child who has been sexually abused has had an adult's sexual knowledge and needs imposed upon her. She has been denied the opportunity to develop and explore her own sexuality. Sexual behaviour becomes linked with powerlessness and confusion. It may also be the only source of affection and approval the child experiences. As an adult you may:

- feel numb during sex
- avoid sex
- seek sex to meet other emotional needs
- be vulnerable to sexual exploitation

## **Parenting**

A person who was abused may have no experience of appropriate parenting or healthy family life. As an adult you may:

- find it hard to balance your needs with those of your children
- be over-protective
- find it hard to show affection appropriately

## **Was I Sexually Abused?**

When you were a child or teenager, did an adult (or someone older or more powerful than you) use their position of authority or trust to involve you in any sexual activity? The sexual behaviour might have been:

- showing you the sexual parts of his body
- touching sexual parts of your body
- making you touch sexual parts of his body
- putting his penis in your vagina, anus or mouth
- putting his fingers or objects in your vagina or anus
- making sexual comments or suggestions
- watching you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable – like when you were getting undressed or having a bath
- taking pornographic pictures of you
- showing you pornographic photos or films
- making you have sex with other people
- making you watch sexual acts

The abuser was probably someone you knew and trusted, and was probably male – he could have been your father, stepfather, grandfather, brother or other trusted adult. Most abusers appear to lead normal lives in the community.

This pamphlet refers to abusers as “he” because most are male, but the information is just as relevant to you if you were sexually abused by a woman.

It is estimated that at least 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 9 boys are sexually abused in childhood – from infants through to adolescents.

## Choosing a Counsellor

If you are going to work on issues related to past abuse you have a right to informed and appropriate support in doing so. An appropriate counsellor must:

- believe that you were abused
- believe that it was not your fault
- have information about the healing process for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse
- be willing to hear about and believe your experiences
- never minimise your experience or the pain it's caused
- keep the focus on you, not the abuser
- not pressure you to forgive the abuser
- respect and allow you to experience the whole range of your emotions
- respect your strength as a survivor
- teach you skills to take care of yourself
- encourage you to build a support system
- respect your decisions and needs

Individual counselling can be extremely helpful in working through the issues involved with child sexual abuse.

Involvement in a support group with other survivors can help break down the feeling of isolation and shame that many survivors feel.

## Further Information

If you would like more information, please contact Victim Support Service on (08) 8231 5626 or view our website at [www.victimsa.org](http://www.victimsa.org)