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Services for Individuals Affected by Sexual Assault Offered at No Cost

FAQ: Childhood Sexual Abuse – The Impacts

What effect does sexual abuse have on children?

Child sexual abuse can cause deep and lasting effects. There are many possible physical and emotional impacts, ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder to fear, confusion, anger, betrayal, fear of close contact and low self-esteem. A child's sense of personal safety and security is heavily damaged by sexual abuse, and difficulties

with personal boundaries are a common result. As each survivor grows up, they will develop their own unique set of coping responses to their traumatic experience.

Healing frequently occurs over time, but symptoms are often activated or re-activated by stressors, life changes, development and growth. Healing is possible because children are resilient and can be very creative in their responses and coping strategies.

The immediate trauma of the event will subside over time, but longer-term psychological consequences can emerge whether a child is very young, a teenager or has grown to adulthood: low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, flashbacks, and issues with trust, fear, guilt, shame, sexuality or intimacy can develop.

Survivors of child sexual abuse sometimes create coping mechanisms as children that are carried forward into adulthood, where they no longer work well and can even cause new problems to develop. Many survivors have reported higher use of "numbing" substances such as alcohol and drugs.

In more than 90% of reported cases, offenders and survivors share a close personal relationship before child sexual abuse occurs. Because of this, many people are very reluctant to report the abuse, and most cases never enter the legal system.

Reporting sexual abuse is an option at any age, however, as there is no statute of limitations for such crimes. If an adult is interested in reporting sexual abuse they endured as a child, it may be helpful for them to seek information and support from their local sexual assault service.

What effect does child sexual abuse have on families?

Like ripples on water, the impacts of a child's sexual abuse spreads beyond the point of original impact to their relatives, friends, neighbours, classmates and teammates. Many people will experience the short- and long-term "collateral damage" of the child's traumatic experience.

Depending on the circumstances and interpersonal dynamics, families can come together or be pulled apart by their reactions to sexual violence. At any age, brothers and sisters can be supportive of their abused sibling or feel resentful about the added attention they receive. If the offender was a trusted relative, feelings of disbelief or denial can emerge to cause internal family conflict.

What are the short term impacts of child sexual abuse?

There aren't many definitive, visible immediate impacts of child sexual abuse. All children will display behavioural changes as part of their growing process, so it's difficult to tell what's normal and what may actually be signaling some form of traumatic effect.

The key is to be alert for "clustering" of several symptoms at one time. Collectively, such non-verbal cues may be the child's only way of disclosing sexual abuse. These indicators may include:

- Expressions that their body is "dirty"
- Notable changes in personality (from outgoing to introverted or vice versa)
- Nightmares
- Sleep pattern changes
- Refusing to stay in their own bed or room
- Withdrawal from physical contact
- "Acting out" of a sexual nature
- Fears/phobias/anxiety
- Unexplained crying
- Depression
- Secretiveness
- Loss of appetite
- Change in school performance or attendance
- Desire to change school
- Lack of interest in usual activities
- Regression to earlier childhood development (bed-wetting, thumb-sucking)
- Fear of being left alone
- Avoidance of being alone with a particular person
- Recurring medical problems (e.g. throat infections, problems in genital or rectal area such as soreness or infections)
- Nausea or stomach aches
- Unexplained scratches or bruises

Won't sexually abused children just grow up and forget about it?

Child survivors may be able to block out memories of their traumatic experience, but they usually can't do it for the rest of their lives. Not talking about what happened will not reduce the psychological damage done in childhood, and the effects often appear sooner or later. The immediate trauma of the event will subside over time, but longer-term psychological consequences can emerge whether a child is very young, a teenager or has grown to adulthood.

As each survivor grows up, they'll develop their own unique set of long-term coping strategies to manage the traumatic experience. Sometimes these are very adaptive strategies, but sometimes they create other problems.

It's important that children, teens and adults who have been sexually abused are encouraged to attend counselling programs to help them deal with the impacts of the abuse.

