

## The Impact of Sexual Abuse in Childhood

When people ask the question “What is the impact of sexual abuse in childhood?” it is sometimes difficult to know where to begin. It will depend on so many things. Perhaps it is a little like asking, “What is a river like?” We are all familiar with rivers and no doubt you have a picture of a river in your mind now – and I imagine that all of our rivers look different. Think about all of the things that would make our rivers different. Is the land steep or flat? Is the river near its source and just a trickle or is it rushing towards the sea. Is it affected by the tides? How much rain pours into the river and how does it cope with unexpectedly high volumes of rain? Does it ever flood? Is the river running over soft grassland or over rocky terrain? Is it in sunshine or running through dark forests? Can it run in a straight line or does it wind its way past obstacles? How is the nature of the river affected by the activities of animals or people? What is a river like?

For every person who has been abused in childhood, there is an individual story. How they were abused, who abused them, when and where the abuse took place, who else was involved or who knew, how old they were, how they were silenced, how long the abuse went on for, whether anyone else was abused, their relationship to the abuser, whether the abuser was violent or appeared ‘loving’ and so on.

Alongside this will be each individual’s life circumstances at the time that the abuse took place and afterwards. Were they living in a family or environment that was caring and supportive or that was neglectful or hurtful to them? Did they experience abuse in other ways? Was it possible for them to tell anyone or did they need to keep the abuse secret? If they told someone, were they believed, was anything done to help them, was it ever spoken of again? What other experiences or relationships in their lives made things easier or harder for them?

All of these elements and more will make each person’s experience very unique. What follows is a list of some of the ways that abuse can have an impact on someone’s life. It is not a complete list but a starting point. The impact of abuse can be complex and far reaching, but may also be hidden and difficult to recognise. You may recognise parts of yourself or others in this list. There may also be something important missing from this list – this doesn’t mean that your experience doesn’t count or is not valid. We can never succeed in capturing the uniqueness of your experience in a list of words, just as we can never describe the uniqueness of one river with a list of words about rivers.

The impact of abuse can be experienced physically, emotionally, psychologically and behaviourally and may lead to a range of difficulties or challenges in different areas of a person’s life. However, it is also important to remember that many survivors of abuse live happy, fulfilled lives – it is the interplay of individual circumstances that will make all the difference.

## Physical

- **Panic attacks, uncontrollable shaking, crying**
- **Sleep difficulties** – nightmares, difficulty getting to sleep, needing lights on or music playing, sleep walking, over-sleeping
- **Impaired bodily functions** – due to physical trauma
- **Physical pain or unexplained physical symptoms**
- **Self-harm or self-injury, including substance abuse** - as a way of coping with emotion and triggers
- **Eating disorders or other issues with food**
- **Sexual difficulties** – questions about sexuality, obsession with sex or particular sexual practices, avoidance or disgust with sex in general or particular sexual practices, lack of basic sex education
- **Infertility** – arising from physical trauma to the body
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** – not everyone who experiences sexual abuse will have PTSD; for many an overwhelming sense that life and how you see yourself in the world has changed forever, and that things can never be the same, underline PTSD.

## Emotional

- **Shame** – may be overwhelming and result in a range of coping mechanisms
- **Anger/rage** – this may range from feeling irritable and being snappy, to an eruption of anger that feels uncontrollable and out of proportion to the current situation
- **Grief/sadness** – this may be experienced as a generalised sadness or more specifically linked to a deep sense of loss of an innocent childhood or for how life might have been if the abuse hadn't happened
- **Fear** – either a generalised fear or a fear linked to specific environmental triggers e.g. enclosed spaces, smells, men, touch (anything that acts as a reminder) – even a fear of fear itself, which may lead to avoidance of certain situations
- **Feeling worthless** – it can be difficult to ask for things or to say no if we feel worthless, we may accept being treated badly because we think we deserve it
- **Feeling powerless** – a feeling of having no control over life or feeling unable to make things happen
- **Feeling powerful** – a sense of being invincible or able to do anything – often as a defence against feeling powerless – a determination never to feel vulnerable again
- **Confusion** – the link between current thoughts, feelings, behaviour and past experiences of abuse are not clear and are therefore confusing – lapses in memory and loss of time
- **Hopelessness/despair** – a feeling that things will never or can never get better
- **Depression** – either long term or episodes in response to triggers
- **Emotional numbing** – in response to specific events or a general lack of any emotion
- **Difficulty trusting or receiving trust** – as a result of traumatic betrayal
- **Difficulty forming or sustaining friendships or relationships**
- **Suicidal feelings/intent/behaviour**

## Psychological

- **Anxiety** – in general or in specific situations or in response to specific triggers
- **Phobias** – e.g. fear of leaving home (or a safe place), fear of men/women, fear of specific places, fear of being touched, fear of certain fabrics
- **Flashbacks** – these may be visual, aural or sensational and are experienced as if the abuse or aspects of it are happening again in the present
- **Nightmares/waking dreams**
- **Obsessive-compulsive behaviour** – e.g. extreme cleaning of the body or the home, repetitive rituals in order to feel safe
- **Self-perception as victim** – as if the abuse defines the person and is all that they are or will ever be, a loss of a sense of self that existed before the abuse
- **Low self esteem** – a sense of being of little or no value as a human being
- **Existential crisis** – despair linked to the profound question of identity, “Who would I have been if I hadn’t been abused?” - a view of the world that has been shaped or changed by the abuse, a loss of important beliefs (spiritual or otherwise)
- **Internalised oppression** – messages from the abuser or from society e.g. “It’s your fault”, “I only do it because I love you”, “You are bad”, “Children tell lies or make up stories”, “Women don’t abuse”, become internalised as beliefs about the self e.g. “It was my fault”, “In order to be loved I must accept being abused”, “I am bad”
- **Dissociation** – a continuum of experiences ranging from: a sense of not being fully present in current experience e.g. drifting off, daydreaming, which might be experienced by anyone; a disconnection from particular experiences as a defence against psychic or physical pain resulting from trauma, a loss of memory, time or sense of continuity; a splitting of the experience of ‘self’ into discrete parts in response to severe trauma (see resource list for useful books and websites)

## Practical

- **Difficulties with medical/dental visits/procedures** – asking for what we need e.g. a woman doctor, fear of the abuse being recorded, fear of being touched
- **Difficulties with or avoiding certain situations**
- **Challenges in parenting** – these may become acute when a child reaches the age that the parent was when they were abused – over-protectiveness, fear of allowing others to care for a child – difficulty assessing risk and appropriate boundaries
- **Educational** - under achievement due to missing school, being unable to concentrate, dissociating due to overwhelming emotions or due to behavioural impacts of the abuse – or high achievement accompanied by a need for perfection
- **Occupational over or under achievement** – similar to educational
- **Unable to make use of positive experiences** – these are discounted or filtered out due to internalised messages, or cannot be enjoyed due to hypervigilance or anticipation of negative experiences
- **Lack of sex education** – may be due to missing school, or absence on the day that sex education was offered due to anxiety, or dissociating when present due to being triggered by the material
- **Poor risk assessment for self or others** - we learn how to assess risk and take care of ourselves by watching others and by being cared for in childhood. Where abuse was present, this can give

conflicting or consistently unsafe messages and make it difficult to assess risk or make judgements about appropriate boundaries in adulthood

**Note: All of the above may also be due to experiences other than sexual abuse.**

“Coping is what you did to survive the trauma of being sexually abused. There is a continuum of coping behaviours. You may have run away from home or turned to alcohol or drugs. You may have become a super-achiever, excelling in school and taking care of your brothers and sisters at home. You may have forgotten what to you, withdrawn into yourself, or cut off from your feelings. With few resources for taking care of yourself, you survived with whatever means were available.” (Bass and Davis, 1998)