

Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Childhood sexual abuse is a betrayal of trust, an abuse of power and is widespread, sadly. It can affect (and be perpetrated by) people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. Abuse can seriously impact your emotional well-being and outlook on life. If you are a survivor of childhood sexual abuse you might recognise some of the effects outlined below. Coping with these effects can feel very overwhelming. Hopefully, recognising that much of what you are feeling is understandable, natural and shared by other survivors will be of comfort, and will give you the courage to seek advice and support.

There is support available, to help you cope with the effects of childhood sexual abuse

You are not alone. Abuse in childhood can occur in families, or can be perpetrated by an authority figure, such as a teacher, carer or religious figure. You are not alone, the loss you probably feel for your childhood will be shared and understood by others. Talking to people can help you cope with what has happened. RSVP provides counselling for survivors of sexual trauma, more than 50% of the people we support are survivors of childhood abuse.

You are not to blame. Feelings of guilt and responsibility are common after childhood abuse, but they do not lie with you. You might have been subjected to manipulation, coercion, threats, physical and/or emotional abuse and forced isolation, where it felt there was no one you could tell. Often abusers also blame the person they are abusing for their actions, grooming them into silence and distorting their views. These experiences have probably stayed with you into adulthood, remember the blame rests with the abuser though, not with you.

Focus on yourself. You might have bottled up your feelings about the abuse for many years; feelings can seem frightening. It's important to take time to focus on yourself and your healing process. Take control of your life again, do things at your own pace and focus on what you enjoy in life. Think about your general well-being; sleep well, stay healthy, surround yourself with people who are supportive.

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You have every right to be angry. As well as feeling anger towards your abuser, you might feel anger at other people in your life who you feel didn't protect you properly. You might feel anger at the whole world for letting abuse happen and you might direct this anger at yourself. Anger is a common and understandable response amongst abuse survivors, but it can become overwhelming when bottled up and left to grow. Anger sometimes leads to self-harm, depression, drug and alcohol dependency. Counselling, or other ways to help you discover safe ways to express anger, can help you cope.

You are not defined by the abuse. Abuse can impact your life in so many ways, affecting self-esteem, trust in others, intimacy, confidence, and even drug and alcohol dependency. You are a survivor of abuse, but this is not all that you are. You are a whole person with interests, quirks and character.

Make a list of what you like about yourself. When you're feeling really low the list might be small; you might not be able to think of anything, maybe ask a supportive friend what they like about you as a starting point? As your well-being improves you can add to this list and keep it as a reminder of the interesting person you are.

Triggers. All sorts of things can trigger powerful memories of abuse, from smells, sights and sounds, to distressing scenes on TV. Maybe you've recently become a parent, or your child is the age you were when you were abused, and painful memories have come flooding back. These memories can be overwhelming and cause feelings of panic and despair.

There is RSVP self-help information on coping with flashbacks, which includes relaxation techniques to bring you back into the present. We also have a telephone helpline you can call when you are struggling with memories of abuse. You could also keep a list of positive triggers, things that make you feel good, such as your favourite music, a photo that makes you smile, or a TV show that makes you laugh.

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Give yourself time. There is no 'deadline', you will cope with the effects of abuse at your own pace. There is no age or point in your life where you should be 'over it'. Memories of abuse can come to the forefront of your mind years after they occurred. Give yourself time and be patient with yourself.

Your voice deserves to be heard. For many years sexual abuse has not been taken seriously and people's stories have been buried and ignored. There are probably more support systems available to you now than when your abuse first occurred. Increasingly, society is facing up to the extent of childhood sexual abuse and survivors are seeking a voice or criminal justice. RSVP's services allow you to tell your story, in your own words, in your own time.

There is hope. It's never too late to seek help and begin recovering from the effects of childhood sexual abuse.

Useful links:

NAPAC (The National Association of People Abused in Childhood) has lots of resources, a helpline and more: www.napac.org.uk/resources

Zoe Lodrick is a sexual trauma specialist, her article on guilt makes connections between abuse and self-blame www.zoelodrick.co.uk/training/guilt-article

Survivors Manchester has produced a self-help guide for all survivors of any gender. Visit:- <http://www.selfhelpguides.ntw.nhs.uk/survivorsmcr/leaflets/selfhelp/Abuse.pdf>

Mindfulness and meditation exercises are one way of calming the mind and helping us stay in the present moment. Headspace provides short guided meditations, including specific topics, e.g. stress, sleep and anxiety. For more information on Headspace visit: www.headspace.com

Practicing Mindfulness has ideas to "Quiet the Mind" and other mindfulness and stress reducing exercises. For more information visit: www.practicingmindfulness.com

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You don't need to deal with the effects of sexual violence, sexual assault or sexual abuse alone. RSVP are here to offer support to survivors, to enable you to live a life with hope and confidence which is free from abuse.

We offer:

- Specialist counselling for survivors and their supporters
- Independent sexual violence advocates (ISVAS) to assist you through criminal or civil proceedings or in crisis, whether you have reported or not
- Social groups and coffee mornings focussing on self-help
- Emotional support on the telephone helpline 0121 643 4136

These are some of our services. For more ways we can support you contact:-

☎ 0121 643 0301

@ info@rsvporg.co.uk

@ isva@rsvporg.co.uk

@ www.rsvporg.co.uk/services

🐦 @RSVP_West_Mids

f facebook.com/RSVPWM

📷 instagram.com/RSVPWM

"My counsellor gave me the courage to face up to what has haunted me since childhood. I now feel equipped to continue with my life."

This self-help sheet may be photocopied under the following conditions:

Each page must be copied in its entirety, including RSVP information headings, where applicable. Copies may be made for use within organisations for training purposes or for clients/individuals for self-help purposes. Copies may not be resold.

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a world free from sexual violence and abuse

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