

About Adult Survivors of Child Abuse

WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE?

Child abuse can take the form of any act of physical, emotional or sexual abuse perpetrated against a child. Child abuse can also take the form of neglect--ignoring the child's emotional and or physical needs. Child abuse can and does take place outside of the family--with stepfamilies, foster families or babysitters.

HOW TO TELL IF YOU WERE ABUSED AS A CHILD

Sometimes it is very difficult to be sure whether or not you actually were abused as a child. You may be blocking memories because you are not yet ready to cope with them all on your own. Here are some questions to ask yourself which may help you to be more sure about the past (from J. Patrick Gannon, *Soul Survivors*):

- Did your parents' discipline involve corporal punishment? Did it result in bruises or injuries? How frequently did this discipline occur and did you ever feel their behavior was out of control?
- Were any of your interactions with your parents either overtly or subtly sexual? Were you touched or talked to in a sexual manner and left feeling confused or uncomfortable?
- How were you emotionally treated by your parents on a day-to-day basis? Were you regularly criticized, threatened, invalidated or ignored?

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE TERM SURVIVOR OF CHILD ABUSE?

Being an adult survivor of child abuse means that you or someone your care about endured the pain of child abuse and survived it. Unfortunately, the survival tactics used to cope with the abuse can later get in the way of productive and satisfying adult lives. Dr. Gannon lists some of the "symptoms" of "survivors syndrome":

- **Relationship Problems**--fighting, blaming, mistrusting, poor communication skills and difficulty with intimacy.
- **Low Self Esteem**--self doubt, self blame, shame.
- **Self Sabotage**--self destructive or self mutilating behavior.
- **Sexual Problems**--sexual inhibition or promiscuity, flashbacks to abusive experiences during sexual contact, inability to achieve orgasm, pain or numbing during intimacy.
- **Symptoms of Trauma**--feelings of fear, panic, agitation, anxiety, numbing of bodily areas, nightmares, multiple personalities, feelings of being disconnected from body.

- **Physical Ailments**--includes psychosomatic illnesses, stomachaches, eating disorders, skin disorders, asthma, headaches and phobias.
- **Social Alienation**--feeling different from others, not accepted, stigmatized.
- **Difficulty in Handling Feelings**--trouble in recognizing, managing and appropriately expressing feelings.

CAN ADULT SURVIVORS OF CHILD ABUSE OVERCOME THIS SYNDROME?

Yes, it is possible for survivors to recover from the abuse syndrome. The recovery process can be a difficult one. The road to a healthy resolution of an abusive childhood involves deep self exploration and sometimes painful recollection of past events and people.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Recovery is very difficult to achieve by yourself. There a variety of sources to which you may turn for help:

Reading about abuse survival is a helpful and gentle way for you to begin to explore your own experience. Some books to look at (many are available in the Center library and at most large bookstores): *Soul Survivors* by J. Patrick Gannon, Ph.D.; *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Abuse* by Bassie and Davis; *There is a Way Out* by Richard Yao.

Self Help Groups are a good place to start and provide a good support system for someone going through the self exploration process involved in recovery. Hearing others recount their experiences of abuse will not only validate your own feelings (which may be marked by confusion), but will give you a springboard for resolving some of the conflicts these feelings evoke: Children of Alcoholics: (800) 359-2623; Incest Survivors Anonymous: (800) 422-4453; St. Vincent's Hospital Rape & Incest Crisis Program: (212) 604-8068.

Counseling may be a more comfortable mode for you to explore the past. A counselor can lead you through the fear, pain and confusion of your abusive experience and guide you supportively along the path of recovery.

If you or someone you care about would like more information, come in and speak with a professional counselor in 0203 James Hall. All services are free and confidential.

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