

Childhood Abuse

Some people are unsure whether their childhood experiences could be called abuse, or not. Perhaps you were frequently beaten but you think others had it worse or that all kids get hit. Perhaps you were frequently put down, humiliated, laughed or shouted at, set unreasonable tasks or ignored which caused you to feel useless or worthless. Perhaps you think you deserved it? Perhaps you know you had a really tough time but don't think it was really anyone's fault, which is sometimes true. Bad things do happen and sometimes no one is to blame but where was the after care and on-going support you needed? It is possible the people around didn't know what they were doing or they couldn't do any better but nevertheless they were a part of the harm done to you.

Looking at your childhood experiences is not about blame but about how the acts and omissions of others affected you. The details of what happened are not that important, what is, is how it made you feel, how you explained it to yourself and the beliefs you formed. Without love, support and the right information it is likely that you will have formed the wrong beliefs and that they still cause you problems today. Typical mistaken beliefs include: 'I'm not good enough', 'I don't belong', 'I'm not loveable', 'Other people are more important than me'. Remember what might seem relatively minor to you now as an adult, could have been devastating to you as a child.

Abuse in one's past can be difficult to admit and many people never make the connection between what happened to them in childhood and some of their later problems. To resolve the past and heal, it is important that these connections are made.

The shock of being hit or punched by someone you love, the pain of rejection, or the sad bewilderment of finding you've been tricked and manipulated, can all have long-term consequences. If you think you might be suffering now as a result of what you experienced as a child, then it could be worth exploring.

Frequently people who were abused in childhood grow up feeling badly about themselves. They tend to lack confidence and this may cause them to be passive or aggressive. These feelings might be buried or pushed to the back of your mind but they will affect your behaviours, your relationships, your expectations of yourself, of life and how you generally cope and manage on a daily basis.

The symptoms

If you choose relationships that aren't good for you, you don't believe the good things that people say about you, and perhaps you don't even trust yourself – abuse may be the cause.

If you:

- Are angry all the time
- Take your anger out on others
- Allow others to take their anger out on you
- Engage in self destructive behaviours
- Feel you'll never grow up
- Sometimes think you're crazy
- Smother your feelings with food, alcohol, drugs or work or don't really have feelings
- Are scared of being abusive to your children or scared of having children in case you would be

it is likely that you have been abused or certainly lacked the loving support that you needed as a child and young person; and that your childhood experiences have had a lasting and damaging effect on you.

Everyone has some of these feelings some of the time. But adults who were abused as children can have many of them, a lot of the time; to an extreme extent. Seeing the ways you may have been affected by child abuse can help you recognise some of the changes you need to make to start achieving the things you want and live the life you wish to lead.

Behaviours and Coping Mechanisms

Denying the abuse, minimising it, or excusing it are common ways that people cope with the pain they suffered and still carry. Admitting that your carers hurt you, belittled you, betrayed your trust, or didn't love and protect you the way every child deserves is very difficult. If the abusers were your parents it can be even harder, threatening your sense of identity, so it is recommended that you obtain specialist help to guide and support you through the process of healing and recovery.

Children need adults, and look to them for love, care, protection and guidance. The adults responsible for our care as children were, and possibly still are, important to us. If we have a choice between deciding whether we or they were bad, we are likely to choose ourselves. We may make up all kinds of excuses for their behaviour, or simply think we deserved it. Very often this was the message we were given.

Most abused children grow up thinking that the abuse was their fault. Placing responsibility where it truly lies is one of the most important steps you can take in overcoming the negative effects of your past.

Whatever reasons you might have to explain what happened, it's important that you don't use them to excuse those who mistreated you. There are no excuses for abusing a child ~ a child is never responsible for the abuse. Facing this can be frightening, however doing so is essential. Perhaps you are not aware of it yet. Many survivors of child abuse learn to disconnect from events that might be overwhelming, to go into a sort of trance to avoid physical or emotional pain. They might even develop different personalities to cope with the enormous trauma and confusion. These behaviours help them to survive as children but this could prevent them or you from being truly alive now.

Not being in touch with your true feelings prevents you from engaging with yourself, others and life. It can lead to depression, isolation, relationship difficulties or to emotional pain so severe that suicide seems the only escape.

Suppressed feelings of anger, depression and fear can damage our health, tensing us up and causing headaches, backache, digestive and/or respiratory problems. The pressure of suppressed feelings can lead to inappropriate outbursts. Anger can explode in acts of violence and destruction, against ourselves, our loved ones or the society that seemed to allow this to happen. Our need for love and care, together with confusion about what that means might lead us into inappropriate relationships or responses. An apparent act of kindness can trigger emotional responses out of all proportion, making us vulnerable to further abuse. Or if the kindness was genuine we may reject that person, feel undeserving, odd or socially inadequate.

There is almost no aspect of a child's development that abuse doesn't affect. Like other survivors, you may have built a "protective wall" of some kind around yourself.

This may involve attempts to be invisible, through meek behaviour, baggy clothes or losing weight. It may cause victims to present themselves as unattractive to keep people away. In order to protect yourself, you may be in denial aggressive or submissive, a bully or a victim. Other examples include: Striving for perfection, never feeling that you have done enough, or abandoning the possibility of ever achieving anything.

Having grown up with low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence, it is easy for you to believe that everything that goes wrong is your fault and you live life filled with guilt, self-blame and shame. Above all, your life and your interactions with others may be governed by fear. If we are full of fear and have learned to dislike ourselves, it is almost impossible to form close, intimate relationships with other people.

Neglected or abused children have sometimes never been lovingly nurtured in appropriate ways. When touched now by potential lovers or affectionate friends, they may flinch or pull away. They might not know how to respond to a touch that doesn't hurt or intrude. They may avoid intimate relationships altogether or enter abusive relationships. These responses are difficult to change but with perseverance you can take control towards achieving your own goals.

Resolution and Healing

Behaviours that helped us survive as children can isolate us from others now. They can make us feel bad and stop us getting what we want. You may need to learn new ways of relating to people, that are neither aggressive nor submissive, but are honest and strong ~ assertive. You can learn to detect and respond to real and current danger instead of being a victim of learned automatic responses.

Constant fear and other troubling feelings, ill health, a sense of total inadequacy, and attempts to mask the pain through addictions, are all normal responses to abnormal experiences. Reading other survivors' stories or joining a support group can help you feel less odd and alone, and help you learn new ways of being.

As you start to accept that you were abused, anger and fear may well up. As you start to explore the effects the abuse had on you, more of your feelings and memories may return. These can be frightening steps, so it is important that you take your time and look after yourself. You might need support from friends, loved ones, books, websites, or professionals who are familiar with what you're going through.

Know that you're not alone, and that you can overcome the negative effects of your past. You've already begun, so take heart, and take the next step.

See Childhood Abuse in the DABS Directory Book List section