

The Healing Process

Those who have been abused often wonder if healing is possible. The answer is definitely yes, although recovery from abuse is not something that happens overnight. You cannot flick a switch or reformat your heart and mind as one would a computer. Healing is an on-going process of profound changes within you. The process for most begins with an awareness that many of the problems and unpleasant feelings they have is in some way connected with their childhood history and to have survived abuse is not enough. Whatever problems you have in your life today, you are still here and as an adult you now have the opportunity to heal even the deepest of wounds.

Abuse and sexual violence is harmful in many ways. These ways are often described by professionals as the four 'Traumagenic Dynamics' (See Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse by David Finkelhor) In short:

The Event Experiences: To start with there is the upset and trauma of the events: This may result in similar symptoms found with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) such as fear, phobias, confusion and inability to trust self and others.

Stigmatisation: This leads to a sense of being different from others and of not being good enough. It erodes confidence and self-esteem, while at the same time maintains a sense of self blame, guilt and shame.

Betrayal: This often results in feelings of grief and depression, profound loneliness, mistrust of others and self. Tendencies towards unhealthy dependence on others; whilst at the same time being compelled to push them away. Acting out aggression and suppressed anger in harmful ways.

Powerlessness: Lowered confidence and self-esteem, fear and anxiety and frequently a need to control that derives from mistrust.

Dissociation: To some degree, all victims learn to mistrust and therefore to disconnect from their feelings in order to cope with the pain and confusion.

Abuse and sexual violence leads many victims to report a feeling that there is a great vacuum inside which they seek to satisfy. Some seek fulfilment of this need in harmful ways with drugs, alcohol, violence and other criminal behaviour. Sometimes in ways that seem good, for example working hard, becoming successful, forming and maintaining relationships, being self-sacrificing or popular; yet all these attempts are essentially flawed.

Healing requires courage and commitment and if you can find suitable support, the journey will be easier. It usually involves experiencing pain, confusion, anger and many unpleasant feelings as the realities of the betrayal and harm done to you are understood. It always involves fully connecting with all of your feelings, pleasant and unpleasant, valuing them and learning to use them well. Ultimately healing can lead to the experience of peaceful resolution, of being able to live a content life no longer overwhelmed or distorted by what happened to you as a child. You will now be able to face all the ups and downs that life has in store for us. Many survivors who have resolved their abuse state that, although no child should ever have to experience abuse, they are now aware that the process of recovery has made them into better people than they would otherwise have been.

Healing from abuse and sexual violence requires information

Everyone experiences abuse of some kind during childhood and in various ways throughout life. Much of it is fairly minor and it is resolved quickly because we have the information and resources, internal and external, to deal with it in healthy ways. Unfortunately, when the abuse is serious and especially if it occurs when we are young, at a time when our knowledge is limited; the affect can be long lasting. Without truthful information about the events, children, young people (and some adults) will mistakenly conclude that what happened must have been their fault. Shame, blame, guilt and fear follow very easily from these conclusions. To heal you need to connect to sources of sound information, (the main reason why you should work with specialist support), know this thoroughly and then as an adult, connect this information and its meanings to the scared and damaged child within. The information together with your love and support gives that part of you the opportunity to see the truth, form sound beliefs and set you free. (See books by Alice Miller)

The healing process goes in phases or stages

These stages are not necessarily experienced in sequence and some can overlap. You might miss one part altogether, yet seem to spend a long time apparently stuck in another. Healing and resolution is always a personal process, unique to you. Knowledge of these stages can act as a map, helping you see what you have already done and what you may have ahead.

Telling your story

For some this is the first step, having been silent for years, to be able to recount one's history and some of the events to an understanding active listener is cathartic in itself. Others may need to wait and a few may decide to keep their experiences private. This will be your choice and it is worth mentioning that nobody needs to know detail. General statements are good enough in order for the therapist know the type of abuse, your age and the relationship of the perpetrator. E.g. Father, mother, stranger or partner.

Understanding that it was not your fault

As a child, you may have believed that the abuse was your fault and even now as an adult you may still feel that. An important stage of healing is placing responsibility where it really belongs, however that is not always simple. It is very common for victims to still retain strong emotional bonds with the perpetrator and others who either enabled the abuse or failed to protect you. Resolving such attachments can be frightening and needs a gentle hand. This is a good reason to reject processes which claim to work quickly.

Getting in touch with your vulnerability

Many survivors have lost touch with their child within - their own vulnerability. Many people talk about "being afraid to be vulnerable". Getting in touch with all feelings leads to self-awareness; knowing who you are. Using feelings to communicate with others is an act of strength, not weakness and an essential part of recovery.

Trusting yourself

The best guide for healing is your own inner voice. As a result of the abuse, many survivors don't trust themselves and learn to ignore their own inner wisdom. Learning to trust your own thoughts, feelings and perceptions forms a new basis for action in your life.

Grieving and mourning

To survive, many victims of abuse and sexual violence dissociate from their pain and loss. In most cases, it is a good coping strategy at the time but can block later resolution. Part of healing is usually to allow those feelings of pain and loss to live and at last for the child within to be heard. Grieving and acknowledgement of loss is an important step.

Anger can be the backbone of healing

Anger is a powerful and liberating force. Whether you need to get in touch with it or have always had plenty to spare, directing your rage in healthy safe ways at your abuser and at those who did not protect you can be pivotal to healing. Part of the requirement for safety is to have settled your attachment issues.

Disclosures and confrontations

Some survivors think that disclosure, confrontation or reporting the crimes against them to the authorities will hasten their recovery or is a necessary step. This is a matter of personal choice; there are no 'shoulds'. It is usually far better to concentrate on the bulk of self-healing first for the following reasons:

There are frequently negative or unsatisfactory outcomes. E.g. being rejected by family and friends, who are statistically more likely to take the side of the abuser than to face the unwelcome truth. It may involve being called a liar and to have your memory and sanity questioned.

For some, disclosure, confrontation and reporting to the authorities can be a dramatic cleansing tool. For most it will have negative, unpredictable and complicated consequences.

Forgiveness

Sometimes it is said that you have to forgive your abuser in order to heal. This is not true. It is not necessary for you to forgive the person that abused you and it is only an appropriate consideration in very rare circumstances. What may be appropriate is a form of self-forgiveness or self-acceptance; not about any of the issues around the circumstances of the abuse committed against you, but critically to take responsibility for any past actions that you now know were wrong. Abuse frequently causes victims to act out in anti-social or unpleasant ways. It can cause victims to engage in what are broadly described as 'self-harming behaviours'. In accepting responsibility however, you and all victims, **MUST** factor in that much of your behaviours were direct results of the harm caused to you and therefore responsibility, in the first instance, rests with your abuser. There is a full DABS information sheet on Forgiveness.

See also the DABS Directory Book List section