

A summary of

Survivors' Voices

Breaking the silence
on living with the
impact of child sexual
abuse in the family
environment

Produced by
One in Four
London, 2015
www.oneinfour.org.uk

Sponsored by a grant from
The Bromley Trust



Introduction

Families should be environments of safety for the love and nurturing that is essential for the healthy growth and development of children. But with CSA they become places of secrecy and fear, wherein children's view of themselves and others becomes distorted, inevitably impacting the adults they become.

In the Survivors' Narratives Project, many survivors showed their distress in childhood through challenging behaviour – becoming aggressive or withdrawn, stealing, taking drugs, failing in school – and were seen as bad.

Survivors reported the positive impact of being heard, and understood by professionals who had the specialist skills to work with CSA.

James

When paedophiles say to their victims, as they all do in one form or another, "If you ever speak about this, unimaginably bad things will happen to you," what they are doing is perhaps on one level even worse than the physical act of abuse itself. They are manipulating their victims into being complicit in the abuse.

Being heard, being met with belief, understanding and compassion, feeling safe from judgement, criticism and blame – these things are the absolute key to rebuilding trust and starting the healing process. Feeling able to come forward and speak out safely has never been more vital for those who, like me, have had the trauma of child rape thrown onto them and, by proxy, those who love them.

Amy

The abuse forced me to lie, to lie to others but most importantly to lie to myself. To pretend nothing wrong was happening. To pretend it was all part of being a good girl. It was all part of being loved and accepted.

Steve

My adolescence was lost to withdrawal and depression, the belief that good things happened to other people, and to feeling as attractive as 'sheep shit'

Due to specialist support for childhood sexual abuse I am a success story, transformed. My abilities are unleashed, my sexuality is far less hindered, my quality of life is coming under my control.

Jane

What he did to me affected my whole life, every relationship, my personal identity and the general trajectory of my life's path. Childhood sexual abuse manifested in all aspects of my life.

I was trapped in two emotional worlds; that of anger and of shame. I was furious that I had been wronged and disgusted with who I was. Any attempts I made to speak about my feelings were quashed; any cries to be noticed were silenced. I was left alone with my shame and humiliated for anything I said about my feelings. I am hyper-vigilant, which can lead to my misunderstanding a situation.

I felt abandoned in life and it took me many years to realise that I may well have been abandoned by key people in my life but I never really understood the consequences of the fact; that I became really good at abandoning myself.

Julie

Having no voice or power gave me an overwhelming sense of anger as I could not protect myself or expect care from an emotionally absent mother. Therefore splitting off or disassociating from my reality became a coping mechanism in a situation too awful to comprehend. Another way of coping was trying to forget.

I have always felt not good enough. Not just self-esteem issues, but a real, bone-crushing devastation in feeling below everyone. Because of the way I was treated, I felt I did not deserve basic human rights. If the people that were supposed to nurture you as a child, sexually abused you, then surely you are unlovable, unworthy and deserve bad things to happen? I am nothing therefore I deserve nothing. As I walked through life feeling like this I had no way of protecting myself emotionally against people who would want to

manipulate or hurt me for their own gains. Then if I was treated badly I would not stand up for myself and would try to get away from any conflict. I did not know how to express or channel my anger in a healthy way to protect myself!

As an abused child, pushing the anger down, just like the memories, forms part of your survival pack where you tune out or try to eliminate feelings – stay in the fog. What is the point of being angry that you are suffering a great injustice? I knew this at the age of four. You then carry these feelings along with you but where does that anger go? Sometimes it erupts for inappropriate reasons or sometimes you drink it away, take drugs or punish yourself with emotionless sex. This anger that I carried for so many years, that very nearly saw me off, was the very emotion that helped to set me free because dealing with your anger is about facing what has happened to you.

You have to face the fog. This fog is built on Fear, Obligation and Guilt: the abusers' keys to your prison. The fear is not knowing when or where your abuser will pounce on you or how they might threaten you. My abuser used my sense of obligation: on being told how you are being looked after and loved, you are obliged to do things that they want you to do. The guilt is mixed with shame too. I always felt guilty because I knew what they did to me was morally wrong so I carried their shame. Therefore, to set yourself free, you have to unpack these dense emotions. This is not easy as they have become embedded in your sense of self, so you have to feel that anger of injustice, in order to illuminate your needs and not stay in the fog. To focus on your needs and become your own authority – reclaim your human rights.

CSA is the ultimate betrayal, as the very people that are supposed to love, nurture and care for you are the ones who place you in a living nightmare.

Dolores

I perfected the art of looking happy and internalized the abuse and kept all the difficult feelings inside. For large parts of my life I hated myself, wished I was dead, wished I had never been born.

Lara

You stole my childhood, some of my adulthood, and my relationship with my family. You stole my self-worth, my self-belief and my inner peace. And in their place, you've left me with rage, pain and confusion.

Looking back now, I realise in situations that we don't know how to deal with, our body and mind are smart, and they find ways to 'cope'.

Taylor

My advice to anyone seeking help for childhood sexual abuse is to get help from people who really understand. Seek out people who can be with you while you talk, and trust yourself to find your way through. Do what you need to do; if you need a teddy, then go to the toy store, or charity shop if you are broke.

Gerard

I am writing this in the hope of reaching others who have been affected by the horrifying damage of sexual abuse, to know that you are not alone and there are people who love you and feel your pain. And that as hard as it is, speaking out, when ready, in the right place, can be the most liberating thing on your journey of healing.

Anon

As a child, I didn't understand I was being sexually abused. I just knew I didn't like it, didn't want it, that it was a secret and it was wrong. In my head I reasoned what was happening was normal, this is what brothers did to their sisters, only it wasn't talked about. I retreated into myself, and became very shy about socialising with other kids, as if they somehow knew there was something wrong with me, or would find out.

Rachel

I feel even more isolated when I find I am unable to explain this existence to others and to express the 'current-ness' of my pain and how life consuming it is. Most things that happen in the past are overcome-able with time. But with childhood sexual abuse it seems to be the opposite. Escaping, denial, drug abuse, wild partying, alcohol carnage, 'workaholism', strenuous physical activity and years of excessive living takes up a lot of 'time' – in the end 'time' runs out and the truth begins to take a hold.

Maud

When I found the right therapist who gave me time, had patience and allowed me to push boundaries without judgement and kept me safe, I slowly began to trust for the first time ever. Despite pushing boundaries endlessly and sometimes cruelly, my therapist remained. At times I despised her for this and became furious with her for not giving up on me. At times it felt it would have been easier had she done so, as that would be proof that my mother was right that I was the crazy one who was unlovable and did not deserve to be cared for. I still occasionally struggle to understand how my therapist can listen to me and be there for me when the one person who should have been able to do that, didn't.

Predominant themes from the research

It is clear that CSA in the family environment leaves long-lasting wounds that continue to exert considerable influence into adulthood. The predominant impact of CSA on survivors consists of trauma reactions that elicit a range of emotional, cognitive and interpersonal responses such as fear, anxiety, shame, loss of identity, confusion and isolation. These commonly manifested in compromised mental and physical health, loss of sense of self, impaired relationships and sexuality, lack of educational attainment and vocational stability, as well as reduced life choices such as fear of having children.

The impact on family dynamics clustered around not having a voice and feeling silenced. A common theme was needing to protect other family members, including the abuser, and fear of the devastation that would result through disclosure. Disclosure was fraught with difficulties with many survivors not being believed, or being asked to retract, or scapegoated. In many cases this led to loss of the family, and for some having to leave the country in which they were raised. Given these complex family dynamics many survivors report having to live a double life in order to navigate family interactions and manage the impact of CSA.

Behind closed doors

The need for secrecy and silence to protect family members, including the abuser, means leading a double life in which external reality differs markedly from the survivor's internal reality. The betrayal of trust, lack of boundaries, unpredictability and uncertainty leads to confusion and a range of emotional and cognitive responses including shame. Over time, distorted perceptions and behaviour become normalised.

“They didn’t talk about it because it meant nothing, but because it meant everything.”

“Nobody wants to believe that this could happen in his or her family.”

Breaking the silence

Disclosure is invariably fraught with fear and anxiety and multiple attempts are often made to break the silence, especially when the secret became too big to handle. First disclosures were often met with disbelief, or ignored, while later disclosures, some not made until after the abuser's death, were also judged, leaving the survivor with a further sense of betrayal. The impact of disclosure invariably had a significant impact on all family members, with some families severing all contact with the survivor, although some were able to gain positive support from siblings and non-abusing parent.

“My mother simply ended the conversation and resumed her Hoovering.”

“I was told ‘Don’t do this to our family.’”

“I didn’t want to tell anyone – for it was my little secret – but it was too big for me to handle, too powerful and too much.”

“I was silenced by my mother and terrified to tell the truth.”

Living in a fog

A common trauma reaction is dissociation which is often experienced as numbness, confusion, feeling unreal, or living in a fog. While dissociation numbs the emotional pain by suppressing feelings, memories and the reality of the abuse, it can lead to fragmented memories making it harder to validate the abuse.

“Teachers said ‘She gets distracted easily’ but I was disassociating”

“I became a people-pleaser.”

“The fog is built on fear.”

Distorted and contorted

A common theme was confusion and the distortion of reality often reinforced by abusers who blame the survivor for the abuse, or imply that CSA is a normal part of a special and loving relationship. In this distortion the world is turned upside down: nothing makes sense and there is nothing to hold on to. To manage the distortion survivors have to contort their behaviour and sense of self.

“He wasn’t a monster. This is part of the confusion.”

“The shame doesn’t belong to the victims. It belongs to the abusers.”

“Did I ‘relate sexually’ when I was less than two years old?”

Sad, bad or normal

Survivors of CSA commonly experience a range of trauma reactions, such as complex PTSD and mental health problems. Many survivors experienced depression, and anxiety disorders such as OCD, as well as problems with alcohol and addictions especially to drugs, food, and sex. Some had a long history of eating disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Some had a number of breakdowns, or were misdiagnosed which delayed their healing and recovery.

“It’s not just the abuse itself that damages, it’s the in-between bits.”

“For large parts of my life I hated myself, wished I was dead.”

The body keeps the score

Many survivors experienced a wide range of unexplained physical illnesses such as chronic genital pain, feelings of paralysis, as well as hyper-immune disorders, allergies, ME and chronic fatigue syndrome.

“I had to accept that CSA was non-negotiable and caused me to be very ill.”

A life half lived

The fear and terror experienced by survivors means that they are unable to trust others, let alone themselves. Alongside this, shame and needing to keep the secret means that many survivors withdraw from others. This leads to self-imposed isolation, loneliness, inability to socialise and fear of intimacy and relationships. Many survivors report not being able to live fully, living in their heads while cut off from their bodies, and a lack of spontaneity and ability to engage in the world.

“It was one isolated incident but its impact on my life has been fundamental.”

“I felt a level of shame that I could only be in the world if I wore a mask.”

“I still grieve for the loss of a family I could have had and the absence of a safe and carefree childhood. All the things that I believe are the right of anyone.”

Scared to be me

Many survivors felt they lost their sense of self and experienced damage to their identity. They felt different to everyone else and experienced a sense of worthlessness, powerlessness, low self-esteem, self-loathing and lack of self-respect. The lack of self prompted many to wear a mask to cover up their inner pain, or to render themselves invisible or invincible. As a result many were too scared and ashamed to be themselves, often leading a double life in which outwardly they appeared to be happy while internally they were suffering and falling apart.

“I perfected the art of looking happy.”

“The abuse forced me to lie, to lie to others but most importantly to lie to myself.”

“Trying anything possible not to be a good girl.”

I was robbed

CSA incurs myriad losses not least the loss of childhood and the loss of a healthy family life and relationships. Many described being robbed of selfworth, self-respect, self-belief and inner peace. Many survivors felt that their childhood and sexuality had been stolen along with opportunities to have stable relationships and children and families of their own.

“[His behaviour] vandalised my childhood and my adult reality.”

Seeking help

The lack of understanding of the impact of CSA and limited access to specialist services meant that many survivors were misdiagnosed or received unhelpful counselling which made them feel worse. Professionals were often not able to link behaviour and presenting symptoms to a history of CSA and lacked understanding and knowledge about the impact of sexual abuse. Conversely, those survivors who felt heard and understood by professionals found that they were able gradually to heal and recover from their abuse.

“12 weeks of NHS therapy... left me more vulnerable.”

“I can’t help feeling angry that the people I originally approached for help got it wrong.”

“With expert help... I am now surfacing for the first time.”

Seeing in colour

Survivors who had access to specialist therapy or support from other survivors through group therapy or psycho-educational workshops found that they were able to recover and heal from CSA and experience post-traumatic growth. This allowed them to break the cycle of abuse, find their voice and learn to live again.

“I began to see colour.”

“I have finally found what I have been looking for all my life – my voice.”

“My recovery is a life-long journey.”