

Helping Adult Victims of Child Abuse 1

Effects of abuse on Sexuality

What effects does abuse have on a child's sexuality?

When a child is sexually abused, his/her normal sexual development is cut short. Being forced to be sexual on an adult level leaves the child not being able to develop his own desire, sexual orientation or interest. He/she doesn't get a chance to explore sex in an age-appropriate way. The child learns that the abusers sexual desire is a scary, out of control, force and his/her first sexual experiences of arousal are linked with shame, disgust, pain and humiliation. This makes for powerful imprinting. If the abuse was linked with affection and nurturing, the child grows up confused about the difference between affection and sex, intimacy and intrusion.

What effects does abuse have on an adult's sexuality?

In adulthood this can play out in several different ways: Some survivors chose celibacy or chose partners who don't want sex. Sometimes they spend many years and a great deal of energy trying to find ways to avoid having sex. Some view sex as "dirty" or see it as an obligation that they must perform. Survivors may force themselves for years to go through the motions even though they are numb, absent or in a panic. They may think that they are frigid, or be confused about homosexuality, or maybe they just feel that they are dysfunctional all together because they do not understand that they are suffering from the effects of the abuse. They may have violent or abusive fantasies that arose them but then cause them great shame. Other times the survivor may confuse the partner with the abuser during sex, Sex becomes a mine field of painful associations and memories. Other survivors act out or become promiscuous believing that they are only good or loved for sex. He or She then fulfills this legacy sometimes with total disregard for his/her own safety. They feel they cannot say NO to sex and end up having sex with anyone that wants them.

The sense of well being and self-esteem gets hooked up with sexual desirability. The survivor might only feel a sense of self-worth when being sexually desired. Also here is the fact that many survivors find one-night stands sexually enjoyable. This is because they are disconnected with any emotional or intimate feelings regarding sex. As a child, survivors become programmed to disconnect from sex and from anyone who loved him and wanted sex with him. So as an adult, sex with an intimate partner may become a "skin crawling" experience. Many have noticed that the deeper the relationship became, the less they wanted sex with this person. They may feel so confused as to why they enjoyed sex before but suddenly can't stand to be touched by the partner. I will get into how this effects the partners in the next paragraph. They may continually be unfaithful to their partners because they want to enjoy a sexual experience, they want to confirm to themselves that they are "sexually normal" that they can enjoy sex. They may come to believe that this may mean they are not "in love" with the partner and even break up the relationship because of the sexual turn off that they

feel. This then becomes a pattern. They can meet someone new, enjoy sex for a time and then as the relationship goes to a deeper more connected level, the same thing happens. They can't stay disconnected from sex in an intimate relationship and they can't connect sex with love. I have seen cases where because of this, survivors feel that they must be homosexual. They find a same sex partner, enjoy the sex in the beginning and then all the same things start happening to them. This leaves them feeling totally confused and dysfunctional.

How does this effect the Partner?

For partners of Survivors, this whole aspect is very frustrating. The partner can wind up feeling like a failure for not be able to give pleasure or express their true feelings to the survivor. They may feel rejected and at a loss on what to do about this situation. Their own sexual desires are put on hold. They love the survivor but have needs of their own also. It is important to remember that the survivor is feeling these feelings because of the abuse they suffered and it is not that the partner is lacking as a lover. It is hard not to take it personally as what could be more personal than your sex life, however, it really is not your fault. You could be the best lover on the planet and that would only serve to make the survivor more confused, more guilt ridden. Survivors feel a tremendous sense of guilt for not being sexually available for their partners...for not enjoying sex the way they wish they could. The survivor probably loves you very much but it is just too scary to feel this with his/her body too. In fact, the fact that they are willing to stay in the relationship and have to deal with this sexual issue every day, is proof that the survivor must care for you a great deal. IT takes a big toll on someone to try and avoid sex, make excuses, panic at being touched in the night, have all those feelings continually brought up.

When the survivor starts being honest about his or her feelings with the partner, the partner might feel shocked, angry and bewildered, especially if the survivor seemed to enjoy sex before. Sudden upheaval of sexual issues is the norm when survivors start to work on abuse issues. Patience with the survivor is key. Survivors often cannot work on sexual issues until the later stages of healing. If a survivor feels pressure to have sex during this time, it only serves to make him/her feel worse. Especially if there is fighting or threats about this. The survivor feels like this is the original abuse because they feel manipulated again. This only shuts the survivor down further. When the pressure for sex is taken off of the survivor, this allows him or her room to heal sexually. As a partner, you do have a choice, you can leave the relationship and find someone else to have sex with but the survivor can't. Unless she/he heals sexually, these problems will follow her into every relationship for the rest of her life. Her/his motivation to heal and change is greater than yours. You cannot make someone heal sexually. You can't set deadlines or orchestrate the survivors progress. You can set mutual goals and work toward them. You can make your feelings and needs known and say that sex is important to you and that you want, eventually, to have a mutual sexual relationship. The survivor understands

this, they want the same thing. Things will change and can even though it may not seem like it now. Ultimately, you will be rewarded with a whole and healthy person.

Working with a survivor on sexual healing takes an incredible amount of patience, persistence and an acceptance of the fact that you are growing as a person too. Survivors often need to be the initiators of sex in order to feel in control. This is an important thing for partners to understand.

Let the survivor make the moves and set the pace for your love making. If the survivor feels in control, often this makes a very big difference. Try not to feel rejected when you reach over in bed and your partner flinches from your touch. Remember that a lot of survivors do not like to be touched when they are sleeping. For obvious reasons, this is very triggering for them. Avoid power struggles over sex. During this time, partners may find it extremely helpful to join a support group.