

# Female Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

By Julie Kowalski

## Are you a Female Adult Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse?

If your answer to this question is “yes”, let me assure you that you are not alone.

Admitting that sexual abuse happened is the first step in the healing process.

## What Is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse represents any kind of sexual contact between an adult or an older teen and a child. This behavior is used to gain power over the child and involves a betrayal of the child's trust. These acts often involve manipulation and trickery. Authority and power enable the perpetrator/offender to coerce/force the child into compliance.

## Types

There are many types of sexual abuse. Some include physical contact or touching including fondling, touching sexual organs, masturbation, making the child touch the adult sexually, and vaginal or anal penetration with self or objects. Non-touching offenses include exposing a child to pornographic material, indecent exposure, leering, making sexual comments about the child, and deliberately putting the child in the position of having to witness an act of sexual intercourse (2).

## Common Physical/ Emotional Symptoms in Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse:

It is hard to believe that there can be such a large variety of symptoms related to sexual abuse, however the symptoms can include:

- Physical aches and pains, Chronic headache
- Chronic back pain, Chronic pelvic pain
- Gastrointestinal symptoms/distress
- Asthma, respiratory ailments
- Poor adherence to medical recommendations
- Obesity, eating disorders
- Insomnia, sleep disorders

## Emotional/ Psychological Symptoms

- Addiction,
- Depression and anxiety,
- Posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms,
- Guilt and Shame, self blame,
- Anger,
- Low self Esteem,
- Isolation,
- Lack of trust,
- Repeated self-injury,
- Suicide attempts,
- Compulsive sexual behaviors, Sexual dysfunction,
- Intolerance of or constant search for intimacy,
- Disassociation, Grief, mourning (3).

## **How Common Is Child Sexual Abuse?**

Studies have shown that approximately 20% or 1 in 5 women have experienced childhood sexual abuse. Of those who experienced sexual abuse; 65% reported the abuse occurred more than once, 57% reported the abuser was a family member, and 53% reported the abuse occurred at home. These averages are of course conservative since most occurrences are never reported. Researchers have found that victims come from all cultural, racial, and economic groups (1).

## **Now What?**

### **Admitting that sexual abuse happened is the first step in the healing process.**

Next it is important that you tell your story. This can be done one-on-one with a professional counselor or within a group setting. The benefit of a group is that you will meet other women who have had similar experiences. It is a place where you can find support as you work through the pain of your past... A place where you will find that you are not alone... A safe place to tell your story.

### **References**

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2. Carol Boulware, MFT, Ph.D. Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse, 1998
3. Hendricks-Matthews M. Long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse. In: Rosenfeld J, Alley N, Acheson LS, Admire JB, eds. Women's health in primary care. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1997:267-276