

The effects of childhood sexual abuse

Psychological Effects

1. **Fear.** The offender may swear the child to secrecy and say that if they tell something bad will happen. Sexual abuse is usually accompanied by coercion, bribery or threats. The child is afraid to tell because of what the consequences might be. e.g. punishment, blame, abandonment or not being believed.
2. **Helplessness/powerlessness.** Children in this situation often feel that they have no control over their own lives or even over their own bodies. They feel that they have no choices available to them.
3. **Guilt and Shame.** The child knows something is wrong and blames him or herself not others. The offender will often encourage the child to feel that the abuse is his or her fault and sometimes s/he will feel that s/he is a "bad" person.
4. **Responsibility.** The offender often makes the child feel responsible for keeping the abuse a secret. Sometimes the child also feels responsible for keeping the family together and the burden of this responsibility interferes with experiencing a normal childhood.
5. **Isolation.** Incest victims feel different from other children. They must usually be secretive. This even isolates them from non-offending parents and brothers and sisters.
6. **Betrayal.** Children feel betrayed because they are dependent upon adults for nurturing and protection and the offender is someone who they should be able to love and trust. They may also feel betrayed by a non-offending parent who they feel has failed to protect them.
7. **Anger.** Not surprisingly this is one of the strongest feelings which many children have about their sexual assault. Children may feel anger against the perpetrator and also against others who they feel failed to protect them.
8. **Sadness.** Children may feel grief due to a sense of loss, especially if the perpetrator was loved and trusted by the child.
9. **Flashbacks.** These can be like nightmares which happen while the child is awake. They are a re-experience of the sexual assault and the child may experience all the feelings again which they felt at the time.

In The Long Term The Child May Also Experience A Number Of Effects As An Adult. These May Include:

1. Depression, anxiety, trouble sleeping.
2. Low self esteem.
3. "Damaged goods" syndrome. i.e. negative body image due to self-blame. This may be intensified if physical pain was experienced during the abusive incidents.
4. Dissociation from feeling.
5. Social isolation.
6. Relationship problems such as an inability to trust, poor social skills or reluctance to disclose details about themselves.
7. Self destructive behaviour such as substance abuse or suicide attempts.
8. Sexual difficulties such as fear of sex or intimacy, indiscriminate multiple sex partners or difficulty in reaching orgasm.

9. Parenting problems such as fear of being a bad parent, or fear of abusing the child or being overprotective.
10. An underlying sense of guilt, anger or loss.
11. "Flashbacks" and/or panic attacks.

The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome

The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome was developed by Roland Summit, M.D. It is a simple and logical model which can be used to help in understanding and accepting the ways in which many children react to sexual abuse. The syndrome classifies the most typical reactions of child sexual abuse victims, dividing them into five categories.

It is worth noting that children are often put through a "grooming process" before the sexual abuse commences. They are initially chosen for being compliant and therefore unlikely to complain or tell anyone. The offender may then go to considerable lengths to build up the child's trust, for example the child may be given presents or told that they are "special".

The five categories of the syndrome are:

1. Secrecy.

Abused children tend to keep the abuse a secret. They do so for a variety of reasons. They may be afraid of the abuser who may have threatened the child or someone whom the child loves. Physically abused children may be afraid of being beaten again. The abuser may have promised safety to the child or child's loved ones if the child keeps quiet. Neglected or emotionally abused children long for their parents' approval and affection - they may keep silent for fear of losing the parents' love.

2. Helplessness.

Children are inherently helpless and subordinate. They are small, dependent, and emotionally immature. For all of these reasons, they cannot escape from a dangerous situation. Children who try to protect themselves are usually overridden by more powerful adults. When their attempts to protect themselves fail, these children come to believe that they are helpless. Eventually they stop trying to protect themselves overtly. Instead they may withdraw, go physically limp or dissociate.*

* "**Dissociation**" is a way in which some children survive abuse by escaping mentally while the abuse is happening. The body and the mind seem to separate. While the body is being hurt, the child no longer feels it because the mind manages to escape to a safe place. Different children may dissociate in different ways. One example is "leaving" the body and floating on the ceiling over the bed where the abuse is occurring. The child may even watch what is happening but it is as if it were happening to someone else. The child feels nothing.

3. Entrapment and Accommodation.

Children who keep their abuse a secret and continue to feel helpless inevitably feel trapped. However, they learn to accept the situation and survive. The helpless child faced with continuing victimization must learn to somehow achieve a sense of power and control. The child may eventually come to blame him or herself, believing s/he has provoked the abuse. Physically abused children may refer to their bad behaviors as reasons why their parents must punish them. Emotionally abused or neglected children may imagine unacceptable traits in themselves. Physically, sexually and emotionally abused children may also employ defensive mechanisms (e.g. dissociation or blocking out the memory) in an attempt to accommodate to the abuse.

4. Delayed, Conflicted And Unconvincing Disclosure.

Adults who ask a child to disclose abuse must recognize that this request may precipitate an acute crisis for the child. Initial disclosures may be fraught with anxiety, retractions and inconsistencies. Therefore it may sound unconvincing. Because the child has used various defensive mechanisms to cope with the abuse, memory may be fragmentary, perceptions may be altered and information may be scattered and sparse.

5. Retraction.

Children who do disclose abuse may be flooded with guilt, fear and feelings of betrayal or confusion. The adults' immediate responses may frighten them further. For example, the child may be removed into foster care, the parent may be put in prison and members of the child's family may suffer. All this may make the child retract the disclosure. Children gravitate towards the safety of a familiar situation, no matter how painful it is. Most abused or neglected children remain loyal to their families and, if given a choice, frequently want to stay with their abusive parents.

It should be noted that this is a "model" describing reactions, not an absolute. **Like all models it does not mean each child will show all aspects of this syndrome.** There have been some problems reported in the U.S. with courts taking the model so literally that if children don't demonstrate all the features they are under suspicion of lying.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is used by psychologists and psychiatrists as a framework for the treatment of sexually abused children. It is valuable in identifying the existence of specific behaviors that should be addressed in therapy. PTSD describes symptoms which are characteristic in many cases of sexual abuse but it is important to note that **it does not apply to all sexually abused children.** PTSD can sometimes appear many years after the original event. A diagnosis of PTSD is often used in court reports e.g. for applications for Criminal Injuries Compensation. The criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD are:

1. The person has experienced an event that is outside the range of usual human experience and that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone.
2. The re-experiencing of the trauma in at least **one** of the following ways:
 - a. Recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event.
 - b. Recurrent distressing dreams of the event.
 - c. Sudden acting or feeling as if the event were recurring e.g. "flashback" episodes, hallucinations, illusions.
 - d. Intense psychological distress at exposure to events that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.
3. A numbing of responsiveness or reduced involvement in the external world some time after the trauma, indicated by:
 - a. Diminished interest in activities and/or
 - b. Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others and/or
 - c. Constricted affect e.g. unable to have loving feelings or to feel anger.
4. In addition, at least **two** of the following sets of symptoms must be present:
 - a. Hyperalertness or being easily startled.
 - b. Sleep problems.
 - c. Guilt about surviving or behaviour required to survive.
 - d. Problems with memory or concentration.
 - e. Avoidance of activities that arouse recollection.
 - f. Intensification of symptoms if events symbolize or resemble the traumatic event.

The Stockholm syndrome

The Stockholm syndrome was originally developed to explain the phenomenon of hostages bonding with their captors. The following are some common ways in which the victim's view of their situation can become distorted, with the corresponding explanations in terms of the Stockholm syndrome:

- a. **The victim denies the abuser's violence against him/her and focuses on his positive side.**

- *Explanation:* An unconscious attempt to find hope (and thus a way to survive) in a situation in which s/he would otherwise feel powerless and overwhelmed.
- b. **The victim feels shame for abuse done to him/her.**
 - *Explanation:* Reflects the victim having taken the abuser's perspective (namely, that s/he caused the abuse and therefore it was deserved).
- c. **The victim resents outsiders' attempts to free him/her from the abuser.**
 - *Explanation:* The victim knows that the abuser is likely to retaliate against him/her for any disloyalty shown, so s/he resists others' attempts to free her or to hold the abuser accountable for the abuse.
- d. **The victim identifies with the "victim" in the abuser.**
 - *Explanation:* This represents the projection of the victim's own victim status onto the abuser. It enables the victim to feel sympathetic and caring towards the abuser.
- e. **The victim believes s/he deserved the abuser's violence.**
 - *Explanation:* This represents an attempt to feel that s/he controls when and whether the violence/abuse is done and thus permits him/her to believe s/he can stop the abuse.
- f. **The victim rationalizes the abuser's violence against him/her.**
 - *Explanation:* An attempt to maintain a bond with the abuser (and thus hope of survival) in the face of behaviour (abuse) that would otherwise destroy that bond (hope).
- g. **Victim uses abuser-as-victim explanation to account for the abuse.**
 - *Explanation:* This represents an effort to see the abuser in a positive light so as to maintain the bond (since the bond provides the victim with the only hope of surviving).
- h. **The victim feels hatred for that part of him/her which the abuser said led to the abuse.**
 - *Explanation:* To improve chances of survival, the victim internalizes the abuser's perspective, including the reasons given for the abuse.
- i. **The victim fears the abuser will come to get him/her, even if he is dead or in prison.**
 - *Explanation:* The victim knows the abuser is willing to "get" him/her because he has done so at least once before. The victim remains loyal in anticipation of his return.

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