



HARLEY THERAPY
Psychotherapy & Counselling London

Sexual Abuse A Help Guide

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What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse is understood as unwanted sexual activity. This involves a perpetrator using force, threat or taking advantage of a victim without consent. Sexual abuse can occur on a one-off basis (**sexual assault**) or can be repeated over a time period (**long-term abuse**).

Individuals of both genders and all ages can be become a victim of sexual abuse. It is also important to understand that males, females, adults, teenagers and children can be abusers. It is difficult to estimate prevalence rates of sexual abuse. One of the reasons is that it is an vastly unreported crime. An important research finding is that **most victims and perpetrators know each other**.

Sexual abuse can include a range of different behaviour. The NSPCC outlines such behaviours for child abuse of which most can be applied to sexual abuse of adults also.

- Sexual touching of any part of the body, clothed or unclothed, including using an object
- All penetrative sex, including penetration of the mouth with an object or part of the body
- Encouraging an individual to engage in sexual activity, including sexual acts with someone else, or making an individual strip or masturbate
- Intentionally engaging in sexual activity in front of an individual or not taking proper measures to prevent an individual being exposed to sexual activity by others
- Meeting an individual following sexual 'grooming', or preparation, with the intention of abusing them
- Taking, making, permitting to take, distributing, showing or advertising indecent images
- Paying for sexual services of a child or encouraging them into prostitution or pornography
- Showing a child images of sexual activity including photographs, videos or via webcam.

What are the Consequences of Sexual Abuse?

Victims of sexual abuse can experience many negative consequences. Depending on the individual and their experience, initial feelings can involve shock, disgust, guilt, sickness, despair and helplessness.

Common **long-term consequences** include:

- Flashbacks of the abuse
- Frequent nightmares
- Sensitivity to noise or being touched
- Increased anger
- Not remembering periods of your life
- Feelings of numbness
- Feeling depressed or suicidal
- Anxiety or panic attacks
- Letting people abuse or take advantage of you (re-victimisation)
- Use substances as a coping mechanism
- Relationship problems
- Distrust in others
- Low concentration
- Difficulty sustaining employment
- Difficulty sustaining parent capacity
- Self-harm
- Behavioural difficulties
- Low confidence and low self-esteem
- Sexual maladjustment
- Social integration problems

Research has shown that these problems can get worse or become more intense when an individual is reminded of the abuse. Stress has also been found to exaggerate these problems.

Another common consequence that victims of sexual abuse can experience is mental illness. For example, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, personality disorders, depression, eating disorders, sleeping disorders and schizophrenia have all been found to have links with sexual abuse. The reasoning for the development of mental ill health is psychologically complex and varies for each individual.

Physical consequences may include pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection (STI) and injury. Speak to your GP, call your local hospital or local sexual health clinic (GUM) to find out more about risk of pregnancy and STIs or to check an injury.



What are the Implications of Child Sexual Abuse?

Many abused children will lead a fully functioning, happy life despite their past. However for many, problems can follow into adolescence and adulthood.

There is a difference between child and adult sexual abuse in that children are less likely to be aware of the crime and wrong-doing taking place whilst they are still young. This can lead to further psychological complications and problems.

Negative experiences such as child abuse can also cause delays in development. A child's ability to achieve age-appropriate behavioural, cognitive and emotional development may be impaired if sexual abuse is experienced.

Research has shown that there are links between childhood sexual abuse and the later development of **psychopathology**.

Many children may be sworn to secrecy by the offender. They may not want to get the abuser into trouble or hold fear that they may be in trouble themselves. A child may also be more likely to feel as if it is their fault.

It is more common for a child abuser to be someone in a position of trust among a family such as a relative or family friend. However, strangers can also abuse children.

Some possible signs of child abuse include injury, anogenital warts, fabricated or induced illness, emotional or behavioural states and reoccurring abdominal pain.

Recommended Intervention for Sexual Abuse

NICE provides guidance which relates to sexual abuse. NICE quality standards are a set of specific, concise statements that act as markers of high quality, cost effective patient care, covering the treatment and prevention of different diseases and conditions. This specific article is 'When to suspect child maltreatment' which can be read here: <http://publications.nice.org.uk/when-to-suspect-child-maltreatment-cg89>

If the abuse you suffered was either recently or a long time ago, it is important to seek help if you are suffering from the consequences. You may have unanswered questions about the abuse and have unresolved issues surrounding it. In this case it can be very useful to process your traumatic experiences in a safe way by seeking psychological help.

The intervention that is best suited for you depends on your presenting problem/s. For example, you may wish to explore and talk over your abusive memories and discuss how they are affecting you now. Or you may benefit from a therapeutic approach that focuses on equipping you with new and healthy coping strategies. Psychological **therapy** and **counselling** can also help you to deal with further consequences such as flashbacks and nightmares. Your relationships and job may be affected, which again, psychological therapy can help you to improve. If you have developed a mental illness then you can also work with a therapist to feel better and improve your wellbeing.



What Help is Available?

You should know that no one has the right to sexually abuse you, not even your partner. This is a crime and the law holds sexual abuse cases very seriously. By reporting the crime, this is a way of protecting anyone else from having the same traumatising experience. It can be difficult to build up the confidence and strength to report sexual abuse. However this website provides information, support and guidance in doing so: http://www.lifecentre.uk.com/police_info/lead_police_information.html

Many people can overcome the challenges that they face as a result of their abusive past. It can be a challenging process yet seeking help can lead to a positive and happy life. There are many ways in which you can find help and support. There are books, websites and help lines which you may find useful. There are also many well trained professionals who you can work with therapeutically to overcome your trauma.

Self-Help Books For Sexual Abuse:

- 'The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse', Wendy Maltz (2001)
- 'Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse: Practical Self-help for Adults Who were Sexually Abused as Children', Carolyn Ainscough (2000)
- 'Overcoming Childhood Trauma: A Self Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques' (2000) by Dr. Helen Kennerley
- 'The Survivor's Guide: To Recovery from Rape and Sexual Abuse' (2005) by Robert Kelly, Fay Maxted, Elizabeth Campbell.

Websites for Sexual Abuse Victims:

- Victim support: <http://www.victimsupport.org.uk/>
- NHS- help for sexual assault victims: <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/en/FemaleSexualHealthSelfCare/SexualAssault>
- National Association for People Abused in Childhood www.napac.org.uk
- Childline www.childline.org.uk
- The Survivors Trust www.thesurvivorstrust.org

Helpful Phone Numbers:

- Rape Crisis - 0808 802 9999
- ChildLine - 0800 1111
- National Association for People Abused in Childhood - 0800 085 3330
- NSPCC - 0808 800 5000 (helpline for adults who are worried about a child)

International Resources:

- This website provides a long list of international rape crisis help lines
<http://www.ibiblio.org/rcip/internl.html>
- Rape, abuse and incest national network:
<http://www.rainn.org/get-help/sexual-assault-and-rape-international-resources>
- Rape crisis network Europe: <http://www.rcne.com/>



How to Seek Therapeutic Services for Sexual Abuse?

There are different counselling and therapeutic services and organisations who can help. Their trained professionals - counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists - will be able to support you.

Services include:

The **NHS** - seeing your GP and asking for a referral to see a psychological specialist.

Local charities or organisations may provide support groups, therapy and advice in your local or nearby area.

Counselling and **psychotherapy clinics** and services. Search through online directories or contact your council for organisations that offer can therapeutic help. (Harley Therapy is one example of a private organisation)

When seeing a healthcare professional you are likely to have an initial assessment with questions to identify the issues, causes and difficulties so they can formulate an understanding of your issues and how best to help.

If you can relate to any of the issues in this guide, do remember - you are not alone. It takes courage to seek assistance, but we hope you will find a suitable source of support.

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Many thanks. Sheri Jacobson

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