

Beginning to Heal from Child Sexual Abuse

It may be very difficult for a survivor of child sexual abuse to talk about what happened to them. Many survivors cannot or do not talk about the abuse right away, and sometimes they can't even remember about the abuse until they are adults.

Some adult survivors think that because the abuse happened when they were a child that it is too late to begin talking about what happened and to heal. This is not true! It is never too late to begin to heal.

How will being abused as a child impact people as adults?

Abuses impacts different people in different ways, and there may be some survivors who feel little impact in their adult lives. Other people may experience some negative impacts, such as generalized anxiety or fear, depression, difficulty with intimate relationships, difficulty trusting themselves or others and an increased risk for using drugs or alcohol.

Each person does things to cope in their own way, and each person does what they need to in order to survive the abuse.

What does the healing process look like?

Every person responds to trauma in a different way, and there is no one "right" way to heal. A person may experience some of the following stages and emotions, and others may not.

- Recognizing that healing is possible. Survivors of abuse are not alone, it is never too late to talk about the abuse or ask for help.
- The decision to heal. The decision to heal from child sexual abuse is a powerful and positive choice. It is a commitment to a journey, and for some it may take longer than they expected.
- The Emergency Stage. During this stage, the abuse may be all that the survivor can think about and it may feel as though their life is constantly in crisis. This stage may feel very uncomfortable, but it is important that the survivors knows that it will come to an end.
- Remembering. Some people may have always had memories of the abuse, but for others they may have tried to minimize or stuff it away and forget about the abuse.
- Believing the abuse happened. As children, we sometimes deny that bad or scary things are happening because they are too hard to deal with or understand. As adults, it can still be hard to face the reality of the abuse and to recognize the different ways it has impacted us.

- Breaking the silence. Speaking out about the abuse can be a very powerful step for survivors, and one that takes a great deal of courage. Some choose to tell a counselor, some a family member or partner and others choose to speak out at a public event.
- Understanding that the abuse is not their fault. Abuse is never the fault of the person being abused.
- Connecting to the child within. It is important for the survivor to connect to the child that was hurt by the abuse, and to confront that pain and their fears.
- Grieving. Grief is a natural part of the healing process. The survivor may grieve for the ways they were hurt, for not being protected or for missing out on their childhood.
- Anger. This is another natural response to abuse, but it is important that the survivor does not turn all of the anger inward toward themselves. When addressed, anger can help guide people toward positive change.
- Forgiveness? Some people may want to forgive their abuser, but for others this is not a part of the healing process at all.
- Spirituality. For some survivors spirituality can be a source of comfort, inspiration, courage, love and strength during the healing process.
- The process of change. Survivors are faced with many changes during the healing process, and it can bring about a range of emotions. It is important that the survivor be kind and take care of themselves during this process.
- Resolution and moving on. The healing process can be a long one, but there will come a point where the survivor feels like their life is more balanced and that they are no longer in constant crisis. It is important for survivors to remember that there is no finish line to healing, they will have some good days and some hard days but the hard days will come less and less.

**** The steps to healing were adapted from Beginning to Heal: A First Book for Men and Women Who Were Sexually Abused As Children by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis.**