

SELF HELP SHEET

Student Counselling Service

Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse has been described as the involvement of children and adolescents (boys and girls) in sexual activity that they do not fully comprehend and to which they are unable to give informed consent. In order for the activity to be understood as abuse, the abuser needs to be several years older (around five years or more) than the child. Laws exist to protect children from childhood sexual abuse. The reality is however that abuse does go on. In over 80% of cases of child sexual abuse, the abuser is known to the child (family member, neighbour, friend). The SAVI Report 2002 noted that one-third of women and one-fourth of men reported child sexual abuse, most of which occurred before the age of 12. The sexual abuse of children is not confined to any one social class, occupation or ethnic group. Child sexual abuse can vary from non-contact abuse to full penetration. Sexual abuse may begin with inappropriate touching or fondling, through exposure to pornography or sex acts and lead up to sexual intercourse or rape. These are offences under Irish law.

What are the effects of child sexual abuse?

It is difficult to predict the psychological impact that sexual abuse will have had. Individuals' responses can vary and a once off incident of sexual abuse can be as psychologically traumatising for one person as ongoing abuse may be for another. Some common psychological effects that have been observed include lowered self-esteem, depression, withdrawal, self-injury, nightmares and flashbacks of the abuse. Individuals may also experience a high level of guilt and repressed anger about the abuse. The effects can show themselves in many different ways and may not come to the surface until the child has reached adulthood and possibly left home. There may be problems in relationships or sexual difficulties with partners. Some people find they encounter difficulties when they themselves have a child or reach another important time in their lives (leaving home, going to college, getting married, moving to an new area or country) and suddenly find themselves unable to cope. This is often a time when people decide to talk to someone about their experiences and so seek professional help.

The treatment of child sexual abuse

When a person who has experienced child sexual abuse seeks help or enters therapy, they meet with their individual counsellor and agree on how they might work together. This will depend on the effects of the abuse, whether the therapy is short-term or long term and what the individual wants to work on (for example, depression, low self-esteem, difficulties in relationships etc). Therapy also facilitates the expression of many of the complicated mix of feelings such as guilt, shame, anger, rage and hatred. It is important that those who have been abused learn to accept that the abuse is not their fault and that they are not to blame. Responsibility for the abuse belongs with the perpetrator. Sometimes the counsellor may refer the student on to a more specialised service where group therapy programmes and other forms of support are available.

The Student Counselling Service operates under the Dept. of Health guidelines on the reporting of Child Sexual Abuse. If we are aware of a child protection risk we are obliged to report our concerns to the Gardai or the local Health Board. We like to encourage

students to report the abuse themselves and will support students through this process. It always remains the students' choice whether to pursue this or not.

Self-help techniques

Some people find it useful to begin helping themselves by writing privately about their experience. Writing can help clarify feelings, thoughts and help identify what needs to be done about the situation. This can often help clarify the issues you might like to address in Counselling

Another avenue through which one can help oneself is by reading books on others' experiences of abuse. Becoming aware of how abuse affected other people helps to normalise feelings of rage, disappointment, betrayal, sadness and loss about the experience. In general, it is advisable to attend a professional counsellor to deal with the effects of the abuse.

Further reading

Bass, E. & Davis, L. (1988). *The courage to heal: A guide for women survivors of child sexual abuse*. New York: Harper & Row.

Finkelhor, D. (1984). *Child sexual abuse: New theory and research*. New York: Free Press.

Walsh, D. & Liddy, R. (1993). *Surviving sexual abuse*. Dublin: Attic Press.

Reference

SAVI Report 2002 Research carried out by Dr Hannah McGee and team RCSI (Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland)