

Taking Care of You

Common Experiences of Adult Survivors of Child Abuse

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Common Experiences

The experience and impact of sexual assault is different for everyone. Whatever reaction you have, it is a normal response to an extreme emotional and physical violation.

Adults who experienced childhood sexual assault report that as children they felt they had to 'be strong' and 'show no fear'. They had to 'keep all their emotions bottled up'. Many report hatred and anger at the perpetrator/s and those who should have protected them. Others report hiding both physically and emotionally.

The behaviours and strategies that children develop in order to resist and survive can continue to affect them in their adult lives.

HOW DO PEOPLE FEEL?

While everyone responds differently to being sexually assaulted, there are some feelings that many adults who experienced childhood sexual assault talk about:

- A feeling of being in a bubble, feeling different and apart, being emotionally isolated;
- Feeling guilt, shame and self-blame for what has happened;
- Having difficulty trusting themselves and others, as their childhood trust has been betrayed;
- Having difficulty with relationships and intimacy because of feelings of shame and distrust;
- Experiencing 'triggering moments' such as smells, sounds or situations which bring back memories;
- Feeling the need to protect others and being over-responsible. A child who has experienced sexual assault is taught that other people's needs come first. Many adults who experienced childhood sexual assault have difficulty asserting themselves. Many feel they have to look after everyone over and above their own needs;
- Often feeling depressed, angry, fearful and anxious and feeling like they are always on guard.

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WHAT ARE SOME OF THE IMPACTS?

Survivors may develop strategies to avoid overwhelming feelings, pain and memories, including:

Impacts	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Excessive use of alcohol and other drugs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Engaging in self-harm.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Eating problems, such as starving, bingeing, vomiting, or overeating.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Repeatedly thinking about wanting to die.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Avoidance of sex, promiscuity, or experiencing fear and 'flashbacks'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Dissociating and not being in their bodies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Being a 'workaholic', over exercising or other compulsive behaviours.	

For some, the childhood experience of violence leads to mental health impacts in adulthood. It is important to remember that the impacts are a result of childhood experiences of sexual assault, and not because the adult is defective in some way. Recovery from childhood sexual assault is difficult. Recovery does not mean forgetting what has happened - a person who has experienced sexual assault will never forget. It does mean recovering to the point where the violence becomes an experience in that person's life, not an event that controls and dominates their life.

CONTACT US

knowmore is an independent legal service giving free legal assistance to people who are considering telling their story or providing information to the Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse.

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Source: This Resource Sheet has been adapted from material on the NSW Rape Crisis Centre website www.nswrapecrisis.com.au

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