

## **This booklet answers these questions:**

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## Introduction

The term 'counselling' refers to a relationship between a counsellor and a person looking for help with a problem. The counsellor helps you to understand yourself and your problems better. Then you can use this understanding to make better choices in your life. We all go to friends or relatives for advice or support sometimes, but if the problem is complicated, we might need special help – the help of a counsellor. We shouldn't see this as a weakness, but as an intelligent way to solve a problem.



People go to counselors for a number of reasons. They might be grieving the loss of a close family member, or trying to deal with a marriage that has failed. In either case they need a counselor with a solid background of knowledge in that particular subject area. Since this pamphlet is to help people recover from sexual abuse, either their own or the abuse of a family member, we'll be talking specifically about sexual abuse counselling.

## What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is an abuse of power. It involves sexual activity forced on a child by either an adult or an older, more powerful child. Because the victims are powerless to stop the abuse and aren't old enough to understand what is happening, they may suffer deep emotional damage even if there's no physical damage. There doesn't have to be intercourse or sexual touching for abuse to have occurred. Children who are forced to watch sexual activity, listen to sexual language, or watch pornographic videotapes may be damaged by the experience.

The reason all this is so damaging to children is that almost always the abuser makes the child keep it a secret. The shared secret then becomes a source of shame, and this undermines the child's sense of self-worth.

## How does sexual abuse affect children?

Children who have been sexually abused often suffer even after the abuse has ended. Some of the psychological damage will be obvious to family members, but some of it won't.

### The damage may take these forms:

**Guilt.** Children may feel guilty, believing they are in some way responsible for the abuse.

**Shame.** The guilty secret may make them feel worthless.

**Fear.** If the offender has told them that something terrible will happen if they reveal the secret, they may be afraid.

**Grief.** Children may stop seeing the world as a safe and friendly place. They may mourn the loss of their sense of innocence and freedom. They may also mourn the loss of the offender if there has been a close bond between them.

**Anger.** They may feel intense, and often uncontrollable anger. Because they can't strike back at the offender, they may lash out at the wrong people – often the mother. Or they may hurt themselves or a pet.

**Helplessness.** Because they felt helpless at the time of the molestation, they may feel unable to resist sexual abuse in the future.

**Depression.** They may seem sad and less playful. They may lose interest in school, friends, and activities.

Depending on how serious the abuse is, and on the child's nature, these feelings may show up in several ways; for example, sexual aggression, sleep disorders, irrational fears, macho or seductive behavior, eating disorders, allergies, or an inability to concentrate on school work. Even if there are no symptoms it doesn't mean that the child doesn't need help – it just means that there are no obvious signs of the abuse.

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## **Does childhood sexual abuse affect you as an adult?**

**Yes.** If you're an adult who was sexually abused as a child, you may have suffered for years from problems that never want to go away. If you're now suffering from drug or alcohol abuse, relationship breakdowns, sexual dysfunction, eating disorders, or periods when you feel out of touch with reality, unremembered childhood sexual abuse may be the cause. It's likely there was little or no counselling available when you were a child. You probably told no one or were expected to forget about it and get on with your life.



Often adults who have forgotten about their own sexual abuse will have a sudden and painful memory when their own child has been molested. If this happens to you, you may have to begin counselling for both your child and yourself. This may seem hard to do. But at the same time, you may be able to see this crisis as an unexpected chance for both you and your family to become closer.

Even if you weren't sexually abused as a child, having to cope with the abuse of your own child may be the most difficult challenge of your life. If you can get counselling for yourself

through this difficult period, it will also help your child to get on with his/her own counselling.

## **How can a counsellor help?**

**A counsellor can help you or your child in several ways.**

① Help take you and your child through the painful details of the abuse one small step at a time, so the whole experience is easier to handle and less frightening. Our natural impulse is to want to 'put the abuse behind us', where we can forget about it – or even deny that it ever happened. This is why untreated adult survivors of sexual abuse may have so many problems or symptoms they don't understand.

② Help you and your child understand the complex and confusing emotions experienced while the sexual abuse was taking place and after it ended.

③ Help you and your child understand why the abuse happened, and why neither of you are to blame for it.

④ Help free you and your child from the effects of the past so you can enjoy happier lives in the future.

You and your child have to work on this together. There are no miracles, but with the help of a skilled counsellor, you can work wonders.

*We can all change, grow, and*

### **Who are the counsellors?**

Counsellors are people trained to listen and respond to their clients and to help them make changes in their lives. They may have different titles such as: psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, school counsellors, church ministers, or art therapists. But the important thing is that they are trained in counselling and should know about sexual abuse.

*heal ourselves, but most of us need*

In cities it may be easy to find a suitable sexual abuse counsellor. If you live outside a large centre, it may be harder. However, in some rural areas you may find *lay counsellors*. These are usually people who want to help others and have received some training from a professional counsellor. Although they may not have university backgrounds, often they can be helpful.

*help with it at some time or other.*

### **Why go to a counsellor?**

We all can change, grow, and heal ourselves, but most of us need help with it at some time or other. The counsellor is there to help. Counselling is especially important for sexual abuse victims because of the damage that may come from abuse that is forgotten or denied. In *Thou Shalt Not be Aware*, Alice Miller, a famous Swiss psychiatrist, explains that victims who bury memories of abuse run the risk of “re-creating the abuse; either as a victim or as an offender”. Denying the abuse or pretending it doesn’t matter keeps us from growing and healing ourselves.

## **What will a counsellor do?**

If you're an adult, a counsellor will talk with you about specific events and feelings. For a child, the counsellor will do exactly the same things but will probably work in a different way. Children don't usually like to sit around and talk for long. In fact, they might not like to talk at all. A skilled counsellor can encourage children to express their feelings through such things as play, drawing, or letter writing.

Children often believe that because they've been abused, they are different. This may make them feel isolated. In this case the counsellor may want the child to be in a group with other children who have been through similar experiences. Group counselling allows children to help one another just as adults do when they work in a group.

Because of the abuse, your child may feel 'weird' or 'not normal'. The counsellor will try to help your child change those feelings by showing a genuine interest in your child's everyday activities such as sports, hobbies, computer games, and time spent with friends.

The counsellor will also emphasize from time to time that the offender was the one responsible for the abuse. Most children need to be reminded of this often, because of their guilt feelings.

The counsellor will probably want to spend a lot of time with you as well, especially if your child is quite young. You'll want to understand your child's feelings so you'll know the best way to talk to him/her, and to handle problems as they arise. Because your child may have a distorted idea of normal sexual development, the counsellor may use books to give accurate information about sex.

## **How can a parent help?**

It will make things easier if you can take part in a parents' support group at the same time as your child is in counselling. In a group you can learn a lot about sexual abuse, child protection and legal systems, and what happens if the offender is prosecuted. Best of all, you'll be better able to understand your own feelings. Parents often blame themselves, and you may need help to see where the blame really belongs. Going to counselling and parents' groups takes time and energy, but there's a great payoff. You have the satisfaction of being part of your child's recovery; and you also learn about your child, yourself, and how the child protection and legal systems work.

## **Do all sexual abuse victims need counselling?**

**Possibly not.** Every so often you hear about some remarkable adults or teenagers who have managed to overcome the effects of sexual abuse by writing a book, making a film, or producing a gallery full of paintings about their experiences. These people are rare exceptions. Most of us like to think we can take care of our problems ourselves. In fact, we could take these exceptional examples as evidence that we don't need counselling at all. We could even believe that counselling is for people who can't look after themselves. However, if you think that either you or your child can go it alone, you could be making a tragic mistake.

Here is a good rule-of-thumb: If children can talk about the abuse, have plenty of loving support at home, and aren't showing any symptoms, it's possible they can get by without counselling.

However, it's not a good idea to take that chance without getting a professional opinion – and from someone who counsels sexually abused children regularly. You'll feel a lot more secure when you do.



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## **When should counselling start?**

Ideally, counselling should start as soon as possible after finding out about the abuse. Research has shown that families are most open to counselling when they are still in crisis. When families wait too long, they are much more likely to believe that they can forget about the abuse or pretend that it isn't important.

## How do I find a good counsellor?

All counsellors are not equal. There are good ones and poor ones, just as there are good and poor auto mechanics. To find one who's good for you, talk to former clients if possible. After you've begun counselling, you should be able to decide yourself whether you want to continue.

### Here are some things to ask yourself:

- ① Does the counsellor believe your story (and your child's)?
- ② Does the counsellor fully understand the pain you and your child are experiencing?
- ③ Is the counsellor non-sexist?
- ④ Does the counsellor cooperate with others? Good counsellors are willing to work with social workers, police, and victims' assistance workers.
- ⑤ Does the counsellor seem to like and respect you? Trust yourself. With a good counsellor, you feel good about yourself, about the counsellor and about the relationship.

## What if I can't afford a private counsellor?

**There are several alternatives to paying a counsellor out of your own pocket:**

**Doctor referral.** If you are referred by your family doctor to a psychiatrist, you won't have to pay anything. However, psychiatrists are usually solidly booked, and you may have to wait for several months for an appointment. Before you put your name on a waiting list, try to find out if the psychiatrist you have chosen understands about sexual abuse, and has a reputation for being up-to-date.

**Criminal injuries compensation plan.** If there is a police report on your child's victimization you may be eligible for counselling from a psychologist or a social worker registered for private practice. Check with a social worker, police officer, or victims' assistance worker to see if your child is entitled to free counselling through a criminal injuries compensation plan.

**Extended health care.** If you have an extended health care plan, you may be covered or partially covered for psychological services.

**Other agencies.** Find out if your child is entitled to free counselling by calling a sexual assault center, a mental health centre or women's resource center.



### **What if I don't like my counsellor?**

First, talk to the counsellor about your feelings and see how he/she handles it. If you're not taken seriously, and you don't feel better about your counsellor after your talk, look for a different counsellor. Think of counselling as any other consumer service. Sometimes the counsellor also feels you're mismatched, and won't take your decision personally. The counsellor might even be the one to suggest that you work with someone else. This shouldn't hurt anyone's feelings.

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### **How will I know if my child or I have finished counselling?**

Your counsellor, your child and you should decide together.

#### **Here are some signs that you are almost finished:**

① You (or your child) have no more obvious symptoms such as memory losses, eating and sleep disorders, or irrational fears.

② Your child has regained self-confidence, and shows it in school, with family and with friends.

③ You (or your child) can take the occasional 'low day' in stride.

Once you have ended counselling, arrange with your counsellor to come back occasionally for a check-up. Sometimes, as children grow older, they see the abuse differently or their reactions to it might change. For example, if an adolescent survivor of abuse started taking drugs, it would be a good idea to go back to a counsellor, the same one if possible.

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## What if my family doesn't support the idea of counselling?

Sometimes other family members present obstacles to counselling:

① Teenagers often resist counselling because they often don't like being told what to do.

② You may belong to a family or social group that has never worked with counsellors before.

③ Your partner may feel the best plan is to take revenge, not get help.

④ Your partner may feel the best plan is to ignore the abuse.

⑤ Your partner may wonder why you need to tell a stranger your family business.

In all of these cases, you need to be patient and persistent. You may even have to seek professional help in overcoming these obstacles before anything else can happen. Even if it's just you going to counselling, pursue it. It's better than no one getting help. Don't be discouraged. Your own persistence may be the key to winning the support you need.

## Books mentioned

Miller, Alice. *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child*. Trans. Hildegard and Hunter Hannum. New York: Farrar Straus, 1984.