

Pastoral Care for Survivors of Sexual Abuse

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Symptoms of Sexual Abuse

Guilt, shame, and self blame.

People often feel guilty about not having been able to stop the abuse, or even blame themselves if they experienced physical pleasure.

It is important to understand that it was the person that hurt them that should be held accountable—not the ‘victim’.

Symptoms of Sexual Abuse

Disturbing mental health symptoms

Flashbacks (vivid memories of the abuse), racing thoughts, being in a state of hypervigilance, extreme mood swings accompanied by anxiety and or depression are all common. Nightmares and hallucinations recollecting the abuse scenes may also be present.

Compulsions including self harming, eating problems, abuse of alcohol and other drugs may develop.

Symptoms of Sexual Abuse

Low Self-esteem.

Struggles with low self-esteem, which can be a result of the negative messages received from the abuser(s), and from having personal safety violated or ignored.

Low self-esteem can affect many different areas of life such as relationships, career, and even physical health. This, compounded by increased anger and hostility, makes relationships difficult.

Symptoms of Sexual Abuse

Intimacy and relationships. Often first experiences with sex came as a result of sexual abuse. As an adult, intimacy might be a struggle at times. Some survivors experience flashbacks or painful memories while engaging in sexual activity, even though it is consensual and on their own terms. Survivors may also struggle to set boundaries that help them feel safe in relationships.

Being able to trust anyone is difficult.

Pastoral care for the survivor

“the church family may provide the abuse victim with the first unconditional love they have ever known. A church minister or pastoral worker maybe able to exert a significant for good in demonstrating that love and caring need not be sexual. ...Loving counsel and non judgemental support can make all the difference in helping people to find God’s comfort in their suffering”

Parkinson, P. (1997). Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 128.

Compassion Meditation

- Choose a person from whom you have received love, charity, *agape*, compassion...someone from whom this experience has been a *felt* experience of their love, concern for you.
- This could be someone very much involved in your life now or in the past: if that is difficult, choosing God or Jesus is not out of place.
- Allow your self to remember and ‘revel’ in the emotional experience, washing over you and penetrating your heart and soul

Meninger, W. A. (2009). *The Process of Forgiveness*. New York: Continuum.

Compassion Meditation (2)

Now return the love and concern to them

- Direct your thoughts and feelings to this person in a loving, compassionate way.
- Wish them peace, joy, healing, life, success, contentment, fulfilment...
- Do this for several moments or minutes

A Compassion Prayer

May you be: Happy; Free; Loving; Loved

- *May God bring you to the fullest completion that his love calls you to.*
- *May you experience the fullness of peace in body and soul*
- *May you forgive every transgression*
- *May you know what it means to be a child of God*
- *I forgive you with all my heart and soul*
- *May goodness and love show itself in everything that you do and in all that is done to you*

Extending the Compassion Meditation

- Choose a neutral person, taking the same compassion experience from the first person and transfer it to the stranger
- From time to time return to the first person to recapture our authentic feelings of compassion in order that we can transfer them.

The final and hardest step:

- Choose an enemy: connect with your feelings of compassion from step one and transfer these feelings to the enemy: this could be an abuser.

Resource List

- Atkinson, S. (2006). Breaking the Chains of Abuse: a Practical Guide. Oxford, UK: Lion Hudson
- Cherry, S. (2012). Healing agony : re-imagining forgiveness. London: Continuum.
- Forgiveness Project: <http://theforgivenessproject.com/>
- Herman, J. L. (2015). Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence--from domestic abuse to political terror. New York: Basic Books.
- Meninger, W. A. (2009). The Process of Forgiveness. New York: Continuum.
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- Schnell, D.D. (1993) Forgiveness Therapy. St.Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press.
- Shults, F. LeRon & Sandage, Steven J (2003). The faces of forgiveness : searching for wholeness and salvation (1st). Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Mich
- Smedes, L. B. (1984). Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve. San Francisco: Harper & Row