

Do Child Sex Abuse Victims Ever Recover?

What we know about sexual abuse could lead us to believe that it is impossible for victims to recover. Some don't, however, many do. Some recover quickly, with very little intervention, and some require months or years of therapy. Whether a victim is in one category or the other is dependent on a number of factors. In order to understand these factors and their impact on a victim's ability to recover, we will consider two types of victims:

1. victims of one-time situational abuse, and
2. victims of repeated, long-term abuse.

One-time victims

Human beings are resilient. We encounter and deal with traumatic events throughout our lives—and we put them behind us. The factors that impact the ability of a child victim to recover are similar to those that influence the capacity of anyone to heal the wounds of a serious trauma.

A child who is touched in a sexual manner one time (a single episode of abuse)—or who is asked to touch an abuser sexually one time—is unlikely to suffer any serious long-term effects from the encounter. This is particularly true if the child tells a trusted adult, is believed, and is surrounded by loving, supportive adults. In this instance, a look at the relevant factors reveals the likelihood that a child will recover quickly and suffer no significant long-term effects.

A number of factors significantly impact recovery time:

- Frequency: How often did the abuse occur?
- Intensity: What kinds of abuse were inflicted?
- Duration: How long did the abuse continue?
- Betrayal: What was the level of betrayal based on the relationship between the abuser and the victim?

The effect on a child is not nearly as easy to predict if one or more of the factors mentioned above figured into the abuse experience(s). Trust is one of the most important casualties of sexual assault. If the abuser is a family member or trusted friend, the child's ability to trust his or her own instincts is compromised. The child will need reassurance from a variety of sources to restore the child's ability to trust people again. For example, a child may need additional support and therapeutic intervention if there was a serious breach of trust in the abuse, or if the nature of the sexual assault was particularly invasive.

Likewise, a one-time sexual assault that results in serious physical damage will have a substantial impact on the recovery process. However, most of the truly long-term damage of abuse is found in those who are victims of repeated and frequent abuse.

Repeated and Frequent Abuse

The presence of two or more of the relevant factors is an indication of the need for additional—perhaps prolonged—therapeutic intervention. Children, who experienced abuse by a family member or trusted friend over an extended period of time, will usually exhibit serious behavioral and physical manifestations of the trauma. These can range from a sudden change in behavior to sexual promiscuity and attempted suicide.

Children who are the victims of methodical and effective grooming by offenders experience ongoing trauma and can suffer the consequences of the abuse for many years. There are similarities between the effects of long-term abuse and that of prisoners of war or victims of brainwashing. In both cases, the abuse was intentional, methodical, and long lasting. It was also unexpected and confusing to the victim and intended to intimidate the victim and instill fear. The victim's level of outrage regarding the betrayal and the victim's fear that it could happen again can paralyze the victim long after the actual abuse has ended.

Another factor is whether the child tells an adult about the abuse and how *that adult* responds to *the telling*. The journey can be very difficult for the child who is unable to tell anyone until he or she *is* an adult. The damage to the victim's relationships and to his or her ability to trust others may be irreparably harmed. Mental health professionals and victim advocates can make a difference with adult survivors of abuse—but the prognosis is much less promising than with victims who come forward and receive protection and treatment at the time of the abuse.

A child who comes forward and discloses the abuse has taken a powerful and effective step toward recovery. The process of healing can begin immediately and the prospects for recovery are enhanced.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether the child was abused once or a hundred times, or whether the trauma was so intense that the victim was unable to talk about it for years, responsible adults should make sure that children and adult survivors of child sexual abuse have the support they need to recover from the trauma as quickly as possible. One of the most valuable elements in the recovery equation is the support of loving family and friends. The possibility of healing is greater in an atmosphere of love, support, and encouragement.

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