


When Males Have Been Sexually Abused as Children

A Guide for Men



If you experienced childhood sexual abuse, this booklet will help you understand how the abuse affects your life today.

Sexual Abuse Information Series 2008

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VISAC (Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre) is a program of Family Services of Greater Vancouver. VISAC offers a wide range of services including specialized victim support services, individual and group therapy for children, youth, families, and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or trauma.

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This booklet answers these questions:

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Why this booklet?

This booklet is addressed to the thousands of men in Canada who were sexually abused as young children or as teenagers. It is also addressed to the people who help these men face each new day with courage: their partners, friends and families.

If you experienced childhood sexual abuse, this booklet will help you understand the impact sexual abuse has had on your life today. It can help you come to terms with your childhood experiences, and help with your healing. If you're seeing a counsellor, or are considering it, this booklet can help you understand how counselling works.

Many men find it difficult to admit they have been sexually abused. Our culture encourages males to believe they should be in charge of every aspect of their lives, so when boys are abused, they often think they should have been able to stop the abuser. Later, as adults, they may blame themselves for having allowed the offender to have power over them. The information in this booklet will help you place the responsibility for the abuse on the abuser – where it belongs.

This booklet will:

- **define and describe the impact of childhood sexual abuse;**
- **explain why males may have difficulty admitting they have been abused;**
- **discuss issues such as shame and fears about sexuality;**
- **explain how childhood sexual abuse can affect adult relationships;**
- **explain how counselling and support groups can help your recovery; and**
- **discuss the pros and cons of making a complaint that could result in charges being laid against the abuser.**

If you experience sexual abuse, this booklet can help you understand what impact sexual abuse has had on your life today.

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is an abuse of power. If someone older, stronger or more experienced coerced you into sexual activity when you were a child or an adolescent, then you were sexually abused. The abuser may have won your trust, and then violated it by abusing you. He or she may have compounded the abuse by forcing you to keep it secret and by making you feel responsible.

Sexual abuse doesn't refer only to sexual touching. If you were forced as a child to watch sexual activity or pornography, this is a form of sexual abuse. If an adult continually invaded your privacy – by watching you shower, or making sexualized comments about your body, this is another form of sexual abuse.

Areas of your life that may be impacted by sexual abuse

- **Confusion about Sexual Orientation.** You may be confused about or question your sexual orientation. We're not really sure how sexual orientation is determined. We do know that it is **not** usually determined by the abuse – neither by the abuser's sexual orientation, nor by what he or she did to your body. If you felt "turned on" and disgusted at the same time by what the abuser did, you might feel as though you can't depend on your body. If you are homosexual and were abused by a male, you may wrongly believe, just as many heterosexuals do, that your sexual orientation was caused by the abuse. Both heterosexual and homosexual adult males suffer from similar kinds of sexual orientation confusion as a result of their abuse.



For example, if the abuser performed oral sex on you, you may have been aroused as well as repelled by the experience. Whether you were abused by a male or a female doesn't make a difference. This is because your penis responds to stimulation regardless of the gender of the person who is stimulating it.

Adolescents or adults who sexually abuse children do so because they are sexually attracted to *children*, and enjoy having sexual power over them.

If the abuser was male, you might have developed a fear of other males, especially if you believe they are homosexual. You may even avoid friendships with other men. Your fear of homosexuals may express itself in negative statements or jokes about homosexuals. This fear and these actions are called homophobia. However, *homophobia* is pervasive in our society, and is not an indicator of sexual abuse.

You might also try to prove yourself sexually by initiating a lot of short-term sexual relationships with women, in the hope that your fear of being homosexual will eventually disappear. No number of "conquests" can overcome this kind of insecurity, but you will succeed in destroying the trust of your partners.

If you were abused by a female, you might have felt overpowered and "less than male" when the abuse was happening. You might feel "different" because sexual abuse by women is less frequent.

This in turn could make you feel more isolated and ashamed. You might believe that the abuse was a sexual opportunity, and not really abuse at all. Our culture often minimizes and even denies the seriousness and harm caused when boys are abused by older females.

- **Difficulties with Sexual Functioning.** You could at times experience problems with sexual functioning. Painful erections, difficulty maintaining erections, premature ejaculation, lack of desire, or an obsession with sex may all stem from childhood sexual abuse.

Both heterosexual and homosexual men can have difficulty with sexual relationships as a result of their abuse.

- **Difficulties with Intimacy.** If you once trusted someone who abused you when he/she should have been protecting you, you may now have difficulty trusting anyone enough to enjoy a long-term intimate relationship. If you can function sexually only during "one-night stands" or only in short-term relationships, it could be because the abuser was a family member or someone you trusted and depended on, who had power over you for a long period of time. Long-term relationships may remind you of these feelings of powerlessness, so you might avoid them. You may have difficulty making commitments in other areas of your life for the same reason.
- **Dependency or Misuse of Drugs, Alcohol or Food.** If you have trouble regulating your use of drugs, alcohol, or food, it may mean that you are using these substances to mask the pain of sexual abuse. It could also mean that the abuser used these substances to lure you into sexual activity.

Because these substances can be addictive, they can block your recovery. There are a number of recovery programs available that serve as an important adjunct to sexual abuse counselling.

- **Self-Harm and Harm of Others.** If you feel worthless as a result of the abuse, you could turn these painful feelings against yourself. This might take the form of cutting, burning or harming yourself in some way. You may find yourself in situations or remain in relationships that are harmful to you, emotionally, physically, sexually or otherwise.

Sexual abuse is an abuse of power.

If you find yourself thinking about or acting out your sexual abuse by becoming sexually aggressive, *you need to seek help immediately* because of the damage you could be doing to others. Contact your local crisis line, doctor, etc.

- **Flashbacks, Anxiety and Nightmares.** If you have unexplained anxiety or panic attacks you could be re-experiencing the trauma of being sexually abused.

Flashbacks are sudden intrusive thoughts about the sexual abuse. They might come when you least want them, for example, when you and your partner are making love. When this happens it could mean that your sexual arousal is triggering memories of the abuse. You might also experience recurring nightmares which remind you in some way of the abuse. A counsellor can work with you to reduce these symptoms.

- **Anger.** You might feel that, as a male, you're allowed to express and to act out your anger. If you feel only anger, you are probably not allowing yourself to have other feelings such as shame, fear or loneliness. A counsellor can help you to identify your feelings and learn ways to manage them.
- **Shame and Guilt.** If you were sexually abused as a child, the underlying emotion you might share with other people who have been sexually abused, both male and female, is a sense of shame. Shame is a deep sense of feeling 'bad' as a person. The abuser might have cut you off from the support of loved ones during the abuse by forcing you to keep the abuse secret. He might have told you that no one would want anything to do with you if they knew what you were doing. Guilt is related to shame. Guilt comes from the belief that you are *responsible* for the abuse. Remember, this happened when you were a child, and adults are supposed to protect children, not abuse them. *You are not responsible for the abuse you experienced.*

You could now be afraid that you will experience further shame if you talk about the abuse to a counsellor or anyone else. Shame can make you hold yourself apart from others in your adult life. A support group, where you can talk and listen to others who have had the same experience that you've had, can help you overcome your shame and the isolation that goes with it.

- **Physical Symptoms.** There are a number of physical symptoms that are sometimes related to child sexual abuse. If you suffer from frequent headaches, choking sensations, nausea in the presence of certain smells, blurred vision, floating sensations, or pains in the genitals, buttocks or back, they might be related

to your sexual abuse. If your physician can't find a medical reason for these symptoms, your counsellor might be able to help you understand the reason you have them.

How can I get the help I need?

You might have difficulty acknowledging that you were sexually abused, and that another person had such power over you. You might even believe that being abused has made you less of a man. This belief comes from our patriarchal society which values power, seen as a male trait, and devalues vulnerability, which is seen as "weak" and as a female trait. As a result most men resist admitting they were once overpowered and helpless, and this is called "denial". Denial is an obstacle to getting help. Because of social values and attitudes, denial of vulnerability is usually stronger in men than in women.

It takes courage to acknowledge you've been sexually abused. A counsellor, a support group or both can be helpful. The best way to find a counsellor is by asking people you trust, such as a doctor or friend, for personal recommendations. If that isn't possible, professional counselling associations will provide names of people qualified to work with men who have been sexually abused. You can then check out those qualifications and find a counsellor you feel comfortable working with.

Individual counselling over a long period of time can be expensive, although some social services have a sliding fee scale for clients. Another option is to see a psychiatrist or psychologist who may be covered through your provincial medical plan or supplementary insurance plan. In some provinces, when you file a police report against the abuser you may become eligible for counselling from a qualified psychologist, clinical counsellor or clinical social worker through a crime victim assistance program. If working with a counsellor isn't possible, a support group may be a good second choice.

THE FIRST STEP
TO RECOVERY IS
TO ADMIT TO
YOURSELF THAT
YOU HAVE BEEN
SEXUALLY ABUSED.

How can a counsellor help?

Once you acknowledge to your counsellor that you have been sexually abused, you have taken an important step to recovery.

Even after you've acknowledged the abuse, you may:

- tell yourself it really didn't affect you;
- speak about the abuse in an intellectual, abstract way; and
- excuse some of the abuser's behaviour.

It is not unusual for individuals to minimize or deny traumatic experiences and their impact as a way of coping.

A counsellor can help you work through any thoughts or feelings you may have. Then you can understand the ways in which you managed to cope with the abuse and begin to resolve the trauma of the abuse to decrease the negative effects it has on your life. Your counsellor may ask you about any symptoms of post-traumatic stress that are impacting you, for example, flashbacks, nightmares, depression, anxiety, or relationship difficulties. S/he will help you to develop skills to manage intrusive or overwhelming thoughts, feelings or sensations. These skills are an important step to help you maintain control. Remembering too much or moving too quickly can feel overwhelming. Tell your counsellor when you need more time to understand and integrate what is happening. Your counsellor might also recommend that you read some articles or books written for men who have experienced sexual abuse. At your request,

A counsellor will probably have to remind you repeatedly that you were neither responsible for nor guilty of the abuse.

your counsellor may speak to your spouse or partner to suggest ways in which s/he can support you in your recovery. Your counsellor might also recommend that you join a support group for men who have experienced sexual abuse.

Your relationship with your counsellor is a partnership. You'll decide together what subjects you will discuss, and when it's appropriate to slow down or end counselling. If you aren't happy with your counsellor, you have the right to express your concerns and to find a different counsellor.

What kinds of questions are counsellors often asked?

"I've heard of five-and six-year-old boys being abused, but I was ten when my babysitter made me perform oral sex on him. Wasn't I old enough to know better and shouldn't I have been able to tell him to take a hike?"

Age has nothing to do with it, but power has everything to do with it. Boys who are dependent on an adult or an adolescent are vulnerable to being sexually abused.

"I was 14 when my coach took the top players on the team camping. He let us drink around the campsite and I wasn't used to it, and all I can remember after that is waking up later with him lying beside me, passed out, with his hand between my legs. Shouldn't I have been smart enough and old enough to be able to figure out what he was up to?"

A coach is in a position of power and can easily appeal to a boy's need for attention and approval. When teenage boys are sexually abused, they often feel even more ashamed and responsible than younger boys and have a hard time reporting the abuse. See booklet *"When Teenage Boys..."*

The boys in both of these stories grew into young men who believed that they were responsible for the abuse, and felt guilty as a result.

A counsellor will probably remind you that *children are never responsible for adults or older teens abusing them.*

"I was 13 and on the Grade 7 basketball team when my teacher felt me up after the game. I told my Uncle Gordon, and he said the teacher was probably gay. Could that be true? Do you think there's something about me that turned him on?"

Sexual orientation has nothing to do with sexual abuse. More importantly, it's not some quality about you that makes you responsible. Sexual abusers are people who want to exercise sexual power over children because they're smaller and less powerful. Uncle Gordon's response was misleading because of its anti-homosexual bias.

“So if I was sexually abused as a kid, does that mean that sooner or later I’m going to start going after kids myself?”

You might have disturbing feelings about children from time to time, and sexual fantasies about children are a warning sign. It is important that you keep your feelings and fantasies conscious and discuss them with a counsellor who is trained to work in this area to ensure that you do not act them out by offending.

Many convicted adolescent and adult sex offenders were themselves sexually abused as children. It *does not follow* from this that all boys who have been sexually abused grow up to be abusers.

“Hey, don’t talk to me about sexual abuse. When I was eight, my babysitter made me put my penis right into her vagina. I learned about sex long before the other kids, and to this day I’m still a hit with the older women.”

Males in our society are conditioned to think of any sexual experience with a female as an “opportunity”. When young boys are sexually abused by women or teenage girls, they tend to deny their feelings of being overpowered, used and/or shamed. If you were sexually abused as a young boy by a woman or a teenage girl, you may use the experience to enhance your ego, and not understand how it may distort your adult relationships.

“How long is this counselling going to take? I want to get it over with and get on with my life.”

Like many men, you were probably conditioned to act on a problem and get results fast. Dealing with sexual abuse is not like mowing the lawn or putting together a business deal. Personal change takes time, and if you were also subjected to physical and emotional abuse you’ll need to work on those issues as well.

“There’s something else there. There’s one important thing I haven’t remembered, and I just can’t get hold of it. Can you hypnotize me?”

This type of question comes up when you think that just below the surface, there is a key that will unlock the whole puzzle, and once you discover it, you’ll be instantly cured. Like the previous question, it comes from a common male desire for a “quick fix”. As you continue working with your counsellor, you will begin to appreciate the value of gradual change.

Kevin’s story

Kevin began counselling at the recommendation of his minister, who’d heard enough of his story to suspect that he had experienced severe childhood abuse. Kevin suffered from night sweats, and would often wake up with his bedsheets drenched. Sometimes he’d wake up screaming after dreaming that a large animal was overtaking him. His wife had urged him to speak to their minister because of his habit of breaking off sexual intercourse before he reached orgasm. He frequently complained that his penis hurt during intercourse, and that he would rather avoid sex altogether.

During the course of his marriage, Kevin had three short homosexual relationships in which he played a passive role. Kevin was ashamed of these relationships, and felt that he was dishonouring his marriage. His wife was afraid that he would contract a sexually transmitted infection and infect her. She threatened to leave him if it happened again.

After Kevin started counselling he was able to explain that he had spent much of his childhood living with his mother and five brothers and sisters in a small logging town. After his parents separated, his mother started drinking and began a series of short-term relationships. Some of her new boyfriends were violent with her and with the children. One of them, a millworker named Willard, was not only a violent alcoholic but a child abuser as well. The children never knew when to expect Willard, so they were in a constant state of anxiety. Kevin recalled how Willard would climb into bed, drunk, and masturbate Kevin before passing out.

As the details emerged, Kevin’s physical symptoms and his behaviour started to make sense. The night sweats, the nightmares about large animals, his hurting penis, his sexual avoidance and his homosexual encounters were related to his sexual abuse. The counsellor saw Kevin and his wife together for a session, and explained to her the connection between Kevin’s symptoms and his abuse.

The counsellor suggested ways in which she could support Kevin. Kevin took the counsellor’s suggestion to join a support group. Because he had spent so much of his time alone in a small community, and because shame of the sexual abuse made him feel separate from

his brothers and sisters, he found the group especially helpful. He could talk in the group because he knew these people understood.

Kevin's recovery was gradual, but with the help of his counsellor, the support from the group, and his wife, his symptoms decreased. The nightmares do come back occasionally, but when he wakes up, he understands where they came from, so it's easier to get back to sleep. Kevin is still tentative about sex, but his wife now talks excitedly about their "new relationship". Their children sense the change, and are much more relaxed when their parents are together.

What should I do about the abuser?

- **Pursue Criminal Charges.** Initiating criminal charges against the abuser is one option. This means reporting the matter to the police. The police will in turn bring the matter to a crown prosecutor, who must decide whether or not there is sufficient evidence to take the case before a provincial or federal court. A successful prosecution may be aided by corroborative evidence (such as photos taken by the abuser) or similar fact evidence (information provided by other victims).

Laying criminal charges has the advantage of placing retribution where it belongs – with society at large. Sexually abusing children is against the law: it's a crime against society as well as

a personal crime against you. Criminal charges are also a way of channeling your anger in a constructive way, by obtaining justice. The problem with using the court system is that the court proceedings are often lengthy and may be very frustrating.

You could also sue the abuser in a civil court. The burden of proof is less in a civil court than in a criminal court, however, a criminal conviction would support your civil suit. In a civil suit, if the judge finds in your favour, the abuser might have to pay you money

in compensation. This can help defray the cost of your therapy, and compensate you for work time you might have lost as the result of the abuse. However there is a cost to you to pursue this litigation. You'll probably want to discuss these alternatives with your counselor, a victim services worker, your partner, a lawyer, or a friend, but your first responsibility is to yourself. The final decision is yours.

- **Confront the Abuser.** You may want to find the abuser, and tell him how the abuse has impacted your life. You might find this more difficult than you imagine, especially if, when you face the abuser, you suddenly feel like the same powerless little boy you once were. You might find it satisfying to confront him, but the risk is that he may deny the abuse or simply tell you he doesn't care. Your plan has to take the abuser's possible responses into account and what you hope to gain or may lose in confronting him.
- **Take Revenge.** You might find satisfaction in the thought of beating up or maiming the abuser. You might feel justified in doing it, but you can damage yourself by expressing your anger that way. You could do yourself further psychological harm, or even end up in jail.
- **Forgive the Abuser.** You might choose to forgive the abuser as part of your healing process. People in your community might pressure you to forgive the abuser. However, premature forgiveness can increase self-blame and block healing. If you can't personally forgive the abuser, you could look upon forgiveness as a process between the abuser and whatever deity he believes in. It's your choice, to forgive or not forgive, and either choice is valid.
- **Let Go.** "Letting go" means you have decided to do nothing about the abuser right now. You might decide to let go because you want to focus all of your energy on healing yourself. Letting go is not the same as forgiveness. After you've worked on your healing for a while, you might then decide to do something about the abuser.



How much should I tell my partner?

If you're in a relationship, your partner can be an invaluable source of support. Support means your partner can empathize with your pain,



Get support from your partner and counselling from your counsellor.

offer you love and encouragement, and support your decisions. **But do not use your partner as a counsellor.** This places too great a strain on your relationship and it's unfair, if not impossible, to expect your partner to give you objective advice. Get support from your partner and counselling from your counsellor.

It's important to talk to your partner about what's happening and what has happened. This can create both difficulties and opportunities. If your partner is also a sexual abuse survivor, your story may trigger painful memories for her/him. What may happen then is that both of you will be seeing counsellors and working on recovery at the same time. If you express the same emotional needs at the same time, you can strain the relationship. You help one another most if you can tell each other when you need support, when you're prepared to give support, and when you need to be left alone.

Is recovery possible?

YES, but look on recovery as a process, not as a project with an end result. You can't expect that at some magic moment in the future your problems will all disappear and

you will be forever happy. More likely, different issues will come up for you at different points in your life, and you may want to go back to your counsellor for more sessions.

What is possible in recovery is that the sexual abuse symptoms will diminish, your self-esteem will increase, and your relationship(s) will be more satisfying. You'll feel more in charge of your life. In other words,

instead of having the effects of sexual abuse run your life, you'll be running it yourself. You can have a good life!

It's reasonable to expect the kind of recovery described in Kevin's story. Kevin's symptoms decreased, his relationship with his wife improved, and his children were less anxious. That's not perfection, but it's better than the hell he was living before he began his recovery.

Additional resources are available at your community resource centre, your local library or the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

What is possible in recovery is that your sexual abuse symptoms will diminish, your self-esteem will increase and your relationships will be more satisfying. In other words, you can have a good life!