

Section 6

The Care and Counselling of Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

This section describes the longer-term implication of childhood sexual abuse on adults. It gives guidance on how to respond sensitively, wisely, and with compassion to those survivors in our congregations.

It has been included to assist and support those exercising pastoral care in our churches, and will therefore be particularly relevant to clergy and leaders with pastoral responsibilities.

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6.1 Who are they?

More and more people are coming forward to seek help for early experiences of sexual or physical abuse. It is important to recognize that any one of us may be a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Survivors can be found in all walks of life, and do not form any recognizable kind of 'group'. Of a hundred Christian survivors whose names were on a network mailing list from all over the UK, five were ordained deacons in the Church of England, four were male clergy from different denominations, and another six worked full-time in church-related organizations (Anne Townsend 'Safety Net' Unpublished article 7.11.93). Most were survivors of abuse as children. We may nevertheless be initially surprised when someone from our congregation whom we know well, or a fellow clergy person, begins to disclose fragments of their story. Sometimes we will know the person well; sometimes we will be sought out by a complete stranger.

6.2 Choice of helper

Adult survivors of child sexual abuse are often in great and urgent need of support and make considerable demands upon the person whom they select to be their helper. Moreover, they are often not easy to pass on to someone whom you may deem to be more experienced or more skilled in this area than yourself. It is therefore important to develop confidence and competence in trying to help them.

A person who discloses early abuse will often have waited for some time until he or she feels that a suitable recipient for this information has been found. This is why it is difficult to refer them on to others, because it is perhaps you that they have chosen. This may be for reasons that are not altogether conscious.

6.3 Initial response – how to be helpful

Accept the person and what they are telling you

This will often involve listening to exceptionally distressing and degrading material. Also, the survivor may have become so used to the relationship with a caring person being an overtly sexual one, that he/she relates to you 'seductively'. Some people who listen to accounts of sexual activity described in an explicit way may also be surprised and distressed by their own sexual arousal.

Seek support for yourself

There are good reasons for needing another person or a consultation group with whom to talk through the work you are doing, whilst preserving the strictest confidentiality around the survivor's identity. It is also important to observe clear boundaries and to maintain absolute clarity regarding the nature of the relationship between you and the survivor.

Listen with respect

Not everything described may have actually happened to the person, but everything should be treated by the listener as if it had happened and listened to with the greatest respect.

Even where memories have become distorted or have led into fantasy, the feelings associated with them are real. It is these that are the primary focus of attention.

Survivors often undergo a curious reversal of guilt feelings – leading them to blame themselves instead of the other person or persons that have caused them harm. This self blame and self disgust is usually very deep-seated and has been held inside for a very long time. It is unlikely, therefore, that you will be able to help the person to deal with these feelings in one or two meetings.

Maintain attentiveness and an appropriate pace. Try not to go too fast, and do not ask too many questions or appear too intense. This may be felt as another form of abuse (and indeed may be so); the individual will feel under attack and will often withdraw from contact with you. If you go too slowly or appear to be over attentive, you may convey to the person that you are afraid of what they want to speak to you about, or are unwilling to accept them or the events that they need to describe.

Adult survivors need, from the listener, high-quality attentiveness, empathy and integrity, which may, in themselves, combine to become 'the corrective emotional experience' needed.

Enable expression of failings

A very important part of the work involves helping the survivor to place the anger and blame for events where it rightly belongs, and to express and discharge this anger as fully as possible. This is an essential, though difficult, part of the process, and must not be short cut or ducked out of by the helper, in the erroneous belief that the survivor needs to forgive those who have damaged her or him. Only after the responsibility for events has been located where it belongs, and the anger discharged as fully as possible, should the helper begin to move the survivor towards ideas of forgiveness. Forgiveness will be a process rather than an event. It involves the forgiveness of the self, some new integration of the meaning of the events, some 'making sense of', and some resolution of the feelings. The person can be helped to feel 'good enough' to enable the appalling past to be relinquished, and move to the future.

6.4 Stages on the way to recovery

There are several stages through which the survivor usually passes on his/her way to recovery:

1. One or more **memories of the past are triggered** by seeing something on television or hearing something talked about, which relates to sexual abuse.
2. The individual **blurts out** some fragment of their past to someone who happens to be around and who is sensed as trustworthy.
3. The individual **indicates that they are distressed** and wants to talk, or that they are *beginning to understand* that something awful has happened and need to find someone to help them.
4. The individual themselves **tests out** the trustworthiness of the relationship with the helper – whether they can bear to hear what they have to say, whether they will be condemned, or whether those they protect will be condemned.
5. The individual's disclosure of abuse usually occurs haltingly. He/she may have **vivid flashbacks**, remembering the details of the abuse as though it were happening now, followed by a return to their **amnesia and denial** of what has occurred.

6. **'Remembering and denial'** usually alternate during the course of time that the survivor is telling his/her story. The survivor – by talking to someone who listens and attends to them deeply, respects them, accepts them, and believes in them and their story – begins to distinguish fact from fantasy. This is never easy after what may be a prolonged time lag.
7. **Naming the events** that have occurred in detail will usually be very hard for the survivor to do. He/she may shrink from speaking in detail and explicitly, and may move backwards and forwards in the ability to do so. This will nevertheless be an essential step in the survivor's progress towards recovery, and will act powerfully to uncover long-suppressed feelings. The survivor usually experiences a whole range of **conflicting feelings**. These can include:
 - irrational **guilt** for what has happened and a sense that they are now 'damaged goods' in some way;
 - **self-blame** for their own impotence or weakness at preventing these things from occurring;
 - **depression or despair** at the irreversibility of these early events;
 - **anger** at those who have harmed them and/or did not protect them from harm;
 - **vengefulness** directed either at the self (leading to self-harm/suicidal gestures) or to the abuser (leading to a desire for violence and retribution). Feelings of vengeance can also be directed at another innocent party (such as their own children who then become the recipients of abuse and the survivor's displaced rage).

The primary tool for healing and helping adult survivors is the warm, reliable, respectful, non-intrusive presence of another person who is prepared to walk with them on their painful journey of discovery. This trusting, accepting, reliable relationship may *in itself* be the means by which these seven aspects of the journey can be passed through as 'stages'. The survivor may need to move back and forth between them in order to get to the point where the past can be understood and relinquished, where the self can be reclaimed, and the emotional meaning of the abuse can be integrated into a new belief (both hopeful and realistic) in what the person can expect from the self and from relationships with other people.

6.5 Referring for further help

More specific help is, however, often required and the clergy/lay person will need then to refer the survivor to a professional helper with more specialist knowledge and skills. Referring a survivor is, in itself, a skilful process and involves:

- a. **Conveying your continuing concern**, respect and acceptance so that referral is not construed as abandonment.
- b. Summarizing all the good work and progress that they have already made in their **journey towards recovery**.
- c. Presenting an **optimistic** but **realistic** picture of the person to whom you are referring them, and the further gains that the survivor can expect to make from this new relationship.

This further professional help may involve:

1. Enabling the survivor to enter more deeply into the trauma of their past, by helping them understand the meaning of their dreams, their free associations and their repressed memories more fully.

2. Actively assisting their regression through the use of hypnosis, psychodrama and other techniques, so that the blocks to their emotional release can be freed.
3. Helping them to confront the people who have harmed them or allowed them to be harmed, by exploring their fantasies, constructing and writing letters to them and arranging meetings with them (with or without the presence of the therapist).
4. Enabling them to begin to regain some of their capacity to be vulnerable, which will ultimately require some capacity to forgive themselves and those who have abused them.

As you can see, **it is possible for survivors, with time and help, to integrate their appalling past experience, and move into a more hopeful but realistic life for themselves, including a belief that they are precious to God as they are.**

The following is a prayer poem written by a survivor out of her struggle:

*“Be still my soul and know your God within.
I long to love and trust you, but find it hard to see
How you, or any other, could possibly love me.
Or how see me as lovely? That’s quite another thing!
Tears of pain and grief
Flow from deep
within.*

*Be still my soul and know God’s love within.
I bring to you my pain and tears, my heartache and my grief.
Tossed about by doubts and fears, my times of unbelief.
So many issues unresolved, but this is what I bring.
Can you accept and love me
Just as I am
within?*

*Be still my soul and hear God’s voice within.
In the stillness of the night, you whispered in my ear:
“You are precious in my sight, and I love you. Do not fear.
I have called you by your name; you are mine.
Be not afraid.
I am here
within”.*

*Be still my soul and worship God within.
As Mary bathed your feet with tears, loved you and adored,
So, through my tears, I bring to you my gift of love outpoured.
You hold me close; my soul is stilled,
I know your words are true.
And in your ear I whisper back
“God, I love you too”.*

[Reprinted with permission from 'Hidden Treasure' by Muriel Green and Anne Townsend: 1994]

6.6 Referral of allegations

What to do with the information confided?

Ideally, the person making the allegation should refer the matter to the Police or the Social Services. It may take them some time to reach this point. If, however, the person against whom they are alleging abuse is known to be currently working with or in contact with children and young people, you yourself must make the referral. We are all responsible for trying to ensure the safety of children and young people. – see section 2.5(4)

We should be aware that people who committed sexual abuse years ago could well be abusing children today. The BCPA can offer advice.

Note the rules of confidentiality during sacramental confessions and those applying in pastoral counselling (see Section 2.10).

6.7 Examples of survivors' stories

The following two fragments are built up from actual situations in a composite form in order to disguise their identities. They are written so as to suggest a way in which a parochial minister might be able to offer initial help and refer the person on appropriately for more specialist work.

Example A: Jack

The churchwarden noted that Jack had started coming to church, but always left before the end of the service. One day he stayed to the end, and seemed to be hovering near the door. The churchwarden said how nice it was to have the chance to say hello, whereupon Jack blurted out that he wanted to see a priest at once. He was taken to the vestry and introduced to the priest.

The priest encouraged Jack to wait until everyone had left, and then said he would willingly hear what Jack had to say. Jack asked for reassurance that everything said would be confidential and then began to talk:

He said he had been a foster child – one of several, and his foster parents also had two older boys of their own. Jack said he had been very lucky to be fostered and not put into a home. He was very grateful to his foster parents. That's why it was so awful. He could not remember anything except blackness and a cold night breeze. He thought it must have happened then – but he wasn't sure. He knew it was terrible, whatever it was that he had done, because one day his social worker arrived and said he was going to live with another aunty and uncle. He had to leave at once.

He used to have nightmares then – always the same. He was running and running, and then he fell over flat on his tummy, and somewhere above him a great long sword which began to get nearer and nearer as he tried to escape. He couldn't remember anything more, except he used to wet the bed, and he wondered if the priest could tell him what he should do.

This is how the priest responded:

1. He said how glad he was that Jack had come to see him, and how important it was that he should talk about these painful matters which were obviously troubling him acutely.
2. He said he would very much like to spend some time with Jack, to see if between them they could piece together the story of what had happened when he was young.

3. He arranged to see Jack again the following day for a longer time, and suggested they would need to meet several times to understand some of the things which were troubling Jack.

The priest began to see Jack regularly. It took time for Jack to believe that the priest would continue 'to be there for him' regularly and consistently. It took time for Jack to trust that he was not going to 'have to leave' or be left, in the way he was as a child. Gradually, small and terrifying fragments came back into Jack's mind, of his foster father standing over him as he lay on his tummy. Jack began to cry a lot in his meetings with the priest. One day he arrived in a towering rage. He shouted and screamed at the priest, accusing him of behaving badly and wrongly, and trying to harm one of the children in the choir. Jack was beginning to:

- understand that he had been the victim of harm rather than the one who had done harm to others, and
- confuse the past with the present and transfer his repressed feelings of anger and fear from his foster father to the priest.

In the following meetings, Jack was able gradually to piece together enough of the past to understand how he had been sexually abused by his foster father, and had therefore been removed from the home to protect him. He was able to distinguish the continuing, strong loving presence of the priest from the unreliable abusive presence of his foster father. Having made these enormous strides forward, he was able to accept being referred to a professional counsellor. Here he could work in more depth to uncover deeper memories, construct a fuller picture of the past and find ways of rebuilding his life, from a more integrated picture of himself and his family.

Example B: Parminder

Parminder (aged 45 years) asked to see the Reader one evening after the PCC meeting. As Churchwarden, she was well known to the Reader, Sunita, and had worshipped at the parish church for many years. They met the next day. Parminder explained how she had been sexually abused by her father and uncle for many years from the age of 4 years. When she was 11, her mother (a church member) had left her husband, taking the children with her. Parminder told Sunita that she had seen a counsellor for about two years when she was in her mid twenties, and had done a lot of work sharing these appalling events.

Parminder then began to cry and then to sob and sob. She gradually explained that she had thought it was all over – that she had come to terms with it all. But a few nights ago she had seen a programme on television about mothers who abuse their children. That night she had lain awake and a horrific memory flashback had made her aware that her mother had continued the abuse where her father and uncle had left off. Sunita arranged to see Parminder again the next day and because of the previous help Parminder had received, she was able to piece together, with Sunita's help, some of the abuse she had experienced between 11 and 16 years, when she left home. Parminder had to face acknowledging that her mother, a staunch church-goer, had at the same time abused her sexually and encouraged her new partner to do so as well. Until now, these further memories had been strongly repressed, but Parminder now had to begin to come to terms with:

- *recognizing that the mother who she had thought of as her carer and protector was also her abuser.*
- *her mother's identity as both an abuser and a committed church member.*
- *her new confused feelings about the Church as her 'Mother', to whom she herself was so committed.*
- *her relationship with women in authority in the Church, such as Sunita.*

Joan and Parminder met regularly for several months to work on these issues, until both felt that the right moment had been reached for Parminder to have some further counselling with a professional worker.

Summary

Individuals who have been sexually abused when they were children need help to interrupt the vicious cycle of abuse, and to be enabled to construct loving relationships with their own partners and children.

The needs of the child, within the body of the adult survivor, therefore need to be seen as paramount. The minister or pastoral worker in the parish is often uniquely placed to undertake crucial work which will have important beneficial consequences for a whole chain of relationships.

Seek support for yourself from a professional counsellor or therapist, who will help you to maintain appropriate perspective and boundaries as you are alongside the survivor. Know when and how to refer the survivor for professional therapeutic help.

You need to decide whether or not to refer to the statutory authorities any allegations against an actual or potential abuser if they are known to be working currently with, or caring for, children.

See Appendix U for a list of support services for adults who have been abused.