

# Abuse

Information and Guidance for  
Adults Physically, Emotionally  
Or Sexually Abused as Children

Shining a light on the future



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The content of this booklet may be upsetting for some people. It is designed for you to use with the help of a professional worker, doctor or therapist, where there is already clear evidence that childhood abuse has occurred.

**“I think I’m going mad, my moods are up and down all the time, I can’t control them. I sometimes feel so angry that I have to hurt myself to get rid of the feelings...”**

**“I have memories coming into my mind all the time of what happened to me when I was a child. I can’t understand why. I’ve never thought about those things until now... I don’t like what I can remember, it fills me full of fear, I can’t believe someone would do that to a child...”**

**“Relationships are a disaster area for me. I can’t trust anyone... the same old pattern occurs again and again especially with men. It is as if my dad was still around and still harming me. I even react the same, always trying to please and pretending there is nothing wrong... what is it about me that causes this?...”**

**“I keep out of other people’s way, I’ve learned that is safer, but I feel empty and full of pain...”**

**“I know I don’t want to face what has happened in my life so I don’t. I drink, take drugs, binge and starve. All of this hides what has happened...” “I can never say no to anyone, they can walk all over me, do and say what they want. It’s only later that I begin to feel angry and it’s usually at my elf...”**

**“I sometimes think I’m completely bad and rotten, then at other times I think no it’s not me, it’s them...”**

People who have been abused as children experience many varied feelings. The descriptions above are just a few examples of the distress people may be left with, though having such feelings does not necessarily mean that you have been abused.

This short booklet is written by people who have experienced abuse and by psychologists and others who work with them to try and help them overcome the effects of what has happened. It aims to help you to begin to:

1. Understand the effects of childhood abuse, both at the time and its impact on you now.
2. Explore ways in which you may begin to overcome the effects of the abuse, and where you may get further help.

We hope you find the booklet helpful and would be very grateful for any feedback from you on its content and anything you feel we have left out.

No two people will react in exactly the same way to having been abused and with this in mind different parts of the booklet may help different people. Please choose what you feel is helpful.

It is also important to note that many people who have not been abused may also experience the distressing thoughts, symptoms, feelings and behaviour described in the booklet.

## 1. What is child abuse?

Abuse of children is something which has happened over the generations irrespective of race, class or culture. Only recently have people recognised that it happens and talked about it a little more openly. Society still has difficulty in accepting that child abuse is widespread, so it often goes unrecognised.

There are different ways that children are abused. All of these are serious and affect the child even if the child may not seem to be distressed at the time.

**Neglect** – is where the parent or carer does not provide for the basic needs of a child. This can mean leaving a child alone when he or she is too young (or leaving him or her with brothers or sisters who themselves are not old enough to manage). This can leave the child in dangerous situations. It can mean not looking after children when they are ill or not keeping them clean and warm with a roof over their head. Neglect has serious long-term effects on children.

**Emotional neglect.** This term is used when parents don't give kind attention, love and comfort to their child. They may appear uninterested in the child, and show no affection or care. This can have serious consequences for the emotional development of that child.

When a child is subjected to violence such as beating, punching, burning, being bitten, thrown around or kicked they have been **physically abused**. This is dangerous in the short-term for the child who may be in a pain or whose life may be at risk. It is also dangerous in the long-term as it leaves

emotional scars and fears which are also very distressing.

A child faced with **any kind** of sexual contact by any other person may have been **sexually abused**. The abuse can involve forced intercourse, or other sexual acts, it can involve touching inappropriately. It may be a child's presence or involvement with the sexual acts of others, or being shown pornographic pictures or films. This form of abuse may involve family members, family friends, teachers, carers or strangers. It may have happened only once, for a short period of time or may have happened over a long time. Any sexual abuse can lead to serious distress for the child at the time and/or later in life. Other forms of abuse can be in the form of mental cruelty such as continuous name-calling or humiliation and excessively harsh punishments.

### **Facing the pain of abuse**

It is **painful to face** the effects that the abuse may have had on you both now and in the past. Here are some examples of how some people respond to childhood abuse.

- Many people who have experienced abuse cannot recall large periods of their childhood.
- Some people can recall what happened but have not linked the abuse to their current difficulties and distress.
- Some people recall a general unhappiness but have partial memories of abusive events.
- People who can remember much of what has happened may try to avoid thinking about it.

It is common for people to try not to think about the abuse because it is such a painful experience. Do any of these apply to you?

- Do you **try to excuse it?** "It was just his way of showing love". "She had too much stress, that is what caused her outbursts".
- Do you **make light of it or play it down?** "He bruised me but it didn't go any further". "I was only touched, it wasn't full sexual intercourse".
- Do you **blame yourself?** "It was my fault, I must have done something wrong..."

It may help you to read the following sections to understand more about abuse.

**What are some of the signs a child shows when he or she has been abused?**

Children who are being abused may show signs of distress at home and in school. These signs are not always noticed by others and the child may even be labeled difficult, disruptive or unwell.

**Did you show any of the following signs of distress when you were a child?**

- **Eating problems** – over eating, starving, bingeing and vomiting etc.
- **Toilet problems** – soiling, bedwetting, etc.
- **Behaviour changes** – becoming disruptive or antisocial, stealing, tantrums, not mixing with others.
- **Schooling difficulties** – underachievement, truancy, overworking at school.
- **Emotional problems** – fears, phobias, obsessions, nightmares.
- **Self-harm** – suicide and self-harm attempts, alcohol or drug misuse.
- **Sexual behaviour** – sexual behaviour that is not age appropriate.
- **Physical problems** – frequent illnesses, stomach pains, headaches, urinary infections, genital pain, bruising, broken bones.

These signs do not always mean abuse has occurred. They can be found in children who have not been maltreated or abused. But they are sometimes apparent in children who have been abused, or are unhappy for some other reason.

If you feel you were abused as a child it may help to try and recall how those around you responded to the signs you displayed.

Who was around?	How did they respond?

## 2. What are the longer-term effects of being abused as a child?

People respond in different ways to having been abused as children. The following descriptions are only examples of some of the possible longer-term effects of abuse.

### **Relationships**

Adults who were abused as children have often been let down by those they trust most. **Trust** can become a major issue which can prevent them from having successful adult relationships. People who were abused sometimes feel they cannot rely on their own judgements about others. It is easy to see that because they have not been able to rely on those who were meant to care for them as children they feel afraid of trusting those around them in adult life. This can lead to loneliness and isolation. It can lead to fear of strangers or crowds of people.

Because many people who have been abused feel so unlovable they feel they cannot take the risk of letting others get to know them.

**Intimate relationships** can also be a problem. For people who have been sexually abused **sexual difficulties** may occur. This can include fear of sex, confusion about sexuality, no interest in sex and obsessions relating to sex. If people have been physically abused they may feel tense fearful or angry in response to affectionate physical contact.

Survivors of abuse can sometimes find themselves getting into unhelpful relationship patterns. This can involve becoming the perfect carer, rescuer, or it may be that they allow themselves to stay in other abusive relationships

It may help to spend a little time considering how your own relationships have been affected by abuse. It can be useful to write it down here or on a separate sheet:

## Feelings of self-worth

Because they have always not been treated with the love and respect they deserve many people who have been abused do not learn to feel love and respect for themselves. Particular difficulties can include a strong sense of being bad or unlovable in some way. Some people may have been told that they were no good and may feel inferior compared to others.

Self-esteem and self-confidence can be very low. This may lead to difficulties in saying no to people, problems in making decisions and letting others take advantage.

Consider how your own self-esteem has been affected:

## Emotions

Survivors of abuse describe a range of difficult emotions that they have to try to manage. Many people feel very **depressed** at times. This can be so severe that they sometimes think about **suicide**. Other people may find themselves on an **emotional roller coaster** with massive mood swings. **Shame** and **guilt** are common emotions that often sit alongside depression. Some people experience **anxiety, fear, phobias, nightmares** and may have problems sleeping.

**Aggressive outbursts** and **angry feelings** can also occur. It is not always obvious to the person what the anger is about. Though it is not surprising that people should be carrying a lot of anger it is as if the anger is just bursting to get out. They may feel guilty and ashamed.

Write down your emotional responses to abuse:

### **Eating**

Many people who have been abused have problems with food and eating and may feel unhappy about the way they look. This may lead to compulsive eating, bingeing and vomiting, or starving.

Do you feel you have any difficulties with eating or body image?

### **Flashbacks and nightmares**

Many people who have been abused experience flashbacks and nightmares in their adult life. Flashbacks are very clear memories which may make the person feel they are reliving the abuse. Nightmares can be about what happened or can be about only parts of it, such as being trapped or chased. Both flashbacks and nightmares can be very distressing.

If you experience flashbacks or nightmares write down what they are:

## **Achievement**

Not surprisingly being abused does seem to have an impact on achievement and performance. Many people set themselves harsh goals and high performance standards. For them whatever they do or achieve is not good enough.

Other people who have been abused do the opposite. They expect nothing of themselves and predict failure. They fear that achievement will draw attention to themselves. They expect that this attention will have negative results such as attack and envy.

Has abuse affected your achievement and goals?:

## **Self-harm**

Some people who have been abused as children harm themselves in some way. This can be by attempting suicide, or it may be in other ways. Some will cut, burn or injure themselves. Others will drink to excess or abuse drugs. The reasons for this self-harm are complex but often it is used to manage horrible feelings. (Another booklet in this series gives more detailed information on self-harm.)

Do you harm yourself in any way?

We hope that up to now the booklet has helped you understand abuse a little more and in particular to begin to see the distressing effects that it can have on people's lives.

The next sections will explore ways in which you may begin or continue to overcome the effects of abuse that happened in your childhood.

### 3. Beginning to overcome the effects of abuse

#### Keeping safe

The most important first step in beginning to overcome the effects of abuse is to make sure you are now safe.

Look at the following list of questions. If you are answering **yes** to any of them then we recommend that you should talk to your doctor or therapist.

- Do you have impulses to **harm yourself**?
- Does someone close to you **harm** or **threaten you**?
- Have you attempted **suicide**?
- Have you plans to **kill yourself**?
- Do you find yourself in **unsafe situations**?
- Do you feel **overcome** by memories, thoughts and feelings or have you felt you have become 'out of touch with reality'.
- Does someone close to you often involve you in **dangerous** or illegal situations?

If you have impulses to self-harm our booklet **Controlling Self-Harm** may be helpful to you.

#### Relationships

In the last section we asked you to think about how your own relationships may have been affected by abuse. It may be that you have found yourself in repetitive relationship patterns for example:

- You always end up rescuing or caring for others.
- You **cut yourself off** from others.
- You find yourself with **no boundaries** – you let others do what they like to you.
- You find ways of **numbing the pain of relationships** by drink or drugs or self-harm.
- Others are **abusive** to you.

It may help to try and gradually change the ways in which you relate to others. You will also need to consider your own **self-esteem** in making these changes.

- If you are always **rescuing** or **caring** for others try to ask for **your needs** to be met as well. Allow others to give to you. You may be only choosing needy people as friends; try to have a mix of friendships. Do you have these thoughts, “I will be rejected if I don’t give to everyone” – if “yes” challenge them. It can help to have a supportive circle of friends around you.
- If you set **no boundaries** and others end up taking advantage of you, learn to say no. Remember that you have rights too. Setting a limit can protect you from being used or let down by others.
- If you end up **numbing** the pain of relationships by drink or drugs or other methods take time to explore what tends to hurt you in these relationships. Look for patterns – keep boundaries, get your needs met.
- If you feel you may be in an **abusive** relationship the following questions may help you to think about this:-
  - does your partner physically harm you?
  - does your partner verbally abuse you using threats, name calling, humiliation?
  - does your partner try and control you?
  - are you afraid of your partner?
  - has your partner forced you to have sex?

If your answer is “Yes” to these questions then it would be helpful to plan how to stop this situation. This may be by leaving the relationship or changing the relationship to stop the abusive behaviour.

If you are having difficulty with these changes it may help to seek the support of a professional worker or support group to move forward.

### **Low self-esteem or self worth**

In the previous section we asked you to consider how your self-esteem has been affected by the abuse. This low self-esteem can lead to:

- Difficulties in trusting your own judgement.
- Feeling you can't express your views.
- Staying in bad relationships
- Feeling guilty.
- Hating your self.
- Being self-critical.

There are a number of ways you can begin to tackle low self-esteem.

Try to begin to recognise the **good things** about yourself – write them down:

Remind yourself of this list every day.

**Challenge** any **critical** thoughts you have about yourself. Many people who have been abused think:

- “Why me? – I must be bad”.
- “Why didn't I stop it or tell someone?”

It may help to try and think what you would say to a friend who made similar statements about him or herself. Write down and challenge critical thoughts you often have.

**Critical Thoughts About Yourself** E.g.: “There must have been something bad about you ... that you were abused ...”

**Challenge** “No child deserves to be abused”.

### **Accepting yourself**

Many people who have been abused have a view of themselves as being bad, but not much recognition of their positive side. They can be critical of their weaknesses but not accept or take credit for strengths. It can be helpful and well balanced to accept both your strengths and weaknesses. Everyone



It can also help to learn ways of **self-calming** and **self-soothing** for times when you are feeling very emotional.

Here are some examples of **self-calming**:

- Relaxing
- Exercising
- Going for a walk
- Reading a book
- Stroking a pet
- Calling a friend
- Listening to music
- Touching something soft/familiar
- Planning a nice event
- Making something
- Practising slow, deep breathing
- Picturing a pleasant safe place in your mind

Try and make your own list of ways you can self-calm or self-soothe:

- 
- 
- 
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More detailed descriptions of coping with anxiety, depression, anger and other difficulties are available in other self-help booklets in this series.

### **Flashbacks and nightmares**

As described earlier, many people who have been abused experience flashbacks or nightmares. They are a way of fears and memories coming to the surface. They can be very distressing.

The best way to deal with them is for you to begin to **take control of them**.

For both flashbacks and nightmares (as soon as you wake) try the following

approach.

1. Write down every detail of what came into your mind. Do this every time they happen. If you keep writing them down they should begin to go away.
2. Remind yourself that you are now an adult who is safe and no longer in that situation.
3. It can sometimes help to make up a new ending for the memories/pictures that you have in your flashbacks or nightmares. For example some people imagine that the abuser is blocked off behind a metal screen. Others picture themselves as an adult (or some other safe person) coming into the scene to stop the abuse. This can help you to feel more in control of these unpleasant memories.

If you find that you are still struggling with flashbacks and nightmares it may be useful to seek professional help.

### **Stabilising other areas of your life**

If your life is constantly in crisis or chaos it may be helpful to check through and think how you may begin to plan to make it better.

The following list may help you to pinpoint target areas.

#### **Yes**

- Health
- Eating
- Drinking alcohol
- Illicit drug use
- Lack of exercise
- Other health problems
- Sex and sexuality
- Money problems
- Legal problems
- Housing problems
- Relationships/family problems
- Work/achievement/education problems
- Other areas: (please state)

It can help to think of as many ways as possible to tackle each problem, then choose one to start with. Tick each off the list as you tackle it.

## Is there further help available?

This booklet is designed for you to work through with a doctor, professional worker or therapist. We hope the suggestions in this booklet have been helpful to you.

Your doctor or therapist will have information about other local services which may be useful.

## The following organisations and help-lines may also be useful.

- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**  
Offers an information service providing contacts for counselling in England & Wales. Telephone: 01455 883316. [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)
- **Breaking Free**  
Aims to support women survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse. Helpline 0208 648 3500
- **Childline**  
Children and young people can ring (free) 0800 1111 or write to Freepost 1111, London N1 0BR if they are in trouble or are being abused.
- **Citizens Advice Bureau**  
Contact your local office, they can direct you to local groups who can help.
- **Mind – The Mental Health Charity**  
15 – 19 Broadway, London SE6 1BE. Telephone: 0208 519 2122.  
Information and helpline 08457660163. [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- **NHS Direct**  
Telephone help-line information. Talk confidentially to a nurse. Call at local rate, telephone: 0845 46 47.
- **Rape and Sexual Abuse.**  
Rape Crisis Centre – help line, support, counselling and information for women and girls who have been raped or sexually assaulted. Telephone: 0207 8371600. [www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk)
- **Relate**  
Help with marital or relationship problems. Herbert Grey College, Little Church Street, Rugby, Warwickshire CV21 5AP. Telephone: 0845 456 1310. [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)
- **Relate Northumberland and Tyneside**  
Help with marital or relationship problems – Mea House Ellison Place, Newcastle upon Tyne. Telephone: 0191 232 9109.

- **Safeline**  
A telephone help-line for people who have been abused. Telephone: 0808 800 5005. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings between 7.00 pm – 10.00 pm, and Tuesday and Thursday between 7.30 -9.30 pm. These times may vary according to holidays etc. There is a 24-hour answer phone available for messages. Office telephone: 0192 640 8315.  
[www.safelinewarwick.co.uk](http://www.safelinewarwick.co.uk)
- **Samaritans**  
Helpline telephone: 0845 790 9090. Confidential support for anyone in a crisis. [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)
- **Victim Support**  
Offers support and practical advice to victims of any sort or crime, including sexual abuse. Gabbubak Giysem Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre, London SE1 6TB. Support line: 0845 303 0900.  
[www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)
- **Women's Therapy Centres**  
Offer individual counselling and groups for women who have been sexually abused. Write to 6 Manor Gardens, London, N7 6LA or telephone 0207 263 7860. [www.womenstherapycentre.co.uk](http://www.womenstherapycentre.co.uk)

## Further internet sites that we have found useful

The internet is a source of help but please use with caution as some of the content may be distressing.

- **[www.survivors.org.au](http://www.survivors.org.au)**  
An Australian site with a lot of helpful information.
- **[www.metanoia.org/suicide](http://www.metanoia.org/suicide)**  
Part of a larger site, this offers support to people feeling very distressed or suicidal.
- **[www.ascasupport.org](http://www.ascasupport.org)**  
A whole site offering help to people who have experienced abuse. Offers guidance on safety, identifying support networks, resolving relationships.
- **[www.safeline.bigfoot.com/survivors.htm](http://www.safeline.bigfoot.com/survivors.htm)**  
A UK charity that also has a telephone help-line, offers information and support to survivors of abuse.

## Some useful books you may like to buy or borrow from your library:

- **Breaking Free. Help for survivors of child sexual abuse.**  
Carolyn Ainscough and Kay Toon.  
Sheldon 1996
- **Adult male survivors of childhood sexual abuse.**  
Kim Etherington.  
Pitman 1995.
- **A source book in child sexual abuse.**  
David Finkelhor.  
Sage 1996.
- **Outgrowing the pain: A book for and about adults abused as children.**  
Eliana Gil.  
Dell Publishing 1988.
- **Overcoming Childhood Trauma.**  
Helen Kennerley.  
Robinson Publications 2000.  
**Ghosts in the bedroom: A guide for partners of incest survivors.**  
K. Graber.  
Health Communications 1991
- **Strong at the broken places: Overcoming the trauma of childhood abuse.**  
Linda T Stanford.  
Virago Press 1991

Written by Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron with contributions from healthcare staff, service users in Northumberland and the Northumberland Survivors' Service Working Group.

**This leaflet can be made available in a range of formats on request (eg Braille, audio, large print). Please contact the Patient Information Centre on Tel: 0191 223 2545**

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