

Common Impacts of Sexual Abuse

Everyone reacts and copes with their experiences differently and there is no right or wrong way. We're all different and we all experience different symptoms and reactions following a sexual assault. It may, however, be helpful to know that your responses are common and normal for your situation.

How sexual abuse or assault affects you depends on a lot of things including, whether you were threatened with violence, whether you knew the offender, what the assault involved, what happened when you told, and what help you got at the time. People who otherwise have a good life with lots of social support, are more likely to be able to recover relatively well from the effects of abuse and trauma. Those who have other chronic stressors might find it more difficult.

Here's a list of some of the more common impacts survivors may experience:

Immediate Symptoms

Shock, numbness, confusion, shaking, feeling panicky and rapid breathing, nausea, being on alert all the time, anger, changes in sleeping/nightmares, not feeling safe, thinking it's going to happen again, changes in appetite, feeling out of control, feeling dirty, disbelief, self-blame, guilt, physical injuries or medical worries, feeling disconnected (like you're in a dream, like it's not really happening to you), flashbacks, difficulty concentrating.

Longer Term Symptoms

Being on "alert" all the time, loss of trust in people, flashbacks, moodiness and depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts or plans, self-harming, not feeling safe, finding it hard to be in relationships, sleeping difficulties (being scared to sleep, nightmares, or sleeping too much), guilt, shame, finding it hard to be on your own and feel o.k., anger, low self-esteem, using too many drugs and/or too much alcohol to help you feel better, taking risks you didn't use to e.g. wagging school, swearing at the teacher, fighting, having sex more frequently than usual but not really knowing why or feeling good about yourself afterwards, not wanting any intimacy, feeling like your anger is "out of control".

Common Impacts for Children

Signs and symptoms of sexual abuse are not always easy to identify and all children vary in their reactions. Although there may be some obvious physical effects, the less obvious psychological ones are also worth understanding. An addition to the effects and responses listed above; there are others that specifically relate to children. They include:

Children's self-esteem is undoubtedly affected by sexual abuse. They can develop a negative image of themselves and/or having low self-worth. Children who are sexually abused often blame themselves. This belief is planted and encouraged by the offenders as it helps to ensure the victims don't tell anyone about the sexual abuse.

Children who experience sexual abuse often lose their trust in adults and feel powerless. They frequently experience sadness, anger, feelings of isolation, problems with trusting people and difficulties in building or maintaining safe and healthy relationships. Children who experience sexual abuse may find it difficult to concentrate at school. They can be anxious, depressed, hostile/self-destructive behaviours or may behave sexually inappropriate.

Another possible impact for children is that they may regress to a seemingly younger age that may bring about sleep problems, bed-wetting or clinginess.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Trauma is an identifiable experience that was so overwhelming or life threatening that it destroys trust or prevents trust from happening again in relationships.

Post Traumatic Stress or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a series of symptoms (related to the traumatic event) that are still being experienced for some time (months, years) after the threat has passed.

Some of these symptoms could include:

- Flashbacks (feeling like you are reliving the event again and again)
- Avoiding anything or anyone that reminds you of what happened
- Sleep disturbances
- Frequent 'zoning out'
- Difficulty concentrating
- Always being on alert (hypervigilance)

You do not have to figure out how to manage these responses, feelings or reactions on your own. Southland HELP has trained professionals to support you and to help you understand what is happening. Research shows that the sooner you get appropriate support for yourself, like seeing a specialist counsellor, the better your chances are of healing. It is normal to feel scared or uncertain about counselling, so take time to find someone that you feel connected to and is experienced in the matter.