

QC0067 - Sexual Abuse

I have been working with victims of sexual abuse for 30 years. So today, I want to share some insights on the issue of sexual abuse.

As I said, I have been working with sexual abuse victims for 30 years. So I know that sexual abuse is a delicate and complicated topic which can't be thoroughly covered in a short podcast.

But today, I just want to give you an overview of sexual abuse. Hopefully, this podcast will give sexual abuse victims (and those who love them) a starting point to understand how the abuse has effected them and what they need to do about it.

What is Sexual Abuse?

Let's start with a definition of sexual abuse...

When it comes to sexual abuse in general, **The American Psychological Association** defines sexual abuse as, *"unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent."*

When it comes specifically to the sexual abuse of a child, the **Stop It Now Organization** says this...*"All sexual touching between an adult and a child is sexual abuse. Sexual touching between children can also be sexual abuse when there is a significant age difference (often defined as 3 or more years) between the children or if the children are very different developmentally or size-wise. Sexual abuse does not have to involve penetration, force, pain, or even touching. If an adult engages in any sexual behavior (looking, showing, or touching) with a child to meet the adult's interest or sexual needs, it is sexual abuse."*

How Does It Effect a Person?

Now most of us have a good idea of what sexual abuse is, but what we're not so sure about is how sexual abuse effects a person.

Though each victim and each experience is unique, there are some responses that often are common to all victims of sexual abuse. So, let's take a look at some of those.

First, sexual abuse...

Makes it hard to trust.

Often, the perpetrator of sexual abuse is someone the victim knew and trusted.

Someone like a:

- Parent.
- Grandparent.
- Family member.
- Coach.
- Teacher.
- Pastor or priest.
- Friend of the family.
- Someone you thought was a friend.

When someone you thought was trustworthy violates that trust in such a vile and injurious way, it can lead you to believe that no one can be trusted.

Creates an unhealthy need for control.

When someone is being sexually abused, they are not in control of their circumstances or even their own body. Consequently, those feelings of not being in control are linked with feelings of threat and danger.

Something in the victim says, "As soon as I can, I'm going to take control of myself and my situations so I never get hurt like that again!"

And so, everything they do is an attempt to control and prevent something bad from happening. They may:

- Resist leaving their child with a sitter. (This is also part of the trust issue.)
- Scan the room, making sure they know where the exits are.
- Sleep facing the door.
- Take the dominant position or role with their sex partner.
- Insist on being self-sufficient...even apart from their spouse.
- Avoid things they're unsure of.
- (The list goes on and on.)

It is amazing the things we will do to have a sense of control. The problem with this is that none of us have complete control over what happens to us. We cannot completely control our spouses, kids, friends, or circumstances. Consequently, the sexual abuse victim is in a constant state of alert and fear.

Which leads us to the next sexual abuse can effect a person...

Amplifies the fight, flight, or freeze response to difficulties.

There is a part of our brain known as the Amygdala. This is the part of the brain that responds to danger. When it senses danger, it moves us into a fight, flight, or freeze response to cope with the danger.

As I said, sexual abuse victims often live in a state of fear and high alert. They can view most anything as a threat, leaving them in a constant amplified state of fight, flight, or freeze...even if the threat is just perceived and not real. This is one reason why they can be easily and overly startled.

Because of this, the sexual abuse victim find it very difficult to just relax and enjoy what's going on around them.

Can fuel depression, anxiety, and an underlying level of anger.

To say that sexual abuse can fuel a person's depression, anxiety, and anger seems like a no-brainer. But, because the sexual abuse is "in the past," it can be easy to over-look it as core to your depression, anxiety, or anger.

But, when you start connecting the dots between present triggers and past experiences, then it's easier to see how past experiences can be fueling present emotions.

Leads to "checking out" when feeling uncomfortable.

Often, when a person who has been sexually abused encounters some difficult situation, emotion, or other trigger, you will see them sort of lose focus and maybe even stare off into space. Then, when you call them back, it's clear they weren't paying attention. They were "somewhere else."

This is a form of dissociation. It's a way of disconnecting emotional from the difficulty they're experiencing. This is often used as a survival tactic during the abuse, to help them get through an emotionally and physically overwhelming situation.

The problem is, that tactic carries into adulthood and becomes an automatic and unconscious response to perceived difficulty.

Other forms of dissociation or “checking out” can involve substance abuse, cutting, promiscuity, staying overly busy...anything that will disconnect you from experiencing the uncomfortable.

Leaves blanks or gaps in your memory.

This can tie in with the idea of dissociation.

Many sexual abuse survivors report gaps in their memories...especially around the time of the abuse. They might remember their childhood up to a certain point and then it jumps to a later time in life....as if a portion of memory was just erased.

Now memories are fragile things, and can easily be manipulated and altered. So just having a gap in your memory doesn't mean you suffered some sort of abuse. But when children experience sexual abuse, they can be so overwhelmed by the fear and pain that it's like their brain shuts down to spare them from the traumatic event.

For adults, they may remember everything up to when the perpetrator started abusing them, but then are unable to recall the details of what happened.

Makes it difficult to recognize and regulate emotions.

Many times, when I'm talking with a sexual abuse survivor and I can see that they're experiencing some sort of deep emotion. Maybe their jaw is clenched, or their eyes are tearing up, or complexion is turning red and blotchy, or they're shaking, or they're white-knuckling the arm of the chair. But when I ask them what they're feeling, they will look at me blankly and say, “I don't know.”

Sexual abuse victims have shoved down and avoided their painful emotions for so long, they don't even recognize them anymore...even though those emotions are clearly affecting them.

Or, a sexual abuse survivor may have trouble regulating their emotions. They feel things in big and overwhelming ways; which in turn can come out in their behaviors in big and overwhelming ways. This comes from feeling things as they did as a child and years of emotional suppression. As the person works through their trauma, they will learn to both recognize and regulate their emotions.

Interferes with relationships.

As you would imagine...because of all we've mentioned so far...it's not hard to see how sexual abuse and its effects can wreak havoc on a relationship. The difficulties with trust, the need for control, the heightened and unchecked emotional responses, the checking out...this all can make having a secure and lasting relationship difficult.

You can boil it down to intimacy. We all long to have an intimate relationship with someone. (I believe this is part of our created nature.) But sexual abuse is an abuse that takes place in the context of intimacy...physically, emotionally, sexually. So closeness and intimacy become triggers for fear and danger.

This leaves the sexual abuse victim trying to navigate a "safe closeness." They bring someone close to a point, but then it feels fearful because it feels like they're getting close enough to be hurt. Then they will push the person away (physically or emotionally.) But then, it feels like they're losing the person, so out of fear they start pulling the person closer. This is exhausting and maddening for both people in the relationship.

Fosters sexual problems and aversion.

It goes without saying that sexual abuse will create sexual problems...even in a loving and safe relationship.

It may not be apparent in the beginning of the relationship...in the honeymoon phase when both excited by the newness and trying to do everything they can to hold onto what they've found.

But problems will arrive later. Maybe it happens when they start to get comfortable enough to let down their guard or want new things. Maybe it happens when you have children. Maybe it happens when your partner does something to trigger you, and you can't ignore it or avoid it anymore.

Whatever it may be, a sexual abuse history will cause sexual problems in a current relationship. Some of the signs might be...

- An obvious and on-going aversion to sex.
- Checking out during sex.
- A need to always be in control during sex.
- A "let's hurry up and get this over with" approach to sex.
- An over-the-top or angry reaction to a certain approach or act.
- And occasionally, (though not common)an uncontrollable appetite for sex.

Sex is difficult enough for couples to navigate under “normal” circumstance. But a history of sexual abuse can throw a grenade in the whole sexual relationship.

Makes spirituality and faith difficult or unwanted.

For a person of faith, sexual abuse can rock that faith to it’s core. The abuse survivor can help but deal with the question, “Why would God allow this to happen...especially to an innocent child?!”

If you’re expecting me to give you a clean and clear-cut answer to this, I can’t. It’s a question that continues to beg and answer, even after 30 years of counseling sexual abuse survivors. And though I have some thoughts on it, even if I had a theologically correct answer, it wouldn’t feel good enough, because it wouldn’t take away the hurt and damage done to the victim.

On top of that, it’s extremely hard to relate to God as a Heavenly Father, if your earthly father was your abuser.

So, sexual abuse can rock, and even rob, a person of their faith, unless they are willing to work through it just like they have to work through everything else. (See the biblical book of Job for an example of someone who had to work through issues of “Who is God?” and “Can I trust Him?”)

A Couple of Things to Remember

First...the above issues can occasionally plague anyone, (including those with no history of sexual abuse.) That can make it hard for the victim to know if what they’re experiencing is normal or not. The key here is that sexual abuse intensifies and prolongs such responses to an unhealthy state. I often say that sexual abuse takes something “normal” and turns the volume up to 10.

Second...sexual abuse victims will often compare their abuse to others’ abuse, and they minimize their abuse if it “wasn’t as bad” as someone else’s. But you need to understand that despite the type and duration of the abuse, the response to the abuse is the same for all victims. I tell the people I work with, “Your abuse experience may not seem as bad as someone else’s, but remember that your worst experience is just that...your worst experience.”

What Should You Do if You’ve Been Sexually Abused?

And now, what should you do if you’ve been sexually abused? My guess is, my answer to this question is going to feel like a let-down to those have been

sexually abused. But the answer is simple. If you've been sexually abused, you need to do two things...

- Stop avoiding it.
- Seek help for it.

I told you it would feel like a let-down. But as I said before, sexual abuse is a very complicated, life-entrenched issue. There are no easy answers or quick fixes. If avoiding it could fix it, it wouldn't be a problem, because that's what most sexual abuse victims do. And if you could have fixed things yourself, you would have already done so.

This is something that requires qualified help and time to walk through and out of. But I can tell you, it will be worth all the time and effort to reclaim your life and freedom from a hurtful past.

A Final Word.

This is a very sticky and difficult topic to talk about. And it is not an easy one to decipher. But, I have seen people reclaim their life after horrible events of sexual abuse in their life. Not only that, but I've seen them grow and mature to the point that they could pour themselves into helping someone else who had experienced something similar. And I've seen them have successful, meaningful, full lives.

But I've seen others stay trapped and buried underneath grief, and hurt, and fear, and all the other things we've mentioned.

So the choice will be up to you. You can choose which path you follow. Neither path is easy, but one path leads you to hope, and possibilities, and new life, while the other path keeps you stuck. Which will you choose?