

What are the possible long-term effects of experiencing child sexual abuse?

www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk

Early experiences can greatly affect how a child or young person's mind develops. When someone experiences abuse as a child it can shape their emotional development - affecting both their sense of self-worth and their ability to trust other people.

And while long-term effects differ from person-to-person, you may be experiencing one or more of the following effects. These may be mild, or, they could be having a significant impact on your day-to-day life. You can find information to help you take care of yourself and find ways of coping on MindWell at www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/i-m-looking-for-myself/what-can-i-do-to-feel-better/practise-self-help/child-sexual-abuse-self-help

Difficult emotions

Dealing with difficult thoughts and memories can affect how you feel from day-to-day. People who were sexually abused as a child can feel [low](#), sad, angry or irritable sometimes and experience mood swings which can include feelings of intense distress and possibly thoughts of suicide.

Feeling alone and difficulty in having healthy relationships

Because children who experienced sexual abuse are often left feeling let down or 'betrayed' by the very people that they trusted - as adults they can often find it very difficult to trust other people. They can fear getting hurt or rejected - and either isolate themselves from other people, or, become too clingy or over dependant. Some survivors expect to be 'let down' or betrayed by people close to them which can mean they are more likely to be pulled into [difficult or abusive relationships](#).

Feelings of shame and guilt

A child who experienced sexual abuse is likely to have been manipulated or forced into keeping the abuse a secret - the abuser may even have tried to blame them for the abuse. As a result, feelings of shame, guilt and 'being to blame' for not stopping the abuse from happening, can become a central part of their self-image. This can especially happen if other people such as family members failed to protect the child from the abuse or reacted with shock or horror when told about what happened. Such feelings of shame can affect self-esteem - adult survivors can feel 'useless', 'different', 'bad', 'dirty', 'not good enough' or 'worthless' and these can become core self-beliefs. Survivors can also be overly self-critical, expecting too much of themselves known as 'perfectionism' or may not expect anything at all.

Feeling powerless

Because a child who experienced sexual abuse is likely to have felt 'invaded', manipulated and helpless to stop the abuse - adult survivors can often find it hard to assert their own needs in relationships and say no to other people. Some survivors can react in other ways - by behaving aggressively, trying to control other people or by developing an eating disorder - all as a means of taking back some control.

Sexual problems

Adult survivors of abuse can experience sexual difficulties including problems with physical contact and intimacy. Sexual contact can become connected in a child's mind with feelings of fear, shame, helplessness and disgust and this can affect and distort later sexual experiences. People who were abused can also question their sexuality, develop obsessions and trade sexual contact for affection.

Anxiety, phobias and panic attacks

The experience of living through the trauma of child sexual abuse can make adult survivors more aware and fearful about possible danger. It can be common to often feel [anxious](#) and fearful about bad things happening. Some survivors can also experience hypervigilance - a state of feeling constantly 'on guard' and looking for potential threats, [phobias](#) especially a fear of being in crowds and being around strangers and [panic attacks](#). A panic attack is a sudden and overwhelming feeling of fear and anxiety accompanied by physical symptoms including shortness of breath, dizziness and rapid heartbeat.

A panic attack happens when a primitive response known as '[flight or fight](#)', which developed millions of years ago to help us react to life-threatening dangers, is triggered for no obvious reason or by a trigger which does not pose a real physical threat. www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/i-m-looking-for-myself/why-am-i-feeling-unwell/anxiety

Flashbacks and nightmares

It is common for people who have experienced abuse in childhood to have 'flashbacks' about what happened to them. Flashbacks are very powerful memories which feel very real and can be very distressing. A survivor may feel like the traumatic event is taking place again and may even be able to smell scents, hear sounds or feel pain that they experienced at the time.

When someone experiences a distressing and traumatic experience the mechanism for sorting and storing memories can become overwhelmed and the mind is not able to process the experience, in the usual way. This means that the memory is still active and can be very easily triggered by anything that is a reminder of what happened - this could be a place, person, smell or sound.

Survivors can also 'relive' what happened to them through distressing nightmares or might dream about being trapped or chased by their abuser. Find help at www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/i-m-looking-for-myself/what-can-i-do-to-feel-better/practise-self-help/coping-with-flashbacks-and-dissociation

Dissociation

Dissociation is a feeling similar to that of 'day-dreaming' when you feel lost in your own thoughts and disconnected from events happening around you. The experience, however, can be more complete for people who have experienced child sexual abuse - sometimes survivors may have no memory of a period of time, feel as if they were outside of their body or may even adopt a different identity while experiencing dissociation. As with flashbacks, dissociation may be triggered by something that reminded the person of the traumatic event. It is an automatic response acting like a fuse which is there to protect you from an electric shock during a power surge. It can become problematic, however, if it starts to happen too often. www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/myself/feel-better/practise-self-help/child-sexual-abuse-self-help/coping-with-flashbacks-and-dissociation

Memory problems

Emotional trauma can also affect your memory. Both dissociation and memory loss are natural defence mechanisms which have developed to help us protect ourselves from recalling distressing and overwhelming experiences. Some survivors may only remember small fragments of what happened. It is also possible for some survivors to not recall whole periods of their childhood - they may have buried the memories deep down until a time when they may be more ready to cope with them. Sometimes memories or flashbacks can start to surface later in life - or, in some cases, may never emerge.

The above are all normal reactions to experiencing trauma and have been experienced by many other adult survivors. Many of these responses are the mind's way of protecting itself from re-living the distressing experience and from experiencing more pain and upset.

Some adult survivors may turn to different ways of coping to help them deal with or manage very difficult thoughts and memories. These can include:

- [Drinking too much, drug use or gambling.](#)
- Spending too much [money and problems with debt.](#)
- [Eating disorders](#) including anorexia, bulimia or overeating.
- [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder \(OCD\)](#) - including [obsessional worrying](#) or cleaning to get rid of 'dirt', fear of crowds or strangers and repetitive behaviour like biting nails or hair pulling.
- Self-harm www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/information-about-self-harm
- Other kinds of risky or impulsive behaviour which may be dangerous or unsafe.

What's important is that you are safe now and find the support you need. If you need to talk to someone about any of these issues - you can find help in **Need urgent help?** at www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/i-need-help-now