

## Surviving Child Abuse

Experiencing any form of childhood trauma and abuse can impact on an adult's quality of life in fundamental ways. It can make basic day-to-day activities, such as eating, sleeping, working and study difficult. Trauma and abuse in childhood can also affect your mental health, physical health, and your relationships with the people around you.

With the right help and support survivors can live healthy connected lives. Understanding the effects of trauma and abuse can help survivors connect their past experiences with their present challenges, and find pathways to a healthier future.

Survivors are often out of touch with their feelings - confused by emotions or reactions they cannot explain. They have often been raised in environments in which a child's normal expressions of upset or discomfort were punished or ignored. They may have been taught to attribute the negative emotions associated with childhood trauma and abuse, such as shame and anger, towards themselves. This confusion often persists into adult life, and can result in heightened experiences of:

Like everyone, survivors have a right to "a life worth living" ,but instead survivors often live with chronic distress and pain. For many survivors, these emotions are so much a part of their day-to-day life that they don't realise that there are alternatives. Unable to readily regulate their emotions they may seek to do so through alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, or other compulsive behaviours. Many survivors also harm themselves out of a sense of despair. All of these ' *coping strategies*' make sense in the context of childhood trauma and abuse.

Learning about emotions – what they are, where they come from, and how to respond to them – is a crucial part of finding a path to recovery. Survivors can learn new, effective ways of regulating the intensity of their feelings, so that they don't need to use alcohol or drugs and/or cut themselves to express their emotions. For many survivors, learning about the psychological impacts of their trauma or abuse helps them to understand why they have struggled for so long, and how they can move forward.

Acknowledging these feelings, understanding where they come from and why they are so intense is an important part of any survivor's journey.

Survivors often find it difficult to trust others. As children they might have been betrayed by the very adults who were meant to nurture and protect them. As a result, survivors often find it difficult to form and sustain relationships. A large survey of adult survivors of child abuse in Australia found that survivors had a higher rate of failed relationships and marriages, and reported lower levels of social interaction (Draper, Pirkis et al. 2008).

When children are abused they come to believe the messages their abusers deliver, such as: '*You are worthless*' and '*You have no value*'. Of course, these messages are not true, but children accept and internalise them. These messages become ingrained that, when a child who has been

abused or traumatised grows up, the adult survivor will often experience feelings of low self-worth or poor self-confidence. Rebuilding self-esteem is a gradual process, but a crucial one.

Childhood trauma and abuse doesn't just affect the mind - they can affect the body too. Children who feel perpetually in danger grow up with a heightened stress response. This in turn heightens their emotions, makes it difficult to sleep, lowers immune function, and, over time, increases the risk of a number of physical illnesses. They are also more likely to smoke and drink more than other people in the community, and be less physically active. These factors can all affect health and wellbeing in later life.

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