

Sexual Abuse Counselling

A Guide for Parents and Children



The counsellor helps you to understand yourself and your problems better. Then you can use this understanding to make better choices in your life.

Sexual Abuse Information Series 2008

This is one of ten booklets in the Sexual Abuse Information Series:

SEXUAL ABUSE COUNSELLING

A Guide for Parents and Children

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WHEN GIRLS HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

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VISAC (Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre) is a program of Family Services of Greater Vancouver. VISAC offers a wide range of services including specialized victim support services, individual and group therapy for children, youth, families, and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or trauma.

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Introduction

The term 'counselling' refers to a relationship between a counsellor and a person looking for help with a problem. The counsellor helps you to understand yourself and your problems better. You can use this understanding to make better choices in your life. We all go to friends or relatives for advice or support sometimes, but if the problem is complicated, we might need special help like the help of a counsellor. We shouldn't see this as a weakness, but as an intelligent way to solve a problem.

People go to counsellors for a number of reasons. They might be grieving the loss of a close family member, or trying to deal with a marriage that has failed. In either case they need a counsellor with a solid background of knowledge in that particular subject area. Since this pamphlet is to help people recover from sexual abuse, either their own or the abuse of a family member, we'll be talking specifically about sexual abuse counselling.

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is an abuse of power. It involves sexual activity forced on a child by either an adult or an older, more powerful child. Sexual abuse interrupts normal sexual development in children and forces them to deal with intensive thoughts, feelings and experiences

they are not ready for and that are often overwhelming, emotionally, psychologically and physically. Because the victims are powerless to stop the abuse and aren't old enough to understand what is happening, they may suffer emotional damage even if there's no physical damage. Sexual abuse can occur without intercourse or sexual touching. Exposure to adult sexual material such as movies, pornography or sexual activity may be damaging. The abuser causes further emotional damage to children by making them keep the abuse a secret. The shared secret then becomes a source of isolation and shame and this undermines the child's sense of self-worth and their ability to reach out and get help.

You may have heard the term "Post-Traumatic Stress" (PTS). It is a description of a person's normal reaction to an out-of-the ordinary, very stressful experience, such as witnessing or experiencing violence, abuse, war or natural disasters. Children who experience repeated trauma or

abuse are at risk of developing PTS. The degree of PTS is related to the seriousness of what happened to them, whether the trauma was repeated or not, and the relationship to the person causing the abuse. A child (or adult) who is experiencing PTS may be agitated, confused, acting-out, or seem numb, forgetful, depressed, withdrawn or "spaced-out". Children will need help to begin to feel safe in their world again and to help them recognize and deal with their feelings about what has happened to them.

How does sexual abuse affect children?

Children who have been sexually abused often continue to suffer even after the abuse has ended. Some of the psychological harm will be obvious to family members, but some of it won't.

The effects of abuse may take these forms:

Confusion. Children may have many mixed up feelings about what happened to them and about what happened after they told, depending on the reactions of family and friends.

Guilt. Children may feel guilty, believing they are in some way responsible for the abuse.

Shame. The guilty secret may make them feel worthless.

Fear. If the abuser has told them that something terrible will happen if they reveal the secret, they may be afraid.

Grief. Children may stop seeing the world as a safe and friendly place. They may mourn the loss of their sense of innocence and freedom. They may also mourn the loss of the relationship with the abuser if there had been a close bond between them.

Anger. They may feel intense, and often uncontrollable anger. Because they can't strike back at the abuser, they may lash out at another person — often the mother, for not seeing what was happening to them, for not stopping the abuse or for not protecting them. Or they may hurt themselves, others or a pet.

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Helplessness. Because they felt helpless at the time of the abuse, they may feel unable to resist sexual abuse in the future.

Depression. They may seem sad and less playful. They may lose interest in school, friends and activities.

Depending on how serious the abuse is, and on the child's nature, these feelings may show up in several ways, for example, physical complaints, problems sleeping, problems eating, irrational fears,

an inability to concentrate in school, macho or seductive behaviour and/or sexual aggression.

Even if there are no symptoms, it doesn't mean that the child doesn't need help – it just means that there are no outward signs of the abuse.

Does childhood sexual abuse affect you as an adult?

Yes. If you're an adult who was sexually abused as a child, you may have suffered for years from problems that never go away. If you're now suffering from drug or alcohol abuse, relationship breakdowns, sexual dysfunction, eating problems, or periods when you feel out of touch with reality, childhood sexual abuse

may be the cause. You may have been unable to tell anyone or were expected to forget about it and get on with your life.

Often adults who have put aside their own sexual abuse will have an intense physical and emotional reaction when their own child is abused. If this happens to you, you may want to begin counselling for both your child and yourself. Counselling is not about retelling and reliving what happened to you but about learning skills to help you manage your distress. This may seem hard to do. But at the same time, you may be able to see this crisis as an unexpected chance for both you and your family to become closer.

Even if you weren't sexually abused as a child, having to cope with the abuse of your own child may be the most difficult challenge of your life. If you can get counselling for yourself through this difficult period, it will also help your child with his/her counselling.

How can a counsellor help?

A counsellor can help you or your child in several ways.

- Help take you and your child through the things that are bothering you the most, one small step at a time, so the whole experience is easier to handle and less frightening. Our natural impulse is to want to 'put the abuse behind us' where we can forget about it – or even deny that it ever happened. This is why those who experienced child sexual abuse may have problems or symptoms they don't understand.
- Help you and your child understand the complex and confusing emotions experienced while the sexual abuse was taking place and after it ended.
- Help free you and your child from the effects of the past so you can enjoy happier lives in the future.

We can all change, grow, and heal ourselves, but most of us need help with it at some time or other.

Who are the counsellors?

Counsellors are people trained to listen and respond to their clients and to help them make changes in their lives. They may have different titles such as: psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, school counsellors, church ministers or art therapists. The important thing is that they are trained in trauma counselling and should know about sexual abuse.

In cities it may be easy to find a suitable trauma counsellor. If you live outside a large centre, it may be harder. However, in some rural areas you may find lay counsellors. These are usually people who want to help others and have received some training from a professional counsellor. Although they may not have university backgrounds, often they can be helpful.

Why go to a counsellor?

We all can change, grow and heal ourselves, but most of us need help with it at some time or other. Denying the abuse or pretending it doesn't matter keeps us from growing and healing ourselves. The counsellor is there to help.

Counselling is especially important when a child is betrayed by a person close to him/her, is struggling with the effects of the abuse and/or when s/he is not supported by the family when s/he discloses the abuse.

What will a counsellor do?

If you're an adult, a counsellor will talk with you about how you are coping and the skills you may need to manage your feelings and reactions. For a child, the counsellor will do exactly the same things but will probably work in a different way. Children don't usually like to sit around and talk

for long. In fact, they might not like to talk at all. A skilled counsellor can encourage children to express their thoughts, feelings and responses through such things as play, drawing or letter writing.

Children often believe that because they've been abused, they are different. This may make them feel isolated. In this case the counsellor may want the child to be in a group with other children who have been through similar experiences. Group counselling allows children to help one another just as adults do when they work in a group.

Because of the abuse, your child may feel 'weird' or 'not normal'. The counsellor will try to help your child change those feelings by showing a genuine interest in your child's everyday activities such as sports, hobbies, computer games and time spent with friends.

The counsellor will also emphasize from time to time that the abuser was the one responsible for the abuse. Most children need to be reminded of this often, because of their feelings of guilt and shame.

The counsellor will probably want to spend a lot of time with you as well, especially if your child is quite young. You'll want to understand your child's feelings so you'll know the best way to talk to him/her, and to handle problems as they arise. Because your child may have a distorted idea of normal sexual development, the counsellor may use books to give accurate information about sex.

How can a parent help?

It will make things easier if you can take part in counselling at the same time as your child is in counselling. In counselling you can learn a lot about sexual abuse, child protection and legal systems, and what will happen if the abuser is prosecuted. You'll learn to understand your own feelings. Parents often blame themselves, and you may need help to see where the blame really belongs. Going to counselling takes time and energy, but it is worth the effort. You'll have the satisfaction of being part of your child's recovery and you'll also learn about your child, yourself, and how the child protection and legal systems work.

Do all sexual abuse victims need counselling?

Possibly not. Most of us like to think we can take care of our problems ourselves and that counselling is for people who can't take care of themselves. However, if you think that either you or your child can go it alone, you could be making a mistake. Here is a good rule-of-thumb: If children can talk about the abuse and their feelings, have plenty of loving support at home, are doing well in school and in relationships and aren't showing any physical or behavioural symptoms, it's possible they can get by without counselling.

However, it's not a good idea to take that chance without getting a professional opinion – from someone who counsels sexually abused children regularly. You'll feel a lot more secure when you do.

When should counselling start?

Ideally, counselling should start as soon as possible after finding out about the abuse. Research has shown that families are most open to counselling when they are still in crisis. When families wait too long, they are much more likely to believe that they can forget about the abuse or pretend that it isn't important.

A skilled counsellor can encourage children to express their feelings through such things as play, drawing or letter writing.



How do I find a good counsellor?

All counsellors are not equal. There are good ones and poor ones, just as there are good and poor auto mechanics. To find one who's good for you, talk to a victim services worker, your doctor, child protection workers who deal with these cases regularly, and/or your community counselling agency or sexual assault centre .

Here are some things to ask yourself:

- Does the counsellor seem to like and respect you? Trust yourself. With a good counsellor, you feel good about yourself, about the counsellor and about the relationship.
- Does the counsellor believe your story (and your child's)?
- Does the counsellor fully understand the pain you and your child are experiencing?
- Does the counsellor cooperate with others? Good counsellors are willing to work with social workers, police, and victims' assistance workers.
- Does the counsellor specialize in trauma counselling and/or working with those who have experienced child sexual abuse?

If you don't feel comfortable with your counsellor ask for a referral to a new one.

What if I can't afford a private counsellor?

There are several alternatives to paying a counsellor out of your own pocket:

Doctor referral. If you are referred by your family doctor to a psychiatrist, you won't have to pay anything. However, psychiatrists usually have waiting lists , and you may have to wait for several months for an appointment. Before you put your name on a waiting list, try to find out if the psychiatrist you have chosen specializes in trauma and treating children or adults who have experienced sexual abuse.

Victim Assistance. If there is a police report on your child's victimization you and your family may be eligible for counselling from a psychologist or a social worker or a therapist registered for

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private practice. Check with a social worker, police officer, or victims' assistance worker to see if your child is entitled to free counselling through a criminal injuries compensation plan. These plans vary across the provinces and territories.

Extended health care. If you have an extended health care plan, you may be covered or partially covered for psychological services.

Other agencies. Find out if your child is entitled to free counselling by calling a sexual assault centre, a mental health centre or women's resource centre.

What if I don't like my counsellor?

First, talk to the counsellor about your feelings and see how s/he handles it. If you don't feel better about your counsellor after your talk, look for a different counsellor. You can also ask to speak with their supervisor or manager to make a complaint. Think of counselling as any other client service. Sometimes the counsellor also feels the relationship is mismatched, and won't take your decision personally. The counsellor might even be the one to suggest that you work with someone else. This shouldn't hurt anyone's feelings.

How will I know if my child or I have finished counselling?

Your counsellor, your child and you should decide together.

Here are some signs that you are almost finished:

- You (or your child) are more in touch with your personal strengths and are more able to manage the symptoms that brought you to counselling.

- Your child has regained self-confidence, and shows it in school and with family and friends.
- You (or your child) can take the occasional 'low day' in stride.

Once you have ended counselling, arrange with your counsellor to come back occasionally for a check-up. Sometimes, as children grow older, they see the abuse differently or their reactions to it might change. For example, if an adolescent who experienced sexual abuse started taking drugs, it would be a good idea to go back to a counsellor, the same one if possible.

What if my family doesn't support the idea of counselling?

Sometimes other family members present obstacles to counselling:

- Teenagers often resist counselling because they don't like being told what to do.
- You may belong to a family or social group that has never worked with counsellors before.
- Some family members may feel the best plan is to take revenge, not get help.
- Family members may feel the best plan is to ignore the abuse.
- Family members may wonder why you need to tell a stranger your family business.

In all of these cases, you need to be patient and persistent. You may even have to seek professional help in overcoming these obstacles before anything else can happen. Even if it's just you going to counselling, pursue it. It's better than no one getting help.

Additional resources are available at your community resource centre, your local library or the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

Don't be discouraged. Your own persistence may be key to securing the support you and your family need.