



## **Adult survivors of childhood sexual assault**

It is estimated that one in four girls and one in seven boys will experience some form of sexual or indecent assault before they reach the age of 18 years.

In most instances of child sexual assault the perpetrator will be known to the child, most commonly being a family member, family friend or trusted community member.

The perpetrator will usually use a number of strategies to make the child believe the violence is their fault or that telling will lead to something terrible happening.

### **Common responses**

Of adults who experienced sexual assault in childhood

Adults who experienced childhood sexual assault often report:

- that as children they felt they had to 'be strong' and 'show no fear'
- that they had to 'keep all their emotions bottled up'
- feeling hatred and anger at the perpetrator/s and those who should have protected them
- hiding both physically and emotionally

The behaviours and strategies that children develop in order to resist and survive can continue to affect them in their adult lives.

## Common impacts of sexual assault in childhood

While everyone responds differently to being sexually assaulted, there are some feelings that many adults who experienced childhood sexual assault talk about:

- A feeling of being in a bubble, feeling different and apart, being emotionally isolated.
- Feeling guilt, shame and self-blame for what has happened.
- Having difficulty trusting themselves and others, as their childhood trust has been betrayed.
- Experiencing 'triggering moments' such as smells, sounds or situations which bring back memories.
- Feeling the need to protect others and being over-responsible. A child who has experienced sexual assault is taught that the adult's needs come first. Many adults who experienced childhood sexual assault have difficulty asserting themselves. Many feel they have to look after everyone over and above their own needs.
- Often feeling depressed, angry, fearful and anxious and feeling like they are always on guard.

## Unhealthy coping strategies

Survivors may develop strategies to avoid overwhelming feelings, pain and memories, including:

- Eating problems, such as starving, bingeing, vomiting food, or overeating.
- Repeatedly thinking about wanting to die.
- Avoidance of sex, promiscuity, or experiencing fear and 'flashbacks'.
- Being a 'workaholic', over exercising, or other compulsive behaviours.
- Engaging in self-harm.

## Recovery from childhood sexual assault

For some, the childhood experience of violence leads to mental health impacts in adulthood.

It is important to remember that the impacts are a result of childhood experiences of sexual assault, and not because the adult has a personality disorder or is defective in some way.

**Recovery from childhood sexual assault is difficult.**

### How Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia can help

We provide 24/7 counselling, support, information and referral to anyone in Australia who has experienced or been impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence, regardless of how long ago the violence occurred.

Face to face counselling is also available for women who experienced sexual assault in childhood from a number of Women's Health Centers throughout NSW.

Recovery does not mean forgetting what has happened - a person who has experienced sexual assault will never forget.

It does mean recovering to the point where the violence becomes an experience in that person's life, not an event that controls and dominates their life.

### Contact Us

24/7 Counselling is available via:

**Phone:** 1800 737 732

**Online:** [www.rape-dvservices.org.au](http://www.rape-dvservices.org.au)

Factsheets on sexual assault, law and criminal justice processes, prevention, and the service can be downloaded from the website.

If you have questions regarding the material included in this handout contact administration:

**Phone:** 02 8585 0333

**Email:** [info@rape-dvservices.org.au](mailto:info@rape-dvservices.org.au)