



Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Assault

NSW Family & Community Services (FaCS) estimates 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. Child sexual assault is against the law and is a form of violence.

Mostly, the perpetrator will already know the child, most commonly being a family member, family friend or trusted community member. The perpetrator will usually use a number of ways to make the child believe the hurting is their fault or that telling will lead to something terrible happening. It is never the child's fault.

Adults who experienced childhood sexual assault report that as children, they felt they had to 'be strong' and 'show no fear'. They had to 'keep all their emotions bottled up'. Many report hatred and anger at the perpetrator/s and to those who should have protected them. Others report hiding the impact it has on them, both physically and emotionally. The behaviours and strategies that children develop in order to resist and survive can continue to affect them when they are adults.

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

- Feeling guilt, shame and self-blame for what has happened
- Having difficulty trusting
- Experiencing 'triggering moments' such as smells, sounds or situations which bring back memories
- Some adults who experienced childhood sexual assault have difficulty being assertive. Many feel they have to look after everyone and before their own needs
- Feeling depressed, angry, fearful and anxious and feeling like they are always on guard

Survivors may develop strategies to avoid overwhelming feelings and memories, such as:

- Eating problems, such as starving, bingeing, vomiting food, or overeating
- Avoidance of sex, promiscuity, or experiencing fear and 'flashbacks'
- Being a 'workaholic', over exercising, or other compulsive behaviours
- Self-harming
- Using drugs and alcohol to 'numb' themselves
- Repeatedly thinking about wanting to die

For some, the childhood experience of violence can lead 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 is possible, and can 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.

www.nswrapecrisis.org.au