

RECOVERING FROM CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

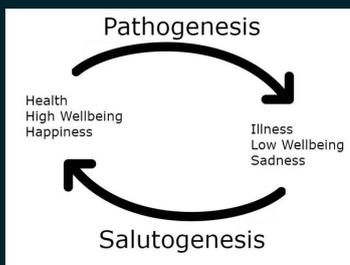
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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

People who have experienced childhood sexual abuse (CSA) are rarely valued for their knowledge. This research aimed to understand what they have learned and use it to help others.

SALUTOGENICS



This research took a salutogenic approach. This means that rather than focusing on the abuse itself or the damage it caused, I asked people what helped and hindered their recovering. The focus was on discovering what actions and experiences moved people towards better health and happiness.

INSIDER RESEARCH

I also experienced abuse. I don't see people who have experienced abuse as unable to contribute to or carry out research. Luckily the Wellcome Trust agreed and funded me.

WHO TOOK PART?

All participants were adults who had experienced childhood sexual abuse and described themselves as recovering. 140 people answered a survey. 21 of them also took part in interviews. The majority were from the UK but there were some from other European countries, the US, Australia and Canada.



ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Gender:

120 female
20 male
1 trans



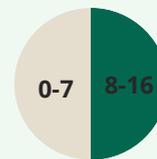
Ethnicity:

129 - White
4 - Asian or Asian British
1 - Black or African
1 - Multiple or mixed
3 - Other

Abused by:



49% - a family member
42% - an acquaintance
9% - a stranger



Age:

Half were under 8 when they were first abused. Three quarters were under 12.

WHAT ISSUES WERE IDENTIFIED?

TERMINOLOGY

Victim, Survivor or me?

There was no consensus about terminology used to describe people who have experienced abuse. Some actively chose the words victim or survivor but others did not like being defined by what had happened to them.

Recovery or Recovering?

There was agreement that people did not like the term 'recovery' because it suggested an end point whereas 'recovering' encompassed the idea of ongoing effort and doesn't exclude anyone. You are not always recovered but you can always be recovering.

Recovering is 'the shift from being a big bundle of trauma with just a bit of person on the side, to a person with an amount of trauma on the side'

'10 weeks here and there with the NHS or a charity meant that you felt as if you were jumping from life raft to life raft.'

LACK OF ACCESS AND FUNDING

76% viewed talking therapies as a positive influence upon recovering but there were many examples given where people struggled to access professional support, particularly longer term help. Counselling and therapy is valued highly, but difficult to access and poorly funded.

JUDGEMENTAL COMMENTS:

The overwhelming message from participants was that was that their abuse was compounded by the way individuals and the wider community responded to it. Many examples were given of poor responses from professionals and how this impacted recovering:

'After I took an overdose the doctors and nurses said I was an attention seeker'

'It was a long time ago. Buddy suck it up. Get over it.' From a GP

'Look how flirtatious that girl is,' A psychologist talking about a child

'I was also spat at by police officers, called derogatory names and laughed at while I was working on the streets in my preteens/early teens.'

'They publicly shamed me to the congregation as a liar'

Such comments reflect the neutralisations used by their abusers and thus reinforce the belief that: 'society is on our rapist's side - just as my family was on my father's side when I was being raped as a child.'



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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Be kind
- Be aware that up to 85% of adults who have been abused have cPTSD
- Understand the effects of trauma
- Question your own assumptions
- Challenge damaging discourses

'you need to listen to the adult survivors because until you hear them you are not going to understand, you are not going to learn. You can have all the training you want, you can have all the psychologists, all the psychiatrists, all the experts you want tell you 'This can happen in this situation' but until you speak to the people who have lived through it you are really not going to understand how insidious it is.'

'[My GP] got up from behind her desk and she knelt on the floor with me and she held my hand, talked to me and calmed me down and told me exactly what she was going to do.'

Recovering

In many ways, recovering is the opposite of being abused. It is about reclaiming rights, voice, choices and bodily autonomy.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

EVERY DISCLOSURE IS IMPORTANT

Talking about abuse is hard. Most, if not all, people who have experienced CSA have had poor reactions to speaking about it, others extremely bad reactions - often from close family members. Every time they talk about it, they revisit the child who wasn't heard, believed or taken seriously. A poor response can silence them and prevent them from accessing services.

Kindness is vital. A warm, understanding, caring and non-judgemental response validates their courage. Participants talked about important interactions with professionals that really changed their lives for the better. It is an opportunity for you to positively impact someone's life.

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

Abuse involves denying the child the right to choose. Recovering is most effective when the individual makes their own choices. Denying the right to choose or infantilising the individual echoes the abuser's actions and can be damaging. Mapping the individual's strengths, likes and dislikes then building on them will empower them in their recovering.

QUESTIONS

1) Are they safe?

Safety is vital for recovering, not just in the therapists room but in the individual's life. Many people who have experienced abuse do not feel safe and this needs addressing. However, some people really were not safe. Some participants reported that they became involved in abusive relationships in adulthood, others were bullied or harassed at home or work. Being safe is the bedrock of recovering. It is hard to focus on recovering when you are not safe.

2) What support do they have?

Participants reported that the most important factor that both helped and hindered recovering was other people. Supportive friends, partners and communities were very important. Finding those avenues for support is vital for recovering.

3) What do they like to do?

Nearly three quarters found creative activities helped, such as art, reading, writing, gardening, design, poetry and gaming. It does not matter what it is as long as it is challenging but achievable, absorbing and fun. This creates a mental state called flow. During flow you feel less anxious, more in control and safer. These benefits can carry over into everyday life.

4) How can you help them foster a better connection to their body?

Abuse creates a mental severance between body and mind so the body is an important area where recovering is created and expressed. Nearly half of the people who filled in the survey said they found touch and movement helped, such as sport, yoga, massage, walking and dance. These activities bring many benefits, including creating flow, releasing emotions and creating a feeling of safety.

'I haven't really felt safe to be open about what happened to me very much.'

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