



RECOVERING FROM CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

RESEARCH CARRIED OUT BY DR CLAIRE CUNNINGTON, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

ABOUT MY RESEARCH

Those of us who have experienced childhood sexual abuse are rarely valued for our knowledge. My research was designed to understand what people who describe themselves as recovering from childhood sexual abuse have learned. The fundamental idea is that someone who's found their own way through a similar experience may be the best person to help you

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. 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.

RESULTS

ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO TOOK PART

Gender:
120 female
20 male
1 trans



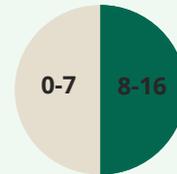
Ethnicity:

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



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?

Some people described themselves as a 'victim' or a 'survivor' but others did not like either word.

RECOVERY OR RECOVERING?

Most people did not like the term 'recovery' because it suggests an end point where everything is over and done with. This was seen as unrealistic. They preferred the word 'recovering' because it describes 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'

'To suggest that somebody ...can resolve the issue in 6 one-hour sessions is complete nonsense!'

ACCESS TO AND FUNDING FOR SUPPORT

There were many examples given of people struggling to access support from family and professionals. Counselling and therapy is valued highly but poorly funded. It is also limited in the amount of sessions a person can access.

HURTFUL COMMENTS MADE BY FAMILY AND PROFESSIONALS:

- 'It wasn't abuse. It was just experimenting.'
 - 'Stop being so bloody selfish.'
 - 'It was a long time ago. Buddy suck it up. Get over it.' From a GP
 - 'The police never took my reports seriously when I was a child.'
 - 'They publicly shamed me to the congregation as a liar.'
- When people try to talk about the abuse they have experienced, the responses can be unsupportive or judgemental. Family members frequently don't want to face the truth and they sometimes choose to side with the abuser.

THESE ATTITUDES AND JUDGEMENTS MUST CHANGE



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SUGGESTIONS

Ask yourself the questions opposite and think about what you can do to support your own recovering. Ask people you trust to help you. It's not easy and everyone stumbles, but when we put more time into ourselves, and access the help we need, it's easier to move from more negative ways of coping to more positive ones.

Recovering is a life-long process. We can't forget, but we can keep trying to live the life we deserve. I hope these ideas help.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

- 1) Get tested for cPTSD. Evidence* suggests that over three quarters of adults who experienced CSA have cPTSD.
- 2) Attitudes need to change. Join a local or national campaigning group, if you feel ready to do that. Some of the participants reported that this helped their own recovering too.
- 3) Please do contact me with ideas for future research. What should we be finding out?

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*Rodriguez, N. et al. (1996) 'Posttraumatic stress disorder in a clinical sample of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse', Child Abuse and Neglect, 20(10), pp. 943-952.
Johnson, D. M., Pike, J. L. and Chard, K. M. (2001) 'Factors predicting PTSD, depression, and dissociative severity in female treatment-seeking childhood sexual abuse survivors', Child Abuse and Neglect, 25(1), pp. 179-198.



RECOVERING

Recovering can be described as the reversal of abuse. It is about reclaiming your rights, your voice, your choices and your body.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1) AM I SAFE?

Safety is vital for recovering, not just in the therapist's room but in your life and many participants referred to it. Some told me about negative experiences in adulthood, such as abusive relationships or bullying at work, that had traumatised them further. Being safe is the bedrock of recovering. It is hard to focus on recovering when you don't feel safe.

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

2) AM I HEARD?

'He listens, he understands, there's never any pressure and never has been over the years that we've been together. That really, really helps.'

Many people reported that, in general, people didn't want them to talk about what happened to them. Friends and partners who listened without judgement were appreciated so much. A quarter of people who took part said that relationships were the most important factor in recovering.

For professionals, a warm, understanding, caring approach was really valued. Participants talked about important interactions that really changed their lives for the better. Counselling and therapy were valued by three quarters of survey respondents.

3) WHAT DO I LIKE TO DO?

Abuse involves denying the child the right to choose. Recovering works best when the individual makes their own choices. 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.

'Creativity is vital. Creativity is life itself.'

4) HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY BODY?

'Feeling stronger has helped me feel safer in my body...I'm not a kid anymore but I can still feel as helpless.'

The body is an important area where recovering is created and expressed. Abuse creates a mental severance between your body and your mind. Recovering involves making friends with your body again. Nearly half of the people who filled in my 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, helping you feel safer because you are stronger and faster.