

ABUSED AS A CHILD

Child Abuse That Happened To You

Did something happen to you as a child that still affects you in a hurtful way? Having been abused as a child, sexually, physically, emotionally, or all of them is a heavy weight on a person's life. Memories can be oppressively painful and keep returning. Experiences we don't even remember can return in the form of inexplicable physical sensations, mood swings and self-sabotaging behavior. Chronic anger and/or fear and anxiety are common consequences of having been abused.

Because abuse at an early age impairs our ability to trust, the baggage it creates can be most intense when we try to be close to someone and build an intimate relationship.

In the following pages, I want to present you with two important understandings about child abuse that happened to you.

1. Having been abused as a child really matters, stays with you and doesn't just go away as you get older.
2. A great deal is known about how to work with (process) the experience of abuse and greatly reduce the damaging effect it will have on the rest of your life. You really can take your life back from child abuse.

The following is a brief explanation of the problems resulting from childhood abuse and a description of how psychotherapy can help you recover from it. This material is not meant as a replacement for psychotherapy.

PTSD

Most people know the term post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as something that happens to soldiers at war. The experience of being abused as a child also induces PTSD. Repetitive traumatic events in childhood would be called complex PTSD as opposed to one sudden highly traumatic event experienced as an adult, which would be called simple PTSD. Both complex and simple PTSD can be devastating, but complex PTSD is more woven into a person's sense of self and requires a more complex treatment. Also, childhood abuse often leads to a sense of shame in the recipient that can be a tremendous burden.

The essential elements of PTSD are that something happened that was overwhelming, got stamped into the nervous system and keeps returning. It can return as flashbacks, nightmares, dysfunctional beliefs, emotions and sensations in the body. PTSD compromises our ability to protect ourselves with the right amount of force. We tend either to be unable to assert ourselves or to do overkill. Being subject to sudden explosive anger is a clue that PTSD is present. Sudden anger way out of proportion to what triggered it may indicate a flashback is occurring.

While neglect is not the same as abuse, it also carries a heavy burden. I will discuss neglect later in these pages.

NOT ABOUT BLAMING YOUR PARENTS

Trashing your parents for having abused you is not the point of therapy. Many people who have been abused still love their parents. Whether you do or you don't love them, the purpose of exploring what happened to you is to take an accurate inventory of your experience in order to be able to understand and deal realistically with your reactions now. A realistic grasp on how you got to where you are today is often a major steppingstone towards healing and taking control of your life.

There is a major difference between blaming your parents versus accurately sorting out what happened to you. You can still love or hate your caretakers. That is up to you. Just understanding that you were not born with the bad feelings you are experiencing now is an important step towards healing. The real victory comes with getting the past out of the present. Even if your parents made a mess, they will not be cleaning it up for you. Only you (perhaps with help from a qualified therapist) can do that.

It is often the case that the abuse did not come from our parents but from some other older person in our life. In that case the issue tends to be a sense of not having been protected. This can raise issues such as "Will I ever feel safe?" and "Was I really cared about?" These doubts can poison future relationships.

THE POINT OF EXPLORING THE PAST

Psychotherapy has a reputation for exploring the past. I certainly don't believe that all individuals need to spend a lot of time doing that. However, when a person has been abused, the past is not past but is still here affecting the present. You may still be having a lousy childhood.

People who care about you and want to help you leave the past behind will offer you such advice as "get over it", "move on", "don't dwell on the past", "that was a long time ago.", etc, etc. However, you may be finding that hard to do. Overwhelming undigested past experience may still be psychoactive and may continue to limit your well being until you are able to process it. I will explain what processing is.

ACTUALLY GETTING OVER IT

We have all heard the contention that time heals all wounds. This is only half true. Time offers the opportunity for us to heal our wounds. If we do not actually heal them, then time scars them over. The part of our brain where psychological trauma is stored (the limbic system) does not record the passage of time. To the wounded part of us, it all happened yesterday. We are talking about circuits in the brain that just keep on firing giving us the same inner experience of pain even though the other people involved in the original experience might be long dead. We are

continually subject to false alarms based on a past in which the alarms signaled real danger. The painful experiences we have buried are buried alive.

CAN YOU TRUST ANYONE?

Our early experiences serve as programming. The way our caretakers treated us becomes a template for what we expect from new people. If we were loved, respected, treasured, guided, supported, and given tools to deal with the world, then the past stays with us as a deep internal resource. We develop a sense of self as worthy and capable. We have a well of self-confidence from which we can draw.

If something very different and very painful happened, whether we remember specifics or not, we will draw upon and be guided by pain. Pain is a powerful teacher. The lesson that **I can't trust anyone** is so impactful that it can shape a lifetime and prevent us from creating the connections to other people that we need and deserve. The conclusion that **hope just leads to disappointment** is also toxic and difficult to shake.

ATTACHMENT

There is a whole subfield of psychology called attachment theory that focuses on the period of time during which we are dependent on our parents or other caretakers and the effect that has on the rest of our lives. Human beings have a long period of dependence on our caretakers for our basic physical survival and for our programming. Contrast this to a baby spider that is programmed by instinct. Soon after birth a baby spider can do everything an adult spider can do but on a smaller scale. It didn't have to learn all that through experience. It is hard wired. Our training is different and prolonged.

As a baby human, you also had instincts, but unlike the baby spider, the world you were inheriting was so complex and variable that instincts just couldn't provide all that you needed. You required years to learn English, Mandarin or Spanish. You needed time to learn the ins and outs of being a person among the people of your family and society.

Learning from experience complemented your instincts and gave you the skills that the little spider got mainly by instinct. As a baby human you had little direct power over the world and did not know the ropes. For a number of years, much of what you learned was programmed by your parents or other caretakers. Most importantly, they taught you who you are and what you could expect from other people. Do you remember the old computer term garbage in, garbage out? If garbage was coming in, you were not in much of a position to assess or filter it. This was partly because you didn't know much, but it was also because you were dependent on the good graces of your parents for survival. Few children can effectively protect themselves if their parents are pushing a distorted view of why life in the family is such a hurtful experience. Often a child's programming includes the assertion that the child himself is responsible for any unhappiness in the family.

GOOD ENOUGH PARENTING

Parenting is a very, very hard job. No parent, however loving and competent can do a perfect job. Luckily a perfect job is not necessary. Good enough parenting generally consists of the caretakers having their own needs reasonably in order and being able to meet a baby's basic needs including the need for emotional support and guidance. Most of all, good enough parents allow the baby to learn who he or she is as a person. Good enough parents create an environment where a baby can sort through his or her own sensations and emotions to learn the sense in them. This self-awareness becomes a trustworthy data bank, a resource to draw upon that gives the grown person a way that is independent of other people's approval to know what is what.

The big if here, is the caretakers having their own needs met. The widely known secret is that many, many parents do not have their own emotional lives in order and require in one way or another that their children take care of them. Here are four unfortunate, but common examples.

The first example is the teenage mother who needs a mother herself. She may resent the child because of the demands and restrictions it places on her. She may expect the baby to make her life worthwhile, to make her feel loved.

The second example is a drug addict, alcoholic or rageaholic (person addicted to her own anger) who is not really emotionally present on a consistent basis for the child and who probably requires the whole family to play make believe around the secret of her abusive behavior.

The third example is a parent who was himself abused as a child and has tremendous unfinished business with his own childhood. This gets awakened when he has children. He may play out his conflicts on his child who has found herself in the middle of a drama that started perhaps generations before she was born. This is particularly true of molestation which tends to go from generation to generation. Because the parent himself was abused as a child, he repeats the same mistakes as his parents for lack of knowing a better way.

The fourth example is a mentally ill parent whose treatment of the child is a function of a periodic disruption in their own mental functioning. One client, the possessor of a probably bi-polar mother shared this with me. "One day I could leave my glass in the middle of the table and she would scream at me for leaving it too near the edge. The next day, I could leave it near the edge and she wouldn't say anything about it." This situation where the parent accuses the child of being responsible for the parent's unhappiness is particularly damaging as the child can tie himself in knots trying to do something to avoid the parent's anger.

SURVIVAL REQUIRES AVOIDING ABANDONMENT

I want to emphasize that a baby's number one priority is to not be abandoned and left to die. This is something that the baby is armed with instincts to avoid. In a

healthy family, the many ways in which the parents and the baby bond protect the baby. But if it is not happening, the baby can sense it. Even a two month old baby can tell the difference between a smile and a frown. The baby will smile back to the smile. The baby will become disturbed by the frown. If the mother's face suddenly becomes blank, this is quite upsetting to the baby. If it goes on too long, he may sink into depression.

The baby is hardwired to try to create bonding as a simple matter of survival. If he is not getting approval he will be upset and try to make his parents love him. He will be anxious and will develop high-powered antenna for rejection. His emotional and social development will start to center around the task of trying to find security in an insecure environment. He may well develop a view of himself as unlovable. The resources that he would have used to build a life and rewarding relationships get diverted into avoiding abandonment fear and managing emotional pain. This could easily include convincing himself that his childhood was wonderful. It often includes a sense of being unworthy.

CO-DEPENDENCY

Some people show this insecurity by obviously low self-esteem. Others create the appearance of superiority as a cover up, but it is brittle and they are easily upset at criticism. Co-dependency would be a reasonable descriptor of the state of being highly reactive to perceived invalidation by others. It can manifest itself in a style of being too nice and ending up vulnerable to manipulation. It can also result in chronic anger, resentment, passivity, or anxiety.

An important point is that emotional and intellectual development can take different paths. Some people who were abused as children were encouraged to develop themselves intellectually. I have had many clients who were being very successful in a career, making good money, perhaps highly educated and/or famous and yet were miserable inside. They were winning, but were having the inner experience of losing. There is an outstanding book describing this phenomenon written by Alice Miller called *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. It was first published in English in 1981 and is quite readable both for mental health professionals and for people just wanting to understand themselves.

SHAME

Shame has been called the master toxic emotion. It is the feeling that we are not really worthy of people's respect and affection. It is the sense that "If people knew what I'm really like, they would be turned off and reject me." It is a direct consequence of an abusive childhood.

Social rejection causes the same part of our brain (the anterior cingulate cortex) that registers physical pain to light up. The pain of being told we are not good enough and of being blamed for our parents' unhappiness is intense. It is just as real as the pain that comes from a physical injury and probably causes more suffering. We experience that pain as shame. When that experience has been intense or

prolonged, it can become a template for our life. Until we can process the experience that overwhelmed us with pain, it is very difficult to see ourselves as OK and worthy.

NEGLECT

Neglect causes many of the same problems as abuse, but is more slippery to deal with. It is easier to focus on something that happened than on something that should have happened but didn't. Individuals who were not traumatized but just didn't get the quality of attention, support and guidance they needed are often confused or vague about why they don't seem to be able to feel good about themselves. Once they appreciate that they are not imagining that something was wrong, much of the healing work of therapy is similar to treating abuse.

In a large family, some kids may get lost in the shuffle. Nobody meant to neglect them. There just wasn't enough quality attention to go around.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Abuse is about crossing boundaries. When an adult uses a child for sexual gratification, it creates tremendous damage in a child's life. Here are some of the common damaging aspects:

The imbalance of power makes it a predatory rather than a consensual event. The molester's need to hide what he/she has done requires secrecy and often leads to threats. Betrayal leads to a shattering of the sense of safety.

The powerful energies inherent in sexuality get called up in the child before the emotional and intellectual resources needed to handle them are developed. This is very confusing to the child and can lead to a lifetime of sex being all about power and mistrust rather than about love and a mutually enriching bonding. When the child becomes an adult, she may operate under the assumption that she is only lovable as a sex object.

There may be physical pain inflicted. This can get encoded into the nervous system. The grown up child may experience a lifetime of emotional and physical anguish without even knowing where it is coming from. Rewarding sexual relations in an adult relationship may be impaired.

REAL HEALING

The issues are:

Is it possible to truly get over abuse and heal?

and if so

What would it take to really heal yourself from the effects of abuse and get past it?

These two questions are at the heart of our discussion here. I have dedicated much of my 40 years of practicing clinical psychology to these issues and want to share with you what I have observed and learned.

GETTING OVER HAVE BEEN ABUSED

It will never be as though it didn't happen, but you can recover your life. Your relationship with the child abuse can go from you being the horse to you being the rider. Healed wounds can be a great source of strength. Many people I have worked with have gone from a sense of being defective or a victim to a clear awareness that they are actually a heroic survivor. At that point, life can feel quite different than it did before.

PROCESSING OUR EXPERIENCE

I have used the word processing to describe the way in which one truly heals from childhood abuse. I want to provide a clear picture of what processing really is. Everything that happens to us that is strong enough to register in our nervous system is information. A child is like a sponge in his/her ability to take in and learn from what happens. This occurs irrespective of whether or not she is conscious of what she is learning. Many observers have concluded that most of the important early lessons we learned, are not conscious but more resemble conditioning. This does not make the experience less influential on our lives. It just embeds it outside of our consciousness. The experiences we had before we mastered words and language are encoded in our mind/body in ways that are deeper than words.

Pain is a highly impactful teacher. It is also a very disruptive one. Research has clearly demonstrated that even an unborn fetus is subject to conditioning and is affected by his mother's emotional state. We are hardwired to be responsive to pain. It is a danger signal that sends us into what I will loosely call fight, flight or freeze arousal. Pain that is paired with a sense of powerlessness tends to overwhelm the nervous system. Too much of this sets a child up to easily go into the states of emergency arousal that I listed above.

Unresolved experiences of emotional pain create triggers or false alarms. The resultant frequent mobilization sets up major emotional, behavioral and physical problems. It puts us into a defensive stance in life. Even if we have no idea that anything happened, our body is keeping score and repetitively warning us through our emotions, behaviors, sensations and beliefs that we were hurt and are in danger of getting hurt again. On a deep level, we are waiting for it to happen again. We are a victim compelled to keep reconstructing a crime scene that we may not even remember having happened.

If we do remember what happened, we have a somewhat different problem. We are relieved of some of the sense of bewilderment and mystery as to why we don't trust,

can't relax and aren't enjoying our life more fully. But we pay for that awareness with images that scare and perhaps infuriate us.

If we have been abused, our mind/body possesses highly compelling information that is not coherent to us and which continually generates false alarms, signals that seem to be coming from the world but actually are coming from our past, creating the sense in us that we are in danger. We keep reacting to this conditioning from the past as though something was happening now. Our reactions to the false alarms to which we are continually being subjected bring on the very pain, disruption and isolation that we so want to avoid. We can hardly help it. We may want to trust, to bravely live our lives and have real relationships, but we are dealing with unprocessed information that creates a great deal of illusion and chaos in our lives. We find it very difficult to make an accurate assessment of safety because pain and lack of words make it hard to get clarity about what we are feeling. Our logic and rationality, helpful as they are in many ways, are not enough to protect us against unprocessed pain.

So what is real processing? Simply put, processing is getting in touch with the deepest level of what is really hurting you and separating out what is in the past from what is happening now. The outcome is recovering yourself, gaining the ability to feel safe and to operate in the world with confidence. Generally people who have been able to process what happened to them in an accurate way find they like themselves a lot more and aren't so angry or afraid of other people.

We are not talking about purely intellectual insight. An intellectual understanding is valuable, but it needs to be connected to our inner emotions to be sufficient for healing to take place. Real processing requires that we get it in our gut too. Real healing requires that we bring together the gut and the intellect. We have to put together feeling with thinking. When we do that, we can really use what we know.

WHAT DOES PSYCHOTHERAPY CONTRIBUTE TO THIS?

Processing abuse is greatly aided by a safe environment, a knowledgeable nonjudgmental guide and the willingness to put time and continuity into the project.

Another way to put all this is that you have been working around the bogeyman in the closet all your life. Now you and your therapist are going into the closet together with a flashlight and a baseball bat and bringing the bogeyman out into the light.

All of the above is why psychotherapy is called "work". You bring to the meeting your pain, courage and desire to take back your power from the bogeyman. I bring a calling for the work, experience, a safe environment and a tremendous desire to see you free from the burden that childhood abuse has put on you..

Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR) is a very powerful tool for promoting the kind of healing and freeing oneself that we have been contemplating.

For more on the technology of processing pain from the past, please go to my section on EMDR. <http://www.arlenring.com/emdr4traumarecovery.php>

For more on anger which so often results from having been abused as a child, please go to <http://www.arlenring.com/angermanagement.php>

I hope this has been helpful.

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