

Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse

By Daniel Keeran, MSW
College of Mental Health Counseling
www.collegemhc.com

The College of Mental Health Counseling presents a summary process for healing childhood sexual abuse that is sometimes an issue underlying mood and anxiety disorders, PTSD, marital problems, suicidality, addiction, eating disorders, borderline and histrionic personality disorders, other mental distress.

The experience of sexual abuse in childhood is one of the most sensitive kinds of trauma addressed in counseling. Those in the helping professions need clear and practical approaches to assist survivors of sexual abuse, recognizing that the healing process may be lengthy and that a single counselor may realistically only be able to help the individual partially heal the pain and effects of the abuse.

This report is adapted from the book "Effective Counseling Skills" by the author, in digital and hard copy at <http://www.amazon.com/Effective-Counseling-Skills-therapeutic-statements/dp/1442177993>

Healing the experience of childhood sexual abuse involves helping the client begin to disclose the experience, addressing the painful emotions associated with the abuse, understanding the affects and unhealthy decisions and beliefs related to the abuse, and then adopting healthy decisions and beliefs and caring self-talk.

CONTROL AND SAFETY

The survivor of sexual abuse has experienced a significant loss of power and control over their own choices. The counselor needs to be aware of the client's need for control and safety which means talking about the abuse if they choose, saying only as much as they feel safe to share, going slow in the disclosure process and processing the process by saying things like: "What has it been like talking about just this much so far?"

Going slow through the healing process can be helped by saying, "Say just a little about what happened," and "Only say as much as you feel safe to say."

THE CYCLE OF HEALING

The process of healing involves moving through the awareness cycle of first becoming aware of the painful emotions, then feeling safe to disclose, then engaging the painful emotions, then withdrawing from the pain.

During the withdrawal phase, the counselor can move the client from emotional exploration to a cognitive thinking level of exploring affects of the pain on his or her life. The cognitive level of understanding and insight is a safe place to go and detaches from emotional pain.

GUILT AND SHAME

An area of healing, that abuse survivors often need to address, are feelings of guilt or shame: feeling perhaps responsible for the abuse, causing or allowing the abuse, or feeling pleasure from the abuse. This pain may leave them feeling worthless and sometimes believing their only worth is in giving and receiving sexual pleasure.

The process of healing guilt and shame involves reversing the self-blame from anger toward self to anger toward the sex offender. The offender took advantage of childhood vulnerability by saying, "I won't be your friend," or "I will give you this prize," or "It feels good."

The guilt and shame resulting from feeling pleasure can be addressed by saying, "It was not your fault. He touched you in a place that is made for pleasure, so he took advantage of your childhood curiosity. How do you feel toward him for doing that?" When the client identifies anger, the counselor can say, "You have every right to feel that. Say more about it."

RESTORING HEALTHY DECISIONS AND SELF-TALK

The survivor of sexual abuse can be helped by becoming more aware of inner dialogue derived from painful unresolved emotions related to the abuse and replacing negative self-talk with healthy, caring self-talk. The inner dialogue also reveals the unhealthy behavior decisions that often come from sexual abuse. These often unconscious decisions repeat and perpetuate the abuse and serve to maintain the abuse by allowing it to continue to affect and restrict the healthy adult life of the survivor.

Here are some examples of unhealthy decisions and what different painful emotions may say, followed by suggested healthy self-talk:

Fear says: "He will not like me unless I give him sex."

Healthy self-talk: "If he does not like me without sex, he is not a person I need as a friend because he does not care about me, only about his own pleasure. I need and deserve someone who sincerely cares for me even if I do not want sex."

Inadequacy says: "I cannot be close to someone without being sexual with him."

Healthy self-talk says: "I can be close without being sexually close. I can be close by sharing my emotions, hopes and dreams, and interests."

Shame says: "I am a bad, shameful person because I did a bad thing and I liked it."

Healthy self-talk: "He took advantage of my sexual curiosity as a child. I was an innocent normal child with normal sexual feelings."

Low self-worth says: "I am only good for one thing."

Healthy self-talk: "I am a worthwhile person and have much to contribute that has nothing to do with sex. Because I care for and respect myself, I will only share sex in a lifetime mutually committed relationship."

Fear of intimacy says: "I do not trust men, and I will never again let a man get close to me or touch me sexually."

Healthy self-talk says: "I want to take a safe risk to give and receive healthy caring and closeness. I will not let the abuser win by continuing to control me and prevent my happiness with a healthy caring man."

Guilt says: "The abuse was my fault. I loathe myself and deserve to be punished with a life sentence of suffering more abuse and choosing unhealthy selfish people."

Healthy self-talk: "The abuse was not my fault. I do not deserve to be punished but to be protected and to protect myself from abuse by choosing healthy caring people and relating in healthy caring ways."

Denial fear says: "It wasn't his fault. I am not angry with him, and I don't feel guilty."

Healthy self-talk says: "The abuse was his fault because he was the adult and I was the child. It's OK for me to feel angry toward him. I will help myself heal and reassure myself that I was innocent and he was guilty."

Displaced anger says: "I am angry at all men and want to punish all men by hurting them. All men are the same."

Healthy self-talk says: "I am only angry at the abuser. I will not judge other men for what one man did. The man who sincerely cares about me is different than the man who abused me. Just because a man is sexually attracted to me does not make him like the man who selfishly took advantage of me."

For more knowledge and skills in counseling visit <http://www.collegemhc.com> and see the video from the author here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aodrYDAo9xk>