Rape Crisis and Victim Services Program
The Women’s Center of Tarrant County, Inc.

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OF TARRANT COUNTY, INC.

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SURVIVOR
A Guide for Adults Molested as Children

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WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse happens when a child is forced, tricked or coerced into sexual contact. This includes touching and non-touching forms of sexual contact such as fondling, oral/genital contact, intercourse, exposure, pornography, prostitution and obscene phone calls. Legal definitions vary from state to state.

WHAT ARE SOME FACTS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Statistics show that one in four females will be or have been a victim of child sexual abuse by the age of 18; and one in six males will be or have been victimized by this crime by the age of 18.¹ Many experts estimate that out of an average class size of thirty children, five or six have been affected by sexual abuse. Some statistics say that about 95% of victims know their offenders.² Most of the time a child is not sexually abused by a stranger.

From a nation-wide study of adult survivors in treatment conducted by the late Dan Sexton, then the Director of the Survivors of Childhood Abuse Program in California, and Dr. Jon Conte, who was with the University of Chicago at the time, preliminary results indicated some common experiences of child sexual abuse survivors. Some of these are as follows:

- 73% of the sample experienced generalized fear and anxiety.
- 50% of the sample indicated some form of suicidal ideation.
- 75% said they experienced severe depression and/or mood swings.
- 40% suffered from eating disorders.
- 28% were raped as adults, and 30% were battered as adults.
- 90% said they knew the abuser with 2/3 being relatives.
- 66% or 2/3 said they never told anyone about the abuse before the age of 18.³

³ Sexton, Daniel and Karen Gunn. Survivor's Guide. Survivors of Childhood Abuse Program, Childhelp, USA, publication date absent.
Child sexual abuse by stranger, trusted friend or family member is a serious crime. It crosses all economic, racial, ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries. Its after-effects can be long lasting. HOWEVER, THERE IS HOPE. Survivors of child sexual abuse can recover from the after-effects and experience a meaningful, productive and joy-filled life.

**COPING SKILLS COMMONLY ADOPTED BY SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

Adult survivors of child sexual abuse often feel like they live in an unsafe world because as children, they were abused and exploited. They were not allowed the normal development that children who were not abused experience. In fact, many survivors grow up without the opportunity to learn the best ways of coping with sexual abuse. And while they may have developed coping skills that were effective at surviving the pain and trauma of sexual abuse, these same skills can become distressing and unproductive for them as adults. These include:

**DISSOCIATION** — Some survivors describe dissociating, or leaving their body, during the abuse. Other forms of dissociation include spacing out, daydreaming and numbing behaviors, to name a few. As an adult, the survivor may continue to dissociate during stressful periods of time.

**EMOTIONAL NUMBING** — Survivors, who found the emotional pain of the abuse to be too difficult to deal with as children, may have learned to block their feelings. As adults, their feelings continue to be blocked so that they do not feel emotional pain. Unfortunately, feelings cannot be selected. By learning to block painful feelings, adult survivors also block positive feelings like love, happiness and joy.

**WITHDRAWAL** — Children who are sexually abused often feel that they are alone, and that they do not have anybody that they can turn to for help. These feelings of isolation are often carried into adulthood and can result in the survivor continuing to be isolated and to cope alone.

**OBSESSIVE/COMPULSIVE TRAITS** — It is not uncommon for adult survivors to have very strong impulses to engage in certain behaviors (compulsivity) resulting from an intense preoccupation with a persistent thought or feeling (obsessiveness). Examples include constant hand washing or bathing, resulting from chronic thoughts of dirtiness, or repetitively counting things as a result of a chronic preoccupation with things needing to be ordered. These behaviors are a way for survivors to feel that they are maintaining some form of control over their life and also act as a defense mechanism to further block the painful feelings surrounding the abuse.

**GENERALIZED FEAR AND ANXIETY** — Sexually abused children may be very fearful of others. As adults, their fears may be triggered by something that may remind them of the abuse. These fears often become generalized, resulting in chronic anxiety, panic disorders and/or phobias.

**DEPRESSION** — Sexually abused children often have feelings of overwhelming loss and sadness. Strong emotions like these may go unexpressed and unresolved because they feel too painful to deal with directly. Depression can result, leaving survivors with chronic emptiness, hopelessness, fatigue and little motivation for living.

**EATING DISORDERS** — Adult survivors may not feel like they are in control of their lives. In order to gain some control, they may choose to eat obsessively or not eat at all. As children, they may have felt that their body caused them to be abused, so they choose to cover their body in fat or starve their body so that they do not look sexual.

**SEXUAL DISTORTIONS** — Adult survivors are often confused and have internal conflicts in their feelings and thoughts regarding their sexuality because as children, they were sexually exploited. These feelings may manifest in sexualized behavior, sexual numbing, avoidance of sexual activity, compulsive masturbation and/or gender confusion, for example.

**SOMATIZATION** — The emotional trauma sometimes buried within survivors may express itself in physical illnesses or complaints such as headaches, gastric-intestinal problems, muscle tension, insomnia, pelvic pain or other genito-urinary problems.

**SUICIDAL OR SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR** — Survivors may harm themselves directly such as in suicidal attempts or self-mutilation. They may also engage in other behaviors that indirectly harm them, for example, drug and/or alcohol abuse and excessive risk-taking activities. These behaviors serve as a way for some survivors to find relief from the emotional pain of the abuse or to punish themselves in proportion to the guilt and shame they feel.
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GENERALIZED MISTRUST OR INAPPROPRIATE TRUST — It is difficult for many adult survivors to develop trusting relationships, because the bonds of trust were betrayed and violated when they were children. On the other hand, some survivors trust everyone, lacking an ability to distinguish between persons who can be trusted and those who cannot be.

DENIAL — Some adult survivors may deny that they were abused or deny their feelings surrounding the abuse, because acceptance can be very painful and difficult.

CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY/SUBSTANCE ABUSE — A method of coping with many of the feelings surrounding sexual abuse is to abuse drugs or alcohol. Chemical dependency is a way to self-medicate and further block painful feelings.

Treatment and therapy often help adult survivors learn how to cope more effectively with the present world and unlearn the coping skills that were necessary for survival as children. The healing process takes time and can be difficult but also promises the hope of learning new skills for living life on the survivor’s own terms.

LONG TERM EFFECTS ON SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A variety of long-term effects on adults are associated with the childhood experience of sexual abuse. These effects may vary for each individual and may be impacted by a number of factors including:

- the duration of the abuse
- the relationship of the offender to the survivor
- the intensity of the abuse
- the response to the abuse by family members and others
- the experience of betrayal
- the powerlessness experienced by the survivor
- the negative labeling of the survivor by oneself or others
- the exact impact of the abuse on the survivor’s sexual development
- the survivor’s own perceptions, thoughts and feelings surrounding the abuse and its aftermath
- the impact on various developmental stages of the survivor
- the particular coping skills used by the survivor to deal with the abuse

Some of the long-term effects include:

- Guilt and shame
- Shattered trust
- Poor self-image
- Fear and anxiety
- Sadness and loss
- Feelings of isolation
- Anger and frustration
- Sexual dysfunction
- Learned helplessness

GUILT AND SHAME — Many adults abused as children feel that they are to blame for the abuse and that it is their fault. It is important to remember that sexual abuse is never the victim’s fault. The offender is always to blame. Many times the offender may blame the child for the abuse so that the child will not tell about the abuse.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the abuse, a child who is sexually victimized is never to blame. It is the responsibility of adults to protect, love, nurture and set limits with children. When adults violate those boundaries in any way, they are always to blame. Offenders may manipulate a situation or manipulate circumstances so they can place responsibility for the abuse onto the child. Consequently, the child might feel that he or she is to blame for the abuse, but the child is never to blame.

Many adults who have been sexually abused were told, as children, that they were doing something wrong, and that they must keep the abuse a secret. Some children may have felt that if they told, they would be telling on themselves, as well as the offender. Children who believe that they are keeping a bad secret may then feel badly about themselves, reinforcing the feelings of shame.

“The pain inherent in shame fosters behaviors designed to avoid it, which include:

- Anger
- Counter-shaming
- Confusion
- Addictive behaviors
- Helplessness

Shame takes form in circumstances where one’s essence is not affirmed, where one’s sense of self is undermined.”

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shame and help them to rebuild their sense of importance and self-esteem. Support, whether in therapy or friendships, can help survivors know that they are not alone, and that their feelings and issues are valid. Group therapy can be particularly helpful with issues of guilt and shame by providing contact with others who have been sexually victimized and offering the opportunity to hear about shared experiences. Telling the secret can be a powerful tool in healing.

Survivors are not to blame for the abuse; it is not their fault. Shame and guilt, in reality, belong only to the offender. His or her behavior was wrong. The offender’s actions violated the victim. The offender is always to blame for his or her deviant and degrading behavior. The survivor’s integration of these truths into his or her belief system is another vital way to combat feelings of guilt and shame.

FEAR AND ANXIETY — Many adult survivors may feel a generalized sense of fear, perhaps directed to a certain gender group, or a fear of intimacy or closeness. These feelings of fear are understandable. As a child, the survivor was violated. All trust was betrayed and all boundaries were crossed. Survivors often continue to feel fear towards their offender, even into adulthood. These feelings of fear and anxiety can often manifest in a variety of ways. For example:

- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Fear of certain places or things
- Sleep disorders
- Anxiety attacks
- Phobias

When survivors begin to address these feelings and their manifestations, they can experience a greater sense of power and control in their lives.

ANGER AND FRUSTRATION — Feeling angry about being sexually abused as a child is a very normal and justifiable response. Some survivors have repressed their anger towards the offender or towards others such as family members. They may not feel comfortable expressing anger, especially if they associated anger with violence. Expressing anger may also be difficult if they lack self-control, resulting in outbursts of rage or misdirected anger. Anger does not have to be expressed violently. Learning how to express feelings of anger in appropriate ways is very important. Adult survivors may want to act out their anger through a variety of techniques. For example:

- Exercising
- Talking
- Role-playing exercises

- Drawing
- Painting
- Writing
- Looking for role models that express anger in safe and healthy ways
- Developing self-awareness of feelings before escalating into a rage

Any safe way of expressing anger that helps survivors can be effective. It is important for them to recognize why they are feeling angry and direct or express that anger at the person who is responsible, rather than directing it at people who are not responsible, including survivors themselves.

SHATTERED TRUST — It is difficult for survivors to trust in others. However, repairing trust is possible. Sexual abuse is the ultimate violation and betrayal towards a child. It is not only a physical assault against a child’s body, but also an emotional assault against that child’s sense of safety and trust in others.

These issues surrounding trust often make it very difficult for adult survivors to become intimate and close to others. As children, survivors had no power and control over their own body. They were never given a choice when it came to sexual contact. If the abuse felt physically good to the child, then not only did the offender betray them, they often feel as if their own body and mind betrayed them as well. This betrayal and violation can also cause adult survivors to have no trust in themselves.

Dealing with the feelings surrounding trust is a difficult step for adult survivors. Trust is something that comes step by step and has to be earned. A first step might be to begin learning to trust oneself. Trust can also begin with a counselor, close friend or mate. Once the first successful step is taken, trust can get easier with time. Survivors have the hope of then learning how to distinguish between trustworthy behavior in people and behavior that is not trustworthy.

SADNESS AND LOSS — Many adult survivors were never allowed to be children. They were placed in adult roles at a young age and were often given adult responsibilities before they were ready to handle such. Survivors often feel as though their childhood was taken away from them. This feeling of loss, of innocence betrayed, can be pervasive and contribute to feelings of depression and anxiety.

Part of the healing process includes mourning and grieving the lost childhood. Grieving the hurts and the loss of childhood can be helpful
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to experiencing life in the present. Healing can also include learning how to play and have fun, something many survivors were never given the opportunity to do. Healing might also mean nurturing and caring for oneself in the present. The good news is that survivors can learn how to care and nurture themselves in ways they did not receive as children. The result can be the experiencing of joy and fulfillment instead of pervasive feelings of sadness and loss.

SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION — Adult survivors were introduced to sexual relationships before they were developmentally able to handle such. The survivor’s perceptions about sexuality may be further confused and complicated when the offender plays other roles in the survivor’s life such as caregiver, family member, teacher or friend. For example, it may be more difficult to separate love from abuse if the survivor experienced both from the offender. It is not at all uncommon for survivors to have sexual problems or difficulties in adulthood.

Because many survivors become overly sexualized from the abuse, they may believe that their only value is sexual. They were taught that basic needs for love and affection are met through sexual channels and may become intimate with others only on a sexual level. Survivors may also choose to have no sexual contact with others. Sex has caused pain for them so they choose to deny their sexual feelings and needs, remaining basically asexual.

There are many issues and feelings adult survivors must face regarding their sexuality. These issues can cause the survivor to have difficulties with sexual relationships as adults. Some of the difficulties may include:

- Sexualized relationships
- Sexual numbing or lack of sexual desire
- Fear of sexual activity or fear of certain sexual acts
- Compulsive masturbation
- Gender confusion

Exploration and resolution of the issues and feelings regarding sexuality can lead to fulfilling, healthy sexual relationships.

POOR SELF-IMAGE — Most adult survivors never had the opportunity to develop a positive self-image. Many of the feelings surrounding their own victimization reinforce this lack of self-esteem. Intense guilt about the abuse can lead survivors to feel shameful about themselves. Survivors were sometimes taught that they must sacrifice themselves, their own bodies, for the gratification of others.

Survivors may also have difficulty separating the acts of the offender from their sense of self. Because survivors were tricked or forced to participate in their own dehumanization and victimization, they may feel equally responsible for the abuse. Again, it is important to remember that regardless of the circumstances, sexual abuse is never the victim’s fault.

Building a sense of self-worth as adults is possible and can be an exciting journey of self-discovery. This journey of discovery begins with learning what one thinks, feels and wants for oneself. The survivor may experience for the first time a sense of personal acceptance as well as acceptance from another individual. This validation can be emotionally freeing and empowering.

FEELINGS OF ISOLATION — Survivors often grew up in families that were physically or emotionally isolated. They were made to feel like they were all alone, that nobody was available to help or protect them from the abuse. Many survivors also believed that nobody else had experiences like their own, that they were all alone with this terrible secret. Survivors must remember that they are not alone. Even though sexual abuse has affected the lives of individuals since the beginning of history, only in recent years have larger numbers of survivors started to come forward and seek help. Help is now available and survivors no longer have to cope with their feelings alone.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS — Survivors sometimes struggle with learned helplessness. Because of the loss of control and lack of validation a survivor experiences during the abuse, the development of feelings of empowerment and competency to direct one’s life may be impaired. Abuse teaches people that their needs, wants, thoughts and feelings are unimportant or invalid. Unfortunately, some survivors often come to believe and accept these false teachings at a deep level. Many do not have the opportunity to develop any sense of competency or control over their environment or even themselves. This can result in strong feelings of helplessness. Through the healing process, survivors can start to experience validation as individuals and explore skills and abilities that lead to a sense of competency, control and personal power.
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HEALING — THERE IS HOPE. Adult survivors can recover. The healing process takes time and does not happen overnight. Many things can help in the process of recovery. The first step is the survivor’s own willingness and courage to heal. Other steps may include reading, education, therapy (individual and/or group) and supportive family members or friends. Continued support can help survivors experience some control over those feelings surrounding the abuse. As a result, they become the ones in charge. Healing is a dynamic process in that it continues throughout the survivor’s life, changing and growing as the survivor changes and grows. Though not easy, it can also be an exciting journey filled with new discoveries, experiences and challenges.

IF YOU ARE AN ADULT SURVIVOR AND NEED TO TALK TO SOMEONE AFTER READING THIS BOOKLET, RAPE CRISIS AND VICTIM SERVICES HAS A 24-HOUR HOTLINE (817) 927-2737.

CALL THE RAPE CRISIS AND VICTIM SERVICES PROGRAM IF YOU NEED US.

REMEMBER THAT ADULT SURVIVORS ARE NOT ALONE ANYMORE.

RAPE CRISIS AND VICTIM SERVICES PROGRAM

Since 1980, the Rape Crisis Program has been the leading advocate for victims of sexual assault and sexual abuse in Tarrant County. In July 1998, the Rape Crisis Program added a new program offering counseling for victims of any other crime. At that time, the Rape Crisis Program became the Rape Crisis and Victim Services Program.

In addition to offering hospital, police and court accompaniment by a trained staff of volunteers, professional counselors provide individual and group therapy to both child and adult survivors of all types of victimization.

The Rape Crisis and Victim Services Program is operated by The Women’s Center of Tarrant County.

RESOURCES

NATIONAL VICTIMS ASSISTANCE CENTERS

Child Help National Child Abuse Hotline
1345 El Centro Avenue
P.O. Box 630
Hollywood, CA 90028
(800) 4A-CHILD (800) 422-4453

National Organization for Victims Assistance
1757 Park Road NW
Washington, DC 20010
(800) 879-6682

RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network)
635-B Pennsylvania Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20003
(800) 656-HOPE (Hotline)
(202) 544-1034

TARRANT COUNTY

Catholic Charities
2701 Burchill Road
Fort Worth, TX 76105
(817) 534-0814

Family Service
1424 Hemphill
Fort Worth, TX 76104
(817) 927-8884

Rape Crisis and Victim Services Program
The Women's Center of Tarrant County, Inc.
1723 Hemphill
Fort Worth, TX 76110
(817) 927-2737 (24-hour Hotline)

Crisis Intervention
Fort Worth, TX 76104
(817) 927-5544

Mental Health Mental Retardation Services
3840 Hulen Tower North
Fort Worth, TX 76107
(817) 735-3800
(24-hour Crisis Hotline)
(817) 335-3022

The Parenting Center
2928 West 5th Street
Fort Worth, TX 76107
(817) 332-6348
(817) 332-6399 Warm Line
HEALING — THERE IS HOPE. Adult survivors can recover. The healing process takes time and does not happen overnight. Many things can help in the process of recovery. The first step is the survivor’s own willingness and courage to heal. Other steps may include reading, education, therapy (individual and/or group) and supportive family members or friends. Continued support can help survivors experience some control over those feelings surrounding the abuse. As a result, they become the ones in charge. Healing is a dynamic process in that it continues throughout the survivor’s life, changing and growing as the survivor changes and grows. Though not easy, it can also be an exciting journey filled with new discoveries, experiences, and challenges.

**IF YOU ARE AN ADULT SURVIVOR AND NEED TO TALK TO SOMEONE AFTER READING THIS BOOKLET, RAPE CRISIS AND VICTIM SERVICES HAS A 24-HOUR HOTLINE (817) 927-2737.**

**CALL THE RAPE CRISIS AND VICTIM SERVICES PROGRAM IF YOU NEED US.**

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SURVIVOR
A Guide for Adults Molested as Children

Rape Crisis and Victim Services Program
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1723 Hemphill
Fort Worth, TX 76110
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(817) 927-4039

A United Way Agency

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