

Sexual Abuse:

A Collection
of Articles

Kali Munro



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Incest and Child Sexual Abuse: Definitions, Perpetrators, Victims, and Effects

Definition of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is any form of sexual activity with a child by an adult, or by another child where there is no consent or consent is not possible, or by another child who has power over the child. By this definition, it is possible for a child to be sexually abused by another child who is younger than they are.

Sexual abuse includes showing a child pornographic materials, placing the child's hand on another person's genitals, touching a child's genitals, to the more extreme form of abuse, penetration. Penetration does not have to occur for it to be sexual abuse.

Who are the Perpetrators?

Perpetrators are most often someone the child knows and trusts. As far as we know, perpetrators, are most often male relatives, including fathers, brothers, grandfathers, uncles and cousins; friends of the family; or neighbours. Perpetrators can also be female, including mothers, sisters, aunts, babysitters, and grandmothers.

Usually the perpetrator has easy access to the child because s/he has sole responsibility for the child, or takes care of or visits the child, and is trusted by the child's parents.

Where Does Sexual Abuse Occur?

Sexual abuse or incest can occur anywhere, at any time, often in front of other people who do not, or choose to not see. I have heard many stories of children being abused while other people were in the next room, in a car with them, or sitting at a dinner table.

Who is Sexually Abused?

All children are vulnerable to sexual abuse, particularly girls. Sexual abuse and incest occur in every race, class, religion, culture, and country.

Once a child has been sexually abused, and has not received appropriate help,

support, and understanding for what has happened, s/he can be particularly vulnerable to being sexually abused again by another perpetrator. This is not the fault of the child. This is due to the fact that she has learned that sexual abuse is something that people will and can do to her/his body.

Children whose emotional needs are not met--who are emotionally deprived, or otherwise abused--can also be more vulnerable because they need attention and some perpetrators exploit that need. Again, this is not the child's fault. The child did not create the fact that her/his needs were not met, nor the fact that someone exploited that need.

Homophobia puts lesbian and gay youth at risk of sexual abuse. Many gay youth are forced to go to adult clubs, bars and other settings in order to explore their sexuality and to meet other people who are gay. By being in an adult setting they are more likely to be exploited (just as heterosexual girls would be at risk in an adult heterosexual setting). Also, it is unlikely that gay youth will tell anyone if they are abused because they would have to reveal that they were in a gay setting. With little or no access to information about gay sexuality, many youth misinterpret abuse experiences as representing what it means to be gay. This puts them at further risk.

Different Effects and Coping Strategies of Child Sexual Abuse

The effects of child sexual abuse are wide ranging, and vary from survivor to survivor depending on a number of different factors such as age of victim, duration of abuse, number of perpetrators, nature of relationship with perpetrator, and the severity of the assault.

I always hesitant to write that last one--the severity of the assault--because all abuse is traumatic and harmful to victims. I have known women quite traumatized by their breasts being repeatedly grabbed when they were a child. While this may not be as severe as some other forms of abuse, it can have strong and long-lasting effects. It's important to remember that while being assaulted in a more violent manner does have its own specific effects, it in no way minimizes the reality and experience of others who have not experienced that kind of violence.

Emotional Effects

The emotional effects include feelings of: confusion, powerlessness, helplessness, pain, betrayal, sadness, grief, loss, feeling dirty, shame, vulnerable, unsafe, scared, terrified, horrified, depressed, angry, numb from feelings and body, suspicious, untrusting, tortured, sensitive, emotional, hurt, panic, anxiety, and feeling miserable.

Beliefs About Self

Beliefs about one's self include: "I am bad, no one loves me, no one could love me, I am unlovable, I am dirty, it's my fault, I'm stupid, I should have done something, I should have told someone, I hate myself, I must be bad, I must have wanted it, I must have done something, I'm being punished, I deserve to die, I don't want to be me, why do these things happen to me, I must have deserved it"

Minimizing Beliefs

Survivors are confronted with overwhelming pain. In order to cope with extreme and intense emotions, the details of what happened, and who hurt them, they may try to convince themselves "it wasn't so bad, it didn't really hurt them, others have been hurt much more" etc. This is a form of self-protection. It did hurt, it still hurts but it may be too hard or scary right now to face it all.

As a form of self-protection, minimizing may help slow the process down which may be what the survivor needs from time to time. As a constant way of coping however, minimization leads to self-blame and self-hatred which is not helpful and hurts a great deal.

Rationalization

Survivors need to protect themselves from the truth of the situation, after all someone they trusted, and perhaps loved, hurt them very badly. Rationalization is when a survivor explains the abusive behavior away--"he didn't know what he was doing, he was abused himself as a child, he thought he was showing me love, she was really messed up, she didn't mean to hurt me." The survivor is trying to protect her/himself from the horrible truth of the situation.

Denial

Denial is recognizable by a survivor saying, "it didn't happen; I must be making it up; after all how can I be sure anything actually happened; and what if I'm wrong; it probably didn't happen; it *couldn't* have happened."

In my experience, some denial even as an adult can be helpful. Denial can help slow the process down. We know denial helps a child to survive. We cannot expect someone to simply abandon their hard earned coping strategies even if they are safe now. Safety is not only an external reality it is an internal one as well. Many survivors do not feel safe and may need some denial to cope with how they feel.

Too much denial leads to all sorts of problems as the abuse is not addressed. This kind of denial is harmful and is fueled in part by the denial of the "False Memory Syndrome" Foundation and other parts of society who would rather deny than face the reality of child sexual abuse.

Dissociation, DID, MPD, and Multiplicity

We all dissociate to some extent or another. Babies do it quite regularly. It is a natural physiological response to being overwhelmed. Children who are sexually abused are extraordinarily overwhelmed. Dissociation allows the child to literally take a break from the abuse, to distance her/himself from what is going on, and ultimately to survive.

Some survivors describe dissociation as feeling as though they were not really there during the abuse, but were far away perhaps watching from a distance. Some survivors describe it as they split off from the abuse, and floated up to the ceiling or into a crack in the wall. Some survivors go really far away, deep inside themselves, and create different personalities to deal with the abuse. Multiple personalities are usually formed in the context of more extreme, frequent, or sadistic abuse.

Dissociation occurs on a continuum from the far left where someone is not present in the moment and is off somewhere else, they may or may not feel spacey--everyone does this at one time or another. Further along the continuum people feel split, or like they are not one person inside, usually there is an adult and a really vulnerable or hurt kid. Further along, survivors have a few dissociated personalities. Even further toward the right of the continuum, people have many different personalities, identities, parts, fragments, and/or different groups of parts inside. These personalities may or may not have names. Survivors near the right end may not have fully formed personalities, but lots of highly fragmented parts. At the far right end, survivors lose time which they may or may not be aware of. They may find themselves places, and not remember how they got there and have the experience of living different "lives".

In addition to a continuum of dissociation and multiplicity, there is a continuum of co-consciousness--the degree to which parts inside are aware of each other, and communicate and cooperate with one another. Achieving co-consciousness is an important step in the healing process. For help responding to different parts inside and developing internal cooperation see my article *DID, MPD, or Multiplicity: Responding to Parts Inside With a Focus on Kids*.

Problems with Boundaries

Because a survivor's boundaries were not respected--they were utterly violated--s/he may have a lot of difficulty knowing where her/his boundaries are, how to maintain them, and how to protect her/himself from those who do not respect or try to violate her/his boundaries. This leaves many survivors vulnerable to further abuse.

Trusting Others

It can be very difficult for a survivor to trust anyone. It can be even harder when that person is close to them, and cares for them. Often the abuser was that--someone who had a close and trusting relationship with them. Adult relationships, particularly sexual ones, can be quite challenging and triggering for survivors. At the same time, they can be a source of great love, safety, and healing too.

Relationship With One's Body

Since the abuse took place on and in the body, the body can become the enemy. After all many survivors' carry a great deal of pain and memories in their bodies. Desperately needing ways to cope with this pain can lead to a variety of coping strategies including eating disorders, self-injurious behaviors, numbing, inability to enjoy sex, having lots of sex, poor body image, a generalized separation from and disregard for one's body, dissociation, and gender-identity issues.

Coping Behaviors

There are a whole range of behaviors that survivors may engage in that come from having been sexually abused. They include: addictions, prostitution, isolation, frequent sexual activity, avoidance of sex, over-working, inability to work, high-functioning, low-functioning, argumentativeness, avoiding conflict, perfectionistic, and wanting to please others.

All of these behaviors were learned in response to abuse and served an important purpose--staying sane and alive. It is important to not judge your or anyone else's ways of coping--you're here because of them.

Other effects

These may include nightmares, insomnia, panic attacks, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, terror, inability to go outside, afraid being alone, afraid being with other people, numerous trigger-responses, headaches, and physical problems (yeast infections, bladder infections, anal bleeding, etc.)

A Final Thought

Some of the most sensitive, intuitive, deep, profound, and hopeful people I've ever known are incest or child sexual abuse survivors. They were able to be that way by not losing touch with their own humanity--their soulfulness--in the face of horror.

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Trusting Your Memories of Sexual Abuse: An Article for Survivors

Acknowledging That You Were Sexually Abused

It can take a long time for survivors to be able to say that they know for sure that they were sexually abused. Acknowledging that the abuse happened is an important step in healing from sexual abuse.

Many survivors waver on this issue for years, even after they do acknowledge that they were abused. This is a natural reaction and is quite self-protective, after all it is extremely painful to acknowledge that a trusted adult betrayed and hurt you in this way. It inevitably raises the question "if I wasn't safe with him/her, how can I be safe anywhere?" That can be a overwhelming thought especially if you don't know how to feel safer in the world.

Worrying That You Can't Trust Your Memories

Some survivors worry that maybe their mind is playing tricks on them, they imagined it, their memories aren't real, and perhaps they made it all up. They think maybe they've watched too much T.V., or read too many books on the subject, or they've listened to too many survivors tell their stories. This is an understandable worry, especially when there is a well-funded organization of people (whom their children said sexually abused them) who state that recovered memories are not accurate and are created by reading books, seeing therapists, and the like.

Not wanting to believe that you or others were sexually abused as children is understandable -- it's never been easy for the human race to acknowledge all kinds of horrors committed by people, especially those committed in our own backyards. But, just because it's not easy, and just because we don't or can't believe it, doesn't mean it didn't happen.

Do People Forget Traumatic Events?

A common worry for survivors (again especially since the creation of the so-called False Memory Syndrome Foundation) is whether or not they can trust their recovered memories to be accurate. Recovered memories are memories that you didn't always have, they emerge later in life often after being triggered by some event.

We know with certainty that people forget traumatic events. Probably the best

examples are of people's experiences of wars and car accidents. There are men who fought in wars who remember little of what happened, yet there is no question that they were there and that the war happened. Many people who survive serious car accidents do not remember the accident. People forget overwhelming traumatic events.

Traumatic Reactions Exist Even Without Memories

Many individuals develop trauma related reactions, even when they have no memory of the incident. For example, many people who have experienced serious car accidents and who do not remember the accident have strong negative reactions to being in a car or driving by the scene of the accident (even when they do not remember where the accident took place.) Many war veterans who have little memory of the war will suddenly duck when they hear a loud sound without understanding why.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

These reactions are called post-traumatic reactions -- also known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. People will often have post-traumatic reactions even when they have no memory of the trauma itself. These reactions include:

intense fear and terror; helplessness; re-experiencing the traumatic event, flashbacks, flooding; avoiding situations that are associated with the traumatic event; numbing, feelings of detachment or estrangement from others; hyper-vigilance; nightmares; panic attacks, anxiety attacks; insomnia; irritability or outbursts of anger; difficulty concentrating; exaggerated startle response; physiological responses such as intense sweating, heart racing, trembling, shaking.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms May Develop After Memories Are Recovered

It's possible for someone to have no or few memories of sexual abuse, and to not have post-traumatic symptoms or to have only mild symptoms. Sometimes, post-traumatic symptoms don't develop until memories come back. This is why it is possible to feel relatively unaffected by sexual abuse only to have post-traumatic reactions emerge later when sexual abuse memories start emerging. Most often, people can look back after remembering sexual abuse, and recognize ways in which they had been affected by the abuse without having been aware of it at the time.

Memories That Were Forgotten Can Return

To recap, we know that people forget traumatic events. We know that even without memories of the event, people have post-traumatic reactions even in relatively mild forms. We also know that memories once forgotten can return. Again, this has been documented with war veterans who initially forgot their war experiences and then remembered them later usually via spontaneous flashbacks.

Are Recovered Memories Accurate?

While all memory, especially declarative memory -- the story or details of the event -- is reconstructive (recreated over time) this does not diminish the truthfulness of the memory itself. Sometimes because recovered memories can be hazy, it can be hard to be sure of all the details. Sometimes, because of how memories are categorized by our minds, it is possible to remember two different incidents as having occurred at the same time. Again, just because this happens doesn't mean that what happened isn't true, only that the events may not have happened in that exact way.

A good analogy is people are in a bank when a bank robbery occurs. They are frightened by the robbers and their guns, and are afraid for their safety. After a robbery, it is not uncommon for witnesses to contradict each other about the colour of the robbers' clothing, even what race they were, and the total numbers of robbers present. But, no one is uncertain about the fact that there was a robbery and that they were scared for their lives.

While no survivor can be certain that every single detail of their memories of sexual abuse is precisely accurate, it is possible to be confident that the crime of sexual abuse occurred, to know who did it and to know approximately what age you were when it occurred.

Implicit Memories Are the Most Accurate

In the robbery example, witnesses were not only certain that they had witnessed a bank robbery, but were intensely aware of how they felt during the robbery, and/or after the robbery -- delayed reactions are quite common after traumatic events. They felt afraid for their lives, their hearts raced, they felt panicked, and experienced other similar reactions.

Trauma related reactions -- heart racing, sweating, fear, trembling, depersonalization --and other physical and emotional responses are known as implicit memories because they require no conscious memory of the event to be experienced.

Remember the example of the car accident survivor who got upset when she drove near the scene of the accident that she had no memory of? That is implicit memory. Implicit memories, unlike declarative memories, are much more reliable. For example, people are far more likely to be accurate about the fact that they smelled alcohol on their abuser's breath, and that they felt searing pain in or on some part of their body than they are about what the abuser was wearing, or what day it was.

Implicit memories include all physical and emotional reactions -- body sensations, smells, sounds, tastes, touch -- which do not require conscious memory of the event itself. Implicit memories also include skills that do not require conscious memory of having been learned in order to be performed.

An example of an implicit skill is someone who, due to brain damage, cannot remember learning to play the piano but can still play the piano. While I haven't seen this issue incorporated into the trauma research, I think implicit learning might, at least partly explain why some survivors repeat trauma related behaviors. By trauma related behaviors I mean engaging in behaviors that were learned during abuse, for example feeling like you are performing during sex, knowing how to perform certain sex acts prior to your first sexual experience, getting involved with people who are similar to your abusers and perhaps behaving toward them in ways that you learned during abuse, and prostitution. These behaviors are known, are implicit, to many survivors even without conscious memories of the abuse.

In summary, the research on implicit memories tells us that our memories of smell, taste, body sensations, emotions, and sounds -- none of which require thought or conscious recall -- are the most accurate memories. Some of these ways of remembering abuse have been called body memories and feel very real to people. When survivors have body memories, it can feel as though you are back there being abused again, feeling the physical and emotional pain vividly. That's how real they are.

What We Know About Traumatic Memories

We know that people forget traumatic incidents. People have trauma related reactions without any memory of what happened. Traumatic memories can emerge a long time after the traumatic event took place, often so intensely it may feel as if it is happening in the present. Recovered memories of sexual abuse are valid even if all the details aren't precisely accurate. Implicit memories -- those of smell, taste, sound, touch, body sensations and feelings -- are the most accurate, much more accurate than declarative memories -- memories about the concrete details.

You Can Trust Your Memories

What all of this means is that you can trust your inner knowledge, feelings, body memories, and visual memories to tell you the truth. Perhaps not an accurate, detailed record of what happened, but still the truth.

While it's very painful to face sexual abuse, it can also be very liberating. Give yourself the opportunity to feel better about yourself by believing in your own memories. You deserve to believe in yourself.

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Sexual Abuse Survivors and Sex: An Article About Becoming More Comfortable With Sex

Many sexual abuse survivors struggle to have positive and enjoyable sex lives. It can be very hard to feel comfortable with and enjoy sex when you've been sexually abused. Even people who haven't been sexually abused struggle to feel comfortable with their sexuality and sex. This article may be helpful to anyone who has issues with sexuality.

Many Survivors Are Vulnerable to Further Abuse

For many sexual abuse survivors, sex becomes linked with sexual abuse. As a result, some survivors will mistake unsatisfying and unpleasurable sex, or even sexually abusive behavior, for sex. This means that survivors can be vulnerable to being further abused. As a survivor, this is not your fault. You may not know: that you have the right to enjoy yourself sexually; what a mutually satisfying sexual experience is; what you want sexually, and that those needs deserve respect; and that you can say "no" and have that respected.

Abuse teaches the opposite - during abuse, your needs don't matter; you have to cater to someone else's sexual needs. Your sexual desires don't exist, and if they do exist they don't count. And of course you have no power to stop the abuse.

Some survivors believe that's what sex is - unenjoyable and abusive - or that that is how it is with a man, or with a woman. They may also believe that's all they are good for, that they can't expect anything better, and that if sex isn't enjoyable it's their fault or the result of their own inadequacy - they are "damaged". These reactions and beliefs are outcomes of abuse and need to be challenged - because they are not true.

Sexual Abuse Is Not Sex

One of the hardest things for abuse survivors to do is separate sexual abuse from sex. I know you may know this intellectually, but it's worth repeating many times - sexual abuse is not sex. Even if you liked the attention, approached your abuser for attention, were aroused, or had an orgasm, it's still not sex and you are not responsible.

Placing responsibility on the abuser is one of the most important steps in separating the sexual abuse from your sexuality and sex life. That may involve feeling anger at your abuser, holding him/her responsible (in your own mind), grieving your victimization and powerlessness, and reassuring the hurt child inside you that it wasn't her/his fault.

Sexual Abuse Becomes the Model For Sex

Sexual abuse is often the child's first introduction to sex. Children are too young to understand what sex is so it's not surprising that many abused children mistake abuse for sex. After all, it does involve sexual contact, sexual body parts, and sexual stimulation. Sadly, sexual abuse becomes the child's model for future sex.

It is crucial to find ways to separate your sexuality and sex from sexual abuse, and to create an entirely new association with sex - one that is positive, safe, and fun. You may need to discover your own sexuality - what it means to you, what you enjoy, and what gives you pleasure. It helps to develop a sexual relationship with yourself including self-pleasuring and discovering how you like to talk, move, dance, or interact with others when you're in touch with your sexual feelings.

You may want to fantasize or read about sex, view erotica, and talk about sex with your friends or partner. If you have a partner try to be playful about sex - cuddle, massage each other, talk about fantasies, and ask for what you want sexually. Sex can be playful, fun, and safe.

The Myth That Sexual Abuse Causes Survivors' Sexual Orientation

Because same-sex abuse is considered to be the same as lesbian and gay sex, many people believe that same-sex abuse causes survivors to be gay. On the flip side, when a survivor has been abused by a member of the other sex and the survivor identifies as gay, it's assumed that that, too, is the result of abuse. This can cause a lesbian or gay sexual abuse survivor to question her/his sexual identity. Many heterosexual survivors also struggle with questions about their sexuality because of the confusion and negative associations about sex that are created by sexual abuse.

It might help to try and remember if you had any sense of your sexual desires prior to the abuse. What gender(s) were you attracted to then? If you can't remember or you were abused very young, you may need to start paying attention to who you are attracted to now, who you feel most comfortable with emotionally and sexually, and who you fantasize about. You may need to see or read about positive images of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual sex to help you discover what feels right for you.

The challenge is to find ways to connect deep inside yourself and unearth your own truth - your own sexual desires, fantasies, passion, and emotional and sexual attractions. Working on separating the abuse from your sexuality will help clear some of the confusion. If you are gay and fear that your sexual orientation was caused by the abuse, you may want to learn more about gay sexuality from a positive perspective - for example read some gay-positive books, look at lesbian and gay websites, and talk to a

gay help line or a gay-positive therapist.

When You Don't Feel Safe With Sex

Sexual abuse robs survivors of their ability to feel safe in the world and with themselves. Internal safety is the extent to which you feel safe when the situation you are in is safe. Many survivors feel unsafe even when the person they are with or the situation they are in is safe. There is a difference between feeling safe and being safe. The first is a feeling and is affected by your past experiences with safety or lack of safety. The second is an actual fact about whether or not the people you are with or the situation you are in is safe.

It's so important for survivors to develop a sense of safety (internal safety) as well as to have ways to identify whether or not people and situations are safe (external safety). Both internal and external safety are needed for enjoyable consensual sex. Without internal safety, sex can feel very scary and triggering. Without external safety, the sex will not be safe, consensual, or pleasurable.

Some ways to develop internal safety:

- Create a safe place for yourself inside your home - a comfortable place that you can call your own. No one should go into this space without your permission, it is yours.
- Imagine what an ideal safe place would look like. It doesn't have to be reality based, you can create a fantasy safe place. Really let your imagination go with this; you can imagine anything you want. What would be there? What would you see, hear, smell, and be able to touch? How would you feel in this safe place? Spend time with this imaginary safe place on a regular basis to strengthen your internal experience of safety.

Some ways to develop external safety:

- Explore your definition of external safety. What does it mean for a person or a situation to be safe? How do you know when you are safe? How do you know when people or situations are not safe? What contributes to your feeling safe, and what interferes with your ability to feel safe? What are your internal signs that tell you when someone or a situation is not safe?
- Identify what helps you to feel safe with a sexual partner. Do you need to talk during sex? Do you need to talk about issues before having sex? Do you need to

know that you can stop at any time? Do you need to practice saying "stop" or "no" during sex? Do you need to have opportunities to initiate sex?

When Trust Is an Issue

Because sexual abuse is such a major violation of trust, many survivors have difficulty trusting their own perceptions and trusting other people. Building trust in yourself - knowing and trusting your feelings, thoughts, beliefs, intuition, and perceptions - is crucial, and will help you to know who you can trust.

Without a minimum of trust, sex is scary, unsafe, and unenjoyable. Different people require different amounts of trust in order to enjoy sex. Some survivors require a great deal of trust, and must know the person they are going to have sex with a long time before they feel comfortable to have sex. Others do not require as much trust to enjoy themselves sexually. Both are okay; it's just important to know your own boundaries and to respect them.

Developing internal trust means becoming aware of and respectful of your own feelings, physical sensations, intuition, thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions - or in other words, your own reality. They are your guides and can be relied upon. At the same, it's important to know the difference between what you have learned to be drawn to or are comfortable with because of its association with the abuse, and what is coming from a deeper, wiser place from within you. Exploring these issues in more depth will help you to make those distinctions.

Building a Comfort Level With Intimacy

For many survivors being intimate - emotionally or sexually - can be very scary. Many survivors dissociate from intimacy, yet they crave the closeness at the same time. Fear of intimacy is often rooted in fear of being vulnerable with another person and of being hurt by them.

Some suggestions to build a comfort level with intimacy:

- Take little steps whenever you can to increase your intimacy with someone you trust and are safe with. This could mean sharing something personal, talking about your feelings, touching them, asking for a hug, holding eye contact, inviting them out, calling a friend, reaching out when you are upset, or staying present for as long as you can in their presence.

- During sex, take it slow, stop when you need to, and breathe in and feel

what you are feeling. Be aware of how you are feeling in your body. Take your time. Hold eye contact. Touch your partner. Stay connected with your partner. Talk about how you are feeling.

Being In Your Body

Because sexual abuse is an invasion and an attack on the body, many survivors feel cut off or distant from their bodies. They may view their bodies as being responsible for the abuse, or at very least intimately linked with the abuse. This negative association between your body and the abuse needs to be broken. Your body doesn't deserve to be thought of this way.

Many survivors hate their bodies, and feel betrayed by their body's response during abuse. Some survivors refer to their body as "the body", distancing themselves from their bodies in order to not feel pain.

Being in touch with and living in your body is key to enjoying your sexuality and sex. But often that means going through a lot of body and emotional pain first. This happens because our bodies hold tension and feelings from the abuse as well as our responses to the abuse. This tension needs to be released so that you can feel your sexual feelings and enjoy them.

Some ways to become more in touch with or connected to your body:

- Breathing exercises. For example, close your eyes, and focus your awareness on the natural rhythm of your breath as it moves in and out of your body. If you get distracted, keep bringing your focus back to your breath.

- Body awareness exercises. For example lie down and become aware of what you notice in different areas of your body, such as tension, feelings, associations, visual images, and memories.

- Relaxation exercises. For example, lie down and tense up one area of your body, holding your breath at the same time. Hold your breath for the count of ten, then let your breath and tension go. Continue like this with all areas of your body.

- Notice how you feel in your body when you are feeling sexual. This includes different kinds of sexual feelings - for example, when you feel attracted to someone, when you feel sensual, when you are aware of yourself as a sexual being, when you are sexually aroused, and when different areas of your body are sexually aroused. Breathe into those feelings and areas of your body. Spend time with those feelings on your own and with a partner. Learn to ride the waves of all your feelings, including

sexual feelings.

Dealing With Triggers During Sex

Survivors are often triggered during sex or while anticipating sex because of its association with abuse. Working on separating the sexual abuse from your body and your sexuality will help you to become less triggered by sex. Focusing on being present in your body and in your immediate environment will also help you to remain rooted in the present.

Some suggestions for dealing with triggers during sex:

Identify that you are triggered. If you feel any of the following feelings during sex and it's not related to how your partner is treating you then you are probably triggered: scared, numb, dissociated, dirty, ashamed, ugly, self-hating, panicky, and very anxious.

Know that when you are triggered, you have a choice. You can decide to put the feelings or memories aside to be dealt with later, or you can deal with them at the time. Sometimes this doesn't feel like a choice, but there are ways to contain, separate from, and manage triggers so that you can put them aside and deal with them later. Ways to separate include self-talk, reminding yourself where you are and who you are with, letting yourself know that you are safe, asking for a safe hug, and doing whatever you need to do to feel present again. For instance, you can visualize placing the trigger away for another time by creating an image that represents the abuse and visualize putting that image in a safe place until you are ready to deal with it. You can talk about the trigger and then tell yourself that you want to put it aside for now and be in the present. You can focus on the present moment by looking around the room, noticing what you see, smell, hear, and touch.

You may choose to go into the trigger by being aware of how you feel, and what you see, hear, smell, and remember. You can let yourself go through the natural rhythm of the trigger. As with any feeling, triggers have their own rhythm of increasing feeling and tension, and then subsiding and decreasing in intensity.

It may be enough to acknowledge to yourself and/or your partner that you are triggered, and what it's connected to if you know, and then return to the present moment.

If a certain sexual act triggers you, a good guideline for minimizing the effect of that trigger is to approach the sexual act gently and slowly for a short period of time, and then stop for a while or completely, and come back to it later. Each time spend a

little longer on the activity, building up your ability to stay present and to feel the feelings in your body.

Taking Charge of Your Own Sexual Enjoyment

Many survivors wait for others to initiate sexual contact with them or to ask them out on a date. They may fear initiating sexual contact or contact that could potentially become sexual. There are many reasons for this; you will need to discover your own. Some common reasons include: a fear of behaving like the abuser or being seen as behaving like a perpetrator; a fear of being rejected and vulnerable; a fear of standing out, being noticed, or being the center of attention; and a fear of being seen as sexually unattractive, undesirable, or unlovable.

Knowing why you are afraid to initiate sexual contact or to ask someone out on a date can help decrease that fear. Working on your specific issues. For example, finding ways to feel better about yourself, your body, your sexuality, and your attractiveness and loveliness. You might want to set small attainable goals such as asking someone out to a movie without having to worry about initiating sex. You could practice touching people in a friendly, casual fashion - not just people you are attracted to, but rather working your way up to that. Role play asking someone out or initiating sex. This can help prepare you and give you the words you're searching for. Just talking about the problem with someone can help, too.

Many survivors feel they must accept whatever their partner does to them sexually, rather than take an active role in their sexual enjoyment. Knowing what you want, what turns you on, and asking for that is crucial to your sexual enjoyment. Only you can really know what feels good and exciting to you.

Many survivors have to overcome a great deal of shame and guilt about their sexuality and their bodies in order to feel comfortable asserting their sexual needs and desires. Most survivors have learned to do the opposite; they've learned to endure, be quiet, please others, and to not be powerful by asking for what they need.

You can become more assertive by discovering with yourself what you enjoy, talking with your partner about it, starting to ask for what you want in other areas of your life, and gradually asking for something that you want sexually. Some survivors find it easier to hold their partner's hand and guide them rather than talk about what they want. Some like to show their partner how they like it by doing it themselves in front of their partner, and then letting their partner take over. Whatever works for you is just fine.

Sexual Healing Is Possible

It's definitely possible for survivors to feel better about their sexuality and sex. The key is to break the association between your sexuality and the sexual abuse, and to create a new experience - one that is safe, fun, and pleasurable - for yourself as a sexual person. You don't need a partner to do this, although eventually you may want to include someone in your sexual journey. At times, it may feel like it's taking a long time, but try not to get discouraged. Being patient and compassionate with yourself will help your sexual healing.

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Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse: A Painful Topic

Sexual abuse perpetrated by mothers on their daughters is an uncomfortable subject for many people. It defies everything we believe, or want to believe, about women and mothers. Most people don't want to believe that female perpetrators of sexual abuse exist, and certainly don't want to believe that a mother could sexually abuse her own children.

Sexist Views About Women and Mothers

Most of us are raised to view women as being very different than men - to view them almost as opposites. Some people can't even imagine women doing the same things that men do, or being anything like men. Even when cultures view women to be strong, capable, and competent most continue to view women as inherently different than men because of their child-bearing abilities. Many character traits are presumed to be true about women because of their ability to bear children - women are believed to be more caring, sensitive, nurturing, and maternal than men. The reality that there are female perpetrators of sexual abuse, particularly mothers, is a fact that many people are not willing to believe.

Heterosexist Views Of Women and Mothers

This view of mothers, and even of all women, runs very deep in most cultures, and is linked with another assumption - that all women (and particularly mothers) are heterosexual.

Heterosexism and Homophobia

Sexual abuse has nothing to do with the perpetrator's sexuality or sexual identity; most abusers identify as heterosexual. Sexual abuse is not sex. Yet because of homophobia, same-sex sexual abuse is linked in most people's minds with lesbian or gay sex. How often do we see in the newspapers exclaiming "lesbian sex abuser" but not "heterosexual sex abuser?" It is an ingrained presumption.

This presumption is important to examine for many reasons. That the perpetrator is perceived to be lesbian fuels many people's denial. Mothers can't be lesbian, the thinking goes, therefore the abuse couldn't have happened. On the other hand, some people may be more likely to believe that the abuse happened, precisely because they perceive the perpetrator to be lesbian. It confirms their belief that lesbians are child molesters. When this occurs people are far more outraged than they are with

father-daughter sexual abuse because a female perpetrator of incest is seen to have violated not only the heavy social expectations of the way mothers should act and be, but also of women.

How People View Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse

People tend to feel far more conflicted and confused about mother-daughter sexual abuse - or female perpetrators generally - than they are about father-daughter sexual abuse (or male perpetrators). People respond with outright denial: "A mother wouldn't do that sort of thing." Others minimize the abuse: "How bad could it be? The abuser was a woman; she was probably gentle." And still others vilify female perpetrators, viewing them as worse than male perpetrators because they are women or mothers.

Some people try to explain away the behavior of female perpetrators by pointing to the history of sexual abuse that they have undergone. Having been sexual abused is one factor that can contribute to a mother abusing her own daughter (although there are plenty of survivors who do not sexually abuse children) - and it is possibly one of the more important factors that might lead female perpetrators to sexually abuse their children because they, unlike men, aren't socially conditioned to be sexually aggressive, or to sexualize children. However, this argument should not be used to minimize the responsibility of female perpetrators nor the devastating effects of this form of abuse.

It is not uncommon when female perpetrators are discussed, the tone is often distinctly softer and more sympathetic than when male perpetrators are discussed. This misplaced sexist sympathy for female perpetrators minimizes the effects of the abuse that a survivor went through and denies a survivor's reality of the trauma. In addition, when survivors are aware of this attitude, and many are, it can make it even harder for them to take their own abuse, and the effects of that abuse seriously.

Survivors of Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse

Imagine how a survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse feels, when the general population who has not undergone this trauma feels this confused and conflicted about it. Survivors tend to be very confused and conflicted about the abuse and their mothers, especially when, as usually is the case, their mothers were their primary care givers. They may have a lot invested in not acknowledging that the abuse happened - both because of their own beliefs about mothers (nevermind the emotional trauma of acknowledging the abuse), and because of the often rigid assumptions made by others about mothers.

When survivors of mother-daughter incest are able to acknowledge the abuse

they experienced, they often believe that there must be something terribly wrong or bad about them. "How could my own mother sexually abuse me?" This belief that they are bad comes from the myth that mothers are intrinsically caring and loving. If all mothers are loving to their children, the thinking goes, then there must be something really bad about the child whose mother abused them. It makes sense that a child would think this way, especially in a context loaded with societal myths about mothers. It's easier for a child to believe that the abuse is her fault than to admit that the person who was supposed to love and protect her actually harmed her. Sadly, this way of thinking is carried into adulthood by many survivors, and it hurts them a great deal.

That Which Has No Name

It is very difficult for even survivors themselves to acknowledge that they were abused by their mothers because of the sexist beliefs many of us hold about women, and particularly mothers. It can be a great struggle to label their experience as abuse. Survivors may not have words to describe what happened; they may not know what to call it. They may fear that the incest was lesbian sex; something "dirty" - not to be talked about or admitted. They may be afraid of being perceived as lesbian, or afraid that the abuse makes them lesbian. Survivors who are lesbian may fear that their sexuality was caused by the abuse.

It is also difficult for survivors to acknowledge their abuse because there are very few places that survivors can hear or read about mother-daughter incest, or even about female perpetrators. Sexual abuse and incest have become almost synonymous with male sexual abuse of females and father-daughter incest. It is within this vacuum that survivors of mother-daughter incest struggle to make sense of and understand their experience.

Homophobic Beliefs - One Effect of The Abuse

Many people confuse same-sex sexual abuse with lesbian sex, thinking that the perpetrator and even the victim is lesbian, or was made lesbian by the abuse. None of this is true. Yet these myths continue to exist, and they confuse and haunt many survivors who live in fear and shame that they really are lesbian when they aren't, or that their lesbian sexuality was caused by the abuse.

Being abused by her mother does not make a survivor a lesbian. Even if the survivor's body physiologically responded to the sexual stimulation, this has nothing to do with sexuality. It is the body's natural physiological response to stimulation, and has nothing to do with the survivor's own sexual desires, or even consent. Sexual abuse affects a survivor's comfort level with and responses to being a sexual person, but it does not cause her sexuality.

Identifying With Mother Perpetrators

Even when survivors acknowledge that they were sexually abused by their mothers, they often strongly identify with their mothers. Just both of them being female in a sexist society can lead to identification with the mother. This identification with the perpetrator can make it more difficult for survivors to separate themselves, emotionally and otherwise, from their abuser.

Many daughters look to their mothers as a mirror for their future lives. Survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse often see their future as a woman and mother as dismal. Many adult survivors painfully worry that they will sexually abuse children, that they are unsafe around children, or that they are potential perpetrators - just like their mothers. This may lead survivors to feel that they are untrustworthy, thus many survivors are reluctant to have children of their own (although the choice to not have children can be a perfectly healthy choice on its own.)

Are They Victims Or Are They Abusers?

Daughters, and thus many survivors, often look to their mother's experiences (in the home and with their fathers) as their future, and identify with their mother's situation. If their mother is in an upsetting situation, survivors will often feel empathy for their mothers, and want to help them. This is heightened for survivors whose mothers turn to them for support.

If the perpetrator views herself as a victim of circumstances, or is a victim of her husband, the survivor often feels sorry for her and fears losing her. This dynamic makes it very hard for the daughter to see her mother as an abuser. Many of us tend to see people in extreme categories - either victim or abuser. For children, this either-or-thinking is the norm, but for survivors it often remains with them and becomes entrenched. The truth is that people can be both - victims in one context, and abusers in another.

"I Feel Like I Am My Mother"

The more a survivor identifies with her mother, the harder it is to separate her identity from her abuser - a crucial step in healing. Many survivors of mother-daughter incest report looking in the mirror and seeing their mothers, and hating themselves for it. When they see their own body naked (which they may avoid doing), many survivors

see their mother's body, and as a result feel deeply ashamed of and angry at their bodies. Some survivors respond to these feelings by not wanting to be women, or lesbian (as they may perceive their mother to be), or anything associated with women or lesbians.

The feelings of shame and self-hatred that survivors can have may lead to their feeling uncomfortable with and/or hatred toward women and lesbians; inadequate and bad about themselves; confused and ashamed about being women; uncomfortable with their sexuality; engaging in self-injurious behavior (particularly in the genital and breast area); developing an eating disorder; experiencing body shame; and having difficulties in relationships, particularly with other women.

It is crucial for survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse to create boundaries with their mothers (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual); to re-claim their bodies as their own, and to truly know the differences between themselves and their mothers.

Longing for a Mother's Love

Mother-daughter sexual abuse wounds survivors' hearts and souls. Their mothers were often their only care-givers and the only source of much-needed care. When this care is mixed with sexual abuse, the effects are devastating. This mixture of nurturance (if there was any) and sexual abuse may have been all the parenting a survivor received. Often the father was absent or simply did not take an active role in parenting. This mixture of caring and sexual abuse leaves survivors with an unpleasant, and often sickening or repulsive feeling. On the one hand, the survivor desperately needed to be loved, held, kissed, and nurtured, but when that nurturance comes with such a high price, it is devastating to the child's psyche. Even nurturance that is offered separate from the sexual abuse becomes hard to trust or to take in freely and openly. This leaves many survivors feeling a desperate need for love, and at the same time, highly conflicted about that need, and wary of those, particularly women who offer support.

Summary of the Effects of Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse

While survivors of mother-daughter sexual abuse experience many of the same effects as other incest and sexual abuse survivors, they tend to have heightened difficulties with:

- **Naming their experience as abuse.** This is particularly true in light of the myth that women do not sexually abuse children.

- **Identity.** Many survivors have difficulty knowing that they are separate from and different than their perpetrators.

- **Boundaries.** Many survivors have difficulty maintaining their boundaries, especially with other women. They may be overly flexible or overly rigid.

- **Self-blame.** This is particularly true in light of the fact that they were abused by their mothers who are mythologized as all loving and caring.

- **Gender identity.** Many survivors do not want to be a woman, have trouble identifying as women, or do not like what they perceive women to be, because the abuser was a woman.

- **Gender shame.** Many survivors feel great shame about being a woman because of their identification with the perpetrator.

- **Body shame.** Survivors often feel great shame about their bodies, particularly their bodies' womanliness, because the perpetrator had a woman's body.

- **Homophobic fears about one's actual or perceived sexuality.** Survivors are often very confused about the differences between sexual abuse and lesbian sexuality, and may believe the myth that abuse causes a survivor's sexuality.

- **Longing to be loved.** Survivors frequently have a profound need to be loved in the way that they were not as a child, and they may fear or be unable to accept it, particularly from other women.

Final Thoughts

Abuse is never pleasant. However, mother-daughter sexual abuse seems to provoke particularly strong reactions in people, even those working in the area of trauma. Sometimes, when mother-daughter sexual abuse is acknowledged, people feel the need to say that it doesn't happen as frequently as father-daughter sexual abuse, or that women aren't as violent as men. Even if those things are true, it is not helpful information when listening to and understanding women who have been sexually abused by their mothers (or other women). If we want to create a safe environment for women to speak about their experiences, we need to talk and write about the fact that women and mothers do sexually abuse children. Only in that environment will survivors be truly free to tell their stories and heal themselves.

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Male-to-Male Child Sexual Abuse In the Context of Homophobia

Remember growing up and hearing the word "pervert"? Nobody wanted anything to do with them--they were the "sick and demented" people whom everyone despised. And yet the word "pervert" is used both for people who sexually abuse children, as well as lesbians and gay men. By very definition lesbians and gay men are considered child molesters.

Newspapers draw connections between the sexual abuse of children and gay sex all the time. When a mainstream newspaper covers a story of men sexually abusing boys, it is referred to as homosexual abuse of children. Yet, when the same newspaper covers stories of men sexually abusing girls, it is not described as heterosexual abuse. Male-to-male child sexual abuse is equated with gay sex when there is nothing gay about it.

Victims of Sexual Abuse are Assumed to be Gay

Since male-to-male sexual abuse is believed to be the equivalent of gay sex, the victim is also believed to be gay. Some survivors are even called "fags" by the men who abuse them. Others don't tell anyone about the abuse because they know that they'll be blamed and taunted with homophobic slurs. One survivor told me that after he went public about being a survivor, he was in a store holding hands with his girlfriend and someone said, "I thought he'd be a fag".

The Myth of the All-Powerful Man

A common myth many people hold is that men cannot be victims. The thinking goes, "He's a guy...he could have stopped it if he really wanted to." It's assumed that the survivor must have consented because sexual abuse does not happen to "real" men, and thus since he must have consented, he must be gay. Add to this the common, but mistaken belief that boys and men cannot become erect or ejaculate unless they are aroused or consent, and we have a powerful and pervasive belief system that keeps male survivors silent and ashamed.

The Myth that Sexual Abuse Causes You to be Gay

Even when survivors identify as straight, they are not believed because of another homophobic myth that sexual abuse "causes" homosexuality. There is no evidence that suggests abuse causes one's sexuality. Our sexuality is far too complex. If anything, we live in a society that tries to ensure that everyone is straight, and this

perhaps more than anything else has a profound influence on how people identify their sexuality.

While it is true that survivors of abuse, like anyone else, can engage in sexual behaviours that they may not desire, but engage in for very a variety of reasons, this is equally true for heterosexual and homosexual sex. In other words, someone can engage in gay acts and not be gay, just as someone can engage in straight acts and not be straight.

"Is This What it Means to be Gay?"

Most often abusers hold positions of authority and are known and trusted by their victims. This has a powerful effect on the victims. Because the child respects the abuser, or the abuser is an authority figure (for example, an older brother, father or coach), the child tells himself that the abuse must be okay-perhaps even normal. And, if it's okay, the child reasons, and since it involves sexual acts, then it must be sex. The child may ask himself, "Is this what it means to be gay?" This association is extremely harmful to survivors-both gay and straight.

How do These Myths Impact on Abused Men?

The very nature of sexual abuse and incest, and its associated stigma causes humiliation, shame, self-blame, fear, and secrecy for survivors. It can be hard for them to speak openly about their experiences. Survivors of male-to-male sexual abuse have to contend with the additional stigma and impact of homophobia, which increases their shame, isolation, and secrecy.

Equating the abuse with gay sex leaves most survivors confused and conflicted about their sexuality. If they identify as straight, they may experience homophobic fear and panic that maybe they really aren't. They may take desperate measures to prove to themselves that they aren't gay. Some men may behave in a really macho way, for example, have sex with a number of women, try to get a woman pregnant, or harass gay men. They may in fact be gay, but the thought of being the same as their abuser stops them from coming out, or from feeling comfortable with their gay sexuality.

It's not uncommon for survivors of abuse to blame themselves, but men blame themselves for different reasons than women. Men often believe, and quite strongly, that they "let it happen" simply because they are men. Men are supposed to be all powerful--never victims--even when they are children. This places an incredible burden on boys and men, often leaving them feeling guilty, ashamed, depressed, self-hating, and conflicted about their gender and sexuality.

If the survivor got an erection or climaxed during the abuse, his self-blame and confusion may be even more extreme. Even though these are normal physiological responses to stimulation and/or fear, and do not indicate consent or desire, the child doesn't know this. Adults often don't know it either. To the child, getting an erection or climaxing may feel like one more indication that he "let it happen," or "proof" that he enjoyed it, engulfing him in even more shame, confusion, conflict about his sexuality, and anger toward himself and his body.

How does Sexual Abuse and Homophobia Effect Gay Men?

Both sexual abuse and homophobia have a profound impact on gay men's ability to feel comfortable with themselves, their bodies, their sexuality, and their sexual relationships. If sexual abuse is a gay man's framework for understanding what it is to be gay, being gay may be viewed as something profoundly shameful and dirty; and something that needs to be hidden, like a dreadful secret. This association with the abuse, in addition to the homophobia that lesbians and gays routinely face, makes it particularly hard for gay survivors to feel comfortable with themselves, their bodies, their sexuality and coming out. Gay survivors can feel like their sexuality is as shameful as their abuse was, and may have a hard time separating the two. They may feel like they are abusers, feeling as though they are guilty too, or they may worry that all gay men are abusive.

If a survivor's understanding of what it means to be gay is derived from having been sexually abused by older men, a survivor may express his sexuality through anonymous sex with older men. Of course, this can be a choice apart from abuse, but it can also be a replaying of something familiar and unresolved. In addition, given the likelihood that the survivor was abused by someone that he knew and trusted, it may feel easier, or safer, to have sex with someone he doesn't know or trust.

The gay survivor may worry, "Am I gay because of the abuse?" In my experience, this question reflects how badly he feels about himself and his sexuality, and the question is a result of the combined effects of sexual abuse and homophobia. Survivors often feel shameful, "bad" and "dirty," and believe they are "damaged goods." In a homophobic context, this shame extends to being gay. Straight survivors may feel dirty about themselves and having sex, but they do not feel dirty about being straight. A gay survivor who sees a causal relationship between the abuse and his sexuality is likely to experience a lot of conflict about being gay, and may end up resigning himself to being gay. He doesn't feel good about the abuse, so how can he feel good about something he believes is caused by the abuse?

If he's fortunate, he is able to distinguish between sexual abuse and being gay. But even if he is comfortable with being gay, he may struggle to let himself enjoy being sexual and close with another man. Having sex with a man can bring up frightening feelings and memories. He may feel like he is back there again with the man (or men)

who raped him. His body may go numb, and even though he goes through the motions of having sex, he may not feel really connected.

During sex, he may find himself behaving or responding in similar ways to the way he behaved or was forced to behave when he was abused. He may try to please his partner with little or no regard for his own pleasure. He may feel like he's performing, even though he doesn't want to. He may place himself in situations where he doesn't have enough control because that's what he knows. Or, he may need a lot of control during sex because he didn't have any when he was abused. And although he may crave emotional and physical closeness, he may avoid them for fear of being hurt or betrayed again. On a deep level, he may not feel safe with or trust men which makes it very difficult for him to have meaningful relationships, or to feel proud of being gay.

Clearly there is a profound difference between sexual abuse and being gay--one connotes control over a child, coercion, force, exploitation, and abuse, and the other connotes sexual freedom, free choice, romance, and love. Unfortunately, gay survivors may have a hard time feeling this difference and may struggle to come out, accept themselves, trust other men, have sex, or be in a relationship.

We Need to Support Survivors

Homophobia and myths about men silence male sexual abuse survivors. Sometimes even the gay community hesitates to talk about it, for fear that it will be used against us (to promote the myth that gay men are child molesters). While most men who sexually abuse boys identify as heterosexual, sexual abuse is not about someone's sexuality or sexual identity. Child sexual abuse is about power and domination; the sexual component is a weapon. We need to separate abuse from sex, acknowledge that men are sexually abused, and take a stand on this serious problem. Whether we like it or not, it's an issue that many men have to face. They shouldn't have to face it alone.

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DID, MPD, or Multiplicity: Responding to Parts Inside With a Focus on the Kids

Having parts inside can be challenging, but it can also be inspiring and wonderful! Getting to know your parts inside and fostering some kind of internal communication with them can help you feel better overall.

Why Do People Create Parts?

The human body and mind is unable to cope with overwhelming pain--emotional, mental, and physical--and so provides us with a number of avenues to escape pain. Numbing, splitting off, becoming unconscious, going into shock, and dissociating are all examples of the body's way of helping us survive unbearable pain.

When emotional pain and trauma get too intense, you must find other ways to cope. Creating parts allows survivors of trauma to survive events that they could not bear otherwise.

Why Should I Get To Know Parts Inside?

It is important to get to know parts inside because they are a part of you and they effect how you are, how you feel, and how you act. Getting to know parts inside can also enrich your life. You may find yourself seeing things from a different point of view , or gaining insights into reasons for your or parts' reactions. Parts inside hold your history, your experiences, and some of your emotions and thus they are a vital part of you and shouldn't be ignored -- to ignore them is to ignore yourself.

How Do I Get To Know Parts Inside Better?

Some people are visual and see parts inside. Some hear voices, or just know or sense that there are others inside.

If you are visual, see if you can let yourself look around inside. Some people do this with their eyes closed, some like to keep them open. You could draw or write out what you see.

If you hear things, write down what you hear. Try putting different voices into different categories or lists that make sense to you.

If you sense parts inside, what do you sense or know about them? Try writing it

out.

Sometimes there are parts inside who know all or most of everyone else inside. These parts are often willing to tell you about the others if you ask them. Take your time at this. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, you can stop and take a break. Going slowly and gently is very important. You've been pushed enough in your life; there's no need to do that now.

If you approach your internal world with a spirit of openness and curiosity, and take it as slowly as you need to, you may find that you enjoy learning about yourself. It can be very validating. You may find that you begin to understand why you've felt a certain way, or why you've had certain needs. You may discover your own inner playfulness and joy.

Learning More About Your Internal World

After you've met or been told about various parts inside, you may want to find out more about them -- what they like, think, feel, want, and so on. Some parts are very unique and have very specific jobs or ways of being. Other parts are more like fragments and are less definable. Some function by themselves, others may be part of a group(s). Everyone is different, and there is no right or wrong way to be. You don't have to be like the multiples in movies or books. You can just be yourself.

What Do You and Your Parts Need?

At some point it can help to find out what parts inside need, besides your respect and compassion. For instance, kids probably need a place to play and someone to hug them. Upset or worried parts may need reassurance, angry parts may want a place to be angry, and any part may want to wear certain clothes that feel more like them (though where and when they are worn should be negotiated). Parts inside may need to feel their feelings, and to hear from you that is a good thing to do. They may need to cry, scream, or stomp around. You'll feel better if you let parts do what they need to do (within reason, and always keeping yourself and others safe).

It may feel like a loss of control to let parts do what they want, especially for someone who has prided themselves in having control or who has kept a lid on parts. You may need time to get used to the idea, and to talk about it with a therapist or supportive friends. Don't forget to start small. For instance, if you're uncomfortable with kids, you can always start by letting a kid play inside first, and then let a kid out only part way while you stay in control and see how you feel. Going slow is really okay; no one likes to be overwhelmed.

Why Do You Have Kids Inside?

Kid parts, just like other parts inside, are created, first and foremost, to keep you alive.

Kid parts inside made it possible for you to keep aspects of yourself that an abuser (or abusers) probably tried to destroy -- such as your ability to feel, dream, and hope -- and kids hold on to creativity, playfulness, curiosity, awe, and gentleness so that you could still have those things when you were safe.

What Happens When You Don't Listen To Kids Inside?

Kids can bring joy and happiness, as well as sadness, fear, and anger. Any of these feelings can be hard to deal with, especially if it hasn't been safe to feel them in the past. When it hasn't been safe to feel good or proud of yourself, to explore and question what you see and hear, to laugh and giggle out loud, to stomp about loudly when you're mad, or to cry without shame (all of which are healthy and natural) it can be hard to know what to do with those feelings when they come up. Some people feel ashamed or embarrassed, and try to hold those feelings in.

That isn't good for anyone to do, but when feelings are held by kids (as they frequently are) it means that the kids are stuffed down and silenced, and that hurts them. They'll start to feel bad about themselves, and rejected, hurt, sad, and mad. When this happens, older parts, adult parts, or main parts also feel those feelings, but they may not be aware that they are because they pushed the kids away. That is one reason why it's so important to create a space for everyone inside.

Letting Kid Parts Out

This is where the challenge comes in. How do you create space for kids when you work, go to school, have a partner or a roommate, and are just plain scared?

Everyone needs to find their own way to let kid parts out -- but sometimes knowing what other people have done can help. However you go about it, it's a good idea to take it slow and gentle. No one likes to feel pressured -- so take little steps, one at a time. You may need to get used to what it's like having kids inside, before you let them come out in your body and play; that's okay. You'll probably also need support from someone, and to be able to talk about how it feels to you. Being small can feel scary, especially when it wasn't safe to be small when you were a child. You may need reminders from yourself or someone else that it is different now. You have your own living space, no one is hurting you anymore, no one can control you, and so it's okay now to let your kids out and be small and silly if that's what they want to do.

When You Feel Silly Doing Kids' Things

Some people say they could never do kid things because they would feel silly, or their partner or roommate wouldn't understand. If you feel uncomfortable letting your kid parts out to play, see if you can remember times as a child that you did kid things or received what all kids need -- such as being held, reassured, read to and nurtured. Were you taken care of in a loving way as a child? Were you reassured and rocked when you were scared? Was an adult there for you in a safe and real way after you were abused? If you answer "no" to any of these questions, then you didn't get what you needed, and parts of you still need them.

Abused children need even more reassurance and love than children who weren't abused. So even if you got a little of what you needed it probably wasn't enough. Perhaps, you could think about it as giving yourself things you needed as a child but never received. Allowing you kid parts to play and receive comfort will help you to feel better about yourself, and eventually, happier.

Talking to Partners or Friends About Kids Inside

When you feel more confident that taking care of your kids and letting them out to play is what you need to do, then you might find it easier to explain this to your partner or friend. Sometimes when things are explained with confidence or certainty, people accept it better. If not maybe s/he could read about the issue, including this article.

Roommates don't have to know what you do, for that matter neither do partners. But, it's usually better if your partner or a friend supports you. Your partner or friend could even help with reassuring the kids, reading stories to them, and holding them.

If your partner or friends help with supporting the kids, they will need to be aware of their boundaries, and be able to ask for what they need from you. Relationships need to be mutually supportive to feel good. And contrary to what some people say, multiples are perfectly capable of giving support to people in their lives. Problems can arise when friends, support people, and partners give and give, but don't say when they need a break, or ask for what they need. Problems can also arise when one partner asks for a lot without thinking about the other person's needs. Finding ways to balance the needs of both people is really important to do.

How Can I Give to My Kids When I Need to be Taken Care Of?

Giving when you're feeling down or needy can be very hard. But remember, by taking care of your kids, even by reading them a story, you may find that you begin to

feel better, too. This also applies to letting your kids out. If they get to come out and play, sing, or cry, you'll feel the benefits of that, too. Remember, you are all connected. What helps one part inside will help everyone else.

Kids Are Wonderful!

Kids can be so wonderful--full of life, awe, creativity, and joy. We'd all be better people, and live in a much better world if everyone let themselves be more kid-like. Multiples have that ability built-in, and deserve to explore that to the fullest. No one should feel ashamed of being child-like. Instead of being a put down--"you're acting like such a child"--it should be a sign of creativity and freedom. It is a good thing.

Nurturing, Caretaking, and Wise Parts

Most multiples have parts inside who are nurturing, caretakers, protectors, or wise parts. Connecting with these parts can help you to feel more grounded, protected, and taken care of. There may be parts inside who will read to kids inside, or can hold them, give babies bottles, and put them to bed. Other parts may be able to nurture all of you by wrapping you in a blanket, reading a kids' story out loud, having hot chocolate or ice cream, drawing a warm bath for you, helping you to relax or to be kind to yourself. You'll need to find the things that make you feel good and safe inside.

Inner wise parts also give terrific guidance -- they often know what to do and what you need, even when you don't. You've got all kinds of inner resources that you may not even be aware of. It can help to find out what everyone has to offer and often these parts will know. Everyone inside, even angry parts, has something to offer you.

Angry and Critical Parts

Most people with parts inside have angry or critical parts -- parts that are may be mad or put you down with insults. These parts may call you names or even growl at you. Angry parts need ways to express themselves safely. Safe ways to get frustration and anger out can include tearing up unneeded paper or phone book, scribbling hard and fast with black crayons, stomping, writing out mad stuff, or writing out angry feelings at a multiple site in the anger section.

Remember, while the anger may be directed at you and may feel scary, usually the angry part is a child who is mad about being abused. You may need ground rules before they come out in the body, for example, no hurting your body, or breaking something important.

You may both feel safer if they express their anger inside for a while before coming out in the body. You can create a safe place inside that they can release their anger without scaring other parts. Or maybe they can stay inside while they dictate what to write down. That gives you control while letting them express themselves.

Sometimes you may feel like you can't relate to or understand an angry or critical part. They are probably very angry, maybe even abusive. It's important to remember that such parts usually took on more of the abuse, or more of the particularly hard or sadistic abuse. They have good reason to be angry. They may have been told that the abuse was happening because of you. They might have had to identify with the abuser(s) in order to keep you safe, and now that the abuse is over they don't know how to stop. Or, they may not believe that the abuse is over and are preparing for the next attack by being tough and guarded.

Angry or critical parts may have been programmed through great torture to act this way and may believe that this is the only way to keep safe. Deep down they are trying to protect both themselves and you from abuse, and they definitely worked to protect you when you were being abused. They kept you alive, and they deserve your respect and understanding for that.

However, it is easier to say this than it is to do it, especially if angry parts are being really abusive and this is causing you and others inside great pain, panic, and fear. Finding ways to compartmentalize parts inside can be helpful in this instance. For example, maybe you could imagine tucking the kids away in a safe and soothing place, while you imagine a barrier between you, the kids and the angry or critical parts. But if you do this, you might want to explain that you don't think they are bad; it's just their that is upsetting. Letting them know that you understand their anger and that they have a right to be angry can help. Letting them have constructive ways inside to express their anger is also a good idea. And listening and responding to their requests, if you can, can help them feel heard and respected -- perhaps for the first time -- and lessen the anger directed at you.

What works for you really depends on your internal system, but it's important to approach the situation with calm respect. This can be hard to do if you're feeling abused, so you might need to find a way to ground or reassure yourself and to feel safe before you interact with these parts. It takes time, practice, and a little creativity to find what works. Again, while it's important not to talk down to anyone inside, it might help to remind yourself that this abusive part is most likely a child -- possibly a child imitating an adult, but still a child. How would you handle an angry or abusive child? You might isolate her/him from other kids, ask them what is going on for them, get them involved with another task, have them take time-out and then check in with them, give them one-to-one attention, give them options or explain they are not bad and that their behavior is hurtful.

Is There Enough Time for Everyone?

Many people think that they don't have the time to let all their parts out and still be able to work and do other things -- but you may be surprised at what little time is needed. Sometimes letting just one part out can help other parts inside to feel better. For example, some people can have different kids come out to play at the same time. For others, switching happens a lot and quickly, so a number of kids are able to be out in fifteen minutes. Or other people may need to let kids take turns being out at different times and on different days. One thing you might want to try to do is ask kids inside to all listen at a particular time -- and then read to them or have them be read to at that time, thus letting many kids experience some comfort.

If your parts know that they can count on you to let them out at some point, they can usually wait until their turn. This may require some coordination and remembering whose turn it is, but usually there are parts inside who are willing to keep track of this and keep you informed. If something comes up and you can't let them out when planned, tell them. Explain your reasons briefly using age-appropriate language, and let them know when they can come out next. Parts inside, especially kids, are often very understanding and reasonable if they are included in the conversation. They know that you work and don't want to disrupt that; they just want to know when they can come out and play.

Won't Other Parts Try to Take Over My Life?

Parts inside don't want to take over your life; they just want to express themselves, be able to do what makes them feel good, and sometimes be taken care of. Angry parts usually want to protect you, and if they think you aren't doing a good job at that, they'll usually tell you (in so many words) and may try to intervene. But for the most part, they, too, are content to have you handle all that outside stuff. Parts inside usually just want time out where their needs or concerns can be addressed. By listening to parts inside, responding to their needs, and considering their advice, you might find that you want to know more often what they think.

Taking the time to let parts out actually gives you more control, even though it may, at first, feel as though you are losing control. When parts inside know that they have times they can come out, they will be less likely to come out at times when you need to be adult or in a specific role. The more you attend to their needs, the better you will feel and the less demanding they will be in the long run. When they first get time out, like the neglected kids they are, they may want more and more, and you may feel overwhelmed. But eventually, by being consistent (like a good parent is), they'll come to trust that you are there for them and that they'll get their turn out, and this will help them to feel less anxious or demanding.

Some Last Thoughts

Listening to parts inside and giving everyone a turn out can help you to feel better over all, and can decrease inner struggles about who has time out and when. In getting to know parts of yourself, you may discover wonderful things you never knew you had --wisdom, strength, the ability to protect yourself, the ability to play and to trust, and more. So, be yourself in all your multiplicity and know that you are doing something brave and healing for yourself.

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THE END