

Older People Surviving Child Sexual Abuse

Written by Louise

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Note: While it's true that some older survivors of child sexual abuse can have experiences that trigger a powerful resurgence of past trauma, this article is not meant to state that this will be the case for all. Rather, I hope it will be a comfort and offer support to older survivors who are experiencing a hard time with their pasts. You are not alone, and it is not hopeless.

Introduction

It is well-documented by writers and researchers that there are times in the lives of abuse survivors when they will be more prone to thoughts and feelings about their histories. Circumstances that can instigate the re-opening of abuse-related wounds include pregnancy, a fresh encounter with sexual assault whether against the survivor or somebody close, children becoming the same age the survivor was at the time of their assault, or being in a safe relationship and no longer needing to merely survive. Another context for the arousal of early abuse-related trauma can be approaching, or having entered, middle-age.

You may be a survivor of child sexual abuse who is now in your late thirties, forties, fifties or beyond, and you may be finding that your feelings around what you experienced are worse than they have ever been, or at any rate worse than they've been for a long time. You may be confused as to why this is happening now. Life changing events such as medical scares, dying abusers, bereavement, retrenchment and ill spouses are things older survivors must often contend with. You may not expect such events to have triggered off earlier trauma, and you may be shocked and frightened by the strength of nightmares, flashbacks and other symptoms.

Or perhaps there's no precipitating event you can pinpoint as starting it all, but you've found that you suddenly can't stop thinking about what happened when you were younger. It may be that you've retired, your kids have left home and life has fewer extraneous distractions. This can be a time when traumatic issues begin to clamour for attention.

If this is you, please know that even if you feel anything but normal right now, what is happening to you is not at all unusual. This appears to be a common aspect of survivorship. In writing about adult survivors of child abuse, trauma expert and psychiatrist Judith Herman says:

As the survivor struggles with the tasks of adult life, the legacy of her childhood becomes increasingly burdensome. Eventually, often in the third or fourth decade of life, the defensive structure may begin to break down. Often the precipitant is a change in the equilibrium of close relationships: The failure of a marriage, the illness or death of a parent. The facade can hold no longer, and the underlying fragmentation becomes manifest. When and if a breakdown occurs, it can take symptomatic forms that mimic virtually every form of psychiatric disorder. Survivors fear that they are going insane or will have to die (1992 p. 114).

I'm going to tell you about how this happened to me, then we'll look at other important aspects of this process, and getting better.

About me

I am a survivor of child sexual and other abuse who had undertaken successful healing work. Yet, two years ago in 2008 when I was 41, I experienced a major event that was for me the catalyst for developing panic disorder and agoraphobia. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) returned with such a vengeance that I was certain I had never before experienced it so badly. I could not allow myself to think about my history of child sexual and other abuse without experiencing the most dizzying terror about it all. I wondered if my past had finally defeated me. If you would like to read more about this part of my journey, [here](#) is a link. Two years later I am much stronger and have a greater appreciation of why this happened. I also know that I am part of a much larger group of older survivors to have felt such an impact - my older friends at Pandora's Aquarium have been a major source of reassurance and validation to me, as was returning to therapy, and I'll say more about this below.

Survivors who may never have addressed their abuse

You may be an older survivor who has managed, through a variety of means, to hold your past in check for decades so that you could raise kids, work, or whatever else your younger life entailed. You may have not recognized the impact of abuse on your

life, or you may have believed you were "over it." Perhaps you felt that you were better off forgetting about it - or maybe you actually did forget it. For whatever reason, you are now finding that you cannot hold the memories and the pain back anymore, and this is probably frightening.

Beverly Engel, author of *The Right to Innocence: Healing the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, writes,

If you were sexually abused as a child, you are still suffering from its impact as an adult. Childhood sexual abuse is such an overwhelming, damaging, and humiliating assault on a child's mind, soul and body that he or she cannot escape emotional damage. The abuse invades every facet of one's sexuality, one's ability to be successful, one's ability to trust others, and physical health. It causes its victims to be self-destructive, overcontrolling, and abusive to others, as well as addiction to alcohol, drugs, and food and attraction to love partners who abuse them physically, verbally, and emotionally. Its victims come to feel ashamed, guilty, powerless, depressed, afraid, and angry.

Whether you actually remember the abuse or not, the damage caused by the abuse only increases with time. This is true for several reasons. First of all, when you are younger you often have many things to occupy your mind--a busy social life, the goal of completing your education and planning a career, a new marriage, starting your own family. Such endeavors are fairly time-consuming and distract you from your feelings. But as time passes, pressure mounts: You must deal with more people, cope with more responsibilities and further problems, and soon the stress grows to the point where something has to give.

As the damage becomes even more noticeable, your life becomes progressively more unmanageable. You begin to realize that time alone cannot heal the wounds, and that a history of sexual abuse is not something you can "learn to live with." On the contrary, as time goes by, the emotional damage takes a heavier toll on you. Pain that has been hidden for years suddenly becomes unbearable. Anger once successfully repressed begins surfacing, causing those who have been abused to become abusive themselves--either to others or to themselves. Feelings of dread suddenly turn into panic attacks, agoraphobia or paranoia. Chronic depression increases in intensity, causing longer and longer periods of suffering; suicidal thoughts become suicide attempts. Battles with eating and weight control, unresolved since childhood, result in

anorexia, bulimia, and obesity. That tendency to drink a little too much has become a need to drink (1990)

It's also true that older survivors may have come from an era where sexual assault was not spoken about, myths abounded unchallenged that kept them ashamed and silent, and there were no resources, meaning that people victimized in this way could not find counselling. If you are experiencing any of the above, it's important that you know it's not too late for you to get help now. You will have to stop and take care of the little boy or girl inside you who was abused. You may be bothered by thoughts that you should be over it, but as the above quote says, child sexual abuse is a wound that time alone doesn't heal. I once spoke to a rape survivor new to healing in her fifties who said to me, "If I have only twenty years left, I'm going to make damn sure they're good ones." You deserve good years too - you have been through enough - both the abuse and the decades of its impact on your life. You have been through this alone - you don't need to be alone with it anymore. Break this long silence, my friend. We'll look at how below.

Survivors who have addressed their abuse

It's also not unusual for older survivors who have perhaps had lots of good therapy and who are fairly advanced in healing, to find that something triggers a powerful and deeply distressing resurgence of traumatic memory and feeling. You may find that events that you have been able to think about with more ease for years, have suddenly become unbearable again, and maybe you begin to employ the same avoidance or numbing strategies that you used before you began healing. Or, you thought you knew all about containing flashbacks, but find just for now that the old methods are useless. For me, this was most disconcerting, and caused me at first to question whether any of the hard work I'd done had actually amounted to anything. I'd had a perky sense of self-assurance in my twenties that working through my abuse history then, would ensure that I would hit my forties a glowing model of psychological good health. I spent a lot of time crying about perceived failure because that expectation was not met.

My therapist, who works with traumatized people, told me she sees many survivor clients who present saying that they'd been getting along nicely and were rarely bothered by past traumas anymore, and then something happened to bring it all back again. They feel, she said, that they're back to square one. But this isn't true.

For sure, it can be shattering to find that issues we thought were dealt with can still be so overwhelming. But, if this sounds like you, you need to be assured that you have not somehow "unhealed." You are feeling terrible now, for reasons you'll begin to understand with the right support. It may help you - as it did me - to think about the progress you have made - for example, although I was again feeling absolute dread around abuse memories, I had not reverted back to blaming myself for the abuse. The work I had done on that did not "change back" just because I was afraid again.

You might like to spend a few minutes watching [this webcast](#), in which Psychiatrist and trauma expert Dr. Frank Ochberg gives reassurance for retraumatized people who may feel that they have lost any ground they made.

At this stage of my own process, I have much more understanding about how it was possible - indeed, probable - for a meltdown to happen to me, and I know that it doesn't make me weak. My sense of strength and belief in myself has returned. You will make it too my friend.

But shouldn't I be "over it" by now?

This is the bugbear of even survivors who were raped a month ago, let alone older survivors for whom it was perhaps decades ago. Two years ago, I was dreadfully embarrassed about being seen to mangle, or to still be going on about my child abuse in my forties. I now know that the fact that our experiences can still hurt so badly at times says nothing negative about our characters. It tells us much more about the nature of trauma. And we are not failures because we are hurting now. That we have managed to live full, though affected lives is testament to strength.

What does "get over it" even mean? We know that this is a cliché offered to abuse survivors with boring regularity. I believe that one of the reasons we give ourselves such a hard time is through a process of internalizing the shame attached to statements like "get over it." For those who don't know, internalization is the process through which we come - usually unwittingly - to adopt social messages as our own reality. If you did not otherwise know how to make sense of the abuse you experienced, or how you felt about it, you may have been handed platitudes that you felt compelled to accept as correct. Frustratingly, some of us find that even if we've

intellectually rejected clichés such as “get over it” and would never say them to another survivor, that message often still resounds inside us, causing us to feel inadequate about ourselves. It shouldn't, but it's something many of us need to keep working on. Remember that if people have shamed you by telling you to "get over it" or questioning the fact that you aren't yet "over it", not only are they wrong, but you have experienced Secondary Wounding, which is the messages trauma survivors receive from others that compound their pain. You'll see a link below if you would like to read more about secondary wounding.

And, is getting "over it" the same thing as healing? I am recently persuaded that the answer is no. I saw and experienced things that I have done so much healing around, but I am not "over" them in the sense that people generally mean that, and I don't believe I ever will be. And that feels very okay to me. A lovely older survivor from Pandora's Aquarium with whom I recently discussed this, has given me permission to quote her:

Getting over it has never been a goal for me. I told my therapist that the first time I saw her. I wanted to be able to learn how to deal with the symptoms like the nightmares, the constant stress of being hypervigilant, all the things I couldn't rid myself of, but not the memories. I really didn't expect those to go away. And don't think I'd want them to if they could. It's all too integral, I'd have to deny most of the first 15 years of my life. All of the abuse from the incest on through the gang rape shaped a lot of who I am today even though it happened 34 to 45 years ago. I still have issues to work through. I might always have issues to work through. I don't see that as a bad thing. Not as long as it moves you forward.

I wish I'd had that wisdom 20 years ago; I believe I would have been less embarrassed and shocked by the horrible time I had two years ago. Child abuse can be such a terrifying ordeal, such a profound betrayal. It accrues tremendous losses, and getting "over it" may be neither possible nor desirable, certainly not when it means we beat ourselves up for failing to be "over it." We don't hang onto our histories for the fun of it; we want to heal and learn to manage the worst ravages. We strive, we have victories, and yet if memory and feeling recycle later in life, we need to respect that this is part of being a survivor, and get through it, not over it. You may also have experienced traumas after the child sexual abuse, such as domestic violence and/or adult rape that are adding to the weight of what you now

feel. Why should you be over it? It may be that we need to accept that a history of child sexual abuse can have longer-term impact on us than we might once have thought. This is sad, and it isn't fair but isn't it better – and fairer - to approach it without castigating ourselves?

Remember that where you are at has less to do with how old you are and more to do with factors such as how long you've been addressing your abuse - you may be new to the process, and thus let me applaud you for the courage it's taking for you to look at such painful issues after so long. If the process of exploring your abuse history is not new, we've already seen that other things going on can stir it up. Either way, you have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of.

So, I would like any survivor reading this to take pressure off him or herself to be or to get "over it."

Trauma is physical, too.

Part of the reason for feeling traumatized now for events in even the distant past is physical. Our bodies were not designed to handle repeated severe stressors. Research findings indicate that the stress of early childhood trauma such as child sexual abuse, can cause actual physical changes in the brain. Traumatic memory appears to be stored differently than ordinary memory. One consequence of this is that when we're in situations that remind us - even in not-so-obvious ways, of the actual traumatic experience/s we've had, those memory tracts open up, causing us to feel as if it were happening again. Please see [this article](#). You might also like to listen to Dr. Frank Ochberg's webcast, [How Does PTSD Affect Brain Function?](#)

Aphrodite Matsakis also gives an excellent explanation in her book, *I Can't Get Over It*, of the biological changes that trauma, especially if it is prolonged or severe, can bring about. These changes appear to be irreversible, but it isn't hopeless (1992 p. 39). A good therapist can work with us on managing these responses.

The trauma of childhood sexual abuse can impact physically in other ways too - for example, a study found that middle-aged women who survived child sexual abuse have greater health-care costs than their non-abused counterparts (Bonomi, Anderson, Rivara et al, 2008)

If you didn't know about this already, it's important that you do. At very least, I hope it helps you to understand that you should not be angry with yourself for feeling waves of traumatic feeling even decades after the abuse occurred. Your brain is acting the way that those of many trauma survivors do.

Don't be Ashamed

I've said enough about how ashamed and deficient I felt for feeling so bad again in my forties, and I've spoken to other older survivors who feel levels of embarrassment and shame about it too. I am no longer ashamed, indeed, I feel prouder than ever of my journey through this testing of my fighting spirit. I do think that there's a general expectation that we'll have acquired sufficient maturity and strength for dealing as we get older. But feeling recycled pain doesn't mean we lack maturity and strength.

I also know many older survivors who are able to accept wherever they're at, and be gentle with themselves. They've grown to a place where they don't feel the need to apologise for being vulnerable; indeed they are wonderfully fierce about their right to own what they feel. They are models for all of us who struggle with shame over being older and finding that our histories still present difficulty.

Remember that it is not your fault you were hurt, and it is not your fault you are – naturally - responding to that.

Don't Despair

If you are experiencing another wave of trauma in your later life, you may feel that it will never end. I did lots of desperate crying as I wondered if my history had finally throttled me. You may also feel as if you are going crazy, coupled with fear, anxiety and depression. It can be a time when suicidal thoughts occur. Please, do seek help from a counsellor and/or your doctor. You deserve as much support as possible to ride this out. I promise you it will get better. Take one day at a time, my friend, and reach out for support. It is there. See below for suggestions on finding a counsellor.

Positives?

I think it's highly possible that the re-emergence of trauma can offer the opportunity to heal at deeper levels. You may have heard of the "onion-skin" allegory to healing - the layers are manifold and as we unpeel them, we may hit the same issues again with stronger feeling. Although it's hard to be grateful for so much pain, this may also offer us new ways of making sense of our experiences and the impact on our lives.

At the time of this writing, I'm considering the possibility that I felt my earlier traumas without the usual layers of protection because I actually no longer need them. It's true for some of us that as we get older, we can feel things more deeply because our psyches decide that we are ready to do so. For sure, it was terrifying to feel everything without any buffers. But could it be that I am actually stronger than I think? I certainly did not die or go insane. I have also learned that dealing with childhood abuse is perhaps not as finite as I thought, and I think that's a good thing to have learned.

It may take time to appreciate the positives. But they are likely to be there as you come through.

Seeking Help

I have heard survivors beyond count say that they're embarrassed about going back to counseling and that they feel like failures. I sympathize; I certainly struggled with that - on my first appointment back to counselling, I spent the first half of the session sobbing that I was scared and embarrassed about being there. But there is absolutely no shame in seeking help to recover - it's wise. You would do no less for your car!

Whether you've had counselling before and are thinking about returning, or you have never had it, you will be bound to have concerns and questions. I suggest you watch this webcast from Doctor Frank Ochberg: [What is your advice for the survivor looking for a trauma therapist?](#)

Please ask any counsellor you're considering seeing whether they are conversant with child sexual abuse and trauma. Even if the counsellor is treating you for other symptoms related to the trauma, he or she should recognize the trauma as

important in itself and never minimize that. You deserve to have a safe and supportive place to unfold this pain in.

It may also be the first time that you, as an older survivor, have ever spoken about the abuse. A good counsellor will not expect you to tell all on the first appointment if that is not what you wish to do. Spend time getting to know him/her to see whether this will be a good and safe healing alliance for you. Look for a link below on seeking a therapist.

Peer Support - Older Survivors at Pandora's Aquarium

Would you like to share about your process with other older survivors? If so, let me assure you that you will be in good company at Pandora's Aquarium message-board for survivors of rape and sexual assault. Older survivors who join our community frequently worry about the fact we have a large contingent of younger people; they feel as if they are "too old" to be there. But we in fact do have a big group of male and female survivors who are late thirties, forties, fifties and sixties plus, and we've also had members in their seventies. Although you are welcome to post anywhere that is relevant to you, we do have a forum especially for older survivors. The name given to this forum by our older survivors is the JOY Group, and you'll find this in the "Reaching Out" section of the board under "Survivor Communities." Please consider this as an option - you will be made very welcome. It doesn't matter how long ago or how recently your assault was, you will find support. See this link: [What you'll find at Pandora's Aquarium](#), and don't hesitate to [contact us](#) if you have any further questions.

Links

[Bubba Esther, 1888](#) - Ruth Whitman: A powerful poem about an elderly woman's disclosure of incestuous abuse

[Secondary Wounding](#) - Identifying and overcoming hurt from others.

[Finding a Therapist](#) - Tips for selecting a therapist and beginning sessions.

See many more articles [here](#) on all aspects of sexual assault and survivorship

References:

1. Bonomi AE, Anderson ML, Rivara FP, et al. (March 2008). "[Health care utilization and costs associated with childhood abuse](#)". Journal of General Internal Medicine 23 (3): 294–9.
2. Engel, B. (1990) The Right to Innocence: Healing the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Therapeutic 7-Step Self-Help Program for Men and Women, Including How to Choose a Therapist and Find a Support Group, Ivy Books, USA
3. Herman, J. (1992). Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from domestic abuse to political terror. BasicBooks, USA.
4. Matsakis, A. (1992) I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors, New Harbinger Publications Inc. California

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