

Internet information on Childhood Abuse and Neglect (iCAN)



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ISTSS Global Collaboration Project

This e-pamphlet has been created to offer *brief, relevant information* to adults with childhood traumatic experiences. This information does not replace advice by a professional clinician or a national legislative body. Please seek support when reading this material triggers unpleasant feelings.

This e-pamphlet will help you understand what childhood trauma *is*, what are its possible *effects*, what you can do to *help yourself*, and what you can do to *get help from others*.

What is Childhood Trauma?

The word trauma is used to describe negative events that are emotionally painful and that overwhelm a person's ability to cope. Examples of such events include experiencing an earthquake or hurricane, industrial accident or vehicular accident, physical or sexual assault, and various forms of abuse experienced during childhood. The types of trauma that tend to have the greatest adverse psychological consequences are those related to interpersonal or intentional trauma. These include childhood abuse and neglect.

What is Childhood Abuse?

Traumatic events that occur in childhood are called “abuse” events when children are threatened or harmed by those charged with their care or who are in a position of power or authority over them. Such persons include family members such as parents, stepparents, and older siblings. Guardians or persons in authority also include teachers, coaches, religious leaders, police officers, and judges. There are different forms of childhood abuse including physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse and neglect. Child abuse can occur in many contexts including homes, schools, churches, foster care, justice systems, and workplaces.

What is Physical Abuse?

Physical abuse is deliberate aggression towards a child that leads to injury or risk of injury. Examples include beating or hitting a child or rough treatment of a child that can cause physical injury or harm. Consequences of physical abuse include bruises, scratches, burns, broken bones, lacerations, and loss of consciousness. The difference between discipline and physical abuse differs from country to country. However, the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations has stated that corporal punishment of children is degrading treatment of children and is prohibited (1992).

What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse occurs when a child is engaged in sexual behaviour by an adult or some person who is older than them, with power and authority over them or who is entrusted to care for them. The purpose of the engagement of the child is for the benefit of the adult, either for pleasure or for financial profit. Because this type of trauma often involves the exploitation of the trust of the child, it is sometimes referred to as “betrayal trauma.”

What is Psychological Abuse?

Psychological abuse includes a range of non-accidental actions that create fear in a child or that intend to injure his or her dignity and psychological integrity. Examples include threats to abandon a child, threats to harm a child or people or things the child cares about, and berating, disparaging or scape-goating a child. Psychological abuse can also include actions such as confining a child (put in a closet or tied to a chair), physical humiliations (standing naked to others) or coercing child to inflict pain on him or herself.

What is Neglect?

Neglect is a form of childhood abuse and is a form of threat to the child by acts of omission of care that threaten the child’s survival. Examples include failure of a parent or caretaker to provide needed food, clothing and shelter, leaving a child alone for extended periods of time and not providing medical care as needed.

Effects of Childhood Trauma on Adults

Experiencing abuse or neglect as a child can have a significant impact on an adult’s quality of life. The impact can be felt across several areas, such as emotional health, physical health, mental health and personal relationships.

Emotional Health

Survivors of childhood abuse can often experience feelings of anxiety, worry, shame, guilt, helplessness, hopelessness, grief, sadness and anger.

Mental Health

Surviving abuse or trauma as a child has been linked with higher rates of anxiety, depression, suicide and self harm, PTSD, drug and alcohol misuse and relationship difficulties.

Physical Health

Children who are exposed to abuse and trauma may develop what is called ‘a heightened stress response’. This can impact their ability to regulate their emotions, lead to sleep difficulties, lower immune function, and increase the risk of a number of physical illnesses throughout adulthood.

Getting Help

What can I do to help myself?

Safety

Ensuring physical, emotional and psychological safety is the first and most important step towards recovery and getting help.

Physical/External Safety

It is vital to consider the safety of your current living environment. This may include the physical security of where you are staying, the neighbourhood, the ability to access support if needed and the relationships that you have with those around you.

If you do not currently feel safe, consider what steps you may be able to take towards ensuring your own safety. Crisis support hotlines, local support groups and community organisations can often provide helpful information about available support options including short-term accommodation or financial assistance.

Psychological/Emotional/Internal Safety

Safety is not only physical. Feeling emotionally safe is also important. Visualizing yourself in a place where you feel physically and emotionally safe (e.g., a positive memory or a specific location) can be a helpful strategy, as well as engaging in positive self-affirmations (e.g., saying to yourself: “I can get through this”) or using ‘grounding’ actions (e.g., snapping a rubber band on your wrist, splashing your face with cold water or noticing and labelling five things around you).

Disclosing

Your personal experiences are your own. It is your choice whether to keep them secret or to share them with people you trust such as your family members/friends/loved ones/professionals. For many survivors, however, disclosing their personal experience can be an important step in recovery.

What is Disclosure?

Disclosure means telling your personal experiences to somebody you trust and feel safe with. Telling a close friend, a family member, or a person from a support institution, care centre or telephone counseling helpline can be an important first step in getting help. By disclosing, you can discuss with the person what next steps you may want to take.

Why Disclose?

Disclosure is the first step towards getting protection and help. It may help you feel less alone, and provide some relief. First time disclosure is often difficult and may leave you feeling fear, shame, despair, anger or horror. However hard, it is often the first step on the path to getting help and recovery.

How to Disclose?

In order for disclosure to be helpful, it is important to consider what you will tell, and to whom. Writing down what you want to say can be helpful. It is also helpful to try to keep calm when you speak, for example, by taking some deep breaths.

Effect of your Disclosure on Other People

Disclosing your experience can be emotionally overwhelming for the listener, especially for a close friend or a family member. The person close to you may cry or get very angry at the perpetrator. Sometimes this is so difficult for this person that he or she simply cannot believe that this is possible. While difficult, it is important not to give up; disclosure is often the first step to getting help. If you are afraid of unpleasant reactions from your friends or family members, use a telephone helpline or first talk to a professional supporter.

Disclosing to an Official Person

Disclosing your experience to an official person (teacher, director, police officer, social worker, psychologist) may legally require them to take action against the offender. To do so, they may have to verify your story, so they may ask a lot of specific questions that may seem intrusive or be upsetting. You might experience feelings of fear, shame or anger, or you may even re-experience the event(s) (feel like they are happening again). Remember that in order to prosecute the offender and protect you, these persons have to follow standard procedures. The investigating officials are trained to work with people who survived similar experiences as you have.

What can you expect from disclosure?

You may expect different things depending on how and when you disclose your experience. A close friend or a family member can give you protection, emotional support, the opportunity to discuss actions to take and assist you in contacting the officials. Professionals can provide counseling, protection, advice or legal action.

Coping Day by Day

While every day may feel like a struggle, there are many things that you can do to help cope with daily activities.

Sleep

Sleep is very important for your wellbeing. While many trauma survivors have difficulty sleeping, there are things you can try to reduce this. Practice moderate physical exercise a few hours before sleeping time. Try to have a light meal about two hours before going to bed, and avoid heavy meals and drinking liquids that contain caffeine. If you can, avoid discussing upsetting things shortly before sleeping. Where possible, try to go to sleep at more or less the same time, in the same place and ensure a quiet environment.

Eating Habits

Regular and balanced eating is good for your wellbeing. Foods that are low in fats and sugars, and are easy to digest, are good for your health. Monitor your weight. Try to maintain regular meal times during the day, and avoid having a meal late at night or shortly before going to sleep. Limit the amount of alcohol you consume because alcohol can impair your judgment and reactions, and negatively affect your emotions and relationships with other people.

Healthy Daily Structure

Maintain regular daily activities such as getting up, going to work, meeting people, resting and doing leisure activities. Practice moderate physical exercise on a regular basis and eat regular meals. Make a list of things that give you pleasure and do at least one each day.

Self-Care

Caring about yourself is good for your body and the way you feel. Talk to your health care provider about any health concerns, avoid using drugs, and limit your consumption of alcohol and tobacco.

Social Network

Identify the people you trust and consider talking to them about your worries and dilemmas. Seek their advice and try to maintain regular contact with these people. Be open minded about meeting new and interesting people.

Mindfulness Practice

Think about the activities you enjoy doing or the places where you feel relaxed and safe. Make a list of your skills, people that care about you, your achievements and other assets that are your 'resources'.

Falling Back into Bad Feelings

The negative feelings you experienced right after the event(s) may return. This is a normal part of the process of coping. When this happens you might choose to distract yourself or do something which helps you relax, e.g. talking with a friend, moderate physical exercise, or listening to your favorite music.

Diary/Expressive Writing

Consider writing a diary of pleasant situations and experiences with people to help you become aware of the different resources you have access to. Writing about feelings can help you express and organize them.

What can I do to get help from others?

Peer Support

It may be hard to talk to other people about the things that have happened. Try to find people you can trust, such as your life partner, parents, peers or friends. You do not need to tell them everything, but you may find it helpful to explain that you are experiencing some difficulties. Doing so may help you to feel less alone.

Professional Help

It may also be helpful to call a telephone counselling service or to contact a mental health professional for support or treatment. Consider asking your doctor to refer you to a local mental health practitioner who specializes in working with trauma, abuse or PTSD. If you are experiencing significant distress, please contact a local crisis counseling hotline or emergency response number.

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) is devoted to generating and spreading knowledge on policy and initiatives aimed at reduction of traumatic stressors and their short- and long-term consequences. Members of the ISTSS come from different clinical and non-clinical settings and have different cultural backgrounds (literally: are from different cultures).

The ISTSS Global Collaboration has been established as a global collaboration between different societies for traumatic stress studies. The ISTSS Global Collaboration consists of representatives from different regions, including Hong Kong, Japan, Africa, Europe, North and South America and Australia. This e-pamphlet has been developed by members of the ISTSS Global Collaboration to increase awareness of child abuse and neglect worldwide.

This pamphlet was created by the Public Education Committee of
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