

## **Mental Health Understanding and Managing The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse On Adult Intimate Life**

**Child sexual abuse includes any sexual act performed on a child by an older person for their own sexual gratification above the well-being of the child.**

Child Sexual Abuse also includes exposing the child to sexually inappropriate material or behavior, exploiting the child, again, with the goal of sexual self-gratification. Childhood sexual abuse is known to cause problems of intimacy for some adult persons when seeking to participate in intimate adult relationships. As a result of sexually abusive experiences some adults may be sexually indiscriminant whereas others may seek to avoid sexual intimacy and otherwise find sexual expression difficult. It is not uncommon for adults who were sexually abused as children to have developed a discomfort or even repulsion to sexual intimacy.

Of those who find sexual expression or intimacy difficult, as a problem, this tends to surface in the context of a significant relationship where sexual intimacy is expected. As such, some couples turn to counseling with the presenting problem framed as lack of sex or limited frequency or discrepancies in sexual appetite between the couple or even communication problems and conflict.

It is remarkable the degree to which some persons are unaware themselves of the impact of childhood sexual abuse on current adult intimate life. Further, some persons may as yet be unaware that certain childhood experiences may in fact have been sexually exploitive and abusive.

In terms of the assessment phase of counseling, some times it is unnecessary to obtain a full individual history. Instead the counseling focuses upon developing a therapeutic relationship with the sexually abused person and then allowing for self-disclosure at such time as the client feels comfortable to talk about the subject. Some times, in fact, it may not be necessary even to review the childhood history in the assessment and treatment process. It is more helpful to focus on the current circumstances of the

problematic behavior of the client and his or her relationships right now.

To address problems of adult intimacy, it is important for therapist and clients together to discuss forthrightly pertinent experiences of sex and sexuality both historically and presently. Where childhood sexual abuse is assessed to have occurred, help must include education on the impact of such experiences on the adult's present intimate life so that sexual relationships are no longer framed as a conflict between two people in relationship, but is identified as an artifact of abuse experienced at an earlier age and probably with someone else than the present couple.

With clear and frank discussion and education on the matter, both persons in a couple-relationship can come to appreciate the impact of the childhood experience on their adult intimacy. With a better understanding of these issues, adaptive strategies to improve intimacy difficulties can be worked out in therapy if this is what the both clients are seeking.

One such strategy is *permission-based intimacy*. Because issues of control and safety can figure large for persons who have been sexually abused, current partners are advised to ask permission before any intimate contact rather than guess or assume it may be acceptable. This puts control into the hands of the person having been abused and allows for discussion on the nature or form of contact requested, to assure comfort. Once control and safety issues are addressed and managed, discussion can move towards further improving intimate expression.

Thus, with direct discussion, education, instruction, patience and respect for personal issues and needs, intimate contact and relationships can be improved.

The process takes time and mutual support throughout along with a skilled therapist with special training and experience in this area of couple counseling.

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