

Finding a Light in the Shadows— Childhood Sexual Abuse in the LGBTQ Community

By Alison C. Smith, Ph.D.



There are some issues that are just uncomfortable to think about. The reality of childhood sexual abuse is certainly one of them. Childhood sexual abuse is a crime that occurs far more frequently in our culture than we would like to believe. Research has found that between 12% to 17% of women and 5% to 8% of men have experienced abuse. These numbers mean that it is likely there are people you know who have had this experience. It could be your brother, your friend, or your coworker but it is likely that you won't ever know because for many survivors it is a secret that simply stays hidden. It often remains a secret because of the shame, confusion, embarrassment, anger, and self-blame survivors can experience as a result of the abuse.

Now imagine living with the reality of surviving this type of abuse and also realizing there is something else that is

different about you. Your friends are developing romantic relationships but you recognize that you are more attracted to people of the same-sex. For some, this realization feels like a natural step in their personal development. For others, however, it can be

experienced as shameful and undesirable, leaving them feeling socially isolated and unhappy with themselves. Most people who go through this stage of identity development eventually move on and reach self-acceptance. However, those who have been sexually abused are likely to have an even greater struggle coming to terms with their sense of self. Survivors may question "his/her" true sexual orientation. If the perpetrator was of the same sex, does that mean that the experience "made" the victim gay/lesbian? Although there is no empirical support for this idea, LGBTQ survivors are often placed in the unenviable position of questioning almost everything they thought they knew about themselves.

Regardless of sexual orientation, research has shown that individuals who have experienced childhood sexual abuse are at higher risk for issues such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. Depending on one's level of sexual orientation identity development, being gay or lesbian may leave the survivor feeling an even greater level of stigma, making it less likely that they will seek help. It is clear that different people are affected in different ways by sexual abuse and there is no one perfect solution for everyone. There are, however, things that can help survivors find that light in the shadows.

1) Education—Survivors can benefit from becoming educated about sexual abuse. Education can help them understand that they are not alone in their experience; other survivors have reacted to abuse in a similar manner (e.g., having constant vigilance over one's environment.) They can also learn coping techniques that have been helpful to others.

2) Counseling—Counseling can provide a safe environment in which



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Self-Care

The following information has been drawn from suggestions offered by RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network—www.rainn.org):

- Utilize social support by spending time with supportive friends and family member.
- Join a support group for survivors.
- Learn about and mindfulness practice and meditation.
- Make sure you get adequate nutrition. People are often so busy that they don't have time to eat regularly or substitute fast food for regular meals.
- Exercise, even if it's just a quick walk at lunchtime, to help combat feelings of sadness or depression and prevent chronic health problems. It is one of the most overlooked forms of self-care but the CDC recommends at least 30 minutes of exercise 5 times a week.
- Sleep is an important form of self-care. Everyone has different needs but most people need between 7-10 hours of sleep per night.

survivors can examine the impact that their experiences have had on them. It can also help them to develop better coping skills and feel less isolated.

3) Medication—When used in conjunction with counseling, medication may be useful for symptoms like depression and anxiety.

4) Self-care—Self-care is an essential part of the healing process for trauma survivors. See the sidebar on the left for more information.

About the Author

I am a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals, particularly those coping with histories of childhood sexual abuse. I earned a

master's degree in clinical psychology from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, and a doctorate in the same field from George Mason University. I have worked with a wide variety of people dealing with a wide variety of problems ranging from coping with significant life events (e.g., divorce, job loss, trauma), to issues such as low self-esteem, identity confusion, and relationship problems, to symptoms such as anxiety, depression and more. To me, the most essential component of psychotherapy is developing a strong therapeutic relationship between the therapist and client. I build upon a foundation of interpersonal psychotherapy and incorporate aspects of other approaches such as psychodynamic, humanistic, and cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy.