



## Who can a man tell?

Information for  
men who were  
sexually  
assaulted as  
children

Education Centre

Against

Violence



# Acknowledgments

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# Foreword

This publication is written primarily for adult men who were sexually assaulted as children. It also contains information which may be helpful for relatives and friends who wish to support these men as they confront painful childhood experiences and strive to overcome the influence the abuse has had on their lives.

The main aims are:

- acknowledge the experiences of men who were sexually assaulted as children and reassure them that they are not alone;
- increase general professional and community awareness of the fact that significant numbers of boys experience child sexual assault;
- contribute to a climate in which both child victims and adult survivors of child sexual assault feel they will be heard, helped and supported.

This publication addresses in general terms a number of issues which are common to both men and women who are sexually assaulted as children. The publication also focuses in depth on issues which are particularly relevant to boys and men. There are, for example, cultural beliefs and attitudes which effectively reject the notion of males as victims, classifying victimisation as a uniquely female destiny. This makes it very difficult for men and boys who are victims to acknowledge their own abuse even to themselves and doubly difficult for them to tell anyone else. In the context of child sexual

# Foreword

assault, the consequences of these beliefs and attitudes are profound.

Not everything in this publication will be relevant to every man who experienced sexual assault as a child. Each child's experience is individual and each individual reacts differently to a given situation. When reading about the problems and difficulties which often derive from childhood sexual assault readers are, therefore, urged:

- to recognise that the extent of these problems and difficulties will also vary very much from one person to another;
- to select whatever information is helpful and applicable to them;
- to recognise that, with appropriate help and support, problems and difficulties can be overcome, they can free themselves of the effects of the abuse, and develop a positive outlook on the future.

*Many dislike the use of "victim" or "survivor" considering that these terms classify people on the basis of the abuse they have experienced rather than seeing them as individuals. Although this publication uses these terms as little as possible, it is difficult to avoid them altogether. Constant use of alternatives such as 'men who have experienced child sexual assault' or 'men who were sexually assaulted as children', would make very heavy reading.*



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# Men's Stories

*The four stories outlined in the following pages eloquently present some of the complex issues and emotions often experienced by men who were sexually assaulted as children. These stories show men at different stages of coming to terms with their experiences. Throughout the text, extracts from the stories of these and other men who assisted in the development of this publication help to bring the issues vividly to life.*

To protect the privacy of those who courageously agreed to talk about their experiences, real names have not been used and aspects of stories which might identify individuals have been changed or omitted. Aspects relating to the impact of sexual assault on individuals are as described by the men themselves or as outlined by therapists who have worked with them.

## **Elias's Story**

Elias (32) has lived in Australia now for 20 years. His family migrated here from overseas when he was 12. His adolescence was a difficult period in his life. The typical changes of adolescence were complicated by his arrival in a new country, with the challenges of adjusting to a new culture and new language.

Confusion is the word that Elias now uses to describe his experiences during this time, especially as he thinks back on being sexually assaulted within his family circle during his childhood and adolescent years.



Elias was 8 when he was first sexually assaulted. This happened while he was on holidays with his extended family. He shared bedrooms with his older cousins. Elias at first thought it was a kind of game which his cousins were playing with him. The others seemed to know and understand what was going on. Elias was confused when he was told that this had to be kept a secret. He felt silly if he objected or asked questions, and he didn't like the way that they laughed at him. He felt scared and small. He liked his cousins and wanted them to like him in return.

After his family came to Australia, he still had contact with his cousins, and the sexual assault continued. Elias says that he began to accept it as a normal part of his life within his family. His feelings of confusion also became a regular part of his experience. As his body matured physically, his response to what was happening, changed. He experienced a mixture of fear and pleasure. He still felt helpless against the initiatives of his cousins, but thought that was just how life was. He realises now that he enjoyed some of the sexual involvement with his cousins, and this adds to his guilt.

There were times when he wanted to talk to his parents about what was happening, but talking about sex was taboo, especially sex with other boys. His parents also seemed to really like his cousins, and he was afraid of upsetting the family. When he gained a clearer understanding of what was happening he felt a mixture of fear, guilt and shame. He was thus silenced, believing there was no-one he could speak to. As he grew older

the sexual assaults included both oral and anal sex. This came at a time when Elias understood more about sexuality and he experienced real ambivalence in his sexual choices, wondering, “Does this mean I am gay?”.

As the years have passed and Elias no longer sees his cousins, he has attempted to form lasting and meaningful relationships with other people. He finds it hard to do this. He is attracted to other men, but often feels unsafe in their company. He is drawn to form relationships with women, especially for the safety and intimacy he experiences with them. He finds it difficult to respond sexually to them. Elias moves frequently from heterosexual to homosexual relationships as he thinks about these issues.

### **David's Story**

David was 12 when the sexual assaults against him began. He now has difficulty recalling the details of how often and for how long the abuse happened. It happened so often that it is all just “a big blur” to him. The perpetrator, Joe, was twenty and lived and worked on a neighbouring farm. Joe was a friend of the family and David’s parents trusted Joe to do baby-sitting.

The abuse started one night when David and his brothers were watching television with Joe. David was lying on the floor when Joe lay down behind him, putting a blanket over David and himself. As he touched David’s leg and gradually moved his hand to David’s genitals, David felt frozen, and unable to move. He felt frightened. He was very embarrassed, guilty,



and saw himself as 'bad'. He was unable to speak or move because all of this was happening in front of his brothers.

David grew up in a family who never talked about sex. He thought that he would get into trouble if he did things like touching himself or if he talked about sex. He was afraid and embarrassed about talking to anyone, especially his parents about what was happening to him. David thought he was bad. He looked up to Joe who had always been friendly and kind to him. Joe was tall and strong, and David really liked him. Joe made him feel special by taking him out on special trips.

After the abuse started David became wary, uncertain, and self-conscious around Joe, and also with other people in general. Several months after the abuse began, David started to hear talk in the school playground about 'poofers'. He wondered about what was really happening to him. David felt different to other boys. He hated changing for sport in the PE change rooms, because he thought everyone was watching him and he worried about getting erections in front of the other boys. He felt weak, unmanly, as though he didn't measure up in some way.

David was uncomfortable and embarrassed about the sexual changes happening in his body. As he grew into later adolescence, David became more confused about his sexuality and secretly worried that he might be gay. It was very important to him to have mates so that he felt like a normal guy.

David kept his abuse secret for many years. Even though he married and felt good in the relationship, he was too embarrassed to talk to his wife about the abuse. When he was in his mid-thirties he went to a personal growth course, where he started to talk about the abuse. David went to counselling where his counsellor encouraged him to explore the impact of his abuse. He helped David to risk speaking with his wife and family. He also decided to speak with a police officer. No court action followed.

David still worries about his decision not to proceed with legal action. He wonders whether other children are being abused by Joe. Since then he has talked to his wife, and family, and has moved forward in ways that never seemed possible to him.

### **Damien's Story**

Damien (27) was sexually assaulted by his mother between the ages of about six or seven. He was later sexually assaulted between the ages of 11 and 12 by three final year students at boarding school.

With his father away a lot of the time in the defence forces and his mother generally distant, Damien was a very isolated child. He says he always felt his parents did not really want him and that this was because he was in some way "a bad son". When he was six and his mother began what he describes as "excessive touching and fondling", he thought this must be her way of showing affection and did not realise that anything was wrong. Now he says: 'It wasn't right to do those things to me'. When he went to boarding school 'and it



happened again I just thought it must be my lot in life and that I had to put up with it'.

Damien says that although he tried to block out the memories by refusing to think about them, 'somehow I always knew it had happened'. About three years ago, he came face to face with the memories he had been trying to block out for years. He had joined one of the armed services, thinking this would make him feel closer to his father. One night, overcome by a sense of powerlessness when his mates made him the butt of their boisterous games, the memory refused to stay buried any longer. At first he thought he was going crazy and sought psychiatric help. In the early days, he twice attempted suicide.

Recently, Damien went back to his boarding school to confront the past. Since then, he has been having much sharper dreams. 'I wake up and feel as though it has just happened. I'm really living with the memories at the moment and can't get them out of my head'. He is constantly asking himself what he might have done to stop the assaults and thinks that, because they happened, 'I must be a bad person'.

Damien is seeing a counsellor regularly and, although the memories are still very raw and the process is very painful, he is working his way through to a different understanding of himself and his past. 'I dream about one day having my own family and giving my children all the things I never had.'

## Brian's Story

Brian's father, Andrew, started sexually abusing him when he was nine years old. His earliest memories are of his father putting him to bed. As a special treat at night they would play hide and seek in the darkened house. But this developed from being fun games, to wrestling on the floor, and then to Andrew touching Brian in the genital area. Over time this became rougher and included more sexual touching. At other times Brian was sent straight to bed with his father joining him later when the family were watching TV. He would lay beside Brian in the bed, and stroke all over his body. Brian felt confused, upset and fearful.

After about a year this kind of touching stopped. But it got worse. Andrew began to anally rape Brian. This was extremely painful and distressing for Brian who was ten at the time. He remembers his father making loud noises, and Brian was scared that his father was going to die. The abuse became a nightly occurrence. Brian dreaded night times and going to bed. Looking back he remembers coping by becoming frozen in his body. He created a special place up in the corner of the room, like an island with a waterfall, which he imagined himself to be in. This was his way of surviving.

As he got older he avoided going to bed at night, by staying out late, waiting for his father to go to sleep. But his father would then come into his bedroom the next morning and rape him. He couldn't concentrate at school and failed most of his exams. He left school at 14, and drifted between menial jobs. He tried on many



occasions to leave his home, but his father threatened to kill him or his mother, & bribed him with money to stay.

Brian finally left home at the age of eighteen, and from this stage cut himself off deliberately from his family. He had many relationships with young women. These all ended because of his moody outbursts whenever there was any physical closeness. He was also unsure of whether he was gay, but never talked about this to anyone. He began drinking heavily, there were terrifying nightmares and frequent thoughts of suicide. Brian became very withdrawn and spent most of his days alone in his flat, drinking. He wanted to tell his mother about why he wouldn't come home. He knew however, that she too was a victim of Andrew's abuse, and did not want to distress her further and put her at risk.

In his early twenties, Brian attended a self-esteem group for men, and drug and alcohol counselling. However he found counselling unhelpful, and never told his counsellors about the sexual abuse. His depression got worse. In desperation, Brian decided to contact the local health centre and spoke to a sexual assault counsellor. She supported him in his decision to report the assaults to the police. He felt very relieved by going to court, and he felt pleased that the abuse was now out in the open. He was then able to speak to his mother & brothers about the abuse. His mother came to counselling with him. She believed his story and moved out of home.

After several years he is now in a relationship with an old girlfriend and is studying for his HSC through TAFE. Although he continues to struggle, with his feelings of guilt and shame, he no longer feels that his life is dominated by the abuse.

# Introduction

In recent times, the community has come to understand more about sexual assault. With the 1970s re-emergence of the women's movement, women began to speak out not only about adult experiences of rape but also about childhood experiences of sexual assault. As research and clinical experience grew, the following picture emerged:

- child sexual assault is not a rare occurrence;
- most perpetrators are not strangers but members of the child's own family or people otherwise known to and trusted by the child and family;
- most perpetrators are male.

Because child sexual assault was first identified by women as part of the wider problem of rape and sexual assault of women by men, the first research into child sexual assault had a largely female focus. Although studies still show that there are more girl than boy victims, it has been clear for some time that significant numbers of boys are also sexually assaulted. In recent years, men themselves have begun to speak out. Both these factors have led to growing recognition by the professional community that significant numbers of adult men who were sexually assaulted as children also need help and support. The fact that more men are now speaking out will further develop our awareness and understanding of child sexual assault and our ability to respond to the needs of all victims and survivors regardless of gender.



## What is Child Sexual Assault?<sup>1</sup>

Child sexual assault occurs when an older, bigger or more powerful person involves a child in sexual activity. Other characteristics of child sexual assault are unequal power between the child and the perpetrator and the exploitation or betrayal of the child's trust and innocence. Child sexual assault includes a wide range of acts and behaviours. The following are some common examples:

- exposing one's genitals to a child;
- fondling a child's genitals, forcing a child to fondle an adult's genitals or to engage in self-masturbation;
- exposing children to prostitution or pornography
- involving a child in vaginal, oral or anal oral sexual activity;
- vaginal, anal or oral penetration of a child with a penis, finger, or other object;
- involving a child in sexual behaviour with an animal.

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1. Child sexual assault is a crime. There is, however, no single definition. *The Crimes Act 1900* covers a range of sex offences depending on the nature of the offence and the age of the child victim at the time the offence was committed.

# Some Facts and Figures

## How Common is the Sexual Assault of Boys?

Most research studies have focused exclusively on female victims of child sexual assault. Only since the 1980s have male victims been recognised as warranting research, and this research is still very much at an embryonic stage. The studies that have been done, indicate substantially varying rates of sexual abuse of boys. Finkelhor (1986) found the rates in the general population ranged between 3% to 31%. A more recent study, which critically reviewed all studies since Finkelhor, found rates as high as 40% for males in the general population (Dhaliwal, 1998). Most researchers suggest that the wide variance in rates arises from the use of different definitions of sexual assault, different survey methods, & different interview techniques.

## Where Does it Happen?

Studies show that boys are often sexually assaulted within their own homes and that the perpetrators commonly include parents, siblings, relatives, and family friends. Boys are also sexually assaulted outside the home, sometimes by strangers but most often by people known to and trusted by the family. Outside the home, perpetrators commonly include members of the child's extended family, neighbours, family friends, or people who are temporarily in a position of responsibility for the care and supervision of the child, for example teachers, babysitters, youth workers, sporting coaches.

In recent years, the severe physical abuse and sexual assault of boys in male-dominated institutions has received wide publicity. Some of those who experienced child sexual assault in church schools and orphanages or in residential



schools and children's homes run by secular organisations have begun to tell their stories.

### **Who are the Perpetrators?**

According to NSW Health statistics for 1996/97 of current reported child victims, the most common perpetrators of sexual assault of boys were:

- male adults known to the child (40 percent);
- males under the age of 16 (22 percent);
- fathers (11 percent);
- Step fathers/de factos represented 6.1 percent of the perpetrators and other male relatives (grandfathers, uncles, brothers) represented a total of 15 percent.

Although both men and women sexually assault male children, the evidence from both researchers & clinicians continues to indicate that: 'Boys, like girls, are most commonly victimised by men' (Finkelhor, 1984), and that 'The vast majority of perpetrators of sexual abuse of boys as well as girls are heterosexual men' (Lew, 1990).

Some researchers suggest that the extent of child sexual assault by female perpetrators is underestimated by both the professional and the general community, because of the commonly held view that women are the victims, and men are the abusers. Mendel (1995) explores what he sees as the "profound blindness" around the issue of the sexual abuse of boys by women: '...cultural bias stands in the way of recognising female perpetrators and identifying sexual interaction between adult females and juvenile males as abusive.'

A massive societal silence exists around the abuse of boys, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator. This silence is being increasingly challenged as more men courageously come forward to tell their stories.

# The Effects of Child Sexual Assault

*In reading this section, which outlines some of the common problems described by adult men who were sexually assaulted as children and by therapists who have worked with them, it is important to bear in mind that these are not the combined experiences of one survivor but the collective experiences of many. Not all survivors will have experienced all the difficulties described but most will have experienced at least some of them. The other important point to bear in mind when reading this section is that, with appropriate help and support, the difficulties described can be overcome.*

## **Some Common Problems**

Children who are sexually assaulted experience many powerful emotions including fear, guilt, shame, loneliness and confusion. Offenders usually trick, bribe, or threaten children to prevent them from speaking out. As a result of the offender's trickery, children are left feeling that what happened was their fault.

When an adult sexually assaults a child the situation is one of unequal power and unequal knowledge. It is never the child's fault and the child can never be said to have consented. The situation is, however, very confusing for a child. Children are taught to respect and look up to adults and it is hard for them to understand that sometimes adults do wrong things. The situation is particularly difficult and confusing if the offender is a parent, relative, or family friend, or someone the family knows and trusts. Children worry about what will happen to the family if they tell. Because they have been



betrayed by someone they trusted, many survivors find it difficult to trust again. The loss of faith in themselves and trust in others lies at the heart of many of the difficulties adult survivors experience in later life.

Some problems experienced by adult survivors of child sexual assault have been compared to the post-traumatic stress symptoms sometimes seen in war veterans.

### **Relationship Difficulties**

Many survivors have problems with relationships. When they were children they were forced to do what adults wanted and to meet adults' needs. As a result they may develop a habit of always putting others' needs before their own and have difficulty asserting themselves or setting boundaries in their relationships with partners, relatives, friends, or work colleagues.

### **Low Self-Esteem**

Because children almost always feel that what happened was their fault, they often have a very low opinion of themselves. They are burdened with guilt and shame and feel themselves to be "bad" or "worthless". This low self-esteem contributes to the relationship problems already described.

*"I find it very difficult to think of myself as a person with any abilities"*

*"I did manage to get a Diploma, but I've let all that go now. I feel like a fraud."*

### **Addictive/Compulsive Behaviour**

Survivors of child sexual assault use a range of strategies to keep their feelings and memories at bay.

While, initially, these coping mechanisms may fulfil their purpose which is to keep feelings and memories submerged, they have the potential to become more destructive as time goes on. Lew (1995) says that it is 'unusual to encounter a survivor of abuse who isn't addictively or compulsively engaging in some form of numbing behaviour'.

Common forms of addictive/compulsive behaviour which may have started out as effective survival strategies include:

- addiction to alcohol or other drugs;
- sexual promiscuity;
- workaholism;
- eating disorders;
- dissociation;
- risk-taking behaviour.

Although addiction to alcohol and other drugs is generally frowned on, some addictive behaviours, such as workaholism and sexual promiscuity, are not immediately recognised as harmful, at least not for men. The result is that the survivor may not recognise when these behaviours are out of control.

### **Sexual Difficulties**

Because consciously or unconsciously they associate sex with abuse, many men who experienced child sexual assault have problems in intimate relationships. For some, sex and sexual feelings always seem "wrong". In his recent book, *Beyond Closed Doors*, John Andrews says:



*“The irony is that to enjoy our sexuality we need to loosen control of the protective barriers we put up around ourselves and our bodies. Yet once we do this we're vulnerable to the point of experiencing all over again our childhood feelings of shame. This is what hurts me.”*

Other men describe similar feelings of disgust or panic. Andrew (34) who was sexually assaulted by a youth group leader while away at camp at the age of about 14 has since found relationships with women difficult. He fears physical contact and sex feels like re-abuse.

A man who was sexually assaulted by his older sister said:

*‘I've always found sex traumatic and associated it with shame. For me, any kind of sexual experimentation felt wrong.’*

Some men experience flashbacks to the abuse during sex and have to stop what they are doing. If their partner does not know what is happening or if the survivor is unable to talk about his feelings, the partner feels as though he or she is being kept at a distance.

### **Issues Specific to Boys and Men**

Boys who have been sexually assaulted may experience the whole range of emotions described above. They also can experience concerns which stem from societal beliefs and attitudes about masculinity - the same beliefs and attitudes which make it difficult for them to speak out about the assault:

- Shame and anger at being seen to be a "victim" and fear of not being believed: ('It doesn't happen to boys').

- Fear of being gay: ('It doesn't happen to "real" men').
- Fear of being blamed: ('Males are always interested in sex so it must have been my fault').
- Fear of becoming a perpetrator: ('Males are perpetrators; females are victims').

### Concerns about being a "victim"

As already suggested society has little room for males as victims. Very early in their socialization, boys are given strong messages that to be a real man, you have to be strong, brave, tough, stoic, in control, and be a protector. Associated with this is the common belief or idea that victimization is the result of some sort of deficiency, or inferiority in the person. Such pervasive attitudes in the culture at large, and in one's own family and friends, can have a devastating impact on the male victim of sexual abuse. There may be profound self blame and deep shame, which are linked to these common ideas about what is expected of a "real man". Also, because the dynamics of sexual abuse always involve extreme powerlessness and lack of control for the victim, the male victim views himself as incompetent and perhaps "less than a male", since he was unable to protect himself. These feelings of being "unmanly" can be even more intense, if he also believes that in some way he was an active, willing participant in the abuse.

### Concerns About Sexual Identity

Boys who are sexually assaulted worry about their sexuality, no matter who the perpetrator is ie, male, female, heterosexual or homosexual. There will be different issues related to the gender of the perpetrator, but all boys and young men are particularly vulnerable to



being recruited into questioning their sexuality, based on another person's abusive acts. To experience a man's sexuality as an oppressive force, can lead to conflicting and deeply confused feelings. Where the perpetrator has been a man, it can be very difficult for the male victim to separate abuse from same sex contact. Often, when a boy or man tells someone about the abuse, the reactions of family, friends and the community at large is to do with their homophobia. The messages that are frequently conveyed to the boy/man are likely to result in him having one or all of the following thoughts: "he chose ME, so that must mean I am gay"; "I must be going to be gay now because I have had sex with a man" "because I experienced arousal when he did it to me, I must be gay". These are only some of the confusing feelings around sexuality that a boy/man who has been sexually assaulted may struggle with.

If the perpetrator is a woman, there are similar mixed up and painful feelings. Again they relate to the expectation that women are the nurturers and providers of emotional support for children, and if a boy has experienced arousal during the sexual abuse, the legacy may be one of feeling completely paralysed about being able to freely choose one's sexuality.

Counsellors say that the confusing mix of guilt, shame and anger are very common, and that a reaction to them is to deny that the experience was abusive, or to attempt to "forget" all about it.

## Concerns About Becoming A Perpetrator

Another common belief or idea is that if a boy/young man has been sexually abused, then he will go on to be a sex offender himself (“Victim to Perpetrator Cycle”). This is a very dangerous assumption. Apart from the fact that it may act as a self fulfilling prophecy for some victims of sexual abuse, it can also be a source of great fear and anxiety. As a result of such strong societal ideas, many male victims report growing up to be afraid, or hypervigilant about being around young children, of isolating themselves, and losing the support of their family and colleagues. This assumption is not backed up or supported by research. As far back as 1994, Finkelhor, one of the first researchers into the sexual abuse of boys, pointed out that between 30 and 40 per cent of identified sex offenders experienced sexual assault as children. More recently, Ryan (1996) found that 35% of sex offenders reported a history of child sexual assault. The importance of this research is that between 50 to 60 per cent of men who abuse have not been sexually assaulted as children. It is critical to note that, to date, no research has demonstrated a single causal link between sexual abuse as a male child, and sexual offending as an adult. The major implication for males who have been abused as children is the fear that they are destined to become perpetrators, and that in fact there is an inevitability that this is their fate.



# Speaking Out About Child Sexual Assault

## Barriers to Speaking Out

*“Our culture provides no room for a man as victim. Men are simply not supposed to be victimised. A “real man” is expected to be able to protect himself in any situation. He is also supposed to be able to solve any problem and recover from any setback. When he experiences victimization, our culture expects him to “deal with it like a man” (Lew, 1992).*

Researchers generally agree that child sexual assault is still under-recognised and under-reported. Even though community awareness and understanding have increased in recent years, there is still widespread reluctance to face up to the reality of child sexual assault. Both child victims and adult survivors realise that many people do not want to hear what they have to say. They sense that the climate is not right for telling.

There appear to be some particularly powerful forces preventing adult men from telling. From their experience of men's groups, counsellors say that many men do not disclose until they are in their thirties and some never disclose. The ratio of male to female child victims presenting to sexual assault services is around one in three yet the ratio of adult male to adult female survivors presenting to these services is around one in nine (NSW Health, 1995).

The most significant barrier to disclosure is the community's general reluctance to admit that boys and men are sexually assaulted. This reluctance stems from

entrenched cultural beliefs about what it means to be masculine. These beliefs form a significant barrier to recognising the truth about the sexual assault of boys. They make it very difficult for both boys and men to tell anyone and contribute to a climate in which boys and men are unlikely to be believed if they do tell. Even if the abuse is believed and recognised, there is a tendency to underestimate its seriousness.

In our society, males are expected to be strong, in control, always interested in sex, and able to protect themselves and others. Being a victim does not fit very well with this image of masculinity. In his book for adult male survivors, *Victims No Longer*, Michael Lew says that: 'in one rather odd way, these distinctions between what we expect of men and women have added to the difficulties of male survivors. Since women are expected to be passive, weaker, powerless beings, there is room for sympathy when they are victimised.' He is not suggesting that disclosure is easier for women, just different in some respects. The dominant beliefs about male-ness contribute significantly to the silencing of male victims.

### **Confronting The Past**

When something happens to trigger feelings and memories of child sexual assault, or when, for whatever reason, those feelings and memories refuse to stay buried, the prospect of having to deal with them can be overwhelming.

When the time comes for men to speak out about child sexual assault, all the anxieties and fears they felt as children resurface. Sometimes the decision to speak out



is voluntary. Sometimes it is involuntary, for example when a person starts having flashbacks or memories keep breaking through to the surface and refuse to be reburied. Whatever the circumstance, this is a very difficult time. During these difficulties, when survivors are overwhelmed by all the old fears and emotions, they often overlook the strength and courage they have already shown in managing to survive to adulthood. It is also important to recognise that confronting the past is the first step in ridding one's life of the influence of the abuse.

For some men, disclosure comes when a life crisis triggers the memory or when the stress of keeping the past buried is no longer bearable. They may find themselves in hospital or seeing a health professional for the first time in their lives. For others, disclosure may be less traumatic.

### **How Counselling Can Help**

When survivors decide it is the time to tell someone, or when the "secret" just forces its way out, feelings which have been pent up for years are released. For some this brings a sense of relief. Others experience overwhelming emotions and a re-run of the old, fear, shame, and guilt. Some feel overpowering anger; others the same old sense of worthlessness and helplessness.

At this point, counselling can be very helpful. Counsellors or therapists who understand all these conflicting emotions can help and support survivors as they confront the abuse and work their way through the pain of the past. Counsellors who work with men who have experienced child sexual assault know that the

very fact of their survival testifies to their inner strength and resourcefulness, even if they cannot presently recognise these characteristics in themselves. By working with them to identify and extend their inner resources, counsellors help these men to gain a different perspective on the past and a more positive outlook on the future.

There are, however, some common beliefs and attitudes which may restrict boys and men from getting the help they need. For some men, the very idea of counselling is something they see as only for women. The attitude is often, 'I don't need counselling, I'm fine'. Going to see a counsellor goes against their beliefs of what it is to be a "real man".

### **Support Groups**

Support groups can help to reduce a person's sense of isolation and offer the comfort of talking to other men who really understand. Some men who have been to groups that the writers have run have said of the group:

*'It's great to know that I'm not the only one...'*

*'I can tell my story and they still accept me..'*

*'I'm learning to trust again...'*

### **How Family and Friends Can Help**

Hearing that a family member or friend was sexually assaulted as a child is always a shock, and generally the closer the relationship the greater the impact. For a mother or father, the reaction can be overwhelming, particularly if the offender is that parent's partner or a close relative or family friend. In these situations parents are often overcome with a mixture of anger, grief, and shame, and blame themselves for not protecting the child.



Some families and friends cope very well and are very supportive. Others want to help but simply cannot cope with the disclosure. They may dismiss the subject as quickly as possible and try to behave as though nothing has happened. It is hard for survivors to realise that they do not intend to be hurtful.

When Tom (21) disclosed, his mother believed him and was very supportive but other relatives were not. An aunt said: 'You should have done something about it' (he was 8 when his uncle raped him).

Sometimes families and friends find it difficult to treat the survivor normally. They may overreact and become too protective or try to make his decisions for him. *'People find it hard to know what to say. They tend to treat you abnormally when all you want is to be treated like anyone else - you feel abnormal enough as it is.'*

Frequently relatives, especially immediate family, find it helpful to seek counselling and support for themselves. *'My sister was very upset and later needed counselling. My mother kept apologising. My father just went white and walked away. My older brother wanted to fight the offender'*.

Sometimes, in their shock, families react insensitively. *'My parents told their friends. I found this very difficult and felt suicidal'*.

Sometimes the reactions of family and friends reflect the common societal beliefs about the sexual abuse of boys, blaming the victim or assuming that he must be gay.

Tom's disclosure of the abuse, combined with disclosure of the fact that he was gay produced a "huge rift" in the family. Some family members with whom he had

previously had a good relationship acted as though the abuse was his fault. They severed all contact with him but continued to visit the perpetrator in jail.

What men who have experienced child sexual assault most need from family and friends is to be believed. They also need acceptance, support and friendship. Family and friends who respond in this way can play an important part in the healing and recovery process. If they find it difficult to cope with the disclosure it is much better for them to be honest and say so. At least then, the person is not left with the impression that he is being rejected, reinforcing the distorted belief that he is worthless and responsible for what happened.



# Where to get help

## Finding a Counsellor

If you have decided to seek professional help, it is important to find a counsellor who is right for you. Feel free to ask questions so that you are sure the counsellor understands the issues for adult men who were sexually assaulted as children. This will also give you an impression of the counsellor and then help you to make your own judgement about whether you feel comfortable with that person. If you start counselling and things do not seem to be working out, discuss this with the counsellor. A counsellor will understand and not be upset or offended by what you have to say. Discussing how you feel can in fact help the counsellor to see where the problem lies. If necessary, he or she will refer you to someone else.

## Counselling Services

Due to the overwhelming demand for services for children and adults who have been recently sexually assaulted, there are currently insufficient services for both men and women who were sexually assaulted as children. The services for male survivors are as follows:

### NSW Health Sexual Assault Services

Sexual Assault Services are based in hospitals (Royal North Shore, St George, R.P.A., Westmead) or community health centres across N.S.W. Although these services must give priority to recent cases of sexual assault, they will see adult survivors if space is available. If they cannot see you or, or if

there is a long wait, they may be able to refer you to someone else.

### **Community Health Centres**

Services available at Community Health Centres vary. Some Centres provide counselling for adult survivors of child sexual assault; others make a needs assessment and, if possible, a referral. These services are listed in the White Pages of the Telephone Book under "Community Health Centres".

### **Counsellors in Private Practice**

Your local Sexual Assault Service, Community Health Centre, or GP, should be able to suggest a counsellor, or you may find your own through the Yellow Pages. Counsellors in private practice (including social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists) charge varying fees. Psychiatrists' fees are covered (at least partly) by Medicare as long as you obtain a referral from your GP. Other professionals' fees cannot be claimed on Medicare but may be partly covered by private health insurance funds.



## Further Reading

### Books for Male Survivors

**Andrews, J. (1994)**, *Beyond Closed Doors: Growing Beyond An Abused Childhood*,

**Berendzen R. (1993)**, *Come Here: A Man Overcomes the Tragic Aftermath of Childhood Sexual Abuse*

**Davies, K. (1994)** *When Innocence Trembles: The Christian Brothers Orphanage Tragedy*

**Davis, L. (1991)** *Allies in Healing*

**Flanagan, E. (1995)** *Father and Me: The Story of Sexual Abuse at the Hands of a Priest*

**Hunter, M. (1990)** *Abused Boys: The Neglected Victims of Sexual Abuse*

**Lew, M. (1990)** *Victims No Longer*

**Lew, M. (1999)** *Leaping Upon the Mountains then Proclaiming Victory Over Child Sexual Abuse*

**Ormerod, N. & T., (1995)**, *When Ministers Sin: Sexual Abuse in the Churches*

**Satullo, M. (1987)**, *It Happens to Boys Too*

**Welsh, L.P. (1990)**, *Geordie: Orphan of the Empire*