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## Toolbox

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### **A Step to Healing**

*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.*

—Matthew 11: 28-30

There are many commonly held beliefs about child sexual abuse. One is that abusers are always men. In fact, reports of female perpetrators are on the rise, involving both male and female victims. At least 5 percent of abusers are known to be women.

Another myth is that the abuser is usually a stranger. In reality, more than 70 percent of abusers are immediate family members or someone very close to the family. A third myth is that the abuser is always hated by the victim. Often the victim loves and protects the perpetrator. Some children are made to feel "special" and given special attention. Because of this, some survivors deal with the abuse by minimizing it, even into adulthood.

#### **Identifying Abused Children**

No child is psychologically prepared to deal with ongoing or intensive sexual encounters. Even very young children, two or three years old, may sense that the sexual activity is "wrong," but they are unable to stop it. Children are frequently threatened that if they tell anyone, they will be punished or get in trouble or that their family will breakup.

Children subjected to sexual encounters, with or without threats, will develop problems. Those older than five years of age become caught between loyalty to or dependence on the perpetrator, and shame at doing something "wrong." Over time, the child develops low self-esteem, feelings of being worthless or "dirty," and an abnormal view of sexuality. How does one recognize such children? There are many signs such as:

- Withdrawal and mistrust of adults.
- Relating to others in sexualized or seductive ways.
- Sleep problems, nightmares, or fears of going to bed.
- Frequent accidents or self-injurious behaviors

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- Refusal to go to school, or to the doctor, or home (or where the abuser is)
- Secretive and/or unusually aggressive behavior
- Sexual components to drawings and games
- Sexual knowledge or behavior that is abnormally advanced

### **Identifying Adults Who May Have Been Abused As Children**

The effects of early sexual abuse last well into adulthood—affecting relationships, work, family, and life in general. Individual symptomatology tends to fall into four areas:

*Damaged goods:* Low self-esteem, depression, self-destructiveness, guilt, shame, self-blame, constant search for approval and nurturance.

*Betrayal:* Impaired ability to trust, blurred boundaries and role confusion, rage and grief, difficulty forming relationships.

*Helplessness:* Anxiety, fear, tendency towards re-victimization, panic attacks.

*Isolation:* Sense of being different, stigmatized, poor peer relations.

Adult survivors may demonstrate some of the following symptoms:

- Fear of the dark, fear of sleeping alone, nightmares, or night terrors
- Poor body image or poor self-image in general
- Wearing excessive clothing
- Addictions, compulsive behaviors, obsessions
- Phobias, panic attacks, anxiety disorders, and/or a startle response
- Difficulties with anger and rage
- Issues with trust, intimacy, and relationships
- Issues with boundaries, control, and abandonment
- Pattern of re-victimization—not able to say "no"
- Denial and flashbacks
- Sexual issues and extremes
- Signs of post traumatic stress disorder

Certain issues appear repeatedly. For example, victims typically blame themselves for the abuse. Guilt and shame are expressed, along with intense feelings of rage. If the abuse was committed by an individual of the same sex questions regarding sexual orientation tend to arise in the victim.

One of the more difficult issues that can surface is the recollection, by some individuals, of experiencing a certain amount of physical pleasure during a molestation or abuse. This adds enormously to the sense of being at fault and feeling "dirty." The sense of isolation, of being "different from the whole world," can paralyze the victim's self-image and extend into relationships. It is only in revealing the secrets and dealing with the pain that survivors of sexual abuse can and do move on with their lives.

Knowing the signs of abuse and being able to identify the possible affects of sexual abuse may enable you to reach out and talk with someone who might be manifesting such symptoms. Offering support and listening empathetically may be a step in a victim's healing process.

Listening empathetically means that, even if only for a moment, the listener connects with, understands, and acknowledges the feelings the other person is experiencing. Empathetic listening requires listening for the meaning and the feelings that are attached to the speaker's words. To get to this point, one must "tune in" to the speaker and discard all opinions about how the speaker should or should not feel or react.

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