

SECRET SURVIVORS

USING THEATER TO BREAK THE SILENCE

TOOLKIT AND DISCUSSION GUIDE + DOCUMENTARY

Effects of Abuse on Survivors' Lives

People have very individualized reactions and responses to abuse. Often there are no obvious external, physical signs of child sexual abuse on survivors' bodies. Some survivors show no emotional signs, at least initially, and some never exhibit severe reactions, especially if after disclosure an adult in their life affirmed their experience and took quick, effective action to protect them and support their healing. Many survivors are extremely strong and resilient.

However, most survivors suffer long-term health effects; often the severity of these effects depends on a variety of factors including the duration of the abuse and the access to healing treatment (or lack thereof).

Survivors, as both children and adults, *may* experience a variety of symptoms including but not limited to:

- Low self-esteemⁱ
- An abnormal or distorted view of sex (especially a normalization of lack of consent)
- Impaired ability to trust others or build intimacy
- Social withdrawal
- Depressionⁱⁱ
- Suicidal ideations/tendenciesⁱⁱⁱ
- Increased likelihood of engaging in sex work or being commercially sexually exploited^{iv}
- Increased risk of participating in a violent intimate partnership^v
- Addiction^{vi}
- Insomnia/Nightmares
- Dissociation from their body^{vii}
- Self-mutilation (ex: cutting)^{viii}
- A tendency to initiate or engage in conflict
- Anxiety disorders
- Eating disorders^{ix}
- A deep sense of shame and/or guilt
- Impaired ability to concentrate
- Impaired memory
- Decreased performance at school or work
- Workaholism/escaping traumatic thoughts or feelings by keeping busy
- Extreme Perfectionism
- Denial of the abuse after initial disclosure/discovery

- Pregnancy during adolescence, either due to the abuse or to early sexual activity inspired by the abuse^x
- Increased risk of contracting HIV^{xi} and other sexually transmitted infections^{xii}
- Increased likelihood of incarceration, especially for women (nationwide, more than 57% of women in state prisons and 55% of women in local jails report having been physically and/or sexually abused in the past.^{xiii} Women in prison are at least twice as likely as women in the general public to report childhood histories of physical or sexual abuse.^{xiv}
- Increased health problems and health-related quality of life challenges^{xv}

ⁱ Richie, B., Tsenin, K., and Widom, CS. “Research on Women and Girls in the Justice System Series.” Research Forum. NCJ 180973. September 2000. www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/180973.pdf

ⁱⁱ Finkelhor, David, and Hashima, P., “The Victimization of Children and Youth: A Comprehensive Overview.” *Handbook of Youth and Justice*. 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kisiel, Cassandra, and Lyons, John. “Dissociation as a Mediator of Psychopathology among Sexually Abused Children and Adolescents.” *American Journal of Psychiatry*. 158: 1034-1039. July 2001.

^{iv} Widom, Cathy Spatz. “Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse—Later Criminal Consequences.” *Research in Brief*. March 1995.

^v Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study: Major Findings* (online), <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm>, September 2012.

^{vi} Kilpatrick, D., Acierno, R., Saunders, B., Resnick, H., Best, C., and Schnurr, P. “Risk Factors for Adolescent Substance Abuse and Dependence: Data from a National Sample.” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 68(1): 1-12. 2000.

^{vii} Kisiel, Cassandra, and Lyons, John. “Dissociation as a Mediator of Psychopathology among Sexually Abused Children and Adolescents.” *American Journal of Psychiatry*. 158: 1034-1039. July 2001.

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Schoen, Cathy. *The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls*. November 1997

^x Stock, J., Bell, M. Boyer, D., and Connell, F. “Adolescent Pregnancy and Sexual Risk Taking Among Sexually Abused Girls.” *Family Planning Perspective*. 29(4): 200-203, 227. August/September 1997.

^{xi} Zierler, S. et. al. “Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse and Subsequent Risk of HIV Infection.” *American Journal of Public Health*. 81(2): 572-575. 1991.

^{xii} Silverman, Jay, Raj, Anita, Mucci, Lorelei, and Hathaway, Jeanne. “Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Use, Unhealthy Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy, and Suicidality.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 286(5): 572-579. August 1, 2001.

^{xiii} Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (April 1999), *Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers*, and Doris J. James, *Profile of Jail Inmates, 2002*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (July 2004), at 10.

^{xiv} Ibid

^{xv} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study: Major Findings* (online), <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm>, September 2012.