

# acts of **RECOVERY**

Moving on from childhood abuse



Edition 1

Copyright ©2012 by Zoë Chouliara, Thanos Karatzias & Angela Gullone  
Further copies are available from [t.karatzias@napier.ac.uk](mailto:t.karatzias@napier.ac.uk)

An aid for people who have experienced  
childhood sexual abuse

## CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Summary</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Difficulties after abuse</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Talking about abuse</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Dealing with shame and guilt</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Moving on from the past</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Chapter 6: On-going hurdles</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter 7: A hopeful future</b>	<b>30</b>

## Introduction

This aid is based on interviews conducted with adults who have been abused as children. It brings together multiple accounts of coping with the effects of, and moving on after childhood sexual abuse. It does not represent any one individual experience but rather fuses together many accounts of recovery.

Some interpretations have been added throughout (*in italics*) to describe what the current thinking and understanding of these experiences are. These ideas are not offered as an explanation but may help some people to make connections between their own ways of coping with the affects of abuse.

This aid does not profess to be an authority on moving on, or represent a full and final description of recovery. However, despite its limitations, we hope this aid will inspire people to continue with moving on from the affects of abuse.

## Safety first

Before you start, be aware that reading about the hurdles in recovery can be upsetting. If you become distressed at any point while reading this aid then you may want to seek professional help.

## The words we use

People do not use any particular word or term to refer to their experiences of abuse. Sometimes we use the word 'survivor' in this booklet rather than the more general term 'people abused as children'. We alternate between the phrases 'moving on' and 'recovery' but we mean the same thing.

## How to use this aid

This aid is for both male and female survivors, and for the people who support them. The topics contained within this aid are broad, and can open up useful discussions about recovery.

# Chapter 1

## Summary



Image: twobee / FreeDigitalPhotos.net

- Childhood sexual abuse affects both men and women
- Talking about the abuse can be helpful
- Working through feelings of shame and guilt is important
- Having people around you can rely on aids recovery
- Learning about themselves (likes and dislikes) and engaging in activities which are meaningful, such as employment, volunteering or learning new skills helps to build a sense of self and aids recovery
- Developing inner trust in themselves (one's own judgments and perceptions) is important for recovery

Based on what people sexually abused as children, and the professionals working with them tell us, the affects of childhood sexual abuse greatly varies between individuals. As people are affected differently from abuse, their needs in recovery also vary.

Many survivors speak about feeling stunted, damaged and disadvantaged by the early abuse. They speak about having low confidence in themselves, anxiety, depression, feelings of shame and guilt, difficulties in relationships and trust. Some people will have professional support and others will not need it.

**Survivors tell us that working through difficulties in their life is central to them and aids their recovery.**

Recovery from abuse can be understood as a process and not as a single significant event. It is a process which involves multiple, varied acts from survivors to move on from abuse. Survivors say that when they are able to engage with improving their physical, emotional and social well-being they begin to do better.

**Many survivors tell us that moving on and thriving is a lifelong process, but it does get easier, and they say it is worth it. People abused as children can survive the abuse. Not only can they survive but they can thrive.**

## Chapter 2

### Difficulties after abuse



Image: Tanatat / FreeDigitalPhotos.net

- Feeling low in mood / depressed
- Feeling anxious a lot of the time
- Not being able to trust others
- Poor health brought on by the effects of abuse
- Fear of thinking and speaking about the past
- Uncontrollable thoughts about the past

The affects of abuse are broad. These include difficulties with feelings, thoughts, physical health, as well as fears about relationships.

## Emotional Life

### Survivors say they feel:

- Overwhelmed with emotions
- Detached and disconnected
- Anxious and agitated
- Angry
- Sad and distressed

Many survivors feel uncomfortable with their own emotions. Some feel anxious about their feelings and avoid talking about their thoughts and feelings even to those people who are close to them.

Some say they have a sense of feeling numb a lot of the time and feel out of touch with their own feelings and body.

**For some the distancing and disconnection from things around them might be a coping mechanism that began in childhood as an aid to buffer the effects of abuse.**

Many survivors experience an on-going feeling of inner distress, sadness and pain, like heartache.

**Some people may be grieving for the loss of their childhood or the person they would have been if they had not experienced abuse.**

Many survivors feel detached and alone in the world even when they are surrounded by a lot of people. *They may be reliving the isolation they experienced as children when nobody knew what they were going through, or were not there for them.*

Some feel out of control with their emotions, especially with anger, fear and anxiety.

**They may feel angry at adults for having failed to protect them and stop the abuse. And they may be feeling angry that the perpetrator(s) have gone unpunished and have never taken responsibility or apologised.**

## Relationships

### Survivors say they:

- **Struggle with social contact**
- **Often do not enjoy intimacy in relationships**
- **Find it difficult to trust people**

Many survivors speak about feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable with social contact. Especially if it involves being around lots of people, such as family gatherings.

Some survivors say that because of the abuse, they feel unsafe in the world. Some say, that they can go for days without answering the phone or door.

Many survivors who are parents say that they are very anxious about their children's safety and are often over protective. *Some fear that the world is an unsafe place for their children.*

Others say they feel detached and alone in the world even when they are surrounded by a lots of people. *For some the distancing and disconnection might be a coping mechanism that began in childhood as an aid to buffer the effects of abuse. They may be reliving the isolation they experienced as children when nobody knew what they were going through, or were not there for them.*

For some the prospect of closeness in a relationship triggers fears and memories of the abuse and they avoid relationships altogether. Some speak about finding it hard to trust others (even partners), and living with an on-going feeling that they are not good enough because of the abuse.

**Abuse can change the way we think about relationships. Unease in relating and loss of faith in others may be because of worry over being taken advantage of, hurt, violated or abandoned again.**

Some say they put others' needs before their own. They usually comply with others' wants rather than go with their own opinions, preferences, needs and even safety. Some say they are engaging in more sexual activity than they want to and say they feel it is risky for them to avoid or turn down sex. *For some, going along with others may be a pattern from the past when it felt dangerous to disagree with abusers.*

**Although survivors struggle with trust in relationships and do not always feel safe in the world, they tell us that positive relationships are very important to them, especially those with trusted family and friends. They tell us that these relationships support them and give their lives meaning.**



## Hurdles in recovery

### Survivors say they:

- Can't stop thinking about the past
- Feel anxious a lot of the time
- Do not trust others
- Suffer from poor health brought on by the effects of abuse

Many survivors feel depressed and hopeless about their lives. Many harm themselves or have tried to end their lives in the past because of an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness. *Some are grieving for the person they would have been if they had not experienced abuse.*

Many survivors are unable to stop thinking about the past, have difficulties sleeping and tend to neglect their personal care. *For some self-neglect may reinforce the belief that they are worthless and do not deserve to be cared for.*

Some find it hard to use public transport alone, start new things, or go anywhere unfamiliar.

**Many survivors are still living with the fears from their childhood.**

Some survivors are living with poor physical health. *This may be a result of living under stress for long periods of time. Some may be suffering from physical illness and trauma caused during violent episodes of abuse.*

## Getting by

### Survivors say they:

- Feel as if they are not living - just existing
- Will do anything to avoid thinking about their past

Some survivors do not cope well and struggle with their lives from day to day. Some feel as though they are struggling with life and going from one crisis to another.

Some survivors have learnt how to avoid the present moment by escaping into an imaginary place which is cut off from reality. Some burden themselves with heavy work commitments, and other tasks to avoid their memories. Others use alcohol or drugs to help keep the past at bay. Some survivors self-harm and may have unprotected sex. Some people use relying on drugs, alcohol and self-harm to numb painful emotions.

**Over reliance on substance misuse and self-harm to cope with overwhelming emotions can hold people back in their recovery because it keeps them disconnected from their lives.**



# Chapter 3

## Talking about abuse



Image: siraphat / FreeDigitalPhotos.net

- The longer the abuse remains hidden and is kept a secret the more difficult it is to talk about it
- Talking about abuse is distressing
- Some people choose to talk about the abuse at some point, whereas others do not
- Families vary with how they respond to the news of abuse

Many survivors say they are uncomfortable with talking about the abuse. Some survivors do not want to speak about it at all and choose to leave it in the past. *This is OK, talking about the abuse is not always necessary. Others prefer to use art work or write about their experience in a journal or post messages on reputable survivor websites.*

Many survivors join survivor groups or see a professional for talking therapy and say that this is helpful to them but that it is not an easy decision to ask for help with this issue.

**Some survivors say that speaking about the abuse helps them to feel a sense of relief. Some say that when they do start to speak about their abuse they realise a need to keep talking and that having their voice heard helps them to feel in control of their life.**

Many people say that it takes some time to trust people with this information - *rightly so.*

When talking about the abuse, many prefer not to go into detailed descriptions and find it easier to talk about how it makes them feel. *Talking about the abuse can bring back unwanted memories which might be difficult to stop thinking about. This is because talking about experiences and emotions that have been kept under wraps for a long time may feel overwhelming.*

Survivors say that in the past they spent a lot of their energy trying to avoid remembering the abuse and keeping it hidden. And when they did finally resolve to speak about it, they often found themselves lost for words. *Despite how long ago the events took place, fear can still keep survivors from speaking up about the abuse.*

**For some survivors, the inability to discuss the abuse is linked to threats of harm and shame that were part of the abuse.**

Some survivors say that speaking to their families about the abuse is important to them. Families vary in how they respond to the news of abuse. Some are supportive; others are awkward and deny the abuse happened.

**Many families react with disbelief because they may feel overwhelmed by what happened. These negative reactions may be more common when the perpetrator is still around and/or is well liked within the community.**

# Chapter 4

## Dealing with shame and guilt



Image: aospa / FreeDigitalPhotos.net

- Many survivors blame themselves for the abuse
- Shame keeps people from talking about what happened
- Understanding that the abuse was not their fault is helpful

Many survivors believe that childhood sexual abuse happens to very few people. *Unfortunately, childhood sexual abuse is a worldwide problem and far more common than most people realize.*

Survivors say that feelings of guilt and shame keep them from speaking about the abuse.

**Shame can keep one withdrawn and isolated, feeling hopeless and helpless. However, shame is simply a sign - an alarm bell - that something wrong has happened.**

Survivors say understanding that abuse was not their fault is important. Some say that looking at old photos of themselves as a child, around the age the abuse began, is helpful. It helps them to reconnect with their past and to think about how much control they would have had over an adult.

**A child can be easily manipulated by an adult. Children are physically smaller, dependent on adults for their basic and emotional needs, are keen to please adults and lack maturity to understand what may be happening. Any of these qualities can leave a child vulnerable to abuse. The abuse was not your fault and it is a criminal offence.**

## Chapter 5

### Moving on from the past



Image: zirconiausso / FreeDigitalPhotos.net

- Breaking away from threatening relationships and behaviours helps people to gain control over their life
- Engaging in enjoyable and meaningful activities aids recovery
- Putting your needs first aids recovery

## Boundaries in recovery

Many survivors speak about minimising present risks and worries. For some, this involves moving away from the perpetrator (if still living in the vicinity), ending current abusive relationships, and getting help with substance dependency, seeking professional support for their emotional and psychological difficulties. Some people choose to report their abuse to the police, take legal action and / or speak to their families about the abuse for the very first time.

**Survivors tell us that reducing present threats in their life help them to feel safe again, to feel they are taking control back, and to start feeling hopeful about their futures.**

## Moving forward

Survivors say that taking up activities which hold some interest, value and feel rewarding to them, helps them to move on from abuse. These can include;

- **Paid work and volunteering**
- **Caring for children or loved ones**
- **Study and developing new skills**
- **Travelling**
- **Joining a survivor group**

**Survivors say that these activities are not only satisfying but can also offer some structure to each day, and that this is especially important in the difficult stages of recovery.**

Many people find survivor support groups helpful. They say that in these groups they can receive and give support, and that meeting with others who have gone through similar experiences helps them to feel less alone and isolated.

**Engaging in meaningful activity can help to shift the focus from the past to the present and gives hope for the future.**

## Putting your needs first

Survivors say the recognising their need for recovery and prioritizing their needs in recovery helps them to move on. Some describe an inner strength – a determination to move on and improve their lives for themselves and their families, despite fearing criticism and judgment from others.

**Many people say that when they begin to believe they can handle their hurdles, their recovery journey becomes less scary.**

## Chapter 6

### On-going hurdles



Image: Napikhomboonwaroot/FreeDigitalPhotos.net

- Stress can trigger a set back and leave people feeling hopeless again
- Moving on does get easier as people become stronger
- Recovery takes time and is an on-going process



Some survivors say that big changes are stressful even when these are positive. Changes such as separation, divorce, the loss of a loved one, moving home, getting married, new job, having a baby, cause stress.

During times of stress some survivors say they find themselves struggling again with their feelings about themselves and memories from the past. Stress can trigger these feelings. *For many, worry and anxiety drains them and makes them less able to cope.*

**During difficult times it is important to eat, sleep, rest and take exercise and not neglect these basic needs.**

Some survivors have found it helpful to talk to trusted friends, while others have gone back to talking therapy for a short period. *Some people may need help to overcome a hurdle which is keeping them stuck.*

**If you are overwhelmed by worries and have become a risk to yourself or others seek professional support immediately.**

# Chapter 7

## A hopeful future



Image: janno0028 / FreeDigitalPhotos.net

- People who have been abused as children say that it is possible to move on after abuse, regardless of how they feel they were affected by the abuse



Here are some key messages survivors of abuse want to share:

*“it is never too late, and you are never too old or too broken to start moving on from abuse”*

*“find your motivation and drive to move on from the abuse and live a full life. Build on this determination to do what is right for you. You are stronger than you know”*

*“be patient with yourself and accept you may need lots of time for healing, to speak about your abuse and work things out”*

*“the abuse was not your fault”*

*“give the shame and guilt you have been carrying all these years back to the abusers, where it belongs”*

*“you are not alone”*

*“speak about what happened to you to someone you trust”*

*“take care of yourself and keep yourself safe”*

*“keep moving on with your life. You are entitled to live a happy and contented life”*

## Acknowledgements and thanks

We wish to extend our thanks to all the survivors who shared their experience of recovery with us. Further, we thank all the professionals and support teams who have supported this aid. Particularly the teams at Break the Silence, Health in Mind, Moira Anderson Foundation, National Association for People Abused in Childhood, Orchard Centre, NHS Lothian, NHS Glasgow, NHS Aberdeen and NHS Highlands. This project was funded by SurvivorScotland.

## Final Note

We are committed to reviewing the content of this aid and are keen to ensure that it continues to be relevant. We invite you to contact us with any suggestions which could enhance the use and significance of this aid.

Please email Prof. Karatzias with any suggestions:  
t.karatzias@napier.ac.uk

If you would like any further information about child sexual abuse please visit the SurvivorScotland website  
<http://www.survivorscotland.org.uk>

## About the Authors

**Zoë Chouliara** is a clinically practicing health psychologist and person-centred psychotherapist / counsellor. Zoë leads the research subgroup of the Working Party for Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse (BPSSS).

**Thanos Karatzias** is a clinical and health Psychologist and Professor of Mental Health, currently based in Edinburgh Napier University and NHS Lothian. He is the convenor of the Working Party for Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse (BPSSS).

**Angela Gullone** has an honours degree in Psychology and works as an Assistant Researcher at Edinburgh Napier University.