



The Institute of Family Living

HEALING FROM ABUSE

Psychotherapy — individual, couple, family, and group — can offer survivors of abuse a process for healing their trauma. Abuse may include physical or sexual assault, abandonment and loss, emotional or verbal abuse, or other trauma often associated with severely dysfunctional families and communities.

For the adult man or woman, certain life incidents may trigger the need to enter therapy to work on childhood or teenage abuse issues that they had previously avoided, or were unable to tackle on their own. Moreover, adult life crises such as accidents, natural disasters, war, social oppression, rape, domestic violence, marriage breakdowns, childbirth, and sexual harassment can produce similar post-traumatic symptoms of depression and anxiety.

At IFL, we only work with the clear memories that our clients themselves bring into therapy. Much has been written about False Memory Syndrome, in which a client may be led to *manufacture* the memories of “what must have happened.” This is, of course, another kind of abuse. Unfortunately, such unethical therapy has cast doubt on the very serious social issue of child abuse.

The effects of childhood trauma, of whatever nature, are profound. In our society, abuse of children is a reality. As an abused child grows to adulthood, typical manifestations of the abuse appear: inability to trust, inability to establish and maintain healthy intimate relationships, and inability to recognize and respect appropriate personal, familial, and social boundaries.

Abuses of power engender feelings of powerlessness. For example, many children are sexualized too early. Certainly, forcing children to participate in the making of pornography is abuse, and so is showing pornography to children.

The Internet, such a boon to us in many ways, is also an efficient market for many kinds of sexual exploitation. Family therapy centres like IFL are therefore deeply concerned about Internet safety for children and adolescents.

Healing from abuse requires a specialized **therapeutic setting**, as well as a **professional assessment**, which determines whether individual, couple, family, or group therapy is the best place to start the healing process.

Individual therapy is often the place where a child or adult begins to break the silence, understand her or his confused feelings, and discover effective ways to deal with fear, shame, humiliation, and worthlessness. A sensitive therapist understands the courage that it takes for any client to begin the healing journey and sets clear, safe therapeutic boundaries.

In addition to individual therapy, many abuse survivors look toward **couple or family therapy** to build on the healing they have experienced. Positive outcomes may include enriched marital communication, higher degrees of sexual satisfaction, improved ability to negotiate for one’s own needs, reduced reactivity, and increased healing of the long-term effects of post-traumatic stress. Such progress *may*, in time, result in reconciliation with members of one’s family of origin when relations have been strained or cut off.

Within a respectful and supportive **healing group**, participants need to set their own personal goals and to proceed at their own pace. This is especially important because abuse survivors have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violations of their boundaries by others, and they need to feel that they have a right to control those boundaries.

The group therapy process provides safe sharing of experiences and strengthens the blessings of individual work.

Increased awareness of what is appropriate for oneself and for others can be supplemented by music, art, journaling, prayer, relaxation exercises, and the therapeutic use of the imagination.

The goal of any healing process is increased personal fulfillment and trust in life itself.

by Nancy Molitz, M.A., RMFT

For Further Reading

Illegal and Offensive Content on the Internet. Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2000.

Evans, P. *The Verbally Abusive Relationship.* Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corporation, 1996.

Hancock, M., and Mains, K. B. *Child Sexual Abuse: A Hope for Healing.* Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1987.

Rogers, S. *From Fear to Freedom: Abused Wives Find Hope and Healing.* Toronto: Path Books, 2002.

Wells, M. *Canada's Law on Child Sexual Abuse: A Handbook.* Ottawa: Department of Justice Canada, 1990.

A BEAUTIFUL PLACE

“... it is difficult for someone who has *not* had a traumatic childhood to understand why one who has cannot just ‘get over it.’ I think I am now making great strides along that path.

We human beings are, after all, very sensitive and fragile creatures, and what happens to us in childhood — how we are treated — creates our first impressions of the world and our place in it. This becomes so much a part of our very being, as we grow into adulthood, that it can be a long journey to reach an understanding that we did not deserve what happened to us, and that it was not our fault.

Childhood abuse leaves one with a sense of lost, stolen time, and time is so precious. Some people may come out of it unscarred, but some don't, because we are all so different and unique. I am coming now to a beautiful place, a peaceful place, and I am more grateful to God, to you, and to my therapist, than I can ever express.”

from a letter written by an IFL client to her spiritual director



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