

A Perspective On Working With Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

By Maria Dowling



Introduction

I have worked as a counsellor and psychotherapist with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse for twenty years now. In that time, my understanding of sexual abuse has deepened, informed primarily by my own journey with my clients.

In the last two decades, I have noticed positive changes where child sexual abuse is concerned, both in the therapeutic field and in society in general. There is now an unquestioning acceptance that sexual abuse is enormously damaging to a victim on many levels. In my view, confusion regarding the impact of sexual abuse on a child was born out of a lack of understanding and exploration of its effects. I believe this was partly due to a natural human propensity to recoil from the issue of sexual abuse. I believe that the sexual abuse of children is deeply abhorrent to us as human beings. A part of the psyche, the soul registers the impact of hearing about it in the life of another, and the potential for feeling overwhelmed and recoiling, is very strong. I believe it is tremendously important that we become aware of the part of us that is impacted, as this is to me the key to understanding and helping survivors.

Over the years the very definition of sexual abuse has broadened. Any study of the definitions from the early 1990s to today, shows a deepening of the understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse. I welcome that sexual abuse is no longer determined by touch alone; that severity is no longer evaluated in terms of violence and coercion. I welcome that the psychological impact of non-contact forms of abuse e.g. the pursuit of a child relationally, is now readily recognised as powerful and harmful in effect.

It appears to me that within the definition of sexual abuse descriptive lists are growing to encapsulate the full spectrum of behaviours and relational dynamics between a perpetrator and victim. I think these descriptions are helpful, as they enable us to grow in our awareness and understanding of this difficult issue. However, the

expansion of the definition of sexual abuse also raises concerns for me. Are we more comfortable focusing on what sexual abuse looks like and still struggling with a recoil response from the source from which it emanates? Do we instinctively agree that sexual abuse is terrible and succumb to a cultural agreement that it is harmful, yet in so doing release ourselves from the question of why?

Over the years, I have encouraged myself to explore the place in me that finds sexual abuse intolerable; that human core that resonates with the needs of any soul and is pained by their exploitation. I have been surprised and deeply encouraged by the hope this work has brought to me, not just as a therapist, but as a human being. The gift of this work has been the discovery that within every soul is an innate, passionate and powerful propensity towards health; a desire to 'be'. In every survivor, no matter how shut-down, repressed, or deceived, one can find evidence of the authentic core self; a unique, vibrant and passionate individual. No matter how damaging the abuse may be, the soul can never be 'snuffed out'. In finding this individual and unique human core, we find the survival energy and the seeds to recovery. If the natural propensity to 'be', is unshakled, given nourishment and space, it 'grows up' within the survivor and leads them to freedom.

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What is Child Sexual Abuse?

In her book, *Counselling Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, Christiane Sanderson defines child sexual abuse as follows:

“Child sexual abuse is the involvement of dependent children and adolescents in sexual activities with an adult, or any person older and bigger, where there is a difference in age, size, or power, in which the child is used as a sexual object for the gratification of the older person’s needs or desires and to which the child is unable to give informed consent, due to the imbalance of power, or any mental, or physical disability. This definition excludes any consensual sexual activity between peers.”

While I would see this as a comprehensive and helpful definition, the propensity is for the sexual activities to be the focus. In my view, grooming is what defines sexual abuse.

Grooming is Sexual Abuse

Most of what I have read on grooming describes it as a process initiated by a perpetrator with a child that precedes sexual contact/sexual activity. The impression is that once a child is groomed, the abuse then starts and the grooming deters the child from getting help. I have come to see grooming as much more powerful than a stage leading up to abuse proper. I see grooming as central to sexual abuse; as defining it. In understanding grooming, we know what is sexually abusive and what is not.

Grooming is the establishment of a relationship whereby one person disempowers, objectifies and uses a more vulnerable person to meet not just sexual but core human needs. I believe two things take place in grooming process. The abuser subsumes the child into his/her core self and an identity is imposed on the child by the abuser.

Subsuming the child:

To subsume is 'to take under', 'to take over', 'to include in something larger'. Grooming is the uncensored, unboundaried enveloping of one person by another. This is often consciously or unconsciously facilitated by the child's family. An abuser may have infiltrated the family of a child and have groomed the family to believe certain things both about the abuser and the child. A culture may already be in place in the family that does not question the development of the exclusive alliance with the perpetrator. Families may be desensitised or distracted by crisis (addictions, violence), or inter-generational sexual abuse and be vulnerable to exploitation.

The abuser grooms the child to meet his/her needs. To groom is 'to train', 'to prepare for a position'. This is done through seduction and dominance.

In seduction, the child may be made aware of the needs of the abuser as a human being. Stories may be shared about the abuser's childhood, or current unhappiness. What is key is that empathy for the abuser is evoked in a child. There is an enticement into the inner world of the abuser, their pain and unmet needs, which evokes emotional and cognitive responses in the child. This empathy is soothing to the abuser and actively encouraged.

In dominance, the child experiences the abuser as unwilling to heed their desire to move back from the intensity of the relationship. The child may be chided as uncaring, cruel, unloving. In extreme cases, threats are made to keep the child locked into the relationship. The child senses the abuser's focus on them and need of them.

The needs of the abuser are vast and unregulated. In many ways I have come to see abusers as starving human beings; men and women who have not had their own core developmental and relational needs met. They appear to have an intuitive sense of their own inner hunger and emptiness and often have a well constructed and

controlled public persona. Success, competency and reputation compensate for, and hide a developmentally needy and desperate core. I believe abusers resonate, identify and seek connection with children because of the immaturity of their own core self needs.

Beneath a controlled public persona, this unregulated desperate self reveals itself to the child. Abusers do not censor how much of the child they seek for themselves and children are developmentally unable to evaluate how much of themselves should respond emotionally and cognitively to the abuser. The immaturity and innocence of the child is manipulated to evoke soothing responses relationally to a starving more powerful person. What solidifies the alliance is the fact that the child may be needy too. Children may be hungry for acceptance, love, value, protection and in meeting these needs the abuser locks the child into a torturous ambivalence about their part in the abuse.

The Imposition of an Identity on the Child:

The child is being enticed into the world of the abuser and being trained to respond and indeed exist in terms of the vast needs of a more powerful person. At the same time, the child is being groomed to believe certain things about himself/herself. A belief system about who the child is is slowly being imposed by the abuser.

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There may be collusion with family and others, depending on the extent to which the context in which the child receives care and protection has been compromised and manipulated. These beliefs often emanate out of how the abuser sees the child, or needs to see the child. Ultimately, they attend to the core self needs of the abuser. In essence a false self is being imposed on the child.

One can easily speculate here on how innocent children can be manipulated into believing they caused the abuse or even wanted it, because they may have wanted attention, affection, appreciation



etc. Intuitively the child senses the wrongness of what is taking place, yet may be confused because they don't want to lose the relationship. This ambivalence can be easily manipulated into guilt and shame about the self. It is common to hear survivors questioning if they were the aberrant party in the abuse, if they were the seducers. Many survivors suffer from chronic low self esteem and indeed self-hatred.

One powerful effect that often emerges from the grooming process is a confusion regarding the survivor's evaluation of their own value and potency/power in the world. Abusers project onto the child the impression that they alone can soothe them and meet their needs. In this, the child is of enormous value, is tremendously special. However at the same time, the child experiences shame and guilt regarding the relationship and what is taking place in it. This leads to an ambivalence and confusion in the developing self of the child regarding their value as an individual.

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the abuser's need of them. They are encouraged to believe that what they do and say has enormous effect. However, the needs of the abuser remain unsatiated. The child may also be experiencing anxiety, fear and confusion in the alliance with the abuser, as well as natural developmental needs of their own. The child may sense their isolation and inability to cope with all they are experiencing and fear being overwhelmed and disintegrating. Many survivors do not know if they are strong or weak; competent or incompetent. Ambivalence regarding personal power and value is akin to core doubt. The self is wrenched apart, uncertain, destabilised. Survivors often struggle with polarised experiences of feeling valuable and worthless; immensely strong and a failure/weak; safe/connected and incredibly vulnerable and alone.

The Core Effect of Sexual Abuse

In my view, sexual abuse impacts

on all aspects of personhood. There is a wealth of literature on the physical, emotional, cognitive, sexual, relational and spiritual effects of sexual abuse. We must look to why the effects are so extensive. In this regard we must go to the fulcrum upon which all the other effects rest – the harm to the developing core self.

I believe the principal damage of child sexual abuse is in the starvation and neglect of the development and emergence of the authentic core self. The true self is not sensed and is not lived. Survivors may admit to a fear that behind a carefully



constructed presentation of self, they have no core. They do not know who they are and fear that beneath the surface, there is nothing there. Others are acutely aware of being performers, chameleons who can adjust to situations, but they have no sense of a real inner person holding it all together. They may fear fragmentation, as they have not experienced a solid inner self that can respond to life should their usual coping strategies fail. They may also fear the shame of being unveiled as a fraud.

In my view, the healthy development of the self necessitates the freedom of an individual to be oneself and explore one's uniqueness of thought and emotion. If a young person is taken prisoner unconsciously and defined by another, they sense intuitively that something within them has not developed. They may fear that who they really are is gone and the only self they can have is a shell of a public persona that feels fragile and may not withstand scrutiny.

The grooming process of engulfing a child into another and projecting onto them false identity beliefs, ultimately robs the child of the ability to attend to their natural propensity to be who they are. The ability to think, feel, choose in life and the natural evolution of a person's personality in terms of the formation of belief systems about the self, world and others is censored and directed by another.

I believe the natural response of any being to the censorship of who they were uniquely made to be, is shame. Shame cannot be explained away simply as the self's sense of humiliation and degradation in sexual abuse. Nor is shame a response to the internalisation of lies about who

the survivor is. It is all this and more. Shame is an intuitive sense of not being who one naturally is. It is a profound sense of having betrayed one's natural being. At the heart of shame is an inner life force that pulls the survivor into unrest, returns memories and torments the survivor in their coping strategies. Shame testifies to a unique inner soul that seeks individual expression and life. It is hidden, undeveloped, unknown, yet sensed in many of the survivors I have worked with. It is often what propels them into therapy.

Recovery

The word recovery sits well with me in working with sexual abuse in the lives of my clients. To recover is 'to find again', 'to bring back', 'to revive', 'to succeed in reaching'. These terms describe a process of redemption where determination may bring pain and struggle in the unshackling of a soul, but also delight, beauty and peace in what is won. What is won is the restoration of a person's natural design; the emergence of a self that meets the world in its own unique way.

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Clients often seek therapy because something has ceased to work. They may be experiencing difficulties in their lives. They may feel unable to continue with how they present themselves in their relationships at home, work or socially, because they are burned out, heartbroken, discouraged or indifferent. Something may have happened that has exposed them as other than they are normally known, or they have just become tired of trying to be something/someone.

Whatever brings a client into therapy, I see my primary goal is to listen and watch for the true self and give it expression, a voice. This may be a voice they alone have heard and been with, but it has not been witnessed or shared. In this regard, it may have strength and but need validation and encouragement in being visible and integrated into how the client lives. Sometimes the self that is found is very immature, unnourished and it takes time for clients to have the courage to let it speak. There may be confusion, anxiety and indeed shame in the emergence of responses from a place inside themselves they don't feel they know. Fear may be evoked, as internalised threats or lies are remembered as gate-keepers to clients ever having their own perceptions or feelings.

I believe that the relationship with the therapist supersedes all therapeutic models as the single most healing factor in the recovery process, because it is in the therapeutic alliance that the grooming process is undone.

Sexual abuse survivors were harmed and imprisoned in the context of a relationship



and it is in a redemptive relationship that they experience healing and freedom. Survivors construct defensive and coping selves in response to what they experienced in the abuse and what they were led to believe. In the therapeutic relationship, clients are brought into an awareness of this construction and invited to allow what they experienced to have expression. This begins with small, courageous steps and develops as the inner self grows in its hunger to live.

On the surface, clients are facilitated in taking ownership of their thoughts, perceptions and feelings and allowing them to be visible in their relationships and choices in daily life. On a deeper, more unconscious level, over time, profound changes that are wonderful to witness take place. Peace and indeed self-confidence comes in being a congruent being. Longings, capabilities, talents/gifts are stirred and explored that may direct a survivor to a fuller life.

Conclusion

Child sexual abuse is a dysfunctional relationship, which takes a vulnerable person hostage to serve the needs of another. This necessitates the neglect of the victim's own needs and responses and the projection of a self-view where they are locked into ambivalence, doubt and silence. Our work as counsellors/ psychotherapists is in seeking and enticing the natural self to break through and become visible in the therapeutic relationship. Once this process begins, it cannot be quelled, as the natural order of the core self is passionate and vibrant.

Who we are as counsellors/ psychotherapists and the connection we offer is extremely



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important in this therapeutic process. In working with survivors, we are searching for the self and we are using the fullness of ourselves to do this. We must 'be' what we are seeking for our clients. We must be grounded, authentic/ true, congruent, self-aware and honest. By being anchored in who we really are in the therapeutic alliance, survivors learn how to attune to themselves.

We must know experientially what it is we are seeking for our clients. When we have done core work on ourselves, a deeply refined intuitive sense tells us when a client is authentically present, or absent. I believe that we must be committed to our own personal process in working with survivors, not only in addressing the impact of working with trauma, but in developing our self-awareness and presence. 



Maria Dowling has worked as an integrative counsellor and psychotherapist for twenty years, having graduated with her M.A. in 1993. She initially worked in a centre providing counselling and training to long-term unemployed people, where issues of depression, addiction and abuse were addressed. She then worked for eleven years as a psychotherapist with survivors of childhood sexual abuse and adult sexual violence in the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, where she was also a Team Leader.

Maria is currently in private practice in Sutton, north Dublin, where she works with a wide range of issues, notably depression, anxiety, bullying, sexual abuse and violence recovery, relationship issues and domestic abuse. She is an Accredited Supervisor with the I.A.C.P and provides training workshops on working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

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