

Sexual Trauma

There is a prevalent relationship between sexual abuse (and other sexual trauma) and psychological problems. Over one-fourth of females attempting suicide had been a victim of rape. Almost 50% of patients undergoing in-hospital treatment for emotional problems have been the victims of physical and sexual abuse. Of those abused patients, 90% had been abused by family members. Victims of sexual abuse, incest and rape suffer from a wide range of symptoms. Behaviorally, they may experience personal, social, sexual and academic adjustment problems. Physically, they may suffer from chemical addictions and numerous psychosomatic disorders. Psychologically, they often feel depressed, suicidal, self-destructive, ashamed and guilty.

Male Victims of Sexual Abuse

Males tend to internalize the trauma and react through self-destructive activities resulting, in such characteristics as obesity, anorexia, self-mutilation, suicide, self-medication or depression. Some boys completely externalize the trauma through acts of child abuse, spousal abuse or murder. Girls generally tend to internalize trauma and more often react self-destructively. Behaviorally, young victims may "act-out" in the home and community through defiance, delinquent acts and drug/alcohol abuse. These are angry, confused children who blame themselves for the abuse they suffered. One common long-term effect, experienced especially by male victims, relates to an identity crisis, fearing homosexuality or becoming homosexuals. The shame these youngsters experience is not always related to sexual contact but simply because they have been physically over-powered by an older male.

Female Victims of Sexual Abuse

Women who have been sexually abused often have problems with trust and intimacy in later life. Some of these victims have multiple marriages and others suffer from various forms of sexual dysfunction. Female victims may become indiscriminate or promiscuous in their choice of sexual partners, thus confirming their unconscious belief that all relationships are sexual and they are merely sexual objects to others. Still others may become withdrawn sexually and avoid physical intimacy as a reaction to early molestation. Often female victims seek abusive relationships. Choosing an abusive partner unconsciously serves to reinforce low self-esteem in women who were molested as children. A large percentage of alcohol-abusing women were molested as children. Over 70% of female drug addicts and prostitutes have a history of sexual abuse.

Incest

In terms of visible symptoms, the effects of incestuous abuse can be similar to the effects of child rape. There are, however, some fundamental differences. Many women who were molested as children claim they were robbed of their childhood and feel their early needs for appropriate nurturing were not met. Because their emotional development has been arrested, child victims often demonstrate a false maturity that masks their need for normal parental affection. Feelings of responsibility for what happened, and the resultant guilt over it, appear to be somewhat intensified in victims of incest. When they do tell someone, their guilt is exacerbated because of



the family consequences. A victim's loss of trust in authority figures is one of the most devastating effects of incest.

Treatment

In general, the effects of sexual abuse are always damaging, often lying dormant for many years before becoming manifest in chemical dependency, depression and other self-destructive behaviors. Counseling and therapeutic treatment directly after a sexual trauma, such as rape, can minimize the emotional destruction and circumvent future problems.

