

Child Rape: For Survivors and Interested Others

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Introduction

This article is primarily intended to provide information and support for adult survivors of child sexual abuse who experienced penetrative contact. A secondary aim is to give information that may facilitate understanding for people who support survivors of child rape. While all child sexual abuse is serious, there are some specific problems associated with rape. I wrote this article because, while we see that there are many articles and webpages available about child sexual abuse in general, it is more difficult to find information that narrows the focus to rape. A Google-search of the words *child rape* tends to throw up links about arrested offenders and specific parts of the world in which child rape is sadly endemic, but relatively little on the subject itself.

I am a survivor of repeated oral rape as a child of four, and later between the ages of eight and ten, multiple types of rape by a close family friend. If the earlier assaults were bad, the later were most terrifying ordeals; I thought he would kill me. Because I knew what people do "make babies" but didn't understand that I wasn't old enough to have a baby, I lived in constant fear that he would make me pregnant and then everybody would find out. I often felt that I would not survive the next time. The despair and entrapment I sometimes felt caused me to think about suicide. But I am extremely thankful that my life-spirit was stronger.

While I have made a success of healing in many ways, the memory of these episodes has proven intensely traumatic at certain stages of my life, as I know that they do for other survivors. It can be comforting to find material that fits our experiences. This article is my contribution to support and understanding for survivors of these gross and terrible inflictions who may be looking for something specific.

It's also true that over two decades, I've had the privilege of knowing other survivors of child rape. I have been approached countless times and asked how it is possible to survive and be strong. This article is in part an answer to that question. Having said that, I would by no means classify myself as *always* able to deal perfectly well with these aspects of my history.

But, generally speaking, I have worked hard to heal some of the more grievous aspects of child-rape survival. I would like to share this with you.

This article is a synthesis of research by others, knowledge I have acquired over twenty-two years of supporting survivors, and how I have come to understand my own experiences – both of child rape, and the aftermath.

If you are a man or woman who was raped as a child, I am so sorry, but so glad you survived. I hope this article will help you to feel less alone. If you have had no help, I'm going to suggest ways that you may get it. Pull up a chair, and please, if you would like to, accept a supportive hug from me.

Definitions

Perhaps when you were a child, somebody close to your age, or an adult man or woman, penetrated your mouth, vagina or anus with a penis, finger, tongue or object. Boys may have been forced into having oral or vaginal intercourse with a woman – or to penetrate a man. You may have been subjected to grooming by an offender who had, or who cultivated a loving relationship with you and told you lies about the abuse being part of loving you, “teaching you” or other. Or, you may have been threatened and forced with violence. It may have happened once or many times, maybe with different offenders – or more than one offender at the same time. These things are all rape, and if you are a man or woman who experienced it, you may still be carrying a lot of pain.

Context

Child rape can happen in any context. Children are raped in organized paedophile rings, in the making of child sexual abuse images and films, or in one-on-one settings by a parent or other relative, family friend, church leader, babysitter or in fewer cases, strangers. It is a heartbreaking truth that children may be made available by their own parents for rape by other adults. Offenders are usually male – though by no means exclusively – and one study specifically about child-rape found that non-related but known perpetrators – such as family friends, comprise the largest group of offenders (Saunders, Kilpatrick, Hanson, Resnick and Walker, 1999 p.193).

How common is child rape?

We'd like to think that people who rape children are rare. Child rape in places like South Africa has been called epidemic (see below for articles). We should support bodies addressing this tragedy, but we should not be complacent about the incidence of child rape in affluent Western societies. By now, we know that child sexual abuse is appallingly common. What about child *rape*? The research of Saunders et al (1999, p.187) tells us the following:

- 85 women in 1,000 are raped at least once as a minor, with the average age for a first rape being 10.8 years
- 21.5% of rapes occur between birth and age 7
- 38.3% of rapes occur between the ages of 7 and 12 years

- 40.2% of rapes occur between the ages of 13 and 17 years

These figures do not tell us about child rape on boys and for this reason among other possibilities, they understate the incidence of child rape. However, studies reveal that between 8% and 13% of men have experienced child sexual abuse (Douglas, E. and Finkelhor, D, [Childhood Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet](#)). Some of these men will undoubtedly have been subjected to rape.

If it happened to you, you don't need figures to tell you that child rape is a serious problem. The figures should at least tell you that you are certainly not alone.

Effects

Saunders et. al (1999, p.196) write, "Clearly, child rape dramatically increases risk for the development of psychological problems."

The effects of child sexual abuse on male and female children and adult survivors are by now well-documented. We know about sexual dysfunction, poor self-esteem and more (See below for websites). The effects of child-rape in particular do not differ entirely from those of child sexual assault in general. However, research does reveal some particular areas of impact in child rape:

Epstein, Saunders and Kilpatrick (1997) tell us:

Specific acts of childhood sexual abuse appear to increase the risk of developing PTSD. For example, victims of childhood rape, defined as experiencing penetration at the time of sexual abuse, were found to have the highest prevalence rate of PTSD of all child sexual abuse victims (Saunders et al., 1992). In fact, childhood rape victims were nearly twice as likely to develop PTSD at some time in their lifetime (64%) as child molestation victims who experienced physical contact, but no penetration (33%) and nearly six times as likely to develop PTSD as children who experienced a sexually victimizing act that did not involve physical sexual contact such as voyeurism (11%) (Saunders et al.).

I'm not going to assume that all my readers know what PTSD, shorthand for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, is. PTSD is a condition experienced by many people who have experienced traumatic events which were perceived as life-threatening and over which they had no control. You may be chronically frightened of things that remind you of the childhood rape, and may experience nightmares about it, or flashbacks – very strong memories that make you feel as if you were reliving it. Conversely, you may feel very numb about it all. At particularly bad times, you may have body-memories – or pain in your body (vagina, anus, jaws or elsewhere) that corresponds with the pain caused by the abuse. Please see more links below about PTSD.

Survivors of child rape are also more likely to be divorced, and have higher levels of substance abuse and depression issues (Saunders et al 1999 p. 192).

I don't want to paint a picture of people irretrievably broken by child rape. Knowing as I do many triumphant and successful survivors of it, this would do a real disservice. Although I would not deny the damage I have borne and to an extent continue to bear, I am a university graduate in a successful marriage for 23 years, with five children, all raised in a loving, safe home. I also have an intact, if rather dark, sense of humour. We do face some stigmatization - where people can deal with more "benign" terms such as "molestation", calling child *rape* by its name is something people have a harder time with, and this can rebound on us. I have met people who feel that survivors of child rape must be damaged beyond all repair. But we survived, and that takes strength. If you are a survivor, it's important that you have hope for healing.

Nevertheless, although I can count my own triumphs and be proud of them, it's also true that thinking of these events in my life is never easy, and may never be so. Particularly, the rape that occurred when I was eight carries an ongoing sense of bleak fear, and while it is usually much easier now to manage, I have made peace with the fact that the fear may never entirely go, and I know doesn't mean I haven't healed. I have had long-term PTSD, part of which I recognize as emanating from child-rape. I manage it - to the extent that long periods go by without thinking about it and fearing it, but sometimes it still flares up. I have begun to accept that this is a part of the process of survivorship for me. Fortunately I have also had sufficient support and beauty in my life to bring about strength and a renewed sense of my own innocence.

If you were raped as a child, you experienced one of the nastiest and most terrifying wounds a child can bear. I suspect I don't need to tell you that, but you may be in need of some validation. You may have heard sentiments such as "try not to think about it" or "leave it in the past." If only it was that easy, right? But there are very sound reasons why this is much easier said than done, and we'll look at that some more below. If you are new to acknowledging and dealing with child-rape, please know that you can heal too.

Traumatic Aspects

As we've seen, experiencing a rape is a predictor of PTSD. The research of Epstein et. al. (1997, p. 583-4) reports that PTSD as a result of child rape tends to be exacerbated by the following factors:

- *Crime characteristics* of life-threat and physical injury: These factors mean that child rape is perceived as more traumatic
- *Aftermath characteristics*: Specifically, it appears that having testified in court increased PTSD likelihood for some survivors.
- *Rape types*: Rape that was experienced as more "deviant" - specifically oral or anal rape, are shown to elicit higher rates of PTSD.
- Other factors that may make child rape especially traumatic are if the perpetrator was a father or father-figure; a series of assaults, and lack of support from caregivers.

In referring to rape type, the researchers go on to say "Moreover, it was found that the number of rape types experienced by the child was an even more effective discriminator of PTSD status." Further, "Number of rape types may be related to more severe rape types (e.g. anal rape) as children who experience multiple forms of rape are more likely to experience the more severe forms" Lastly, "It appears that there are factors inherent to the more deviant acts of childhood rape (e.g. pain) that may exacerbate postrape psychological adjustment."

I don't question that anal rape is intensely painful, and may generate more shame and trauma. However, I do find the researchers' use of pain as an example of what generates greater trauma in child rape interesting. For many of us who experienced vaginal rape when we were very young (I was 8 the first time) excruciating pain was certainly a factor.

For me, the life-threat aspect of child rape has been the singular worst consequence in my life. When I was raped between eight and ten, I certainly felt that I would die because of the pain, inability to breathe and sheer fear. The perpetrator actively fostered this with threats. If you're familiar with PTSD symptoms, you'll have heard of *Sense of Foreshortened Future*. For those unfamiliar with this, it basically means that a survivor of trauma doesn't expect to have a long life. This describes me perfectly. I waited between assaults, certain that the next time it happened he would kill me. Even though I did survive, I have spent most of my life haunted by the same sense of impending doom – waiting for the shoe to drop. If I perceive myself to be threatened or trapped in any way, I can go into the same annihilation panic I felt as a child. I have had some success in therapy working with this, but would acknowledge that further work is needed.

If you are a fellow survivor, you may have had dreadful effects that go beyond what has been described above. Some of us feel as if our sanity is threatened at certain times in dealing with child rape. But what we feel are normal reactions to very abnormal situations. If you have not received support or help, you deserve it. You went through all that pain alone – you don't need to be alone now. We'll look at getting help below.

Why does it come back?

If you are a survivor of child rape, it's likely that you developed an array of skills to help yourself survive psychologically. These may have included numbing, forgetting, pretending it wasn't happening, or the development of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Many survivors find that our defenses wear off at certain stages in our lives. Accepted non-wisdoms are that we are surely better forgetting about it and not dwelling on horrible things in the past. Some of us enjoy periods of time where it lays dormant. It's very disconcerting when the memories and feelings flare up – or flare up again after a relatively peaceful time, suddenly again feeling unbearable.

You may not know that part of the reason for feeling traumatized now for events in the past is *physical*. Our bodies were not designed to handle severe stressors. Research findings indicate that the stress of childhood trauma such as child sexual abuse, can cause actual physical

changes in the brain. Traumatic memory appears to be stored differently than ordinary memory. One consequence of this is that when we're in situations that remind us - even in not-so-obvious ways, of the actual traumatic experience/s we've had, those memory tracts open up, causing us to feel as if it were happening again. Please see [this article](#). You might also like to listen to Dr. Frank Ochberg's webcast, [How Does PTSD Affect Brain Function?](#)

Sometimes it comes back because we may have further healing to do. Although it can be terrifying, it can also be an opportunity. It can take a long time to make sense of such a devastating crime. This frequently happens in fits and starts, and we need to give ourselves the space to do it.

You may be addressing child rape for the first time, or finding it has returned again due to another stressor or trigger in your life. This is perfectly normal, but whatever the case, it is important you seek support.

Healing

There are many, many different ways to heal, and what works for some people may not work for others. You will find your own path to healing. Healing generally does not happen all at once; you may find yourself looping back to issues you thought were over and done but which have thrown a different perspective up at you. You may also find that there are times you feel "stuck." Many of us need to decide that we have done all we can with an issue for the time being, and relax. If it comes around again - and it probably will - we can deal with it then and walk away with new understanding.

Remember that it is okay for you **not** to be okay, no matter how long ago it happened. If you are anything like me, you spent a lot of time trying to "act normal" and hide your vulnerability - both as a child and as an adult. You need to find safe spaces and times where you no longer need to do that.

Now, I'll share some central things integral to healing:

Safety First: Many survivors of child rape experience problems with alcohol or drug abuse. This is not because they are weak or bad, it is just a known hazard of surviving such a shocking trauma. While some survivors are able to disassociate, that is, mentally distance themselves from the trauma naturally, others may have trouble doing so, and so they artificially medicate to distance themselves from the horror. If they are going to heal, these issues will need to be addressed. Attempting to deal with deep trauma before they've developed healthier coping skills just worsens addiction issues for some people. If you have problems with eating disorders or self-injury - as many survivors do - you will also need support with these things.

I'll give you an example of my own experience: Two years ago I developed panic disorder with agoraphobia, plus a resurgence of strong PTSD. At this time, I knew it was a priority to become able to cope before focusing too much on traumatic issues, which were helping to cause the panic. It was most important to have support to recover from issues that were

affecting my ability to function, before feeling sufficiently safe to revisit traumatic injuries.

Attempting to delve into deeply traumatic material before coping skills have been maximized is very dangerous for some people.

If you are experiencing problems associated with PTSD such as anxiety or lack of sleep and these are making it harder to function, you may want to speak to your counselor and your doctor about medication, which can make it easier for you to work on your issues. It is very okay to use medication if needed, as long as the underlying issues are not being ignored or minimized by your health practitioner.

The other important question is that even if you are feeling internally unsafe, are your external life circumstances safe now? If your abuser is still a threat to you (and I personally know survivors of child-rape whose abusers continued to assault them into adulthood) you need help to get safe *now*, so that you begin to heal and take your life back. It may be that you can't see yourself as having any more options than you did as a child; the rapist severely damaged your sense of having a right to boundaries when you were young. This dreadful situation *can* change, my friend, you just need help, support and encouragement as you find out how. Even if the abuser is no longer raping you, they may be a family member who continues to harass, manipulate or otherwise degrade you. Healing will teach you that you are worth standing up for.

Like many survivors, myself included, you may have learned that people who love you hurt you, or that you are simply not worth any better. Revictimization is sadly common in survivors of child sexual abuse (Herman, 1992 p. 111), and you may thus be with a partner who hurts you physically, sexually and emotionally. Even if you don't believe me right now, you are worth so much more, but you will never find this out while you are still in danger. Please, reach out for help, to a trusted family member, or domestic violence service.

You may be unsafe because, like many male and female survivors, you are in a dangerous situation involving prostitution or other sex-work such as stripping or porn, and you are being abused by a pimp or by customers. Having been raped and perhaps even forced into prostitution or pornography as child, this may seem like a natural continuum for you. But you can have so much more.

Getting safe from dangerous people is an integral part of healing. This is something many of us learn as we heal. Please see below for links that you may find helpful.

Facing it: The simple act of admitting we were *raped* as children is something that many of us, myself included, feel at different times is just too big an admission. For me, the issue was a mixture of fear and shame. I honestly felt that if I let it emerge, I would go insane. I would have done anything to make it go away, but am glad today that I could not do so. For some survivors, the acknowledgment of child rape can also be an acknowledgment of a terrible betrayal by somebody they loved very much. Some survivors maintain a relationship with the

perpetrator, feeling that there's too much to lose if they acknowledge what happened. There are many reasons for not wanting to squarely face something so awful.

If you want to heal, you will need to acknowledge it, perhaps in small increments, and definitely with safe support. Go at your own pace; you don't want to overwhelm yourself. For me it started with saying "Something happened to me" and then it took me a full year of counseling before I could describe an experience of child rape in full. It doesn't matter how acknowledgment begins, as long as it does. You may find that you know when you're ready.

Some of us find it hard to use the word rape; we may try to dress it up in "prettier" terms that feel safer or less shameful. I believe that for a time, getting support is more important than what we call it, but in healing, most of us do find that we can come to staring it down and giving it its name.

Facing it may also mean facing how child rape has affected you. This is something that you are likely to be able to see as you heal. Many of us make the mistake of seeing effects as negative personality characteristics. It can be wonderful to learn that what we thought were fixed traits or insurmountable personal weaknesses, are not. They were caused by the abuse, and we can get help to overcome them.

Getting Support: If you are struggling with your history of child rape, you deserve to have support. It might be difficult to imagine asking for it, but please know that it exists for you. Some ways you can get support are:

- Telling. This often a terrifying prospect, but without it, it is difficult to find support. For me, there was the need to undo the fear-based silencing inculcated into me by an abuser. Although my adult mind knew that he was long gone and could not know I was telling, much less harm me for doing so, the child in me was still utterly terrified that he would carry out his threat to kill me. Initially, I had panic attacks when making even the most oblique or veiled references to it. I would immediately derealize – and if you have ever had that sense that nothing is real, objects look too large, music is going to leap out of speakers and get you and your abuser is behind the door listening, you'll know what I mean.

I began to tell first by writing, and then reading what I could to a counselor. It was a very slow process, but I was so traumatized that it was necessary to go gently. Telling was difficult, but ultimately so rewarding. Eventually I was able to speak to a national newspaper doing a series of interviews with child sexual abuse survivors. Even then, after I let the reporter take photographs of me holding a picture of myself as a child, fearful implications about being recognized by an abuser set in and I called the journalist asked him please to use pictures of adult me only. It is perfectly okay to do what you need in the interest of your safety, but the more you tell, the more you can challenge the sway abusers hold over you. Child-rape is an abuser's worst secret. "Don't

tell" is the rapist's rule, *not* yours. It is *your* voice; you can defy the abuser and use it.

Another reason that we fear telling is frank shame and embarrassment. We were little when somebody made us do dirty things, and unless we've had early intervention and support, we don't know that *we* are not dirty. Some survivors of child rape find it difficult to tell even a therapist trained in working with sexual assault, and whom they know to be empathic. It's as if they fear that *their* story will turn the therapist's empathy to disgust – at the survivor, not the abuser. I had a tendency to protect my listener, trying to clean up or "prettify" what I wanted to share because I believed that an unexpurgated account was too gross for anybody else to hear. Of course, I was also attempting to protect myself from a disgusted rejection by the listener.

If you recognize yourself in this, you may be projecting your feelings about what happened onto others. If you feel full of (completely unwarranted) disgust at yourself, it can be hard to imagine that *not* everybody else will see you that way. Perhaps you have been shamed, disbelieved or denied support by people in the past. If so, please understand that not everybody thinks the same way as the people who have given you inadequate responses. Telling supportive people will begin to undo the shame. Remember this: You are not what the abuser did to you.

If your rapist was a family-member, this may be another reason you've kept silent. You may be afraid of "making trouble" or hurting others, or that nobody will believe you (is this something the abuser told you?). It's an unfortunate fact that many families tend to support the abuser – largely because they are unable to tolerate the implication of the fact that somebody in the family is a rapist of children. You may also be terribly afraid of losing your family.

Whom you tell, and how much you tell, is completely up to you. I strongly suggest that you begin with people likely to be safe, and I'm going to suggest a couple of options:

- Counseling: There are many fine counselors trained in working with child sexual assault and its pursuant traumas. You may want to start with a counselor who works specifically with sexual assault. If you are able to have private counseling, please first ask the counselor if they are comfortable with and knowledgeable about child sexual assault and trauma. You want somebody who is empathic and gently but firmly helps you move toward healing. Beware counselors who tell you that you don't need to talk about it. This can said be to meet a counselor's own needs to defend against hearing about it. If there were years of rape in your childhood, you may not need to revisit every single trauma, and of course, if the severe trauma of child rape has made you very dysfunctional or self-destructive, a responsible counselor will help you maximize coping

skills before opening up traumatic material. But they will not minimize the trauma, and they will not close you down. You want somebody who can assist you in processing traumatic memory and feeling so that you can begin to heal.

I saw a psychiatrist in my early twenties who suggested that the only reason I was afraid of my abuser was because I'd turned him into a monster to "whitewash" my own guilt – guilt which was, he said, caused by the fact that I had possibly seduced the abuser. He assured me that little girls could be very seductive – and no, I am neither joking nor exaggerating. Then he finished up by saying, "So you were sexually abused, so what? Is it the end of the world? These sexual assault counselors encourage far too much dwelling on it." I hope it bears no saying that *you* certainly do not need a practitioner who clings to outmoded ideas about seductive children, much less one who belittles your abuse.

What you will **not** need to do is tell everything at the first session. Spend time seeing if this is somebody you can trust.

Please see below for links on finding a counselor.

- [Speaking to other survivors](#) – You may feel very alone in what happened to you – and child rape can feel very isolating, even in a discussion of general child sexual abuse. But the chances are, unfortunately, that there are many other people with similar experiences; other survivors who can empathize, and who can share their healing with you. You might like to ask your local sexual assault service if there is a child sexual abuse survivor support group you can attend.

Online support from other survivors is also available. At Pandora's Aquarium messageboard for survivors of rape and sexual assault, there are many survivors of child rape at various stages of healing. You will be made very welcome. See [this link](#) about how to join. (**Please note** that you must be 16 years or older to join. We believe that younger people deserve more specialized help than an online forum can offer them. If you are under sixteen, please see [this link](#) for help.) If this appeals to you, you may like to start by posting only what feels comfortable to you, until you settle in and feel like posting more. Just be aware that online help isn't a substitute for professional help. which, if you have been traumatized by child rape, you are likely to benefit from at some stage.

Please see more links below about telling.

Grieving: It takes a few seconds to destroy a child's sense of safety in the world, and this is an incalculable loss. You may never have been allowed to be a child; somebody's sexuality forced

on you may have destroyed any sense of innocence you had. There might also be other very sad issues like the sheer betrayal by the rapist.

You may need to grieve the affects – perhaps you had learning difficulties, addictions or psychological problems that made functioning difficult. I have grieved what the terrible fear generated by those abuses took from me.

I have heard survivors beyond count say “I can’t cry! Why can’t I cry?” Like many survivors, you may have been initially so numb that you find you don’t feel much of anything. Maybe you don’t yet see yourself as worth crying for. Some of us mislabel compassion for ourselves as “self-pity.” But just as you would have compassion for any other little one who was hurt so badly, you deserve the same, whether you believe that right now or not.

Trauma gave you numbness to help you survive. Don’t worry if you can’t cry now, my friend. As you heal, you will feel safe enough to express your pain. You know what? My first counselor used to call me “the talking head”: because I lived exclusively in my head, rationalizing everything and with no emotion. About the only emotion I could feel was fear. I would plead that I just wanted to feel. My counselor would say “trust your process.” That was frustrating, but she was absolutely right. When I was about 27, I went through a 10-month period that I call my “Coming to Terms with it” phase. I could not think of my child rape history even momentarily without crying. I felt as if my heart was breaking. I cried as I cooked dinner, on the way to night school, under the shower, everywhere. I certainly wondered why in the world I had wished to feel! Yet for me, that was a very necessary stage of healing. The beautiful thing is that now, I can let any tears that need to fall again, come as they will. It may be different for you, but you will know when you’re ready.

Don’t be afraid of being vulnerable, will you? Sometimes we are terrified of our own vulnerability, because that’s what abusers used to hurt us badly. In healing, I discovered a beautiful paradox – that there was real strength in allowing myself to be vulnerable sometimes. The abuser can’t hurt you now for being vulnerable; you can be kind and gentle to yourself, and find people who will treat you with respect and affection.

You’ll be able to note the difference between grief and depression. When you cry, even if it hurts badly and you feel as if you will never stop, your tears will feel therapeutic. Depression generally does not feel positive in any way. That isn’t to say, however, that grieving may not be complicated by depression. See below for a link on depression, and if you think you are depressed, please do speak to your doctor and/or counselor.

Anger: Many survivors have problems feeling anger at the rapist. We feel angry with ourselves, with a non-protective parent; anybody but the damn perpetrator. The anger may manifest as depression. I felt immense frustration – intellectually I knew I “should” be angry at the perpetrators, but just...wasn’t, though funnily enough, I could easily become furious for other survivors.

While perpetrators certainly deserve our anger, the word “should” needs to be erased from our healing lexicography. This too, will come in its own time. You have to know that the little one you were is worth being angry for.

Some survivors are afraid of losing control by becoming angry. Some people do need safety and support in expressing their anger – especially if there is a real danger they may become homicidal or commit an otherwise criminal act. But, although many of us have revenge fantasies, most of us don’t go down that path. There is nothing wrong with anger; it is a feeling, not an action. Anger is definitely a stage that a therapist can help with.

When I say it’s a “stage”, it has not really been a one-off stage for me. It has come in fits and starts; I still feel bright flashes of rage that among my first memories of life are those of a penis in my mouth. I am allowed to feel this; I value my little girl-self that much.

If you are abusing drugs or alcohol, it may be that you are trying to artificially numb feelings that you’re afraid of. You’ll need to seek help with this so that you can rightfully claim your feelings, and heal.

Establishing contact with your abused child-self: I couldn’t wait to grow up and get away from the child whom I felt was to blame for everything. In actuality, I was also terrified of her powerlessness and vulnerability. I frankly hated my child-self, and was convinced she must have done something wrong. Why else would somebody want to hurt an eight-year-old so badly? And this while I would never have blamed another child; I just felt that there was something especially beyond the pale about *me*.

You may identify with this, or you may have actually no sense of yourself as a child at all. Your therapist, and some good books (see below), can help you with inner-child work. You can make your little one feel safe and loved again. It’s okay if you feel as if you don’t want to do it now, but doing so can bring about very great healing.

I love my inner little girls, I feel as a parent to them; I love to give them treats, stand up for them, and laugh with them. While they were badly abused, they also contain memories of things that were beautiful; things that still make me laugh. I won’t say it was easy getting there, but I did.

Your little one may have been alone for a very long time, my friend. Contact, with him or her, even if it is awkward or angry to begin with, is still contact, and as you heal, will become something wonderful.

Establishing contact with your innocence: If you were raped as a child, it hardly bears stating that you are completely innocent of any wrongdoing, whether you can yet believe that or not.

But for many of us, innocence is not just a legal definition. Innocence, or that lack of a sense of it, is something that goes to the very core of our souls. It is supposed to be something light, sweet, free of taint.

I have often said that I had the knowledge of a whorehouse madam by the time I was ten. It emerged in my play. It's very difficult to feel that any innocence can have been preserved when you were given knowledge of things a child should never know about. Many of us feel as if we were some sort of child "whores", and the unjustified sense of dirtiness sticks.

Yet if that was true, it was also true that I believed in fairies, golden castles, kindness and goodness, pretty flowers and fluffy kittens. I was an affectionate – or affection-starved – child who loved everybody, and while that was used against me, it was a quality I retained still. I refused to stop loving, and that is a triumph. Can you recall games and toys you liked? I have a whole shelf-full of Little Louise's favourite books – eBay is great for the out-of-print ones. These bring back to me her innocence that never died, even while such ghastly things were happening.

Read these words written by survivor Cathy-Ann Matthews, who was repeatedly raped throughout childhood by her father:

The cheeky child in me, so long constrained, laughs aloud, shoes off, kicks up her heels and heads for the water. Down the hill, slipping and sliding, rolling over, sand flying. Wading into the foaming, surf, skirt held high. Chasing the waves outwards as they retreat, then racing up the beach as fast as I can go, thrilled to outrun them as they advance. I hug myself in sheer delight. Then dance across the dunes, high stepping, twirling, the music of Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite" lilting and vibrant, swirling and singing in my brain, my body barely able to contain its joyous elation (1990, p. 206).

I am persuaded to believe that there is in most of us a flaming innocence that no rapist could put out. I hope you will find yours if you have not already.

Understanding that it wasn't your fault: One of the chief absurdities of child sexual assault is that while we would rather die than blame any other child for being raped, many of us blame *ourselves*. There are many reasons for this. For some of us, it was easier for us to be bad than for our abusers, especially if they were our caregivers. We could not afford to sacrifice those relationships. Blaming ourselves also gave some of us the illusion that we could stop the abuse. When trying to be different – better – didn't stop the abuse, I concluded that it wasn't what I did, it was what I was.

I certainly no longer blame myself, and I can spend time reassuring *you* in this article that it wasn't your fault, but if you are still blaming yourself, you in all likelihood may not believe me, even if you accept that it wasn't your fault intellectually. What needs to happen is for that intellectual truth to grow into emotional understanding – that is where it makes a difference. When you begin to understand *why* it wasn't your fault, you will feel change happen. And with the right help, you will get there. Counselors, other healing survivors, and good books can be

great ways of helping ourselves make sense of our pasts in different, less destructive ways. For starters, please see Katy's beautiful article, [Why Child Sexual Abuse Can NEVER Be Your Fault](#) *Sexuality*: You may wonder, after surviving child rape, how you could ever like sex again. I hated sex and did a lot of crying after it was over. I had some specialist counseling and in my 40s enjoy great sex that is no longer tied to my history. Sex may be associated with pain and fear for you, so you avoid it. Conversely, sex associated with pain and fear may be the only way that you can enjoy it. This is not your fault, my friend; it is the way you were affected. If this is the case, you may find this article helpful: [Sexual Arousal & Sexual Assault](#)

If you would like to experience positive sex again, you can do so. You will know when you feel ready – it is often one of the later things we work on. Please see below for an excellent book suggestion.

Activism: Judith Herman writes, "Many survivors seek the resolution of their traumatic experience within the confines of their personal lives. But a significant minority, as a result of the trauma, feel called upon to engage in a wider world (1992, p. 207)." When you engage in challenging the forces that tried to destroy you, this can be profoundly healing.

Just one excellent example of this is a woman called Shy Keenan, author of the book *Broken*. This book details Shy's survival of repeated rape by her stepfather, Stanley Claridge, that commenced when she was four (with the eventual full knowledge and consent of her mother) Claridge prostituted Shy to other paedophiles, often drugging her first, and involved her in the making of child sexual abuse images (Shy rejects the term *child pornography* as it implies a consent that does not exist). Shy's work on behalf of other sexually abused children, and against children being abused in the making of pornography, is just wonderful and has accrued well-deserved awards. She is an amazing woman – if you would like to know more about Shy and her work, please visit her website: www.shykeenan.com

There are many ways to stand up and fight for the raped children of the world, and I'm going to suggest some links below. Think of it as standing up for you too.

Questions Survivors of Child Rape frequently ask:

How can rape on a child pass unnoticed? Please see "Myth 5: Children who are being abused will show physical evidence of abuse" in [this article](#), from the Leadership Council on Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence. The section is too large to quote here, but in short, abnormal genital or anal findings are not common, especially if a child is examined 48 hours after an assault. I only bled for a short time; it was not copious and I hid it. I developed a urinary tract infection after the first rape at 8, but was given antibiotics and conventional wisdoms on wiping my bottom front to back – so even if there are indicators, people may quite naturally look to other causes. Also, please remember how good abusers are at making sure they carry out the abuse so that it remains a secret.

Will I ever get over it? If by this you mean what people usually do – that your history of child

rape will never hurt again after you take certain steps, the answer is maybe not. Many of us experience times after major healing work where fear or other angst around it can be triggered again. I have a friend whose focus has never been to get "over it", but, wisely, to deal with symptoms causing her pain. I like this approach; it is proactive and yet fosters a self-acceptance that I believe is good for us.

If you are experiencing a painful time with child rape I promise you that with the right support, you will know peace again. You will know that you are a strong and worthwhile person. While there may be continued times when your history will hurt, these will become easier to manage. And what you most certainly *can* "get over" is the destructive meanings you may have carried away from child rape, such as the belief that you deserved it or that it makes you worthless.

Please also don't listen to people who tell you that you should be over it by now. This is a cliché, nothing more. *You* lived through it, not them.

If my body responded to the abuser's touch, does that mean I liked being raped or wanted it to happen? **No.** Please read this article: [Sexual Arousal & Sexual Assault](#) and have compassion for yourself.

Why did this happen to me? Many of us feel tormented by that anguishing question, and the normal explanations about how some people are attracted to or exploit children, just don't cut it. It's like a deeper, spiritual questioning, and I don't know that it has an answer. For me, it was freeing to let go of the need to know why.

Was it my fault that because I didn't tell? No – no way, no how. Please read Katy's article, [Understanding Why You Didn't "Tell"](#)

What if nobody believes me? Being disbelieved is very painful and is a form of Secondary Wounding (see below for a link). But people who can't or won't accept rape on a child are not really your problem. Please be aware that there are many people who will believe you. Engage a good therapist, and look to other survivors.

If I liked the abuser's affection, does that mean I am to blame for the rape? No, my friend. Children need affection like they need food, and for some of us, the only affection we got came through abusers. Just as a person dying of thirst will drink from a poisoned source, so too, did some of us accept love from wherever it came. There's a very good reason why an Australian colloquialism for child-molesters is "Rock-Spider" – kids don't know what is hiding under the façade presented so manipulatively and skillfully by an abuser, and once they've been "bitten" it becomes more confusing. The abuser is to blame for using your need for affection to get you to accommodate abuse. Please see Kate's article, [Child Sexual Abuse and the Grooming Process](#).

I actively participated - I lay down when the abuser approached, took my clothes off; sucked his penis willingly and without protest etc. Surely I was a bad child and it's my fault? You may be surprised at the number of survivors who believe they "actively participated" in their own

rape as children. Getting children to feel complicit in their own abuse is, for a start, a common dirty trick of some perpetrators – who may ask a child if he or she “wants” to engage in certain sexual activities, or if he or she “likes” it. They ask these questions knowing full well that the little one is too intimidated to say no. Such abusers like to pretend they are not in control of everything when in fact they *always are*. You did what you knew the abuser expected of you, out of fear of harm, loss of the abuser's affection or other. Like many sexually abused children, you may have been “trained” to perform on cue, or may have been simply too young to know that this was not part of a special “game” or a special relationship. You may have been groomed to believe that “participation” would accrue rewards or approval - poor little baby, how could you know otherwise? The book *Cries Unheard*, by Gitta Sereny, tells the story of Mary Bell, convicted of murder when she was a child of ten. Mary had experienced chronic sexual abuse and rape up until this time, and recounts the story of visiting an elderly male neighbour and spontaneously taking his penis out to “see whether he'd be like all the others (1998, p.337).” Fortunately, the neighbour responded in an ethical way, which was his *responsibility*, irrespective of anything the child Mary did - a child who, through no fault of her own, was acclimatized to sexual abuse and the approval it might bring. But active participation is what takes place between consenting adults, not between a child and a rapist. You were *raped*, and it was not - ever - your fault.

Why didn't anybody care? Am I really worthless? I mentioned above that some survivors as children were given over by their own parents to be raped – with participation, or cold indifference. If you were devalued so badly, my friend, it's little wonder you question your worth. You should have been loved, cherished and protected, and you were not. But this doesn't *make* you worthless. It is about everything from bad luck to criminal dereliction of what it means to be a parent. It was not about you – another child would have experienced exactly the same fate. I told about the oral rapes when I was very young; my mother simply said she didn't want to hear about it. She was probably shocked, but that didn't help me much – especially as she later said it was my fault. I learned that what happened to me didn't matter, and that was indescribable.

It will take time, support and grieving, but healing will overturn these messages. And there are people who care very much about what happened to you.

Surround yourself with as much beauty as possible, my friend – surviving child rape earns you that.

Resources

Crisis Links:

If you need help right now or would like to speak to a counselor, please see [this page](#) of international links and hotlines.

Other Useful Links:

[Child Sexual Abuse and Depression](#)

[The Silver Braid Survivors of Sexual Exploitation Network](#) – The website of survivor and activist Anne Bissell. Addresses children used in prostitution, trafficking and pornography

[Making Daughters Safe Again](#) – Site for survivors of mother-daughter sexual assault

[ISA - The Incest Survivors Association](#) - for survivors, friends of survivors, and those affected by incest and childhood sexual abuse. For male and female survivors

[The effects of childhood sexual abuse](#) – Good article by Australian organization North-East Center Against Sexual Assault

[Adults Surviving Child Abuse \(ASCA\)](#) – An Australia-wide support network

[An Infinite Mind](#) – Excellent educational site on DID

[Sidran Foundation](#) - Helping people understand, manage, and treat trauma and dissociation.

[Gift From Within](#) – Excellent articles and PTSD resources

[Rape, Sexual Abuse, Grief, and Loss](#) – *Transcript of a Pandora's Aquarium-hosted guest-speaker chat with Allyson Maida, CSW - Therapist, consultant, and speaker*

[MACSAS: Ministry and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors](#)

[Sexual Assault and The Body](#) – Research on the impact of early sexual assault on women. Includes information about body memories.

[Trusting Your Memories of Sexual Abuse](#) - Advice for survivors who doubt the accuracy of memory

[Childhood Sexual Abuse: Body memories](#) - Excellent article by a survivor of child rape

[Louise's Story of Childhood Rape](#) – If you would like to read the stories of what happened to me at ages three and eight, you may do so at this link. But please be aware that they are triggering.

Free Webcasts by Psychiatrist and Trauma expert Frank Ochberg:

[Advice for the survivor looking for a trauma therapist?](#)

[Trauma Memories](#)

[Are you at risk for more abuse after being a survivor of incest?](#)

[How Does PTSD Affect Brain Function?](#)

[Nightmares Versus Flashbacks](#)

Articles

[Pandora's Project Articles & Essays](#) Go to this page and scroll down to the Child Sexual Abuse section, where you will see some very good articles, with PDFs to print off if you like. You will also see other articles on healing, self care and trauma. Please see articles under Self-Care on **finding a counselor**, and **making the decision to get help**.

[Child rape: A taboo within the AIDS taboo](#) – The heartbreaking truth about child-rape in Africa

[Child Prostitution](#) – an excellent article explains the scope of this problem

[Child Pornography & the Internet](#)

[Child Rapists Speak](#) – This is a Youtube of clips from a documentary by BBC Newsnight, in which Shy Keenan so bravely agreed to wear a wire whilst confronting the rapists of her

childhood. The behaviour of "child protective service" workers at the time of Shy's abuse will infuriate you. **Warning:** The video is graphic and disturbing, but essential viewing for anybody seeking to understand the rationalizations paedophiles use. I think it is also validating for survivors in a strong enough place to watch it.

Activism

[The Phoenix Chief Advocates](#) – The organization of survivors Shy Keenan, Sara Payne and Fiona Crook – working to combat the evil spread by paedophiles, and to improve social responses to survivors

[Childtrafficking.com](#) – Fighting child prostitution and child marriage

[Anti-Child Porn Organization](#) (ACPO)

[SNAP - The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests](#)

[Child Porn Star..Please don't call it that](#) – a short Youtube by Shy Keenan

Suggested Reading

(Members of Pandora's Aquarium can borrow some of the titles below from US and Australian branches of our [Lending Library](#). If you choose to purchase books using the links below, you will benefit Pandora's Project)

[The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse](#) - Ellen Bass & Laura Davis

[Rockspider: The Danger of Paedophiles - Untold Stories](#) - Chris O'Connor and Vikki Petraitis

[I Will Survive: The African-American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse](#) -Lori Robinson

[Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering from Sexual Child Abuse](#) - Mike Lew

[The Inner Child Workbook: What to do with your past when it just won't go away](#) - Cathryn Taylor

[The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse](#) - Wendy Maltz

Monsters and Men – Bob Long and DCI Bob McLachlan: This book is a terrifying but necessary look at the world of paedophiles and child pornographers.

[Broken](#) - Shy Keenan

[Our Little Secret: A Father's Abuse, a Son's Life Destroyed](#) - Duncan Fairhurst

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4. Saunders, Benjamin E., Kilpatrick, Dean G., Hanson, Rochelle F., Resnick, Heidi S., and Walker, Michael E. (1999). Prevalence, Case Characteristics, and Long-Term Psychological Correlates of Child Rape among Women: A National Survey, *Child Maltreatment*, vol. 4 no. 3 187-200

"Look in the mirror and say to yourself, 'I am innocent and I am beautiful and I am pure. And I am not what happened to me.'" - Carlos Santana