

# **Illusions of Intimacy – Sexual Abuse and Gay Men**

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## **SUMMARY**

Gay men share the common human need for meaningful intimate contact in which the connection is genuine, open and honest. This need can be frustrated, complicated and undermined by a sexual trauma history.

The child's sense of personal boundaries, of sexual integrity and of affectional relationships is deeply impacted by a sexual trauma. The child learns that his needs become secondary to the offender's and as a result the victim learns to barter with his sexuality to get those needs met.

The offender may foster a sense of isolation in the child, creating a perspective of the world that is harsh and dangerous, so that the child becomes terrified of abandonment.

Homophobia is understood to be a "sexuality abuse" and as a result gay men often come in contact with other survivors. As a result, distinguishing between sex and love and recognizing genuine intimacy become difficult. This creates a spiral of difficulties whereby gay men may take enormous risks to "belong" or to avoid abandonment, often with profound consequences in terms of health and self-esteem.

## **KEYWORDS**

Boundaries, gay men, homophobia, intimacy, self-esteem, sexual trauma, sexuality abuse.

## **Article**

An advertisement depicts two attractive nude men reclining in an intimate embrace. One man cradles the other's head against his chest as the second man, lying against the first embraces him around the waist. Both men have their eyes closed peacefully with contented expressions on their faces. The caption reads: "The place to meet. The place to cuddle. The place to ..."

The rest is left for the reader to fill in. The imagery and the verbs "meet" and "cuddle" suggest a meaningful, tender contact between two men.

Yet, this is an ad for a bath house, places often notorious for anonymous, multiple sexual encounters.

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Thus, on the one hand, emotional intimacy is suggested, while on the other, sexual adventure. One can assume the duality is intended. The positioning of the two men and the choice of words suggest something beyond physical contact. The possibility of emotional intimacy or perhaps even love is implied; whereas the nudity and the fact that it is an ad for a bath house offer casual sex.

The gay man's desire for emotional connection and often misguided search for intimacy in casual sexual encounters are portrayed in this type of advertisement. It illustrates the confusion between sex and intimacy with which gay men often struggle.

Gay men share the common human need for meaningful intimate contact in which the connection is genuine, open and honest; one in which they are seen and appreciated for who they are. Unfortunately there are several factors which undermine gay men's ability to find this kind of intimacy:

1. socialized homophobia;
2. the confines of traditional male roles;
3. the prevalence of childhood sexual and physical abuse;
4. the highly sexualized nature of contemporary gay culture;
5. the cultural obsession with youth and beauty;
6. the lack of intimate gay role models; and
7. the prevalence of HIV and other serious STDs.

These are some of the major forces compromising the search for true intimacy.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to address all of these factors; however, I will examine the impact of historical childhood sexual abuse as manifest in the struggles of gay male survivors in their search for genuine intimacy.

The paper discusses the tendency to avoid desired genuine emotional connection in favor of illusions of intimacy as a phenomenon resulting from the blurred boundaries from childhood sexual abuse.

Beginning with the devastation of an abusive childhood, there is an accumulative effect obscuring the path to a healthy fulfilled adulthood. The lack of early boundary development provides a poor basis for establishing personal boundaries within the broader, flexible boundaries of gay culture.

Fears of abandonment springing from childhood experiences with offenders (and later reinforced as an adult with a series of sex partners) may serve to undermine the survivor's confidence to assert himself with regard to intimacy. Childhood abuse-related shame reinforced in adulthood by socialized and internalized homophobia also seriously impedes a survivor's ability to establish positive self-esteem.

All of these factors and a lifetime of relationships based on sexual accommodation, in combination, result in an adult gay male with a limited concept of genuine intimacy and a basic distrust of anything that professes to be intimate.

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In addition to socialized homophobia, gay survivors of childhood sexual abuse are burdened with a constellation of abuse-specific issues. To begin with, childhood sexual abuse by its nature fundamentally violates personal boundaries prior to any conscious development or awareness of them.

This violation of the child is both physical and psychological and the child is both physically and psychologically unable to stop the abuse from occurring. In other words, the child is unable to separate himself from the sexual agenda of the perpetrator.

Particularly in cases of incest, interpersonal boundaries are non-existent or limited to the needs of the offender(s). Identity is limited to a definition which is in keeping with how the offender manipulates and controls the child and the purposes that the child serves for the offender.

Within an incestuous home, the manipulation and intrusiveness are often pervasive and undermine any sense of boundaries that a healthy home life would model.

Often the only consistent boundary that exists in the incestuous home is the one placed by the offender between the offender/victim relationship and anyone outside the incestuous circle. It is not uncommon for abusive care-givers to convince the abused child that the outside world is cold, unfriendly, and unconcerned about the needs of the child, and that only the care-giver truly loves him.

In effect, the child caught in an abusive relationship is made to be fearful and distrustful of the outside world and is unlikely to reach outside that relationship to someone who might be understanding and intervene on the child's behalf.

Consequently, the child is given a skewed idea of what a loving relationship is, and a negative view of the world outside the incestuous home. Within the closed-in confines of the offender/child dynamic, anything goes as per the whims of the offender, with little or no consideration of the well-being of the child. The imposed isolation and alienation of the child from the outside world serve to facilitate continuation of the abuse.

In the unconscious process of developing a gender identity a child looks to his own gender as a role model. In that process, any adult male figure (or significantly older adolescent) can have a great influence over how a boy perceives his place as a male in society and how he attributes meaning to life.

When a boy is being abused by a male, his concept of what a male is and his relationship to other males are shaped accordingly. Likewise, his relationship to significant women will have an influence on how he perceives relationships between genders.

When abused by a woman, his adult relationships to women often reflect something of the original abusive dynamic. When a boy is abused, the long-term impact on the development of gender identity and his concept of interpersonal relationships in terms of gender, is profound. That is particularly true in the case of offending parents or other care-givers.

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Whereas any adult may serve to model social norms and gender-specific behaviour for a child, a parent/caregiver also represents to the child security, protection, provision of needs (particularly for love and affection), a sense of belonging and recognition.

When abuse is part of the relationship between a boy and his care-giver, the child is unlikely to question the lack of sexual boundaries, primarily due to a lack of comprehension of “healthy” parameters. He may also sense that to question the abuse could compromise the relationship upon which he depends. On some level, the abused child comes to understand that cooperating with sexual exploitation is often the cost attached to having his needs met (or which he hopes will be met).

The offender's use of reward for compliance, withholding of attention or need of fulfillment for non-compliance, reinforces the child's perception of the link between abuse and provision of physical and emotional survival needs. Consequently, the element of barter becomes part of the child's definition of loving relationships. Love is not given unconditionally. An abused child, particularly the victim of incest, may not have any other experience with healthy adults from which to draw upon in developing a concept of intimacy.

This is further complicated by the biological availability for a child to become aroused while being sexually abused. For a boy, the arousal response is difficult to hide. The offender may exploit any arousal response the boy may have in order to induce feelings of guilt and responsibility. A purely physiological response on the part of the boy is thereby defined by the offender as willing participation.

In the midst of the confusion of the situation and the conflict between biology and will, the child's made uncertain of his culpability. The child may be unable to experience a sense of self as independent from those who use and abuse him.

Forced to comply, not only with the physical act of abuse, but also with the psychological manipulations of the offender, the child's self-concept and cognitive schemas are, as a result, co-constructed by the offender. The child's identity may therefore be limited to a definition which is in keeping with how the offender manipulates and controls the child's emotional and physiological responses and by what the child is led to believe about the experience.

As an adolescent male survivor of sexual abuse approaches adulthood, he may experience considerable confusion about his sexual orientation. As he begins to identify as gay, influenced by socialized homophobia, he may internalize society's condemnation and hostility toward homosexuality. Enhanced by the confusion and shame attached to the abuse, this developmental period may become intensely distressful.

Eventually, when he is more accepting of his orientation, he may look to the gay community in an effort to to formulate a sense of his sexual self. As a gay male begins to consciously develop a sexual identity, many of the unresolved manifestations of childhood sexual abuse are often in evidence in current dilemmas and may influence conscious and unconscious choices he makes in the process of coming out to himself.

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By acknowledging his sexual orientation and in formulating a sexual identity, he may strive to adhere to what he believes gay culture dictates as normative behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs. In the face of the less restrictive sexuality of the gay community, and without healthy development of personal boundaries, he may have difficulty defining himself, his relationships to others and to his sub-culture on his own terms.

In the process of attempting to identify and articulate boundaries, within the sexual norms of the gay community, the adult survivor may avoid the risk of articulating his boundaries for fear of rejection or criticism, especially from those who are, or might become, his sexual partners. Once again, the demands of others take precedence over his own needs or values.

Sexuality abuse is a term that may include overt behaviour (often involving physical contact); as well as many covert behaviours such as teasing a boy because he is not good at sports, is interested in theatre, gardening, cooking, or being ridiculed for having a high voice, or being thin or soft spoken.

Perhaps the most devastating form of sexuality abuse to a developing young man is perpetrated by mainstream society in the form of homophobia. The effects of homophobic sexuality abuse may have deep lasting effects on a bi-sexual or gay male, undermining his sense of self as a male, and tainting what for him is a natural attraction to his own gender. Consequently, many gay men, to varying degrees, suffer guilt and shame very much the way survivors of childhood sexual abuse do. Discrimination in education, religion, work, social settings, sports and within families, are all forms of sexuality abuse which any gay male may have had to endure.

As a result, gay male survivors frequently meet men who are also survivors or who have similar issues. These associations further enmesh each partner in the other's unresolved dilemmas. Survivors of sexual abuse almost without exception experience deep abiding guilt and shame. In many instances, the offender uses the child's shame to enforce silence. In some instances the shame that the offender feels is intuited and internalized by the child. Similarly, shame and self-contempt (internalized homophobia) are particularly common to gay men and may permeate their relationships to one another.

Gay male culture is somewhat prone to the whims of current fashion, currently focused on youth and virility. Gym-built bodies and model's faces prevail. Often when a gay man is dazzled by popular, idealized images of a desirable partner, he may not attend to the more substantial qualities of his sexual partners.

When that is the case, he may continuously move on in search of the illusive perfect man. When a male survivor of sexual abuse is passed over by casual partners or left by a man he believed he had a relationship with, old pains connected to being rejected by an adult or incestuous parent are renewed. He is then left feeling valued for purely sexual reasons, reinforcing the belief that he needs to be a skillful, accomodating object in order to hold on to a man.

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Just as it is common for the abuser to abandon the abused child once the victim outgrows his desirability to the offender, so too, gay men are often abandoned by their partners for similarly appearance-based reasons. In adulthood, when abandonment occurs, the gay male's self-concept is diminished and his distrust of relationships is increased.

Within either a short- or long-term connection between gay men, both parties may have fears about saying “no” or setting boundaries that they fear will be in contradiction to the expectations placed on them by their sexual partners. With neither partner able to set clear, healthy personal boundaries, the result is often high-risk sexual activity. As previously discussed, the survivor, responding to earlier constructions resulting from abusive boundary transgressions, may feel an obligation to please his partner and/or ensure continuation of the relationship.

The tendency to view the self as only conditionally acceptable, or particularly valued in sexual terms began when an abused male's relationship to his offender was imbued with sexual energy. Many elements of a sexually abusive relationship directly or thematically involve sex. Affection, guidance, discipline, gifts, sports activities, entertainment, meals, and bedtime may all be involved in the sexual interaction as rewards, punishment, or conditions connected with sexual cooperation.

The child's sexuality becomes a commodity which buys or guarantees provision of what would come naturally in a healthy relationship. The child's need for a care-giver relationship means that he can easily be exploited.

The adult gay male survivor's relationship to the gay community is also imbued with an analog sexual energy. On the most obvious level, it is sexuality which defines the gay community as separate from the heterosexual mainstream.

Beyond merely the gender of one's sexual partners, there are significant differences in sexual values and norms between sexual orientations. Whereas marriage and parenting are very much a part of heterosexual social structure, these are considerably less significant within the gay male community (in some countries, like the United States, it is specifically not legal at this time for persons of the same gender to marry). This unfair difference at the same time allows for a broader range of acceptable dynamics within gay relationships.

While monogamy is often expected in a committed gay union, open relationships are perhaps as common. Two men in a committed relationship may occasionally invite a third party for casual encounters. When not in a relationship, casual, "recreational" or “sport” sex appears to be generally accepted by a majority of the gay community.

Most large cities have bath houses, sex clubs and cruising areas. Smaller cities may not have sex establishments, but often have cruising areas well known to local gays. Gay newspapers are full of ads, articles, calendars of coming events, all of which use sex as a selling point.

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The availability of casual, recreational sex, combined with the diversity of relationship choices and the sexually open nature of gay culture, does little to provide clear parameters for the survivor who has grown up without any. As it was in childhood, the gay individual's need for acceptance, a sense of belonging and personal meaning can be accessed and exploited through sexuality.

For a gay survivor of sexual abuse, the dual sexualization of his childhood relationships with offending adults and the sexually charged atmosphere of gay culture are confusingly similar. Through having been sexually abused, the male survivor may associate sex with many elements of life that would not be sexual had he not been abused. He may not be able to ask himself "What does sex have to do with this?" and therefore be unable to separate sex from something else.

Differentiating between a sexuality that has been constructed abusively, and what is not sexual as well as the authentic sexuality of the survivor is often a monumental task. Selective response to sexual imagery, norms or mores within gay culture may likewise be difficult.

Gay survivors of sexual abuse are caught in the cross fire of three opposing sexual norms. At one point of the cross fire is the offender and abusive sexuality from which the child learns that exploitation, secretiveness, control and self-interest are the norm. At another point are oppressive forces proclaiming opposite gender partnering (including marriage, children and family) as the norm. At the third point, the gay community implicitly promotes casual, recreational, often multi-partnered sex as part of the norm.

In the midst of these powerful, insistent pressures, forging an identity, making choices and setting personal boundaries can be extremely daunting. An adult who has survived childhood sexual abuse has learned powerlessness, silence and surrender to the imposition of stronger forces. The gay survivor may not even consider breaking free of external influences, nor to risk being in conflict with peer norms.

As a child in a sexually abusive relationship with a care-giver, to refuse to cooperate, to object, or to dare to break the imposed silence could mean a lack of approval, or worse: to be abandoned. The fear of abandonment reflects the perception, perhaps introduced and reinforced by the family, of being left alone, powerless in a dangerous world. Similarly, gay male survivors may have concerns about being ostracized by the gay community should their values diverge from community standards, alienated by heterosexual culture and left in an isolated no man 's land.

Boundary confusion, often refracted through the lens of interpersonal relationships, will be traumatically influenced as discussed. The lack of early boundary development and the seemingly unboundaried gay culture; fears of abandonment springing from childhood experiences with offenders and later as an adult with a sequence of unfulfilling relationships; childhood abuse related shame reinforced in adulthood by socialized and internalized homophobia; and a lifetime of relationships influenced by (or indeed based upon) sexual accommodation will all contribute to frustrating difficulties with intimacy.

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This is often painful for the survivor, whether or not he has insight into the origins of this confusion. Having difficulty making choices that reflect his genuine desires and values, the survivor is brought to a place of shame, isolation and loneliness.

When loneliness, isolation or flaring up of historical pain and self-contempt become too oppressive or intrusive, gay survivors of child sexual abuse often turn to sexual behavior for comfort. Bath houses, public washrooms, parks and other cruising areas may offer a respite from loneliness and pain. While the cruising is under way, the issues that brought him there are forgotten.

During the sexual interaction, the intensity of the moment provides the semblance of intimacy without the risk of emotional exposure, commitment or rejection. Low self-esteem, for some, can be ameliorated by being pursued. All too often, however, almost as quickly as the post-orgasmic slowing of the pulse, the illusion fades and loneliness, isolation and pain return now reinforced by what has been yet another reenactment of the original empty childhood sexual experience.

For some gay men, chance encounters at the baths or parks are intense, though short-lived, connections with other men. For them there can be real connection and intimacy within which there is a recognition and validation of each other and a celebration of their shared eroticism. Unfortunately, it is far more frequent for an adult survivor who has not resolved his historical pain and grief, to not have the means to make such a connection. Ironically, in the contrast between the images of joyous sexual sharing put forth in gay media and his abuse imposed psycho-emotional distress, the survivor may once again be made to feel inadequate.

Without the opportunity to work through the unresolved trauma, to reconstruct a personal paradigm, to break free of the cycle of reenactment, the adult gay male survivor of sexual abuse may spend a lifetime in a hopeless search for himself within illusions of intimacy. Community standards are likely to be confusing and highly reactive to the oppressive forces of majority culture.

However, if the survivor's confusion is validated and he learns to develop clear, firm but flexible boundaries, he may develop the tools to make appropriate relationship choices that reflect his true desires and values. He may gain insight into how he barter/negotiates between intimacy and sex. He may recognize ways in which he participates in the reinforcement of a split between sex and intimacy.

Armed with a new level of insight and self-knowledge, the survivor may be able to begin a cycle of change, trading illusions for authentic intimacy.