

# Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse

by Don Wright, M.Ed, R.C.C.

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## Article

Of the various types of family violence, sexual abuse is the most recent to gain attention. Early on, the physical violence so often found in alcoholic homes resulted in the development of programs to address that trauma ("Alcoholics Anonymous" was the first published in 1939). The wide use/abuse of drugs in the late 60's and 70's resulted in a substantial increase in drug treatment programs. Then, once the women's movement got into full swing, rape relief programs sprang up in every major city and many smaller communities. More recently, date rape and sexual harassment have also been given credence in the courts.

These rape crisis programs brought to light the reality that many of the women coming to these centers were survivors of child sexual abuse as well. Subsequently, programs were created to provide for the healing and protection of children *now*. We are seeing not only programs providing therapy for child victims, but also prevention programs in schools.

Child sexual abuse centres are very new, which means that only children abused within roughly the last 10 years have had intervention and treatment soon after the abuse is stopped. What that means, is that of our adult population, only a fairly small portion of survivors have received treatment in current programs. Statistics vary on the numbers of adult survivors in our population (anywhere from 20%-50% depending on what you read). But, all we really know about are the ones that come forward.

It would seem, by looking at the mandates and focus of a greater part of the sexual assault treatment programs, that an overwhelming majority of survivors are women. For most people, the words "sexual assault" imply a woman being raped, or father-daughter incest. In fact, most articles and a large portion of the literature on sexual abuse refer to victims in the female gender and perpetrators in the male gender.

Until recently, the idea of sexual assault against males has been largely minimized or discounted all together. In the last few years some media attention has been given to the more dramatic instances of assault against males (such as Mt. Cashell). The focus of the coverage seems more often to be on the offender, particularly in the case of a priest, teacher, or other "trusted" individual violating their role, rather than on the trauma experienced by the male victim.

Logic suggests that victimization of males is not a new phenomenon; nevertheless, many people remain incredulous, still believing that it is an unusual occurrence. It is far more common than we know, since male survivors by and large do not disclose their abuse.

Children of both genders are victims of sexual abuse. Offender profiles and case studies suggest that the majority of pedophiles do not have a gender preference, but rather are interested in prepubescent undifferentiated children. A study funded by the BC Ministry of Health, Community & Family Health Services, and Health & Welfare Canada, published July 1, 1991 examined the profiles of 30 pedophiles. The study offered an interesting statistic on the percentage of gender preferences exhibited. Of the 30 pedophiles, 20% had an equal number of boy and girl victims, 30% had more girl victims, and a surprising 50% had more boy victims ("A Study by Child and youth Mental Health Services, BC Ministry of Health: Dimensions of Multiple Victim Child Sexual Abuse in BC, 1985-1989 and

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Community Mental Health Interventions.”) This study does not provide the final word on who's being abused, but it does suggest that the current belief that victimization of males is rare, needs to be re-examined.

Statistics may be misleading if taken at face value. Statements such as “...the majority of victims are female” minimizes the pain experienced by male victims and perpetuates their silence. So too, statements such as “...offenders are predominantly male” may result in one overlooking the fact that women also offend (a third of the clients in the Victoria and Vancouver programs for male survivors have had female offenders). Statistics have their place, but what is most important is the fact that innocent people are being traumatized and are in need of healing, and many offenders remain invisible.

It is not difficult to imagine the range of outcomes the unresolved traumas of adult victims (both female and male) have on society: alcohol and drug abuse, physical and sexual violence, prostitution, suicide, poor relationship skills, poor parenting skills, reduced ability to cope with the responsibility of adulthood, etc. However, because sexual abuse of males has remained largely hidden, we can only speculate on the scope of the problem.

In the fall of 1989 the Victoria Male Survivors of Sexual Assault Society was formed to address the needs of adult male survivors of sexual abuse. This was the first program specifically for male survivors in western Canada. In the spring of 1990, the Vancouver Society for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse was formed. Both programs are now firmly established members of the healing community dedicated to treating sexual abuse trauma. The Vancouver program has grown in the last year and a half from one person and an answering machine to a staff of five therapists and a small number of volunteers; yet the waiting list continues to grow. The fact that both programs have survived and flourished without any formal funding more clearly emphasizes the need for the service.

The focus and mandate for the two not-for-profit societies is on male survivors of sexual abuse, primarily because this area has been sadly neglected. Nonetheless, we recognize that male survivors live in the real world where survivors and offenders are males and females, young and old, from every walk of life, every race and religion. We believe that the healing process, to be complete must be inclusive.

Many of our clients are in relationships with men and women who are not survivors, so we offer non-survivor support groups. Because we have clients who are in relationships with people who are also survivors, we offer therapy groups for couples who are both survivors. We have clients who have been abused by men, some by women, and some by both genders, so we have both male and female therapists. Clients have their choice of services and service providers.

An inclusive approach to healing reflects the real world where healthy and unhealthy people come in all shapes and sizes. Our clients need an opportunity to learn to make the distinction between the two, as well as learn the skills needed to negotiate their journey through life.

Both the Victoria and Vancouver programs share the philosophy that we are all in this together and that as long as battle lines are drawn between sexes, between races or religions, or any groups of people, that the abuse will never end. The enemy is not men or women; blacks, whites, or reds; catholics, jews or atheists; the enemy is fear and ignorance.

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Violence is unforgivable; people who commit violence are forgivable when they heal from the pain and trauma which brings them to the place of acting it out. As healers, our task is to discover the trauma that leads to dysfunction in all its forms and heals the hurts; not to condemn the person in pain.

I look forward to the day that funding is available for healing options for all survivors of family violence in all its forms. I look forward to the day that the community at large understands that victimization is not the sole experience of one gender, and that both genders can and do perpetrate violence. I look forward to the day that we focus our attention not on someone else, but on our own capability to close our eyes, as the real enemy.

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