

Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse

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Article

It would seem, by looking at the mandates and focus of a greater part of 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 at 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. Because sexual abuse of males has remained largely hidden, we can only speculate on the scope of the problem. 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 children of either genders.

A study funded by the B.C. Ministry of Health, Community and Family Health Services, and Health and 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 than boy victims, and a surprising 50% had more boy than girl victims (“A Study by Child and Youth Mental Health Services, B.C. Ministry of Health: Dimensions of Multiple Victim Child Sexual Abuse in B.C., 1985-1989 and Community Mental Health Interventions”). The percentages quoted in this study run contrary to the current belief that male sexual victimization is rare.

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. The two societies merged in 1997 to form the British Columbia Society for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse, which is a firmly established member of the healing community dedicated to treating sexual abuse trauma. The BCSMSSA has grown from one staff person and an answering machine to a staff of ten therapists, two victim services worker and a small number of volunteers, and the demand for service continues to grow.

The focus and mandate for the not-for-profit Society is the healing of male survivors of sexual abuse. 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

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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. We have clients who have been abused by both men and women (some by both genders), so we have both male and female therapists. An inclusive approach to healing reflects the real world where people come in all shapes and sizes. Because of this inclusive approach, clients learn to negotiate their journey through life.

I look forward to the day that the community at large understands that victimization is not the sole experience of one gender and that offenders are not exclusively male. We must focus our attention not on someone else, but on our own ability to see beyond stereotypes.

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