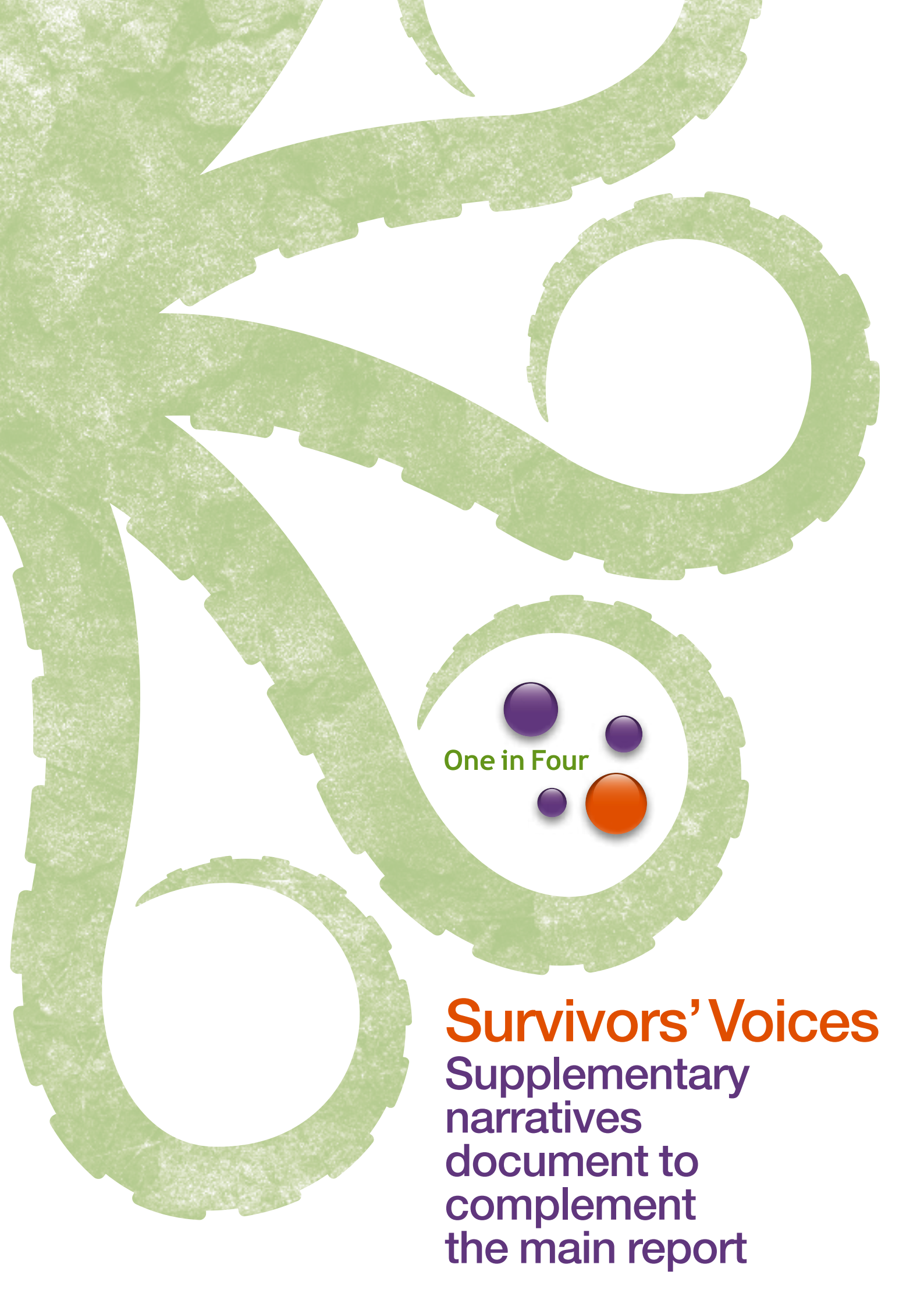




One in Four

Survivors' Voices
Supplementary
narratives
document to
complement
the main report

One in Four would like to thank all the participants in The Survivors' Narratives Project for their willingness to give their time to write about their difficult experiences so that others may understand more clearly the personal impact of sexual abuse in childhood, and the complexities within the family environment.

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Introduction

One in Four is a charity passionately and professionally committed to supporting survivors who experienced child sexual abuse (CSA) and to raising awareness of this challenging issue.

One in Four created The Survivors' Narratives Project in 2015, to give survivors a voice and a chance to be heard. Through publication of these narratives – both in the main report *Survivors' Voices: Breaking the silence on living with the impact of child sexual abuse in the family environment* and in this supplementary document – we aim to improve understanding of the impact of sexual abuse in childhood across professional audiences including health professionals, social workers, counsellors, educators, lawyers, policy-makers and the wider public.

These narratives have been written by people who were sexually abused as children in their families or in the wider family environment by people they should have been able to trust. Their narratives bring an intimate, personal face to their lived experiences and illustrate the long-term impact of CSA. Any views expressed here are those of individual survivors and not necessarily those of **One in Four**.

All the narratives submitted to **One in Four** have been analysed in the full report by CSA expert Christiane Sanderson for themes of personal impact, family impact and professional responses. The analysis also highlights common themes for survivors of CSA in the family and includes recommendations, from survivors themselves.

Too often survivors have been silenced. CSA is still a terrible taboo so we appreciate these narratives may not be an easy read. But it is incredibly important we change public perceptions and help survivors to speak out. This way, we can learn from their experiences in order to prevent this happening to children now and in the future, and to support and help heal those who are dealing with their survival on a daily basis.

We urge you to read the full report and analysis, downloadable at www.oneinfour.org.uk

Survivors' voices

Mirabelle FEMALE

I'd like to write something useful that will open up discussion amongst people who can make a difference. I've learnt from other people who've been abused. I've started to unpeel the pain around my heart. My Dad broke my heart. Broken heart, why do you still survive?

Well, my heart, I must tell you that I've survived because I'm a fighter. Because I love this beautiful but pain-stricken world. Because I see the good in people who do bad things. Because there are lots of people out there who are doing mainly good things. Because, in middle age, I learnt that nobody is perfect. Now I am old. I'm not perfect. Perfection is not guaranteed. I like to think that my Dad was less perfect than most. But still, he had some good in him. He has been dead these last nine years, and now that I haven't seen or contacted him for 26 long years, I know that he is a piece of the earth, the soil on this planet, a piece of soil at peace with himself, I can honour him.

He is like a giant, who, in a rage, seized the kaleidoscope of my life and dashed it to the ground, shattering the potential for beautiful patterns and scattering sharp pieces of glass in all directions. What he did to me impacted upon everyone around me – my mother, siblings and their children, aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, cousins, teachers, neighbours, colleagues and carers. He tied me up in bonds of invisible steel and blocked my every move to escape. Yet he is my Dad, and I loved him. I wanted him to stop, but I loved him. He may have wanted to stop, but couldn't. It was almost like he was possessed. Like he was given a beautiful bunch of flowers to care for and pulled it apart, petal by petal, and scrunched it under his feet on the ground.

Those sharp pieces of glass – they've hurt me, they've cut me, they've hurt others around me, trying to help me, when I've cut them with sharp words or looked at them with arrows coming out of my eyes. Those shards have isolated me, they've punished me, they've enabled others to punish me for what I believe they perceive in their unconscious as my sin, my aberration, my abomination, and they've

“ When the abuse started, I was a two year-old child, a cherub, running around. I was innocent, pure and completely dependent on my caregiver. My caregiver let me down, abused me. That's the reality

cleverly disguised their punishment as a 'treatment'... thus the five sessions of electro-convulsive therapy and the more than 30 tablets a day for years – tranquillisers, neuroleptics, antidepressants, sleeping pills, mood stabilisers – plus anti-Parkinson drugs supposedly for 'the side effects'. I've been accused, vilified, vitriolled, mocked, spoken about in hushed voices, innuendoes, and whisperings. I've been excluded, pushed away, evaluated, sectioned, mistreated and suspected of 'making up' my distress, of playing up to attract attention. I've even been told 'you relate sexually'. What came first, the chicken? Or the egg? Did I relate sexually when I was less than two years old?

When the abuse started, I was a two year-old child, a cherub, running around. I was innocent, pure and completely dependent on my caregiver. My caregiver let me down, abused me. That's the reality. It's not my fault that I was taken advantage of. The abuse continued within a web of skilful manipulation by the perpetrator. To any who may hold me accountable, I say: look deeply into your heart, and see if you can still accuse me of wrongdoing. Now, I'm courageously sharing from my experiences with those who wish to know. I have opened up my heart to you. It's up to you who read this whether to accept or reject what I've written.



Now I am a jeweller, I have a diamond polishing machine and I am fashioning bracelets, brooches and necklaces from all those pieces of glass. I will sell them and give the money to a good cause.

I remember that, for a time, I was the only child in the family, and my sibling was two years younger than me. My first memory of abuse is from when I was under the age of two. When my mother was next going out, I cried and begged her: "Please don't leave me alone." For a moment she appeared to listen but then she said: "Don't be silly, you are not alone, you are with Daddy." She left the house and the abuse happened again. I believe I learnt from this early experience that there was no-one out there to help me and that this was something that I must bear alone.

Not long ago I was sorting my mother's papers and found a school report from when I was aged sixteen. The teacher wrote: 'What has happened to Mirabelle?' In fact, I had just experienced particularly traumatic abuse. I became silent, sad and withdrawn, prone to irritable outbursts and seeking meaning by acquiring a quirky sense of humour. I often had a feeling of being followed by someone who had malicious intent towards me. I spent long hours lying on my bed and spacing out whilst looking at the sky and clouds. I found that playing my music brought me relief. In my family, mental health was not talked about. So music was the only therapy I had at that time. I suffered many, many episodes of abuse and it has been impossible to forget.

I made a number of attempts over the years to tell people what was happening to me, but I never felt safe. Deep down I knew that if people didn't believe me, I'd probably not survive the shame. When I was 29 years old I experienced my first intimate relationship, and I told my boyfriend about the abuse. We left the UK without telling my family, to live in a distant country, where we got married. I had few friends and couldn't speak the language. Living abroad I experienced emotional problems that led to a psychotic episode. I was sectioned and treated with vast amounts of medication as well as electro-convulsive therapy.

It was a shame that I had to break down so completely. However, after my breakdown there followed years of healing, often one step forward, one step back. I found part time work. I returned to the UK and even had a number of years of working full time. This was very helpful, but very hard. I felt alone, anxious and depressed. Together with my GP, I made attempts to reduce my medication and once to come off it altogether

– this was unhelpful and resulted in serious relapses. On the positive side, I made friends, for the first time in my life really connecting with people. Conversely, I also experienced rejection by many of these friends. My experience of being cared for by mental health professionals led in time to reconciliation with my mother and siblings. My mother asked me to forgive her for not protecting me. This was healing and I felt that she had been a secondary victim within the family. My current GP has been very supportive. When I presented with depression she referred me to an exercise programme. When I came back to her still depressed, she suggested mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT).

Despite what the abuser told me, the abuse was not my fault. I was not to blame. My greatest healing experience has been to connect with other people abused in childhood. This has happened within a twelve-step support group based on the Alcoholics Anonymous model and also within workshops delivered by One in Four. I've also found One in Four's specialist childhood sexual abuse (CSA) counselling very helpful. I am finding that the CSA counselling, the workshops and the MBCT are leading to more healing, but I know that the wound affects my body, mind and soul deeply and I expect that – for me – recovery and reconciliation will be a lifetime process.

“ Despite what the abuser told me, the abuse was not my fault. I was not to blame. My greatest healing experience has been to connect with other people abused in childhood



“ I still grieve for the loss of a family I could have had and the absence of a safe and carefree childhood. All the things that I believe are the right of anyone

Ryee FEMALE

I find this really difficult. I want to express it all. I want my writing to be truthful and useful. I don't want to suddenly block something out.

My entire life until I was 25 was so blocked. I had forgotten being abused when I was little. I only felt it. I couldn't see it. The pieces were too far apart to be put together. I connected the dots only after I let go of my fear of losing everything. Everything being: my identity, as I knew it, my 'family' and even my home in many senses. I realised that this sense of identity and belonging was only a superficial thing and I was being eaten up inside by something that was very present and real.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence there were a few men who molested me here and there. My parents' reaction was never to protect me. They said it was normal. This is something I only thought was odd once I became older. It always played on my mind. When I was 19, a 20 year-old man I knew from school raped me in my car. When I told my parents they had different reactions. My mother didn't believe me and thought that if I didn't want it I could have surely pushed him away or defended myself. My father was shocked at first and said all the acceptable things, lulling me into a trusting place before then saying it was my fault I put myself in that position. I was expected to continue to drive my car on a daily basis. It just didn't fit. I had no support. My rapist was in town and friends with my friends. This created splits between me and people. I lost so much. It destroyed my life. When I was 25, after leaving home and making two video and performance projects about this experience, I finally clicked. I remembered the childhood abuse within the family. I made the connection. I saw the familiarity. I was free. My art, my therapist, my muse, my collaborators and the world I created for myself was strong enough to see the painful truth. I could not go back after this realisation. I cut out my family to protect myself.

After this the quality of my life skyrocketed and I found deep and centred happiness. The process of emancipation and healing was aided by my therapist, who was with me for six years; my muse, who inspired my work and outlook in life; my friends, who I could confide in, talk to, process with and laugh with; my collaborators,

who helped me make my visions a reality and, finally, my partner, who has been with me only in the last two years but has helped me build the new me – the me I want to be.

I still grieve for the loss of a family I could have had and the absence of a safe and carefree childhood. All the things that I believe are the right of anyone. I know my triggers. I know where they come from and what to do to keep myself safe. I have had about a decade of therapy. That is not enough. I will need more in my lifetime. I am sure of it. I am not ashamed anymore. I am not even directly angry anymore. I am proud of myself and of what I have done with my experience. I have been creative with it. I have learned a lot about the world and myself through it. I will continue to work on it. Life is a work in progress.

What happened was unfair and gave me a handicap. For example, it is hard telling people I hardly know about my family situation because they just ask me polite, small talk questions. I can't pretend. I go into autopilot. I am honest when I say it is so much better this way. I mean it. For a while I wished I had a loving, supportive family of my own. I was on the lookout for a substitute for years. I have finally accepted that I am my own mother, father, sibling and child. I got this far. I will be fine.

I spent most of my childhood withdrawn and dissociated. I still have days where my partner feels foreign to me, even though I remember how I feel about him. My brain still splits me up to protect me. My emotions still get purged from time to time, in hours of crying and sobbing. I accept it now. When I was younger it made me feel ashamed. I wanted to go a day without crying. I hardly succeeded. I don't feel bad anymore. It is a relief to know why. It is fine.

I was open with my experience as soon as it became clear to me. I felt like announcing it made me safe. It gave me back the power that was taken away from me. I no longer need to be silent, which was part of the abuse as well. I no longer need to censor myself. I no longer need to protect abusers. I am grown up now. I still need to remind myself sometimes, when I feel little. When I regress. When I feel alone. It is just temporary.

The hardest knock-on effect of this kind of experience is post-traumatic stress. I have times when I get unreasonably scared, paranoid, depressed and suicidal, but I am aware of it. I 'sit in it' and let it pass. In the past cutting my arm would help to relieve me. I have not done that in five years. I was stuck in another place,

withdrawn and dissociated from my body. It is difficult to know the difference between intuition and fear, phobia and paranoia. I don't trust at all when I am in that state. I want to quit everything I have committed to. I want to leave the country. I want to leave my relationships. I want to die. Just like I have always done, I split myself to deal with this too. When my one part is falling apart my other knowing part looks on and protects me. I may still not be good at self-soothing. I still can't do that totally alone but I can sit in it. I sit with myself and wait for it to pass. I don't abandon myself like I used to. I don't cut anything out without really thinking through and evaluating the situation.

Triggers for this post-traumatic stress include: people being too friendly too quickly, unclear boundaries, people being pushy or overly friendly, seeing little children running around naked (e.g. at a beach), spending a lot of time with people in a family context, meeting a lot of new people at once and travelling in foreign places. I still get overwhelmed sometimes but I don't let this 'problem' stop me. I just deal with the after-effects as they happen.

My research and work as an artist always started from life. I love giving myself long-term projects involving transformation and shedding of past negative patterns, or 'schemas' as I call them. I have burned a lot of bridges. I have pushed a lot of people away. I was ruthless and am still strict with protecting myself from people, because I am aware that my early experiences will make me more likely to be attracted to

“ What I would like to see would be for experts, with survivors, to put together learning material on the subject and spread awareness in educational institutions

people who do not have my best interest at heart. That is just how schemas work. I analyse and keep myself safe.

I have never been interested in drugs to escape and I think my only addictions were other people. My escape was always creative. I joined a theatre group when I was eight and continued until my twenties. Without being dramatic, I think theatre probably saved my spirit. I was also set on succeeding in whatever I did, so would study hard and did well in school. I managed to go to university and get a degree I was happy with.

I now live a life that represents how I feel and who I am. That's because I state what I feel, what I need and I help people help me. I communicate. I realise that I will benefit from harmony and mutual respect. If it is not there then maybe a relationship is not worth having. I am fine with letting go of unhealthy things, but am careful not to throw away the baby with the bath water.

What I would like to see would be for experts, with survivors, to put together learning material on the subject and spread awareness in educational institutions. It needs to be just another thing for us to manage. It cannot be swept under the rug. If people are more aware they will be more vigilant and it will happen less. If children are given the language they will be able to expose perpetrators. Children also need to be heard. Adults need to believe them. This needs to somehow reach the mainstream. I am working on this with my art. I am one person. It needs to spread.



Susan

FEMALE

I am writing this at the age of 61. About five months ago I finally gave a name to a single incident of sexual abuse that happened to me when I was about four years old. My abuser was an older girl of about 12 who was 'looking after me'. I have never forgotten it and it would pop into my head from time to time and I would casually observe it as something rather odd – a game we played.

I went from being a happy, confident and carefree child to one that was withdrawn, shy and beset by worries. I had night terrors, was frightened of the dark, plagued by guilt. I was depressed for many years. I had several periods of therapy that helped me deal with particular problems at different times in my life but the thing that troubled the most was a feeling of what I now call numbness, but which I used to think of as feeling 'unreal'. I have never been able to talk about this until recently. I thought that I was a freak, that something was missing or that my 'self' had been broken, leaving me with this lack of sensation, this lack of feeling alive.

I can't explain how I came to suddenly think about this incident as something other than a

harmless game, but when the thought arrived that maybe this was sexual abuse, my first reaction was disbelief. Yes, it was sexual touching. I was only four years old but it wasn't painful and it only happened once. The main feelings I do remember are those of feeling confused and totally passive. I was also pressured into returning the favour, as it were, and in this I felt inadequate because I didn't understand what I was doing. I started reading and over the next few days began to review my life.

To an outsider my life had proceeded in a fairly conventional way, being successful at school and going on to university and then becoming a teacher. When my first serious relationship in my twenties broke up I sank into a deep depression and that was when I first sought therapy. I worked through some of the issues and then went on to meet my current partner and father of my two children. I had another period of depression after my second child was born and again sought therapy that lasted for about three years, in which I did deal with some of my issues concerning how I related in my intimate relationship. I give this brief summary to show the exterior of my life. I would say that people generally experienced me as a solid, secure person who had a wide circle of friends. I think I was most comfortable with people who exhibited insecurity and visibly having problems and my role was often that of supporter.

So what of my interior journey? During all this time I was aware that something was wrong, that I was experiencing life at second hand. Even since first writing this I have moved on in

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my understanding and now would say that I have lived most of my life in my head, lacking spontaneity and thinking my feelings rather than experiencing them, but putting on a good show that nothing was wrong. I have had little sense of myself, reacting to others' demands and being totally unassertive in being able to meet my own needs. Because I was unable to communicate about it to my parents, I learned to be separate and this self-imposed isolation and secretiveness has remained with me throughout my life. It has been a survival mechanism for me, but has made sharing in an intimate relationship an issue for me. It has been very important for me to create my own alternative family with my partner and children, but also through a circle of close friends. I feel as if I have set everything up for myself and now I am ready to really jump in and engage fully with the life I have made.

I have been seeing a therapist, specialising in CSA, for a couple of months now and feel that I am making headway. As yet we haven't explored the CSA experience other than for me to give an account of what I remember. My therapist and I have made some connections or references to it when exploring other issues from my past or present. It feels like another piece of the picture has been found, and at this stage it is making a quite subtle but significant difference. It's like a light has been turned on, shining on everything I have known. I have also been following a mindfulness programme and this is really helping me to connect with my body in a subtle but quite strong way. I am also learning to share with my partner more of myself, even though this is very frightening. I am even noticing moments of spontaneity.

The more I am progressing the more I realise what I have been missing, how invisible I have felt, but overall I am relieved that I am finally doing this. I have realised that dealing with this isn't like opening a box and finding a treasure that will suddenly make everything all right. If only life were like that! I don't have horrific buried memories of abuse that I need to uncover. It was one isolated incident but its impact on my life has been fundamental. My journey to recovery is a slow and painstaking one but it's my journey and I know I am on the right path.

I have not been helped by the commonly-held beliefs about CSA but hopefully that is changing now – so that it is recognised that any non-consensual sexual contact is abuse and that the effect is not necessarily proportional to the perceived 'seriousness' or frequency of the incident.

Cheryl FEMALE

The ground for actual sexual abuse I was subjected to, between the ages of 10 and 14 by my mother's lover, was prepared long before he came into my life.

I grew up with the firm knowledge that I existed in order to keep my mother emotionally secure and happy. Her needs were paramount. I could only be happy if she was happy, and very often she wasn't. She managed this by drinking. I perceived my father, whom she despised, through her eyes for many years – as a hopeless, weak, incommunicative individual. My perception of men as pretty useless compared to women still endures today, with a very few notable exceptions. I now realise my father is autistic and wired very differently and, as such, was never capable of being a responsible adult or loving parenting. I do know he loves me, in a childlike way, but I struggle with feelings of huge injustice and fury towards him for not being able to protect me from my mother, particularly now he is 95 and I have to put care packages in place for him which he unwittingly sabotages.

Until very recently I was unable to feel anger towards my mother. My compassion for her loneliness and neediness and twisted sexual power disabled me, and I still find that this is a powerful legacy – when I am treated in an unjust and even abusive way by friends I will instinctively understand why and go to compassion rather than protect myself. I don't know if this is a gift or a curse. It does have the result of taking me into a genuine deeper connection with them, as I am so non-reactive and loving that they are able to look safely at their own patterns and own them. I truly want their healing but the thought of losing their love for me is so horrendous it feels life-threatening. I am programmed to understand and I get a lot of my identity through being able to be there for others, and I am able to reach and deeply connect with many damaged people who don't trust easily. But they do trust me.

I grew up feeling locked into my loneliness and I will take huge emotional risks to myself to reach out to the unreachable, because I know how awful that locked-in loneliness and fear feels. It also puts me in control. I am still struggling with the concept that I could be loved just for

“ Until very recently I was unable to feel anger towards my mother. My compassion for her loneliness and neediness and twisted sexual power disabled me and I still find that this is a powerful legacy

being me, without having to go to superhuman lengths to deserve love. Receiving love is still very frightening, although I am extraordinarily good at giving unconditional love to others. This played out in my 20 year-long partnership with a beautiful man who really did, and does still, love me. I felt under siege much of the time, despite his huge patience and being there for me. I particularly felt under siege sexually, and ultimately this led to his sexual infidelity and our break up.

My right to my own sexuality was stolen by my mother and her lover. I sensed that if I showed any response at all to their attempts to arouse me, the abuse would have gone much further physically. This locked me even more into my tower of loneliness and into disconnect with my own body, and made me prize emotional connection over the physical and sensual. This separated me from my female peers. I wondered if I was gay for a long time. Beyond the initial thrill of first contact with a man, I found, and at times still find, his passion for me overwhelming. I go into my bones to survive it – through fear I go numb. I am learning to stay more present by exploring my sensuality and talking about what I enjoy, what I am feeling and by saying no, although that is still hard. I am angry with my mother for treating me as a plaything, a comforter. No child is owned by an adult and no child should have to parent their parents. It has taken training in holistic massage, learning belly dancing and ultimately being on my own and doing a lot of heart-centred conscious body work, initially in a group of just women, to be able to locate my sexual desire.

I am now exploring staying connected to this very fragile flower and nurturing it in a mixed group where I can access support and am encouraged to witness and articulate my feelings, physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual. This is a huge challenge. I know my true healing lies in being able to stay connected to myself and to give myself the unconditional love I am able to give to others. And to learn to love and accept myself and, importantly, to reconnect with my playful child. Only then will I be able to fully reclaim my sexuality and meet a partner fully without going into fear.

Our sexuality and sensuality is at the heart of our wounding and it is the key to our recovery. Talking therapy is not enough; the damage was done through the body and that is the path needed to heal the damage. It is also the most frightening one, but I am utterly determined to reclaim what is rightfully mine.

“ **My right to my own sexuality was stolen by my mother and her lover. I sensed that if I showed any response at all to their attempts to arouse me, the abuse would have gone much further physically** ”

Rose FEMALE

The impact of physical and sexual abuse on my life

- Years of sleepless nights and waking full of fear and anxiety
- Shame and blaming myself
- The feeling of loneliness
- Not being able to trust anyone
- Fear of the future and the unknown
- Fear to make a mistake and fear of small dark places
- The need to be in control
- The loss of my childhood and the loss of myself
- Depression and grief
- Recognising I had a problem and asking for professional help through my GP – but not knowing the underlying causes
- Years of taking prescription drugs (antidepressants, tranquillisers and sleeping tablets) which numbed my feelings and I ultimately became addicted to tranquillisers
- An empty void deep inside me that needed to be cuddled and loved. I didn't know what it felt like to receive real love from my parents, or from my ex-husband. He used me for sex, like my father did, and I thought it was normal
- Food issues – the fear to be slim and vulnerable. And using food to suppress my feelings
- I had a breakdown in my 30s when the flashbacks started. I was in denial about the sexual abuse until I was about 55. I didn't want to admit it because it was too painful to recognise and know that it was my father. But once I admitted it, then the real healing started
- Twelve-week NHS therapy that opened me up to look at what happened and left me more vulnerable
- The pain has been so overwhelming and confusing, and at times unbearable. But something in me kept telling me it will pass. And when it does, I feel stronger and the struggle is all worthwhile.

I don't know where to begin in telling my story. There has been such a lot of it, what with Dad sexually abusing me and Mum bullying and



hitting me to offload her anger. Up to the age of five, I was a happy little girl.

My Dad promised to take me to the seaside. There's me sitting on the donkey and him pulling the reins. I looked across to see in the distance the blue sea and the big ocean waves dancing like white doves. I was so happy. That happiness didn't last very long when he took me into the bushes and started to do something. I just stood there listening to him with this horrible noise. I was so confused I didn't know what he was doing to me. It felt wet and horrid. Then he dragged me into the sea. I didn't want to go I was afraid of the big waves but he wouldn't have it. He picked me up and took me into the sea with big waves coming over my head and me screaming. I guess it was to wash off the evidence. He told me not to tell Mum otherwise he would not love me and that she would hit me, so this was to be our secret and that he loved me. He told me all this before he dragged me into the sea. I was only tiny and my feet didn't touch the bottom. I kept screaming but there was no one to hear me. I must have passed out.

The next thing I remember was being at home in my bed and Granny calling me to wake up. I couldn't open my eyes, there was some heavy pressure over my eyes and I didn't want to wake up. I could hear my mum shouting. I thought she was angry with me, but she was shouting at him. Eventually with Granny's voice talking to me so lovingly, I opened my eyes. She had a wet flannel on my forehead.

The next time he tried was in the middle of the night. Mum was out (at a hen night). I was in the big bed sleeping when something woke me up. When I saw where I was, I pulled myself to the end of the bed my eyes wide open and stayed awake till daylight when Mum was home. That's why I wake at night to keep myself safe. I am now able to get back to sleep. I talk to my inner child to tell her she is safe now.

“ The pain has been so overwhelming and confusing, and at times unbearable. But something in me kept telling me it will pass. And when it does, I feel stronger and the struggle is all worthwhile

A short time after that, he had to go away for three years and when he got back I was too old for him to do anything to me. Mum, on the other hand, would take her anger out on me, no matter how much I tried to please her. I remember once she hit me so hard I was very bruised and she left me in a dark room and I wasn't allowed to come out. I wasn't allowed to cry or make a sound because the neighbours would hear me and tell her off again.

On another occasion she hit me and Granny took the stick away from her and hit her back. I could not tell anyone about the abuse. I felt ashamed and I blamed myself for everything that was done to me. I felt dirty and not good enough to be loved and I could trust no one. I was always afraid of the future because of not knowing what was going to happen next.

When I was just 14 I was sent to London to stay with my Uncle. Three years later they all came to London, it was 1960. I was once again happy to be with my family as my Aunty rejected me staying with her and my Uncle – she'd made it clear the night I arrived in this country. I was so happy to be with my family again. That didn't last long. Six months later I had to get married to someone I didn't know – a family arranged marriage. I tried to refuse but, at the age of 17 and full of fear from my childhood, Mum still had the power over me.

My marriage was just as bad as being with my parents. I allowed my husband to treat me like my Mum and Dad did, as I didn't know any better. That was until I divorced him in 1991. Before my Dad died I confronted him about what he did. I told him I remember everything you did to me. He just walked away holding his head. He could not look me in the eye. He knew what I was talking about. He died of dementia a few years later. I loved him and I hated him at the same time when I was going through all the memories and flashbacks. Now I forgive him and my mother because they didn't know any better. All I can say is that they were both very sick at the time, and I was the victim.

Now I have come back to myself. I feel I had been lost for so long and now I feel I have come home to myself. It's never too late to heal. It took me a long time but I am now a survivor of sexual and physical abuse and I am thriving too. The reason I want to tell my story is to help others in the same situation. It is so important to get therapy for sexual abuse and not to stay in silence and suffer. The shame doesn't belong to the victim, it belongs to the abusers.

“ If you were assaulted by a stranger, not family, people would think it outrageous to ask you to keep a relationship going with the person who assaulted you

S.G. **FEMALE**

My experience is long and complex, hard to write in a couple of pages.

The briefest version is that I experienced CSA in the family from the age of about 12 – by a close family member, as well as by an in-law. I told no one.

I had been successful academically at school, but began having problems, lost the ability to concentrate. This became progressively worse yearly. I passed exams but with lower and lower grades. I saw my headmistress, who referred me to a child psychologist. He said “Don’t worry, you’re not mad,” listened a lot, didn’t say much. I still never told any of them that part of my life, or understood it myself.

When I was old enough I broke away, went to college, worked, did well, kept distant from family, got treated as an outcast. I blanked it all out for many years – always felt weird and wrong. Life was like cycling in a permanent headwind.

I never knew at the time about PTSD, dissociation, depersonalisation, derealisation, disorder of stress not otherwise specified (DESNOS), complex trauma. But actually I did know about them, because I had them. I just didn’t have the names for them.

During this period, there was a new generation of children in the family, and the memories came back. I became afraid it would happen to them. So I disclosed. There were complex mixtures of acknowledgement, minimising and denial from various people. I don’t know to what extent my efforts safeguarded those children who are now adults.

About those children I loved so much, now estranged adults, questions run in my head – “What do you know? What have you been told? Were you ever safe? Who have you become?”

About myself now, borrowed words from a good friend – “I loved my children so much, I never had them.”

Separate from the details of my experience, it is important to me to contribute what I have learnt from it, in the hope that it will resonate and connect with what other survivors go through.

1 If you were assaulted by a stranger, not family, people would think it outrageous to ask you to

keep a relationship going with the person who assaulted you.

For instance, expect you to:

- not prosecute them
- not safeguard any other potential victim
- sit round a dinner table regularly with them
- accept their gifts on your birthday
- give them gifts on their birthday
- go to their wedding
- invite them to yours
- visit them in hospital
- go to the christening of their children
- babysit their children
- give them financial help
- help them move house
- decorate their home
- invite them to your housewarming
- let them do DIY in your home
- not ‘ruin their life’
- let them ruin yours.

2 I think language influences perceptions of sexual harm, especially by a family member to another. The terms abuse/abuser are used relating to assaults between adults within family, or generally between adults and children. I prefer the terms assault/assailant, which are used between adults who are not related. These immediately invoke ‘crime’. The other terms blur and diminish this aspect, and give scope for assailants to evade justice. To me, sticking to the basic truth is paramount – a human sexually assaulting another human.

I have also heard the term ‘inappropriate behaviour’ referring to the assailants’ actions. What does this cover? Using the wrong cutlery at a dinner party? Burping loudly in public?

3 I recall research many years ago regarding the efficacy of therapy given to children who have been sexually abused. It found that those who still lived with the assailant in their social environment did not progress, even though the assaults no longer took place. However those who lived without the assailant in their social environment did make progress.

I think this applies to adults or children who have been assaulted by family members. If assaults are no longer taking place, the pressure is to



conform with complex interrelationships within family. This becomes an insidious chronic form of mental and emotional assault. The agenda to cover it all up and ‘play happy families’ dominates, and the assailants are protected over and above those that they harm. Survivors are expected to see it as something in the past like everyone else - ‘get over it’, ‘move on’, etc. Focus is on the event(s), not on the instigator. The ongoing inclusion of the assailant in the family environment perpetuates the harm and keeps it in the present for the survivor.

4 There are an amazing amount of obvious and nuanced ways that the focus is shifted away from assigning responsibility to the assailant, then deflected onto the survivor. It occurs in family and in the wider social, political and professional environments.

5 Research has shown that there are high levels of inflammatory markers in the blood of adult survivors of childhood assault. This makes them at higher risk of developing life-threatening illnesses such as cancer and heart disease. I suggest that perpetual exposure to assailants in external social environments exacerbates this internal stressor.

How could the above points be addressed?

- Recognition of the scale and complexity of sexual harm within families
- Recognition of the range of effects this inflicts onto survivors

- Not diverting focus away from assailants’ harming within the family, but holding them responsible
- Economic autonomy available to survivors who are dependent on family
- Physical health monitoring and early prevention resources available to survivors
- Expanding availability of emotional/mental therapeutic work available to survivors
- Ensuring ease of accessibility and support for survivors to pursue criminal justice prosecution
- Therapeutic support for family members who are neither survivors nor assailants

Conclusion so far

Following disclosure, life became less like riding in a permanent headwind. It became lighter and there is more fresh air. The headwind comes and goes, as do the lighter breezes, fresh air. And some stillness too.

My experience is that I had to learn so much of the above the hard way, for decades after the assaults themselves. I would like other survivors to not have to reinvent the wheel, and experience the healing effects sooner rather than later.

I was lucky to have met wise people along the way who helped me and I would like resources directed towards having more of this widely available and easy to find.

I find ‘satyagraha’ (‘insistence on the truth’) good for my way of doing things.

“ I have also heard the term ‘inappropriate behaviour’ referring to the assailants’ actions. What does this cover? Using the wrong cutlery at a dinner party? Burping loudly in public? ”

Katherine FEMALE

I was sexually abused by my maternal grandfather from the age of five. The abuse ended when my grandfather died 11 years later.

I was born in the 1960s, raised to treat adults with respect and believed that those adults I came into contact with – family members, friends, neighbours, teachers, etc. – were trustworthy and would never cause me any harm. Ironically, I was warned about ‘stranger danger’ and told never to speak to strangers.

When I was 13 years old, I became more uneasy about my grandfather’s advances and realised something wasn’t ‘right’. I was confused – how could my grandfather who was a respected adult, do something harmful?

At this time, I went through a period of acute anxiety and broke down and told my mother what had been happening. Her initial reaction was one of disbelief. As my tears continued and I persisted with my story, she realised I was telling the truth. She did tell me that my grandfather was taking advantage of my innocence but she said so in an angry tone, as if it was also my fault. She added if he did it again, I should slap him and tell him I had told her what he was doing. Then in a very stern, angry voice, she told me that I should never stay alone in a room with a man like that, and I should always remember that sexual intercourse was only to take place between married couples. By this stage, I was very distraught, but my mother simply ended the conversation and resumed her hovering.

From that moment on, I changed. I began to feel I was a bad person and guilty of all sorts of things I shouldn’t have said and done – most of which were imagined. I initially shared these thoughts with my mother, who said if I didn’t stop this behaviour I would end up in a mental hospital and then I would have a reputation that would stay with me forever.

I got on with my life, still plagued with unhealthy thoughts and much anxiety. The abuse continued until my grandfather died when I was 16 years old. I was glad and relieved he had died. I finished school and went to university. There, I made some good friends but also had friends who manipulated me and treated me badly, but I was so unsure of myself that I allowed it to happen. I developed obsessive-compulsive

disorder (OCD) – endlessly washing my hands over and over again and becoming obsessed with germs, constantly cleaning because of imagined contamination. This began to take over my life, and if I didn’t perform these rituals I felt plagued with anxious thoughts. Once I washed my hands or performed some cleaning ritual I felt relief from the anxiety, but it was short-lived and the whole cycle would begin again. I knew it wasn’t normal behaviour, but I pushed the feelings down and coped as best as I could. I believe I was desperately trying to rid myself of the feelings of being dirty and contaminated, but no amount of washing would dispel those feelings.

When I left university and started working, the distressing thoughts and feelings continued. I felt I should never make a mistake in a work situation and if I did, I felt full of shame. I felt inadequate unless I performed ‘perfectly’.

I met my husband when I was 24 years old and we married three years later. Apart from my mother, he was the only person I confided in about the abuse. He was shocked initially, but didn’t seem to think it was a big issue.

When we married, although happy and in love, my anxieties continued. The cleaning rituals and contamination fears continued. My husband found my behaviour difficult and had to endure verbal abuse from me if he didn’t play along with my obsessions. Looking back now, trying to maintain these obsessions all the time was exhausting and impossible, and my husband naturally suffered as a result.

Shortly after getting married, I expressed my anger about the abuse on one occasion to my husband. He dismissed what I said, told me my grandfather had been an old man (he was 61 years old, when he started abusing me) and that it had happened a long time ago, it was time I forgot about it. I decided not to bring it up again.

My depression worsened. I was constantly crying but couldn’t understand why and I took little interest in anything. During a severe episode of anxiety and depression, I took sick leave from my job. I was prescribed antidepressants and once they kicked in, I began to feel better. I felt more relaxed and less anxious, although my weight soared as a side-effect. I stopped taking them to become pregnant but became anxious and depressed again, and when my son was born I suffered post-natal depression and have taken antidepressants ever since. Although delighted with my newborn, having a baby put extra pressure on me. I felt the midwives and

“ When I was 13 years old, I became more uneasy about my grandfather’s advances and realised something wasn’t ‘right’. I was confused – how could my grandfather who was a respected adult, do something harmful? ”

health visitors would judge me as an inadequate mother if everything wasn't perceived as perfect with my home and baby. I would have loved another baby but decided getting pregnant again would be irresponsible.

When my son was a few months old and I was staying with my mother, I started crying about the abuse again. My husband mentioned it to my mother who at first denied all knowledge of it. Despite her denial, she proceeded to ask me why I was bringing it up again after so many years and told me I should put it out of my mind. I felt guilty and pathetic.

During a recurrent depressive period, I confided in my GP about the abuse. Whilst sympathetic, he said he could refer me for therapy, but in his experience people were often left in pieces after therapy and said I would have to relate exact details of what happened. I decided not to go ahead.

A few years later, I again plucked up the courage to ring a women's centre which dealt with physical and sexual abuse. The person I spoke to was quite dismissive. I decided that was it, I was not going to seek help again.

Last year, I did in fact seek help again. I found out by accident that my husband had been cheating on me and I was totally devastated – I had always trusted him completely. The sexual abuse from my past reared its ugly head again and discovering my husband's infidelity felt like being abused all over again. I knew I needed help, and this time a different GP referred me for counselling. The counsellor I saw was very helpful and as well as helping me with marriage problems, we discussed the sexual abuse and she gave me useful information into the effects of childhood abuse and insight into the behaviour of the abuser. At the same time, after an Internet search, I found an organisation offering a 10-week group course for adult survivors of sexual abuse and I joined the next course.

Meeting other people who have gone through a similar ordeal and receiving information about sexual abuse have had a life-changing effect on me. I feel so much anger and distress that has burned inside me for years has been released and I now have more control over my thoughts, feelings and behaviour. My feelings of worthlessness have also lessened considerably. I don't go around telling people I have been abused, but I have told a few close friends and it doesn't seem such a dreadful secret anymore. I still feel shame even though I understand now that it is misplaced shame. I still carry the

memory of the abuse and I think about it and my abuser every day. His facial expression when he was abusing me, his body, his weight, his smell, his touch, the feel of his breath on my skin and the way his voice would change, all of these memories stay with me. I also dream regularly that my grandfather is still alive and I approach him as an adult and angrily confront him about what he did. On another positive note, my husband and I have managed to save our relationship and I believe that this is largely due to dealing with the abuse, and our greater understanding of its long-term effects.

Having met other survivors who have bravely shared their experiences, I feel it is we, the survivors, who have been punished for the crimes of our abusers and continue to be punished. I also feel that many people still believe that children are at risk from sexual abuse from strangers; that the average abuser is the social misfit who looks and behaves oddly. My abuser did not fit this picture and my family would never have dreamed that my grandfather would have been capable of such evil. Nobody wants to believe that this could happen in his or her family. I also recently learned that the commonly held belief that all abusers have themselves been abused as children is not true. By extension, does this mean that many people believe that those of us who have been abused are likely to go on and abuse other children? Surely this is another factor which would make survivors reluctant to come forward and seek help?

Based on my own experiences, I believe health professionals and society need more awareness of sexual abuse and its effects, both to prevent it happening and to encourage survivors of all ages to cast aside their misplaced shame and come forward and receive help.

“ Having met other survivors who have bravely shared their experiences, I feel it is we, the survivors, who have been punished for the crimes of our abusers and continue to be punished



“What options for escape were there for Pam, she was raised in a violent upbringing where domestic violence was normality?”

Pam FEMALE

“Your brother raped your mother,” said the friend and Pam just felt numb and went quiet. She didn’t react. “But I thought that if I sacrificed my mind, my body, my life, no one else would ever get hurt, I thought I was protecting them,” Pam thought silently to herself.

She was three years old when she made that decision. At that time, her Mother’s eldest child, a son from a previous arranged marriage who was just approaching 18, came to live with her family. That step-brother would rape Pam while her parents were at work, having ironically left her in his care as the elder sibling.

Who really helps you when you come from a seemingly respectable, educated and hard-working immigrant family? In her family great importance was placed on demonstrating yourself to be an upstanding and respectable member of the community. Particularly when you come from humble beginnings and are trying to forge a new and better life away from your country of origin.

What options for escape were there for Pam, when she was raised in a violent upbringing

where domestic violence was normality? The memories of seeing blood, hearing the screams and feeling the fear in her tummy, spending her child and young adult hood walking on egg shells would be engraved in her memory and set the frame for her adult life.

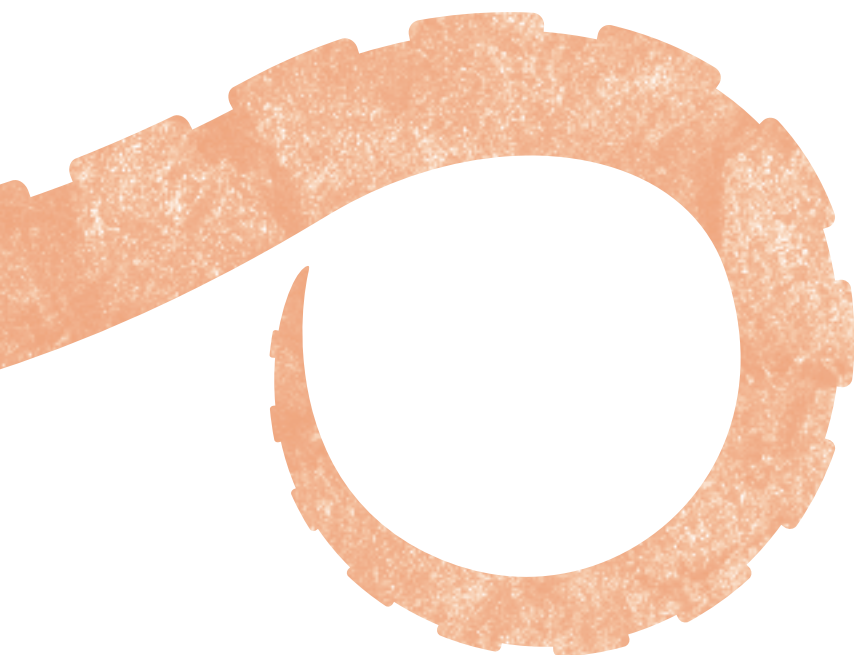
Pam was one of very few non-white children in an all-white working class part of town. “Go away Blackie we don’t want to play with you” was her earliest memory of school at age four. Was it the colour of her skin, or the fact that she couldn’t read and write (until she self-taught at ten) that made the other children not like her? She would never really understand. She roamed the playground and ate by herself for most of infant and the beginning of junior school, until a new girl joined from far away and she had found her first real friend. Finally someone to play with every day and at nine years old, for the first time in her life, she was invited to play at her new friend’s house – some may say a late developer.

In some immigrant households there is no time for love, laughter, play, nurturing and fun. Her parents worked day and night to try and build a new and ‘better’ life in those times of 1980’s prejudice and austerity.

When she was 11 years old a new start at secondary school resulted in regular beatings by boys and girls. She would always remember being beaten to the ground, in front of her local bus stop as all the adults stood there and watched in silence. She fell to the ground in a foetal position covering her face as a boy she had just met from her school kicked and punched her in the stomach: “You dirty camel eating Paki – fuck off back to where you came from”.

Much later she assumed that a relationship meant she had to go out with any man that asked her out and fancied her, as she couldn’t do any better and had to ‘take what love she could get’. She would always walk away feeling dirty and numb, having gone into many relationships already numb whenever it came to talk of real connection and intimacy. There was just no one out there who seemed to understand her. There are no personal boundaries in your life; from the day the people who are meant to unconditionally love and protect a child fail to do that, and even rape that child, you just become a giant hole through which you are constantly falling, every day treading water and never reaching the shore.

Her Father dictated her life and chose all her GCSE and A level subjects, her degrees and diploma right down to the finite level of choosing her optional subjects, what career path she



should take and the exact course she should follow within that career. She was told in no uncertain terms what she 'needed to be' – not to be a failure and shame to the family.

Puberty added to the confusion when her Mother refused to buy her bras or let her shave. It's mind-boggling for an 11 year-old to navigate when you have no kindly sister or aunt to guide you and no pocket money to buy what you need and a Mother that refused to acknowledge that her body was changing. Meanwhile she just became that hairy, smelly kid at school with the large breasts.

At work Pam's intelligence and drive to be technically good at what she did, (by this point it appeared to be the only source of limited approval and appreciation she ever received), meant that she lost any flexibility to cope with criticism, whether warranted or not, but could only demand perfection from herself at all times. Once she walked into an appraisal meeting where at the end of extremely positive feedback she was asked not to do one activity, not because it was wrong, just because. Despite the glowing feedback from everything else she had performed, this one small comment which she only knew how to view as a criticism, left her feeling utterly shamed, embarrassed and anxious for days. Replaying itself for hours, days and even weeks in her mind. Whenever she feared or was made to feel that she 'upset' someone, that shame would crush her own spirit and she would hate herself for it without control or reason.

I am Pam and this is a tiny glimpse into my life; what do you do when this is your life to heal yourself, who do you talk to, and who is there to help and protect you?

I only started to acknowledge my life experiences, including the CSA three years ago. I am now in my thirties. I have never told anyone about the CSA I was subjected to and that has shaped a lot of my life. My abuser walks free without accountability, and is loved by many, including members of my family. I fell into receiving psychotherapy privately, on the advice of a friend and my therapist guessed one day, but we have never spoken in detail about what I experienced, and other than a handful of friends that I have met through this project and on a twelve week private group psychotherapy course, no one else in my life knows or even understands what surviving this every day feels like.

I hope that my story can inspire YOU to protect others out there from a life like this, where there has been no protection for me.



“ I have never told anyone about the CSA I was subjected to and that has shaped a lot of my life. My abuser walks free without accountability, and is loved by many, including members of my family

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