

# it's not your fault

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men talk about living beyond the effects of child sexual abuse

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**respond**sa  
adult childhood  
sexual abuse service

Respond SA is a program of

*Relationships Australia*  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



## It's not your fault

Men talk  
about  
living beyond  
the effects of  
sexual abuse

### A message from the men who have contributed to this booklet

Research tells us that one in six young males have been sexually abused. You might have picked up this book because you might be one of them. Not talking about sexual abuse hasn't helped anybody and we want to make it really clear that it is okay to talk about being sexually abused. It is important to understand that you are not alone. There are others travelling this road who will walk with you and help relieve the loneliness and isolation that you may experience.

Picking up this book might be your first step in changing your life. Or you might be well on your way to already changing your life. Whatever the case, it is a brave step and it is worth recognising the courage you have shown in taking steps to change your life.

You might see that there are things not going right in your life. You might be asking yourself questions like 'Why am I angry?' or 'Why do I feel the way I do?' This book can help you answer those questions and may help you to better understand what you are feeling and experiencing.

We know from our own experience that it is possible to move beyond the abuse and the effects that we experience.

We encourage you to read this book. However, if you'd rather talk to someone, please refer to the back of this book for contact details of services that can help and support you as you take this journey.

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# Introduction

Sexual abuse of males in childhood or teenage years is a problem that is rarely talked about in society. Men affected by this issue can feel isolated and alone, not knowing who to turn to or the best course of action to take. Research shows that child sexual abuse might be committed against one in six males and that most acts of abuse go unreported to authorities, such as police and welfare services.

This booklet is written for men who are living with the effects of child sexual abuse as well as their partners, family, friends and professionals who want to support them. It aims to share understandings and knowledge about the effects of sexual abuse, the causes of these effects and ways of coping with them. The booklet also aims to assist men to gain greater control over the effects of sexual abuse and to feel more capable of living the life they want.

In writing this booklet we have drawn upon the knowledge from men and professionals around the world, who have found helpful ways to understand and deal with the effects of child sexual abuse. Men involved in this project agreed the effects of abuse (such as self-blame and shame) were made much more powerful through the experience of pain and isolation around abuse, and thinking 'I am the only one'.

The men who are quoted and who contributed their knowledge and experiences to this booklet, did so because of a commitment to making a difference to the lives of other men who have experienced sexual abuse. They wanted to convey a sense of unity and hope with men who read this booklet as a way of breaking this isolation. They also wanted to stand together with others against the injustice of sexual abuse and its effects.

## What do we mean by the term child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse occurs when adults or older people involve children and teenagers in intimate physical contact, exposure to sexual things or sexual talk. Research shows that the majority of people who sexually abuse young people are men, with a small percentage of women named as perpetrators.



Child sexual abuse is an injustice



Sexual abuse is a crime for which the adult or older person is 100% responsible. It is NEVER a younger person's fault or weakness. Nor is it ever about what they did or did not do

For some men who were abused in their teenage years, the term 'child sexual abuse' can have them thinking that what they experienced was not abuse because they weren't children or were teenagers and they 'should have known better'. Some men have also thought they should have stopped the abuse from happening.

In this booklet we will use the word 'young people' to refer to children and teenagers. This is because regardless of the age of the young person, it is important to remember the differences in power between adults and young people. It is these power differences that abusive adults use to trap, trick or force young people into abuse.

## Who is responsible for sexual abuse?

Most men who contributed to this booklet felt a sense of self-blame for the abuse and its effects. It is important to understand that these feelings and thoughts are 'effects of abuse' or effects of the 'tactics' used in abuse rather than the 'truth' about the situation.



## Respecting different journeys and experiences

It is not uncommon for people to compare their experiences of abuse with other people's experiences.

However, comparisons are unhelpful as they can lead to judgements about experiences of abuse as being either 'less than' or 'worse than' others.

These types of comparison can discourage men from speaking about their abuse because they are worried about being judged. This can lead to further silence and isolation for men around their experiences of abuse.

Comparisons also can have men focusing on the physical acts that make up sexual abuse and comparing these in terms of their severity. What can get lost by doing this is acknowledging that the painful effects of sexual abuse relate not only to the physical abuse but also to the abuse of power, vulnerability, trust and care that happens before, during and after sexual abuse. People can have a range of feelings that vary and can be more intense or less intense.



*Every time I talk about it I get bigger and he gets smaller. It hurts but it's good to talk. I've learnt that I'm not to blame. I've become free from what I was told to be. He treated me like I was a toy to be used, but I know I am a good person who is worthy of affection*

The men who decided to share their stories and thoughts said they were clear that there is no right or wrong way to go about healing, or to think about things in relation to the effects of sexual abuse. Sometimes men said they had made progress while at other times they felt the need to go back over things they had once thought they had resolved. We see this as a common process of going back and forth in the journey or healing.

## What's in this booklet?

The first part of this booklet talks about the context of abuse. This refers to the conditions under which abuse can take place and the effects of sexual abuse on people's lives.

Young people have less power than adults. Older people who sexually abuse young people manipulate these power differences. This manipulation of power also includes adults who had the care and protection of young people (mothers, grandparents, etc) who were threatened, tricked or manipulated in ways that made it hard for them to keep the young person safe from abuse. It is important to paint a clear picture about the context because this context of powerlessness, vulnerability and manipulation is crucial in understanding the effects of abuse.

The second part of this booklet looks at 'the other story' of abuse – the ways people have coped and continue to cope with the effects of abuse. Some men have talked about this as the story of 'survival' or 'resistance'. It's the story that describes the parts of them that were 'bigger than the abuse' or 'stronger than the abuse'.

This story is helpful when men find it difficult to see how they have coped in the past and why they should feel hopeful about the future. It can sometimes be harder to see and remember this story, but it is important to do so. It is this story that describes how adults who sexually abused young people did not succeed in totally taking over people's lives.

Acknowledging and recreating this other story can be a complex process. Often, when people first begin to think about this, they find it hard to see the ways they have coped with abuse or resisted its effects. This is not because they haven't coped or resisted its effects. This is because the tactics of abuse, and the effects of secrecy and silence, actually make it hard to remember the many different things people have done to survive sexual abuse and its effects.

Throughout this booklet there are some questions designed to help you think more about how these issues relate to your own life. You might decide to talk about these questions and the answers with a friend or a counsellor. Or you may wish to think about them on your own.



# Looking after yourself while you read this booklet

Many men have said that the decision to talk about sexual abuse requires a lot of bravery and courage because it can involve strong and overwhelming feelings. It may also often involve breaking years of secrecy, silence and shame.

In this booklet, specific details about abuse are not talked about. However, reading about the tactics or effects of abuse may trigger painful memories or intense emotions and feelings.



It's a real roller coaster, there are periods when I'm in control of feelings and thoughts and then there are times of mood swings. I usually keep it in a box. I want to learn how to control the effects

If you are experiencing painful or difficult feelings it may be helpful to remind yourself why you decided to read this booklet. It can be common to feel quite vulnerable and sometimes fearful even when considering doing something like reading this booklet, let alone talking to someone about the effects of child sexual abuse. Because of social beliefs and myths about child sexual abuse we recognise that it is important to carefully consider who is a safe person to support you.

Before reading this booklet, please consider some ways of taking care of yourself such as:

- Contacting someone you can talk to like a friend, partner, member of your family or worker
- Planning to do something that will help you reconnect to the present moment if you do experience strong flashbacks or memories
- Looking at the 'Self care' section on page 42 of this booklet for more suggestions.



I want healthier relationships with people, because somehow the abuse has distorted my view, distorted the way I relate to people. I would love to have better relationships with people, where things are working and we're feeling good about ourselves, rather than feeling bad in those relationships

In tough times, the men who contributed to this booklet found it helpful to remind themselves that they were on an ongoing 'journey' or process of healing and reclaiming their lives from the effects of abuse.

When we talk about 'reclaiming your life from sexual abuse', we are describing the way people can free themselves from the effects of sexual abuse (e.g. shame, guilt, blame, isolation) and reconnect with the type of person they would like to be. In our experience, this journey is made up of many small steps that take time and often require enormous courage and determination.

This courage has often been what has helped men to survive. Men make these steps having been inspired, sustained and helped by many different people, animals, movies, music, stories and hopes. For some men this journey was about building better relationships with their family and friends.

For some men, taking steps is about achieving a sense of justice or making sure that what they had been through 'wasn't for nothing'. For others, it is about honouring a promise or commitment they made to themselves when they were younger; that when they were older and safer they would do something about the abuse they were subjected to.

*These steps,  
however small,  
are made by  
the part of you  
that is  
bigger than  
the abuse*



It hurts, but it's good to talk

*I'm starting a new family tree that is a break away from the old family tree. It's like a young sapling growing next to this big old tree. It will have different meanings, different values and different relationships than the old family tree. The seed came from the old tree, but this tree will be fertilised properly and will grow*

It is important to remember that these steps, however small, are made by the part of you that is bigger than the abuse or not touched by the abuse.

It may be helpful to think about who would be walking with you on this journey. This could be someone alive or dead, who has cared about you in the past or cares about you now. It could be your family or friends, work mates or a loved pet.



As you are reading this booklet you might like to think about how you could remember these people and what they appreciate and know about you as a person. This might be a way of reminding yourself that you are not on your own when you are experiencing painful memories or feelings.



In reading this booklet:

What hopes do you hold for life?

How long have you held onto these hopes?

What do these hopes say about what is important to you?

What other steps have you taken to hold onto these things that are important to you?

Who or what has supported you to take these steps?

## Looking after others as you read this booklet

“ I’d go quiet or withdraw. I’d lock myself away in the shed and smoke and have a beer. At times I’d dump it on my partner or the kids, they wouldn’t know what to do

One strong emotion that may arise as you spend time thinking and reading about sexual abuse is anger. It is understandable that you would feel outraged when you remember the injustice and unfairness of the abuse you were subjected to as a young person. In speaking with men who contributed to this booklet, many expressed regret that they had often hurt the very people who were close to them. This hurt was caused through their use of anger, abuse or violence.

They were clear that if they had been involved in using violence, this was something that needed to be dealt with. It is important to let people know if you have thoughts, feelings, or plans that may make you or other people unsafe.

*“My dad was really badly abused as a kid and he made the choice to never, never harm one of his kids. He hit me once with a belt because I did something wrong and he cried; he was crying more than me because of the whole thing. So you can make your choices and live with it too.”*

“ Violence and abuse is NEVER okay. Having been abused is not a reason or justification for hurting others



## Carrying myself with pride

Until two years ago I thought 'I am on my own with this shit in my head',  
I wanted to talk it out but there was no one.  
I wanted to feel like part of the whole human race,  
I wanted to live my life with nobility, respect, grace and courage.

In the group I have experienced trust, being heard, being respected by older men.  
When I spoke about feeling inadequate and I heard others talk about this  
I found myself thinking 'Why do I feel that way?'

Our society is always getting us to measure up against something...work, a car,  
a partner, kids.  
But the idea of measuring yourself is futile - you can never reach it.  
I'm thinking of giving away the idea altogether.

I've decided to take the attitude of feeling confident  
on the bus, in the street, with people.  
I make a conscious effort to give myself a bit of an attitude, to wind  
myself up a bit,  
I think to myself 'I'm as good as anyone else, as the next bloke...I am as good as you'.

Sort of like a positive self-arrogance,  
this Self-Respect, carrying myself with pride.  
I'm seeing positive changes,  
I keep striving, it pisses me, it's frustrating a lot of the time  
but you've got to keep working at it.

Like accepting praise,  
learning to thank people for it,  
rather than thinking 'What do you want?'

Or looking to the positives, like the kids,  
being with them, picking them up when they fall over,  
helping them grow up to be who they are now.

And forcing myself to think positively,  
to do otherwise is letting the abuse win,  
and I don't want it to win.

I don't have to live in a dark room,  
I don't have to let history control me,  
these are new ways of dealing with the past.

# Understanding the context of abuse

## Why didn't I tell or stop it? Remembering what it was like to be a young person in an adult's world

Sexual abuse is a crime. The law recognises that the extreme difference in power between adults and young people makes it impossible for sexual contact between young people and adults to be equal, fair and mutually consenting.

“ It's like I know in my head that I was just a kid, but I still feel guilty about it. I think - how could I have been so stupid? I should have seen it coming

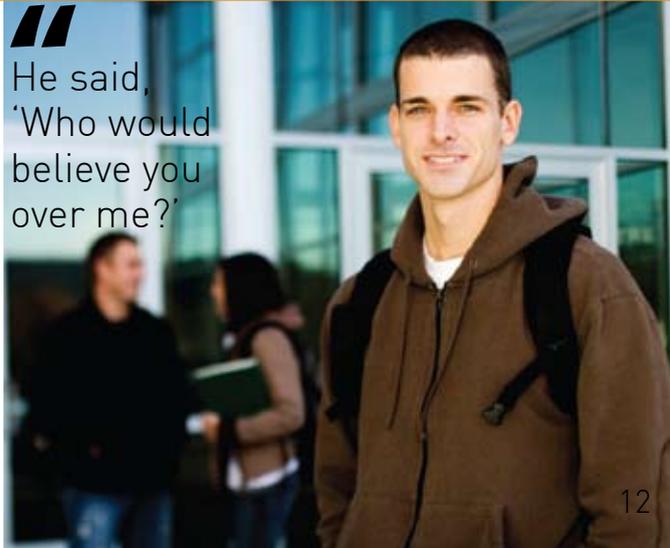
Many people who were sexually abused can experience strong feelings of shame and self-blame for sexual abuse occurring. People often ask themselves questions like 'why didn't I tell someone?' or 'why didn't I do something to stop it?' or, 'why did I just let him do it to me?'

These questions are often connected to feelings of guilt, shame or worthlessness. When looking back at events that happened in childhood it can be hard to remember what it was like to be a young person. In addition to this, it can be particularly difficult to remember the many differences in power that exist between adults and young people. When these power differences are overlooked it can be easy to forget or not see what younger people were up against when sexual abuse was happening.

While growing up, young people rely on adults for their physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. Young people grow not only physically but also in their ability to understand and make sense of the world. This leaves young people with less power than adults and dependent on adults for protection, guidance and support. When sexual abuse occurs it often relies on and exploits this dependence young people have on adults.

“ I was desperate for affection. I know that he planned it, he could see that I was vulnerable, because he knew my father wasn't around the place

“ He said, 'Who would believe you over me?'





## Power differences between young people and adults

Adults have much more power than young people. When thinking of power, we often focus on physical strength. However, there are many ways that adults are more powerful than young people.

For example, adults are listened to and believed more than young people. Common social beliefs about children, such as 'children tell lies', 'children are manipulative' or 'children should obey adults', reinforce the power that adults have. This power gives adults the ability to control how things are understood. For example, if a child is upset about something and acting in ways to express this, adults might call this 'having a tantrum' or 'misbehaving'.

It's like not being able to identify what is going on; having nothing in your experience or knowledge of the world to compare it to. Your mind can't fathom it; as a child it is inconceivable to your little brain

This form of power can contribute to sexual abuse continuing. Some men have said that because they experienced not being believed by adults in other situations, they felt they wouldn't be believed if they spoke up about the sexual abuse. Other men said when they did try to tell adults they were not believed and told that they were 'liars'.

Men remembered how often they had been told as young people to obey and trust adults. This message in their upbringing made it confusing when an adult was acting abusively towards them. On the one hand they felt what was happening was wrong. On the other hand they felt they had to obey and trust the adult.

Then they bring that back at you. It's manipulation because kids don't know the different levels of 'wrongness'. You don't know the difference between the 'wrongness' of sexual abuse and telling a lie about something, you just know that you would be in trouble if anyone found out

Young people	Older people
<p><b>Physical power</b> Smaller, less powerful, still growing</p>	<p><b>Physical power</b> Stronger, bigger, more powerful</p>
<p><b>Economic power</b> Have no or limited access to money, are dependent on adults for money, food, clothing and treats</p>	<p><b>Economic power</b> Working or have greater access to money, can buy what they want, when they want</p>
<p><b>Social power</b> Dependent on older people, can rarely choose their own social situations, trained to listen to, respect and obey adults</p>	<p><b>Social power</b> Can choose who they want to be with, are given more respect than young people, listened to more than young people</p>
<p><b>Knowledge power</b> Still learning about the world, about right and wrong, about laws or the justice system, looking to adults to teach these things</p>	<p><b>Knowledge power</b> Know about the way the world works, know about laws, how the justice system works, know what is legally right and wrong</p>
<p><b>Intellectual power</b> Neurological pathways in the brain / intellect are still developing</p>	<p><b>Intellectual power</b> Intellect is fully developed, have skills in manipulation, can consider concepts, able to anticipate the thoughts and feelings of other people</p>
<p><b>Psychological power</b> Still developing an idea of who they are, still learning about feelings and expressing feelings, still learning about their own needs, preferences and desires</p>	<p><b>Psychological power</b> Have a well-developed idea of who they are, have learnt about expressing feelings, and are aware of their own desires, needs and preferences</p>
<p><b>Sexual power</b> May not even be aware of sexual matters, sexuality just beginning, still learning about their sexuality and sexual preferences</p>	<p><b>Sexual power</b> Aware of appropriate sexual relationships, aware of issues of power, aware of consent and equality in sexual relationships, know their own sexual preferences</p>

*Adapted from work by Maxine Joy*

In sexual abuse these power differences are used by adults to manipulate or intimidate young people. For example:

- **Economic power** might be used to buy the young person treats or gifts
- **Intellectual power** might be used to lie to and trick the young person (by saying things like 'this is normal, everyone does it')
- **Social power** might be used to isolate the young person by labelling them as 'bad', 'naughty' or a 'liar' or make them feel special in order to manipulate the situation for sexual abuse to occur.

# Naming the tactics of abuse

In our society there is a mistaken belief that people who sexually abuse act compulsively or have little control over their actions. In some instances sexual abuse may occur suddenly like an attack, but more commonly it follows a carefully planned gradual set up, where a young person's trust and often their family's trust is gained by the perpetrator.

It is an orchestrated plan to build trust. There are these 'isolation tactics' that are about building up supports for secrecy. It starts with totally innocent things like ice creams, or presents, or doing things you're not supposed to do. The treats are like paying off your program. It's part of a long-term program. There are rewards for gradually doing little things outside of the norm, things that were quite insignificant, breaking rules that were harmless

Research (with both survivors of abuse as well as perpetrators of abuse) shows that perpetrators strategically act in ways that manipulate and exploit the young person's dependence on them for love, affection, safety, information and learning.

By using these dynamics, perpetrators aim to control and manipulate the young person into meeting the needs of the adult or older person and to keep their abusive, and at times violent, behaviours a secret.

The manipulation in sexual abuse takes many different forms. Some tactics like physical force or threats are easy to see. While tactics like trickery, affection, treats, friendliness or trust are often harder to see and name – especially for a young person.

Sexual abuse usually involves multiple tactics. Because these tactics rely on differences in power between adults and young people, it is virtually impossible for the young person to see these tactics or to even understand they are being manipulated, tricked and trapped. An important strategy used by perpetrators is to make the young person feel responsible and confused. Often perpetrators will blame the young person for what is happening to them, their family or anything that happens to the perpetrator if the abuse should be discovered.

In support groups for men who have experienced sexual abuse, men are often surprised to discover they had been subjected to similar tactics. Following are a range of tactics that men have told us about. These are not the only tactics used and you may have experienced different ones. In outlining these tactics we have explored ways these tactics worried these young men, how social beliefs contributed to these worries and how these issues affected men's lives.

## ① Using verbal threats and physical force

During abuse, perpetrators may threaten young people with being hurt or say other people they care about will get hurt. This tactic aims to keep the young person silent. It relies on the messages young people are given about respecting, listening to and obeying older people. During abuse, perpetrators would exploit this 'upbringing' by misusing the respect and trust that young people gave to them.

Some men have described how threats might not be spoken but just given with a look or a body movement.

For other men, physical force was used to overpower them. For these men, experiencing such an attack as a young person was not only a terrifying and painful experience, but they had often been left with severe physical injuries and hurts to manage on their own.

Having physical threats or force used against you often means coping with a lot of fear. Young people might be scared of the perpetrator of abuse, or scared of what they might do to them or others if they spoke out.

Another effect of threats is young people being very worried about and feeling responsible for other people's wellbeing. The decision not to tell people about abuse is sometimes about protecting others or the fear of not being believed. Some men spoke about how as young people they had thought it would break the family apart, or really hurt their parents to find out that an uncle, close friend or trusted figure (like a Priest) was abusing their child.

*There is this creation of an air of 'normalcy', pretending it is normal. Perpetrators may say things like 'this happens to everyone'. These tactics try to normalise abuse and hide the abuse of power involved*

*I was told not to tell, or suffer the consequences*

*It (not speaking out) was to do with everybody else's dependency on the person who was abusing me.*

*I thought 'if I dob my father in and he goes to jail, then what will happen to us?'*



## ② Disguising sexual abuse by calling it other things

Perpetrators of abuse often act or talk in ways that communicate to the young person the abuse is 'normal', 'natural' or 'not a big deal'.

For some men sexual abuse was introduced as something that was about 'loyalty' or 'friendship'. When men talked about this tactic, they remembered how as young men this had introduced a lot of confusion into their lives. This confusion arose from knowing or feeling something was wrong, but being told by an adult what was happening was normal.

*I was confused because he appeared to be trying to be gentle and was telling me it was the way men showed affection and love. So instead of me seeing it for what it was, he conned me. On the one hand I felt dirty, ashamed, embarrassed and abnormal and on the other hand I was even more confused because I felt like I 'should' be feeling pleased and valuable and that I was special*

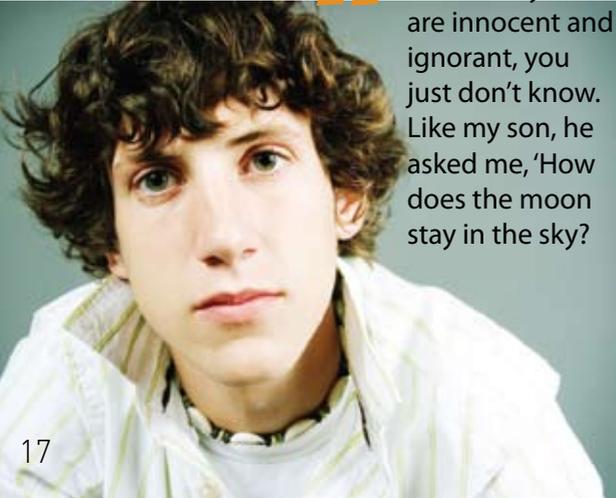
There was this assertion that the abuse was 'educative', that I had to 'learn this'

## ③ Using trust and secrecy to cut the young person off from others and confuse them

A common dynamic used against boys was the development of a relationship of trust. Men spoke about how coaches, uncles, Priests or fathers had built relationships with them that made them feel special. In these relationships, secrets were often introduced in ways that acted to cut them off from other adults who could protect them. Often these secrets were in the form of special treats or special treatment that other adults didn't give them. Men said when abuse started to happen the secrecy had already been established making it harder to speak out about the abuse.

As a child you are innocent and ignorant, you just don't know. Like my son, he asked me, 'How does the moon stay in the sky?'

An important part of trapping someone into this dynamic abuse is the tactic of manipulation against caregivers in the young person's life. These tactics may involve lies, deception, threats and the use of power to separate the young person from adults who could keep them safe. Usually it is impossible for the young person to know and/or understand what is going on. Or the young person may be tricked into believing caregivers condoned or gave permission for the abuse to happen.



#### ④ Having the young person experience pleasure

// There was this belief that these responses reflected emotional desires. This led to confusion

A very common tactic used by perpetrators of abuse is to masturbate the young person or stimulate physical pleasure in some way. During anal intercourse the prostate gland is stimulated and causes an involuntary erection and sometimes ejaculation. Stimulation of this gland can also produce experiences of physical pleasure.

Men spoke about how this tactic had trapped them into feeling guilty about experiencing this pleasure. It had them feeling like they 'went along' with the abuse or 'wanted it to happen'. Men said this had made it harder for them to speak about what was happening to them. In talking about this tactic, men agreed it was in the interests of the perpetrator (and not the young person) to introduce pleasure into abuse. This was because it made it more likely the abuse would be kept a secret and therefore continue.

Part of this tactic may leave a young person feeling guilty and confused about their response and sometimes their sexual identity. At the best of times young people often feel a sense of confusion when exploring sexuality. Sexual abuse adds to this confusion especially when perpetrators of sexual abuse have said and done things to confuse you.

Sexual abuse is separate from sexual identity. Conversely, sexual identity is much more than sexual acts. For men who are heterosexual and for those who are bisexual, gay or transgender, these issues about sexual identity can be quite different.

This is impacted by the level of homophobia in our society. Homophobia refers to negative stereotypes, dislike and at times hatred in our society about people who are attracted to the same sex. Homophobia causes many young men to experience fear of what other people would do if they found out about the abuse. It had made them afraid of getting into trouble, of being teased or not being believed.

// As an adolescent there was a negative image about homosexuality. It meant that I couldn't say anything to my peers about abuse, because I would be labelled gay. You know that you are not, but you don't know what you are

The tactics of abuse and homophobia can have young people and men feeling embarrassed, ashamed or angry about the abuse because they believed it to be 'gay sex' rather than sexual abuse.

“ I thought that because I hadn't tried to fight him off, or died trying to, it meant that I encouraged it and must have wanted it to happen therefore I must be queer

“ Research shows that the majority of men who sexually abuse boys identify as straight or heterosexual and are usually a known and trusted family member or friend

One aspect of homophobia is the myth that all paedophiles are 'gay' or that all gay men are paedophiles. Sexual abuse of young men is frequently connected to gay men in newspapers and magazines. These beliefs or myths are not supported.

“ I was really scared that I was gay because of his abuse. This was the really big secret that sat alongside the secrecy of abuse the whole time I was at school

“ He would play this fantasy role playing game and I liked it, it was like a drug; magical. I was really into it because I didn't have anything else. That was the only place I could go to lose myself. Then he brought abuse into it as well. I wanted to keep the role playing going, but if I did that, the abuse was something I had to accept

⑤ Hiding sexual abuse by making it a part of games like 'chasey', role plays or fantasy games

Sexual abuse is often introduced during games or activities that adults play with young people. This creates incredible confusion when young people like the games and play, but not the abuse that comes with it.

When this tactic is used it can leave young people worried about whether complaining or feeling uncomfortable about the abuse is wrong when they know that playing games is legitimate and not wrong. It can also leave them confused about the good or fun things that occur in the relationship with the older person or adult.

## ⑥ Offering friendship and taking advantage of a young person's needs for affection and attention

Men spoke about how they were often befriended by the person who went on to abuse them. The affection and friendship they received was very different to how they were being treated by other adults in their lives.

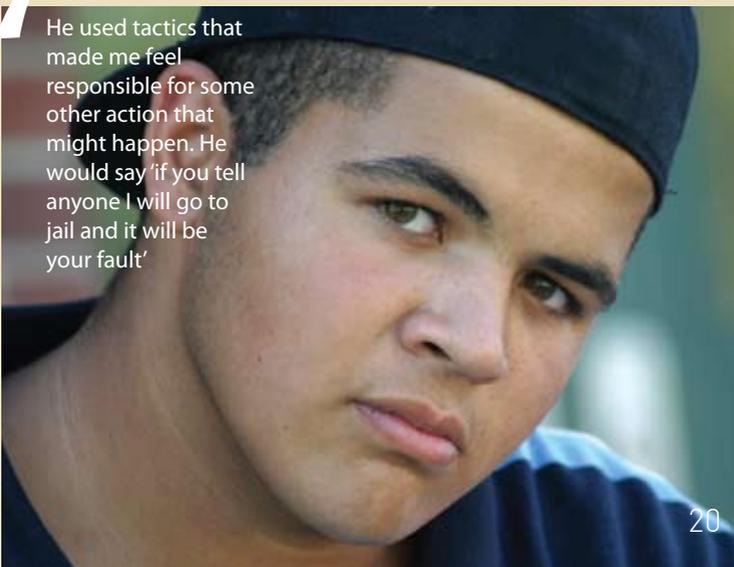
The men described this as a very painful and confusing experience - to feel loved, liked and cared for while at the same time feeling frightened and hurt because they were being sexually abused by the same person. The effect of this can leave a young person confused and silenced because on one hand they want the good aspects of the relationship to continue, but on the other they want the abuse to stop.

## ⑦ Making young people feel responsible for abuse and the consequences of abuse

Another common tactic used during abuse is doing things that make the young person feel responsible for either the abuse or the consequences of the abuse. For example, a young man may be told that he caused the abuse to happen by acting a certain way, looking a certain way or needing something. Perpetrators may ask questions like 'does that feel good?' or 'do you like that?' These questions have the young person thinking and feeling like they were participating in something rather than being manipulated.

Sometimes perpetrators would present sexual abuse as 'repayment' for the treats, friendship or help that the adult had given the young person. Other men were made to feel responsible for the trouble that the perpetrator would get into if the abuse was ever found out.

Tactics of abuse are designed to confuse young people and make them feel responsible in some way for the abuse occurring. Having a young person feel this way is an important strategy in keeping the abuse a secret and therefore ensuring the perpetrator will not be caught.



He used tactics that made me feel responsible for some other action that might happen. He would say 'if you tell anyone I will go to jail and it will be your fault'

## Where the truth is

The feelings that overwhelm,  
horrible shameful feelings,  
I interpret the truth through these feelings,  
they become the lens I see the world through.

Preoccupied with it  
it drains me,  
stops me from being who I am.

Life used to be controlled by the effects  
of abuse,  
by falsehoods about abuse,  
self analysis paralysis,  
disempowering.

But the truth isn't the horrible feelings,  
that's where the lies are.  
And I don't want to stay there anymore,  
the truth is in other parts of me.

The truth is in:  
Knowing it's something I've survived through,  
rather than feeling overwhelmed by it,  
tapping into strength.

Making a decision to survive the whole thing,  
choosing to have survivor status.  
Not a victim, but a survivor,  
getting my power back.

Thinking that I'm stronger than it,  
that I can beat the odds,  
telling myself that enough is enough,  
realising that I am the only one who can  
take control.

The truth is also in:  
Always being gentle with yourself,  
learning to manage the effects better.

Accepting it actually happened.  
Facing that, there is pain  
And pain is not an easy thing to face.

Embracing pain, experiencing the highs  
and lows of everything,  
finding the strength to stand firm  
in myself.  
Sometimes it still comes back,  
but never as overpowering as before.

Not seeing a full stop when God sees  
a comma,  
thinking that abuse is a comma,  
not a full stop.

Knowing there was a part of me that  
no one could get to,  
I'm fighting to get that back,  
fighting to get that restored.

Remembering that life is not meant to  
be like this,  
learning everything I can,  
refusing to believe it is hopeless.

Feeling that there is more to me,  
that something is calling me  
to be greater.

Raising children and not passing on  
that baggage,  
deciding that it ends here.  
Giving my children what I wanted.

These are the places where the truth is,  
the truth is not in the shadows.

# Getting through: coping with the effects of abuse and striving for a different life

*“ I feel like I lost my childhood; my innocence. I never had a chance to be a child*

In this section we are going to talk about the effects of abuse and ways that men have coped with these effects in order to keep taking steps towards the life they want to have and the person they want to be.

Some people use their power to manipulate, control, force and trap young people into relationships in which they are sexually abused. This manipulation, betrayal and assault often leaves young people and adults with feelings of self-blame, dirtiness, shame, fear, physical injury, self-hatred, isolation and confusion long after the abuse has stopped.

*“ Abuse makes you see things in a different light. I had to find resources in myself. You learn to be resourceful with what you have got*

The effects of sexual abuse relate to the abuse and not the person. This means that the troubling and painful feelings, behaviours and thoughts people experience are a legacy of the manipulation, control, betrayal and physical assault that occurs during abuse. Some ideas about abuse view people who have been abused as being permanently damaged or wounded. Men tell us that these ideas can make it difficult to feel hopeful about changing their lives. It is important to remember that recovering from and dealing with the effects of abuse is a journey or a process.

All the men who contributed to this booklet hold the view that the effects of abuse can be changed and can have less impact on your life. This does not mean that you will forget the abuse or its effects, nor does it mean that there won't be times when the effects are more present for you. Rather, when these times occur it is more possible to deal with the effects because they have been explored in the past. Below are some of the more common effects of abuse that men have talked about.

*“ I've had the experience of post traumatic stress disorder. I've had certain aspects of it and I believe that even in 10 years there will still be things there, but I will probably be handling them differently or better. Like the scar on my arm, it's going to be there for the rest of my life, it doesn't mean that I have to worry about it*



## ① Feeling shame and responsibility for the abuse

It is common for men to feel a sense of shame about the sexual abuse they were put through. This shame can be related to memories of the sexual acts they were forced or tricked into as young people, or it can relate to a sense of self-blame about the abuse occurring. Shame might also be connected to questions men have about their sexuality as a result of the sexual abuse.

“ It had me blaming myself, always feeling frustrated, asking myself ‘Why did I let them do that?’

Men can also feel shame if they believe they were somehow responsible for the abuse happening. Men may feel that they were somehow weak in not stopping the sexual abuse or stupid for ‘not seeing it coming’. Even though they were only young people, shame can have men thinking they should have been able to fight off the perpetrator. As mentioned before, it is in the perpetrator’s interests to make the young person feel responsible for the abuse as that will ensure that the abuse is kept secret.

 Remember: sexual abuse is never about what a young person did or didn’t do; it is about what the adult did 

Society sends out a strong message about what it means to be a man. This message is that men are not supposed to be victims or show vulnerability of any kind. Men are expected to be macho, tough and in control at all times. One man said that these ideas had him feeling like he should have been ‘a man when he was only a boy’.

If this story of shame is strong for you, it may be helpful to remember what you were up against in terms of the differences in power that existed between you and the person who was abusing you.

“ It has me always thinking about myself, but in a self-hatred type of way. I feel like I don’t fit in anywhere. I think things like ‘Who am I? Where do I fit?’ I’m still finding out who I am

These ideas about being a ‘macho’ man can also make it hard to respect ways of coping with abuse that don’t involve violence or coming out on top. Young people coping with the pain of abuse by crying, numbing out or imagining they were somewhere else may seem silly or weak. It is important to acknowledge that these are ways of resisting abuse. They are powerful ways that young people tried to look after themselves in an overwhelming, confusing and frightening situation.

“ Thinking about the tactics he used makes me not bash myself up too much, because it’s not my fault. What happened is not any of the victim’s fault. So I stop blaming myself

*// You are feeling shame when the abuse happened to you and you connect it to your body. I can remember being in the shower afterwards and scrubbing and scrubbing to make myself clean*



From talking with men, we know that not resisting abuse, or 'going along with it', was an important way of limiting the amount of abuse they were subjected to. Responses like numbing themselves, doing what they were told or having their body go limp, may have meant the abuse ended sooner. Or that young people were not further physically or emotionally hurt during the abuse.

When sexual abuse is happening or has happened, young people may struggle with feelings of being 'different', 'dirty' or 'worthless'. The physical acts of sexual abuse may be painful, frightening, confusing and psychologically upsetting for a young person. This often leaves them feeling like their bodies are dirty.

*// I was always having to prove myself, having to be the best, trying to show that I was worth more than I felt*

Men have spoken about how even though sexual abuse often left them feeling worthless, as young people they had tried to hold onto a belief that they were worth something. This often involved finding something they were good at, like making models, playing sport, looking after animals or caring for or protecting other people (like younger brothers and sisters, or younger kids).

*// I remind myself that I'm striving for something, going forward and still going ahead. It helps me to remember that it's days now, rather than weeks of hatred*



“

It (expressing anger) was a way of trying to be acknowledged, trying to stop what was going on, a way of trying to control what was happening

## ② Feeling anger and outrage

Many men experience anger and outrage in relation to the abuse they were put through. This anger may have been directed towards the perpetrator for the manipulation, betrayal and sexual assault that happened. Sometimes anger was directed at the responses of others who had seemed uncaring of, or who did not acknowledge the significance of the abuse. At other times the anger was directed at themselves because of shame and self-blame.

Being angry may have been a way young people kept themselves safe from other people and further abuse. Men disclosed that it usually wasn't safe to express this outrage to the person who was abusing them, yet they would express it at other times in their lives.

Anger can be used to keep other people away so as not to have to talk about the abuse. The expression of anger is also a strong message from a young person that they are not happy with what is happening or has happened to them.

If as an adult the expression of anger is uncontrolled or acted out through violence and abuse it may get in the way of maintaining relationships that are important. It can have you hurting yourself and other people you care about. It can also get you into trouble with others or the law.

The message that men in our society get about responding to injustice is often one of physically expressing outrage and anger. One man described it as the 'Rambo response'. In movies and on TV, men who have been wronged are often portrayed as: 'busting heads'; being angry; getting violent justice or revenge; or being an outsider, a loner who is violent.

These messages can have men thinking that the only way to deal with anger is to be violent and abusive to other people and things around them. It can have men feeling weak, ashamed and isolated if they express other feelings like sadness, grief or confusion as they don't fit with the 'Rambo response'.

Finding positive ways to deal with anger can be an ongoing dilemma. Intense anger, hurt and rage about the abuse can leave moments where violence feels like the only way to express how wrong the abuse was. For all of the men who contributed to this booklet, violence did not fit with their own values about what was important to them (e.g. not hurting others, caring for others).

In choosing not to use violence these men were clear that they didn't want to act in ways that were similar to perpetrators of abuse. That is, using power over people with less power and hurting other people. It was important to them to realise that when they had used violence in the past it had hurt people they cared about and left them living in fear.

“ *Revenge is seen as the most appropriate response if somebody does something bad. Particularly child sexual abuse, as a ‘man’, you have to take revenge. When I watch movies I get annoyed because I know that I am being manipulated to feel victimised, to feel outraged and then to feel OK about expressing this outrage through violence. Movies like Rambo say that it’s OK if you’ve been hurt to hurt other people; it’s OK to do what ever you feel like. This is crap*

“ *When I told him about the abuse, my brother offered to go down and bash him. I said, ‘no, it’s pointless to do that’*



In thinking about anger in your own life you might like to think about the following questions:

What are the ways I can express my outrage about what happened that are positive for me, that help me become more of the person I want to be?

Are the ways I am talking to myself increasing the angry feelings or lessening them? What can I do now to interrupt the escalation of these feelings?

What effect is my anger having on the people around me who I care about?  
How can I notice this more?

What do I want to do when I notice anger getting bigger?  
(You could have some ideas already in place that you can draw on)

Who can I talk to who will help with these feelings and not make them bigger?

### ③ Having vivid memories, intense feelings or experiencing 'numbness' and dissociation

Research with survivors of trauma has shown that it is a normal reaction for people who have experienced traumatic events to have vivid visual memories and feeling memories (e.g. fear, panic or other bodily sensations). These experiences are called 'flashbacks'. Flashbacks can be disorientating and frightening as people can feel like they are back in time and in the moment of the trauma.

Another common survival strategy people use in traumatic situations is numbing themselves, or taking themselves away from the traumatic event in their mind or body. This is sometimes called dissociation. It can be a very useful coping mechanism for a young person in situations where things are happening to them that they do not like and have little or no power over. Dissociation may be one of the only ways available to them of keeping safe.

*“ Sometimes I can't separate what is happening now (e.g. walking down the street) from feelings from my past. It's like I don't trust what my senses are telling me, when I know that there is no reason for me to feel like that, but I don't believe it*

*“ I've noticed I become dissociative - like being cut off, not being there on a psychological level and a physical level. It's like a way of coping, separating yourself from it*

Young people often coped with the pain of sexual abuse by using their imaginations to create other worlds, lives or identities where the abuse wasn't happening. In these other worlds they imagined that they were strong, free and had good, caring relationships with people and animals.

*“ I sort of look at paedophilia amongst other things as an act of total control over someone and I hate that. In the past I have had some trouble with some bosses, because it's me the kid and the big bloke leaning over me. I've had big confrontations with bosses where I have felt they have got too close*

As an adult these might seem 'silly' or embarrassing but they are actually very creative ways that children are looking after themselves. Men have spoken about creating physical sensations in their bodies in order to cope with the bad or painful feelings and memories that abuse was bringing into their lives. For others, alcohol and drugs became a way to cope with the abuse and its effects.

In adulthood, situations that are similar in some way to the abuse experienced in childhood can trigger flashbacks or dissociation. In situations where another person is using power over them (e.g. with an aggressive boss or manager) survivors can experience intense feelings of anger, fear or other feelings connected to the sexual abuse. Other times sexual or emotional intimacy may trigger flashbacks and dissociation.

“ I'd wind myself up on a swing and spin until I got dizzy...it was like getting away from those other feelings

#### ④ Feeling isolated

Tactics of abuse may aim to cut young people off from those around them. During abuse and afterwards, young people are not only trapped into secrecy and shame, but may also struggle with feelings of being different or bad. As a result, young people can become isolated and lonely.

In finding ways to cope with the abuse, isolation was often a very important way young people used to keep themselves safe. Isolation meant a reduced chance of being hurt or let down again. Running away or staying away from school or sport was often a way young people tried to protect themselves from further abuse. It also reduced the chance of other young people finding out about the abuse or teasing them about the sexual abuse.

In adulthood, isolation may be a painful and lonely experience. Men can feel isolated, particularly with other men. They can fear that no one will understand, or they will be seen as 'weak', 'gay' or 'damaged goods', if they talk about what has happened to them.

Messages from society add to isolation. In our society a strong man is someone who 'does things on his own'. Asking for help or support can be seen as being weak or that you are 'not coping'. Men have also talked about how living with secrecy around sexual abuse had meant that they were used to doing things on their own and not asking for help even if they needed it.

“ People can't understand, or find it hard to understand, if they have never gone through it...it's not exactly something you can talk about with your mates at the pub

At the back of this booklet there are some suggestions for coping with flashbacks and vivid memories





By developing relationships with people in their adult lives men can overcome the isolation they experienced in childhood. This might be with friends, or rebuilding connections with families, starting families of their own or talking with professionals such as counsellors, doctors, social workers or psychologists.

“ The perpetrator isolated me from my parents, that meant I missed out on my childhood with them. Now I am reclaiming my childhood - it means being close to my parents...people can't understand why I do this, but it is important to me

“ Because you are so used to struggling with your own load, you can't share any of the load with other people. Struggling to do things on your own, you won't bow down to assistance

“ I was always wanting something better or to be somewhere better. I would go over a friend's house whose parents were respectful. The love and harmony that was in that house, I felt loved. It was the type of place I wanted

⑤ Having difficulties with trusting people and being emotionally or sexually close to others

Young people are usually sexually abused by adults or older teenagers who they feel close to, respect, look up to or feel affection for. Perpetrators of abuse often create these close relationships with young people in order to sexually abuse them. In these relationships young people feel cared for or 'special'.

“ There was a lack of relationships or relationships not working. Ideas running around in your head that 'it won't work', 'you'll get abused', 'you're not going to be understood', 'they'll use it as a tool against me'

When sexual abuse is introduced into these relationships, young people often feel betrayed, hurt and confused. They may still like the person who is abusing them but not like the abuse they are being put through. All this creates vigilance around the issue of trusting people. At the same time, checking people out before giving them trust is an important skill young people have used to keep themselves safe from further abuse.

“ You are thinking that people are deceiving you, being really paranoid you think that they're working on you... You're always wary, looking for ulterior motives

Earlier we spoke about how situations that have similarities with abuse may trigger feelings connected with abuse. While friendships or intimate relationships aren't usually abusive, the closeness and caring that is a part of them may trigger strong feelings such as fear of being 'trapped', flashbacks or numbness.

These responses may be linked to the fact that being 'cared for' or 'loved' may remind you in some way of the abuse you were put through as a young person. Similarly, sexual and emotional intimacy might also trigger flashbacks or dissociation.

Feelings of mistrust can also get in the way of developing and maintaining close relationships that are not abusive. Men have spoken about feeling frustrated at wanting to build close relationships with friends, family and partners but feeling unable to because of strong feelings of distrust or fear that get in the way.

“ Seeing a psychologist that was supportive, who offered me unconditional support. All my life I've been paranoid but having this support gives me strength. It has meant that I can talk to my mum about it and I have been able to tell some of my friends

“ Having sexual intimacy difficulties like not feeling able to touch people, reading any hesitation as proof that people do not want to be intimate with you



*I believe that if you tell the truth, there will be people who will understand and you are not so isolated. It's like the world's not this terrible thing, where everyone's out to get you or trying to judge you*

It may be helpful to find ways to notice these feelings and remind yourself that they are about an old betrayal, where 'closeness' and 'caring' were used to manipulate and abuse you. This may not be what is happening now.

Some men have found it important to take little steps in experimenting with giving trust to people. This may be with friendships or in relationships with professionals. Men are encouraged to seek support and talk things through with someone. See the back of this booklet for resources that may help.

*It (counselling) was someone putting their time into me. I felt like Frankenstein, like I didn't belong. I felt isolated, not right. She (the counsellor) gave me strength, and supported me to tell people about what had happened*

## ⑥ Worrying that you will abuse children

One of the most painful, shameful and worrying thoughts men can struggle with is the fear that they will sexually abuse children themselves. Usually this thought is related to an incorrect social belief that people who were abused are somehow damaged and will go on to abuse children when they grow up. This social belief is not supported by any research findings.

*I was scared to go near little kids, because I thought I might abuse them and not know that I was abusing them. I thought it was something that just happened. I didn't know how to understand it, so there was isolation from younger children. That became thoughts of suicide*

What research does suggest is that while a percentage of sex offenders were abused as young people, this is not a 'predictor' of this behaviour. This myth can also link in with a popular idea that people who sexually abuse young people are 'sick' or 'can't help themselves'.



These social beliefs can have men worrying that somehow they will sexually abuse young people without realising they are

It is much more common that people who have experienced abuse as young people have very strong values and beliefs about keeping young people safe from abuse

This incorrect social belief has led to men, for many years, being too afraid to talk about the abuse they experienced as young people. For some men this has had them feeling cautious in their relationships with the young people in their lives who they love. For other men, this has meant that at the same time as knowing they would never hurt a child in the way they have been hurt, this incorrect belief has stopped them from being able to talk about their own hurtful experiences. They feared that people would assume that because they had been abused they were more likely to be abusive towards children.

“ The way I see it is that everybody in life, whether you were abused or not, we all have choices in life. Now as an abused person we also have the same choice. I know what it was like for me when all these different blokes did me wrong, I hated it. So how the hell can I inflict that on anyone? That’s the way I look at it. I’ve made that choice not to go down that path. You have a choice to offend or not offend and I have chosen not to offend because all you are doing is to continue that cycle

As more men have begun to talk about the abuse they experienced as young people, this incorrect belief has been exposed as yet another way of men being stopped from talking about the abuse. This belief comes out of community ignorance and only serves to protect ideas that make it more possible for abuse to continue.

“ I can remember hearing that abused children become abusers. That stereotype scared me because I thought if I came forward and said I was abused then I would be just coming forward and saying that I was an abuser. So that was a concern for me because I didn’t want to be judged

## ⑦ Questioning your sexuality

Thinking about sexuality is complex at the best of times. There are strong social pressures to be attracted to the opposite sex and to build sexual relationships around this. Any feelings and thoughts of attraction to people of the same sex are seen as wrong or as a bad kind of different.

Society prefers to think about sexual identity in black and white terms (e.g. you are either gay or straight). However, the reality is that people’s experience of their sexuality is far more complex and diverse. Sexuality is much more than sexual acts. It can include experiences of emotional, spiritual and psychological attraction and intimacy.

In the section called ‘Naming the tactics of abuse’ we talked about how a major aim of these tactics is to make the young person feel responsible in some way for the sexual abuse occurring. This may occur through psychological manipulation or through having the young person experiencing a form of pleasure.



I sort of accepted it (sexual abuse) as part of the norm. It's like living a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde type of life. It was like a split life, one side was really seedy, I knew other kids didn't do these things, all this sex behind closed doors

Sexual abuse can occur at an early age. This includes when young people are manipulated into sexual acts before they are developmentally ready, or at a time when young people are starting to explore their own sexuality. In both of these instances a young person's right over their body is violated.

At the same time, sexual abuse commonly occurs in relationships where young people are experiencing emotional closeness. This creates confusion, shame, distrust or lack of personal boundaries. These effects along with social pressures and beliefs can make it hard for people to express their sexuality in ways that feel positive and affirming for them.



*A message you get during abuse is 'Don't try and protect your body'. It felt like my body wasn't really mine or didn't belong to me. I wasn't able to control it or say no*

It is common for men who have experienced sexual abuse to have questions about their sexuality and sexual preferences. Men who are mainly attracted to other men may question whether this attraction is a result of abuse.



*This might sound weird, but sometimes when I'm having sex I actually feel like I am a perpetrator*

Other men who identify as heterosexual may be confused or ashamed of feelings or thoughts of attraction to men. They may question whether this is a result of sexual abuse. Or they might think those feelings are proof that they are somehow responsible in the abuse.

A number of aspects of sexual abuse may lead to confusion around sexuality. Homophobia can make it really hard to think about and accept whatever sexual feelings you may be having. In thinking about your own sexuality, if you are experiencing confusion, shame or difficulties around sexuality or sexual intimacy we encourage you to find someone you feel safe with to talk to. You can refer to the section at the end of this booklet for further resources.



I keep reminding myself what I should focus on. I can sink back into negative types of thinking. When I am thinking about the abusive aspect of the relationship I can't focus on myself

## ⑧ Finding it hard to trust your own judgement



This is a very confusing experience for a young person



A young person might start to deny or distrust their own judgement



In the section on 'Naming the tactics of abuse' we talked about how perpetrators of sexual abuse often psychologically manipulate young people into thinking they are complicit with the abuse. Perpetrators of abuse may ask questions that imply equal participation e.g. 'Do you like that?' or by saying 'I know you want this', or they may describe acts of sexual abuse as 'teaching' or signs of loyalty or friendship.

This is a very confusing experience for a young person. On the one hand they have an older person who they often like, respect or look up to telling them what is happening is 'OK' and on the other hand they may be having feelings and thoughts of fear, dislike, discomfort or pain.

Due to powerlessness, and in order to survive sexual abuse, a young person might start to deny or distrust their own judgement. Some men realise later in life that they were tricked into sexual abuse and this realisation can also have them distrusting their own judgement.

*It's like living for other people, or hiding. It's hard to find a sense of yourself. It teaches you not to express yourself in any way. It causes self-doubt, you can't confront anyone about anything. You might do it in an uncontrollable way, when you lash out*

Men have found that an important starting point in trusting their judgement more is being able to talk about the tactics of abuse and its effects; what is important to them; and what they value in life.

*I don't trust my own senses. I never believe that people are actually saying what they mean. It's like I'm always trying to work it out, which means there is constant adrenalin and anxiety.*

## *It's not a one-way street*

*Battling on, feeling alone  
like a little flower in the desert.  
Feeling imprisoned by my past,  
what is wrong with me?  
One minute happy,  
the next, down at the bottom.*

*Bogged down in your own problem,  
abuse or other stuff.  
Tragedy, it's easy to be bogged down in that.  
I don't want the past to run my life,  
I want to be myself.*

*If I didn't believe I could let go of this  
I'd top myself,  
Why would you go on?*

*I know others struggle,  
and I'm not alone in my struggles,  
it's OK to struggle, it's a part of life.*

*You can't do this on your own,  
there's the strength that lies within,  
and the strength of working as a team,  
strength and support.*

*Interdependence.  
Not, I don't need you, I don't need the  
entire world or I can't live without you.  
But two ways, we reciprocate.*

*Like practicing compassion  
with my partner, lover, friend.  
Talking about intimate stuff,  
getting to know each other,  
verbal closeness not just physical,  
caring more about her feelings,  
seeing them, recognising them.*

*Or being with a friend and  
valuing simplicity,  
creating an atmosphere  
where people can just exist.  
Being recognised as a deep person  
helps me be myself, back to my core,  
back to my integrity.*

*Appreciating my mother  
who believes that there is hope for me.  
Who understands the pain I'm going  
through and the barriers I throw up  
and knows I am not a bad person.  
Who knows how I lived my life  
over a period,  
who taught me to love and enjoy giving  
and gave me a greater appreciation  
for what life is about.*

*Or having my brother,  
who always believes I've got a future,  
that I can have a life as well.  
I've turned to him when I was upset  
and I inspire him to be a good father.*

*My Dad who is supportive,  
I see in him the ideas of integrity,  
acting fairly.  
It makes me happier  
and it helps him stay connected to his  
fathering instincts,  
completing him in some way.*

*Parenting children,  
giving guidance, support,  
helping them to grow into a person  
of substance  
opens me up, helps me understand myself.  
Giving them space to be,  
while giving them safety.*

*Offering compassion,  
being there for other people.  
Giving and getting positive support  
helps get my feet back on the ground.  
My abusers never had any compassion,  
so I want to have compassion,  
I want to be different.*

*This is the power, strength, support  
abusers never wanted us to have.  
The more we speak up the less power  
they have.  
The strength that lies within,  
and the strength of working as a team.*

# Finding your own way through: staying connected to what you value in life

## Noticing that you are more than the effects of abuse

The 'effects' of abuse often started as ways and strategies that young people used to cope with the confusing, frightening and painful things that were being done to them. The ways young people resisted and coped with sexual abuse shows that they were doing the best they could in a situation where they had very little power or control over what was happening to them.

Young people may have adopted different behaviours aimed to keep them safe from further abuse. These behaviours eased some of the pain of the effects of abuse and were a way to try to let other adults know that there was something wrong. Sadly, because people don't know that abuse is happening, these behaviours are often named or understood as other things.

**“** I would disrespect adults that were doing the wrong thing

For example, if someone is missing school in order to get away from an abusive teacher or using alcohol or drugs to cope with painful feelings, they may be labelled as 'troubled' or 'delinquent'. The following are some of the labels men who contributed to this booklet had been given when they were younger: weird, a problem child, disturbed, disordered, naughty, ill-mannered, oddball, shy, a loner.

**“** I was allowed to get away with stuff, like I stole so much and I didn't really want to steal anything. I just wanted people to ask why I was doing it. I know that the whole time I was doing it, I hated myself

In talking about these labels, men sometimes realised that as teenagers and adults they had taken on these labels about themselves.



Men reflected on how these negative labels often came to speak the 'truth' about them as people. It's important to realise that these labels are not the truth but a misinterpretation of behaviours.

These were often ways young people tried to stand up to abuse or its effects. For example, one man was called a 'problem child' because he refused to do anything his stepfather asked him to do. This man spoke about how this refusal was about not respecting this man because he was sexually abusing him.

Despite the painful and isolating effects of sexual abuse, many men have never given up on their desire or dreams for a different life. Even though the effects of abuse are often strong and painful, men have managed at different times to act in ways that takes them closer to the life they would prefer to have.

// I was always being naughty and wanting someone to ask what was wrong

 Young people may have adopted different behaviours aimed to keep them safe from further abuse

This is reflected in:

- The way people choose to live their lives
- The types of lives they have built with other people, or
- The hopes and dreams for their future lives.

## The idea of being a survivor

Some people who have experienced abuse use the word survivor to describe themselves. In doing so they do not think about themselves as only a victim of abuse. In a way, 'survivor' is saying there are always two stories about sexual abuse and its effects.

One story describes the way power is used against young people to trick, force and trap them into abuse. This story talks about the power of the adult and the powerlessness of the child. The other story is about the way young people found, and as adults continue to find, ways to resist both the abuse and the effects of abuse. These stories often have not been told and are an important part of recovering from the effects of abuse.

People have found the story of survival important. It helps them to remember that even though the abuse and its effects can feel overwhelming, the abuse could not control or defeat all of them. The part that could not be controlled or defeated was there as a child. It also continues to be there as an adult.

Even through hard times, people held on to what was important for them in their lives.

The journey of resistance, protest and survival is often hard to see. It is easy to look back on our childhood through 'adult eyes' and forget what it was like to be a young person.

In the first part of this booklet we talked about adults using many different forms of power to manipulate a young person. We also looked at how tactics of abuse aim to psychologically manipulate young people to think they are responsible or willing participants in the abuse.

When as adults we forget about this use of power it can be easy to think thoughts like 'I did nothing to stop it' or that what you did was not 'good enough' or 'silly' because it didn't stop the abuse.



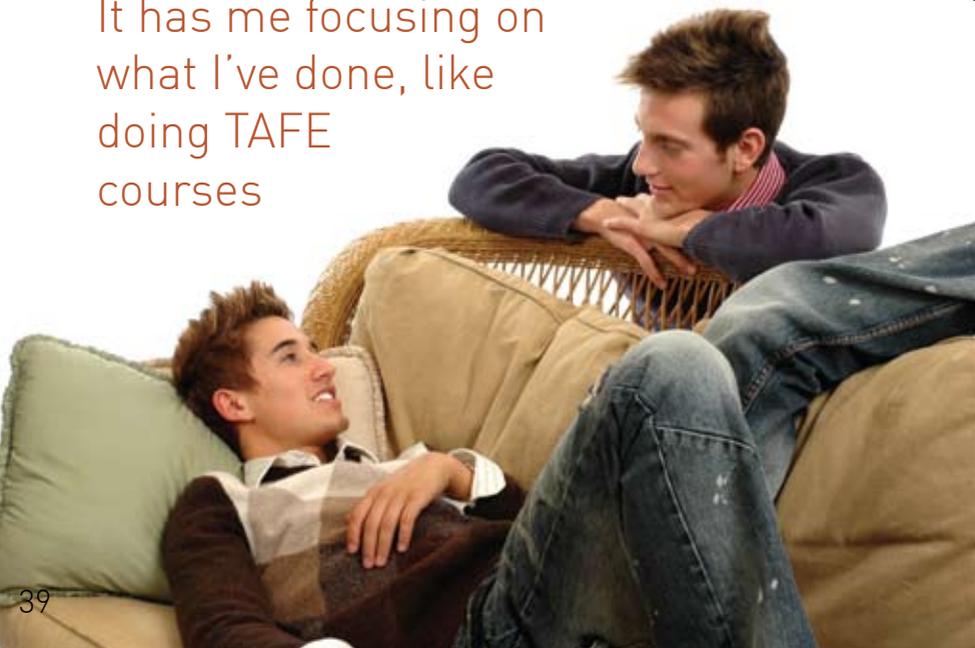
// It changes all the time, your position changes, you might be really on top of it one week and then all of a sudden what you've learnt has just turned bad and you just turn to a little piled heap on the ground and it can change rapidly. But you change your stance, you go from being a victim to a survivor, which gives you a bit more empowerment a bit more agro to be able to deal with it

Another aspect that makes the story of survival hard to remember is that abuse occurs in secret. There is no one around to see how the young person tried to stop the abuse. Behaviours like crying, going tense, freezing, going numb or cleaning yourself afterwards are powerful ways young people are saying no to abuse. Perpetrators of abuse will often ignore or minimise these responses which can have young people feeling unimportant, pathetic, weak or confused.

// *A victim I think, to me, is someone who has suffered a gross injustice and when I was introduced to the whole process of calling myself a survivor it just helped me have a little victory over the perpetrator and it helped me have more positive thoughts about my overcoming the situation*

// The survivor focus is empowering.

It has me focusing on what I have achieved. What I have achieved to get this far in life. I thought I would be dead by 21. It has me focusing on what I've done, like doing TAFE courses





“ Talk with supportive people about what you are doing

## Remembering that you are not alone

While there are many painful effects of sexual abuse, it is important to remember that it is possible to heal these effects and live more of the life you would like to lead. As we said earlier, dealing with the effects of abuse is often a slow process that requires courage, patience and perseverance. This doesn't have to be a journey on your own and we hope that this booklet supports you in feeling that you are not on your own.

“ *I don't think you ever get over it, but you get a different perspective. It doesn't change that it happened, or the feelings about it but you realise it was just a moment or moments in time and you can choose to not let it define you. I know it sounds simple and if someone had told me that before I would have been angry and told them to get stuffed. But it's not like that, one day I decided I wouldn't let it affect me anymore, not let it control my life anymore*

It may be helpful during tough times to remind yourself that the men you have heard in this booklet have experienced and are still experiencing similar struggles to what you may be. These men want you to know that they have also gone through ups and downs. You might want to think about some of the things you have in common with these men. It might be some of their values, their desire to change, the ways they have survived sexual abuse or something else.



“ I fully believe that if I hadn't been abused, there's no way I'd be thinking the way I am now. Like having a sense of humour, having empathy for others, knowing what is really important in life. I'd probably just be looking after number one, not caring about other people. But because I have been abused, I look at other things differently, I look at other people differently, I look at animals differently. It has changed me in a lot of aspects towards the good rather than towards the bad, which I have had my fair share of in the past

“ It's probably the greatest task watching these kids grow up to be decent human beings. Knowing that I have done that and they won't experience what I went through. Watching these kids grow that haven't been part of any abuse or neglect

You might find it helpful to talk with someone about the ideas in this booklet or what it has had you thinking about. Or you may want to share this booklet with someone you trust. We understand that talking is not for everyone but this is what some men have said about talking to counsellors or other men about sexual abuse.

“ Talking to my counsellor helped me realise I'm not a kid anymore and this helps me in thinking about different ways of reacting to people and things that are challenging. I am feeling softer and more open to other people and ideas

“ *Since I've been talking about the abuse I feel more at one with myself and I'm not clinging to an idea about myself as a victim. I'm reminding myself it's over and beginning to trust men again*

# Self care: managing the effects of sexual abuse

People have told us they have found it helpful and important to try and think in advance about how they might manage the effects of abuse when they know they might be strongly reminded about the abuse (for example in reading this booklet).

Below are suggestions from other survivors of ways to look after yourself when the effects of abuse have felt particularly painful:

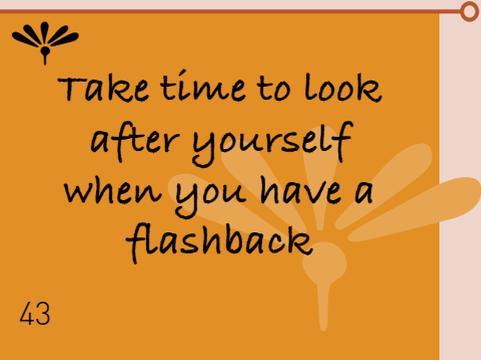
- Acknowledging or reminding yourself that you are a survivor and feeling proud of surviving what happened to you
- Connecting to things about yourself that have supported you through hard times in the past
- Talking with supportive people about what you are doing
- Having someone to talk with before and after reading this booklet
- Preparing for the possibility that you may feel tired, exhausted, physically unwell or have a loss of appetite after reading parts of this booklet
- Making sure you've got something planned, like rewarding yourself, or doing something special after you have spent time thinking and reading about sexual abuse and its effects
- Congratulating yourself on what you have achieved and reminding yourself it takes courage to be willing to face these painful issues
- Linking in with groups such as the men's group running through Relationships Australia (SA) - see the Respond SA website [www.respondsa.org.au](http://www.respondsa.org.au)
- Talking to a counsellor for support - refer to page 45 for contact numbers.



# Ideas for coping with flashbacks

- ① Tell yourself you are having a flashback and that this is okay and very normal in people who were traumatised as children (or as adults).
- ② Remind yourself that the worst is over. It happened in the past and it is not happening now. The 'child' inside you who was abused is giving you these memories to use in your healing and, however terrible you feel, you survived the awfulness then. This means you can survive and get through what you are remembering now.
- ③ Call on the 'adult' part of yourself to tell your 'child' that he is not alone, not in any danger now and that you will help him to get through this. Let your child self know it's okay to remember and to feel what he feels and that this will help him in healing from what has happened to him. However hard it is for you, he is communicating in the only way he can.
- ④ Try some of these ways of 'grounding' yourself and becoming more aware of the present:
  - Stamp your feet, grind them around on the floor to remind yourself where you are now
  - Look around the room, noticing the colours, the people, the shapes of things
  - Listen to the sounds around you: the traffic, voices, the washing machine, etc
  - Feel your body, the boundary of your skin, your clothes, the chair or floor supporting you
  - Have an elastic band around your hand that you can 'ping' against your wrist and feel on your skin
  - Tell yourself that feeling is in the now, the things you are re-experiencing were in the past.

- ⑤ Take care of your breathing. Breathe deeply down to your diaphragm; put your hand there (just above your navel) and breathe so that your hand gets pushed up and down. Count slowly to five as you breathe. When we get scared we breathe too quickly and shallowly and our body panics. This causes dizziness, shakiness and more panic. Breathing slowly and deeply will stop the panic.



Take time to look  
after yourself  
when you have a  
flashback

- ⑥ If you have lost a sense of where you end and the rest of the world begins, rub your body so you can feel its edges, the boundary of you. Wrap yourself in a blanket, feel it around you.
- ⑦ Get support if you would like it. Let people close to you know about flashbacks so they can help if you want them to. That might mean holding you, talking to you, helping you to reconnect with the present, to remember you are safe and cared for now.
- ⑧ Flashbacks are powerful experiences which drain your energy. Take time to look after yourself when you have a flashback. You could have a warm, relaxing bath or a sleep, a warm drink, play some soothing music or just take some quiet time for yourself. Your 'child' and you deserve being taken care of, given all you went through in the past.
- ⑨ When you feel ready, write down all you can remember about the flashback and how you got through it. This will help you to remember information for your healing and to remind you that you did get through it (and can again).

Remember you are not crazy. Flashbacks are normal and you are healing.

*Adapted from Bristol Crisis Centre for Women - Ideas for coping with flashbacks*

“ Flashbacks are normal and mean you are healing



# Where can I get help?

**Relationships Australia (SA)** / Adelaide (08) 8223 4566 / Berri (08) 8582 4122 / Hindmarsh (08) 8340 2022 / Marion (08) 8377 5400 / Ridgehaven (08) 8396 4237 / Salisbury (08) 8250 6600 / [www.respondsa.org.au](http://www.respondsa.org.au)

**UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide** / Childhood Sexual Abuse Counselling Team  
(08) 8202 5190

**Centacare** / Adelaide (08) 8210 8200 / Salisbury (08) 8250 3694

**SHineSA - Sexual Health Information Networking & Education**  
Woodville (08) 8300 5301 / Morphett Vale (08) 8325 8164 / Davoren Park (08) 8252 7955

## Local Primary Health Care Services

### Southern Primary Health

Clovelly Park (08) 8277 2488  
Woodcroft (08) 8325 8100  
Noarlunga (08) 8384 9266  
Seaford (08) 8392 4500  
Aldinga (08) 8557 9500

### Eastern Primary Health

Enfield (08) 8342 8600

### Northern Primary Health

Playford (08) 8252 9900  
Salisbury (08) 8281 7644  
Tea Tree Gully (08) 8263 1155

### Western Primary Health

Port Adelaide (08) 8240 9611  
Parks (08) 8243 5611

## For young people

**Salisbury Shopfront Youth Health & Information Service** / (08) 8281 1775

**Southern Primary Health - Marion Youth** / Warradale (08) 8377 1055

**Southern Junction Family Services Centre** / Christies Beach (08) 8326 2955

### The Second Story Youth Health Centre

24 Hour Service 1300 131 719 / Adelaide (08) 8232 0233 / Elizabeth (08) 8255 3477  
Christies Beach (08) 8326 6053 / Woodville (08) 8268 1225

## Private practitioners

Some private practitioners who have worked with Respond SA in the past are listed on its website [www.respondsa.org.au](http://www.respondsa.org.au)

## A word of thanks

We would like to thank all the men who in different ways have contributed to this booklet. As a society, we are still learning how to talk about childhood sexual abuse and its effects. As professionals we are still learning how to work with men around this issue. In many ways it is the men who have the courage to speak out about their experiences that are helping this knowledge develop to assist other men in the future.

We would also like to thank the South Australian Government Department for Families and Communities for funding this booklet. A special thanks needs to go to Relationships Australia (SA) for their commitment to bringing this issue to the fore and to the workers from Respond SA, in particular Andrew Groome, Sue Mann and Jodie Sloan who brought with them the skills, knowledge and experience in the writing of this booklet. Thanks also to Dr Patrick O'Leary for his knowledge and editorial input.

*Have something planned, like rewarding yourself, or doing something special after you have spent time thinking and reading about sexual abuse and its effects*

*Congratulate yourself on what you have achieved*





There is this road, a straight stretch of road, with a right hand at the end of it. There are all these trees along it, and when they are in full bloom it's like an overhead canopy, it's beautiful. A couple of times when I had suicidal tendencies I'd drive along that road and think this would be the way to go, the perfect place to do it. But then I thought why destroy that beauty and let those bastards win. Because that's what happens if you kill yourself. You don't win, they win and I don't want to let them win. If I can help kids in my life, if I can stop suicidal tendencies then I've won. They might have beaten me when I was a kid, but they won't beat me as an adult

**respond**sa  
adult childhood  
sexual abuse service

Respond SA is a program of

*Relationships Australia*

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

OCTOBER 2008