

THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF MALES



Whakatu Mauri / Auckland Rape Crisis
Supporting survivors of sexual violence and their whanau. Working to eliminate rape and sexual abuse through education and community work.

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How common is male abuse ?

The sexual abuse of male children is more common than many people think. One New Zealand study found that one in five children who are sexually abused is male⁽¹⁾, and overseas research suggests that 16% of males will experience sexual abuse before the age of 18⁽²⁾. The majority of the sexual abuse that boys experience is perpetrated by family members ('incest')⁽²⁾.

Male sexual abuse is likely to be widely under-reported. There are several explanations for why this may be so:

- you may feel a sense of shame or self-blame about coming forward as a survivor of abuse, regardless of what gender you are
- you may feel that as a male, you are less likely to be believed than a woman might be about the abuse that has happened to you
- you may be unsure about what effects the abuse may have on your long-term sexuality, and what it says about you as a person

Many of the ideas we have about male sexual abuse are based on misconceptions that exist in our society about sexual abuse and what it means to be a man. These myths can discourage male survivors from sharing their experience with others and getting the support they are entitled to.

"But real men don't get raped or sexually abused"

This is a myth that encourages males to stay quiet about their abuse and not get the support they need. Some men feel that the abuse has robbed them of their masculinity. This is because our society sends strong messages to males about what it means to be a 'real man' (e.g. someone who no-one messes with, and who doesn't feel emotional pain or hurt). Many of these messages do not allow for men to be 'victims'. Ideas about 'real men' always wanting sex (especially sex with an older woman) also work to discourage men from seeing what happened to them as real abuse.

Many male survivors overcompensate to prove they are 'real men' by engaging in very macho-type behaviours. These behaviours frequently become self-destructive as well as being destructive towards others and can make it extremely difficult for men to heal from their abuse.

(1) Fergusson, Lynskey & Horwood, 1996, cited in J. Read (1997). National and international epidemiology. Paper given at the Doctor's for Sexual Abuse Care Conference 1997 – "Sexual abuse of males: New Zealand's Untold Story"
Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., Lewis, I., & Smith, C. (1990). Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics, and risk factors. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 14, 19-28.

FAQs – frequently asked questions

“If I have been abused by someone of my gender, does that make me gay?”

No. Your sexuality is not determined by any abuse you have suffered. You determine your own sexuality by choosing who you want to have sex with when you have the power to say yes or no for yourself.

“If I was sexually abused, will I go on to abuse others?”

It is a popular misconception in our society that people who have been abused in childhood will grow up to become abusers (the ‘cycle of abuse’). However, if this was true there would be more female sexual offenders than males as research shows that more girls are abused than boys. This is not the case. Whether an offender goes on to offend is their responsibility only.

“Are men who abuse other males (especially children) gay?”

No. Research shows that only around 3% of males who abuse males identify as homosexual (Jenny et al, 1994). The vast majority of offenders (82%) are living in heterosexual relationships at the time they offend.

“If I sometimes enjoyed the physical feeling, does that mean it wasn’t really abuse?”

No. It is natural for our body to respond to stimuli even when we don’t want it to and feel emotionally uncomfortable about it. Consensual sexual activity is when you feel positive about the experience and your body also responds. However, there are some circumstances where the relationship between two people is too unequal for consent (e.g. between an adult and child).

“I’m worried about any physical effects the abuse may have had on my body – what can I do?”

Even if the abuse happened years ago, you may still be wondering whether the abuse had any effect on your body. The best thing you can do, both for your physical and mental well-being, is to get a physical check-up. Sexual health clinics (like Auckland Sexual Health at Auckland Hospital) provide thorough and confidential check-ups, or you could talk to your personal G.P. If you would like more information about your options, contact Auckland Rape Crisis.

www.rapecrisis.org.nz

FAQs – cont.

“How can I tell my partner about the abuse?”

Many men find telling their partner about their abuse to be the hardest part of their healing process. You may find that receiving some support before you choose to tell your partner (e.g. from a counsellor) where you can work out ways to tell your partner is really helpful. Likewise, gathering information you can share with your partner (on things like the prevalence and effects of male sexual abuse) may make you feel more comfortable about telling, and may help your partner understand what you have gone through.

Telling someone

As our society encourages men to suppress their feelings and emotions from a young age, it can be hard for men to open up and tell people about their abuse. However, breaking the secrecy around sexual abuse is a vital first step in enabling you to deal with it and begin to heal.

Many men are unsure about the kinds of reactions they will get from people they disclose their abuse to. While people may not react in the same way, these are some things to keep in mind when you're thinking about telling someone . . .

- Who, when, and how you tell is your choice. You should never feel forced into telling someone.
- Getting support for yourself (e.g. from a counsellor) can be useful as they can help you work through your feelings about the abuse.
- Give the person you tell some time and space to process what you've told them. You may want to give them some information to read to help them understand what you have been through (Auckland Rape Crisis can provide you with resources)
- Give the person an opportunity to be a support person for you, if this is what you both want. You may want to tell them what they can do to best help you. Talking together about their role in your healing process may make your relationship a stronger and more understanding one.

If a person you have disclosed to reacts badly, it's not your fault. Don't be discouraged; you have been courageous enough to tell someone, which is an important step in your healing process.

Support options

Once you have decided to seek out some support, there are a lot of options open to you. Many survivors of sexual abuse find that seeing a counsellor or attending a support group are very helpful experiences in their healing. You can call us on 366 7213 during office hours to talk through the options.