

SURVIVORS' WISDOM*

Please be aware that Child Victim's Voice is not a crisis center, and if you are in need of immediate help please call your local crisis center, dial 911, or present to the nearest emergency room.

1. Acknowledge your courage. It takes courage to acknowledge that we've been abused and it is not easy to even admit it to ourselves. Just looking at this Web site is a big step.

2. Know that you are not alone. There are many more survivors of abuse than any of us wants to believe. According to a study cited on www.darkness2light.org, an estimated 39 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse exist in America today.¹ Most of us believed that we were the only victim of the person who abused us. Over time we have learned that there is rarely, if ever, only one victim of a sexual predator.

While we were being abused we were isolated and felt extremely alone. Now it is possible to join with other survivors to find healing. We do not have to be alone anymore.

SURVIVOR RESOURCES IN DELAWARE:

Survivors of Abuse in Recovery, Inc. (SOAR) is a statewide recovery program which provides counseling, referral, and education services to adult, adolescent and child survivors of sexual abuse and assault, their non-offending partners, and non-offending family members.

www.soarinc.com

Northern New Castle County, Pennsylvania and New Jersey
405 Foulk Road
Wilmington, DE 19803
(302) 655-3953

Central and southern Delaware, and Eastern Shore of Maryland
1001 S. Bradford St., Suite 8
Dover, DE 19904
(302) 422-3811

SNAP Delaware

An informal support group for survivors of childhood sexual abuse and their supporters is held in Wilmington on the second Tuesday of every month at 7 p.m. SNAP is a confidential, non-religious group of men and women who were sexually victimized as children in any religious setting. The SNAP support group provides a safe and sympathetic place for victims of childhood sexual abuse to be heard.

Date: Held second Tuesday of each month.

Time: 7 p.m.

For location, e-mail: snapdelaware@yahoo.com

If you are not in Delaware, but are looking for a survivor support group in your area please contact us at info@childvictimsvoice.com.

ContactLifeline

Delaware's 24-hour confidential helpline services
In Delaware: 1-800-262-9800
www.contactlifeline.org/

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**TO REPORT CHILD ABUSE IN DELAWARE:
Call Delaware's 24-hour Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline
Report child abuse or neglect by calling 1-800-292-9582
<http://kids.delaware.gov/services/crisis.shtml>**

Or contact the Office of the Attorney General of Delaware
Call the Criminal Division at (302) 577-8500
or visit:
<http://attorneygeneral.delaware.gov/office/contact.shtml>

3. Don't go to the administrators who employed the perpetrator. Many survivors have gone to officials at the institution that employed the perpetrator to look for help, guidance and/or healing. Many of us went to these leaders, after building up loads of courage and strength to face them, because we wanted to make sure that our perpetrators didn't abuse anyone else. We mistakenly thought that the leaders would want to ensure others' safety too and that the perpetrators would be removed from access to children. So many of us did this without ever telling anyone else. Then we found out we were wrong. The administrators did not care about protecting others and they did not care about us. Most of us found the experience of going to the perpetrators' employer just awful. They were insensitive and acted like they did not know how to respond to us. We were looking for healing and consolation but found further victimization. Most of us left feeling devastated and the entire experience of talking to the institutional leaders left us hurting more than ever.

4. Don't go alone! If you still decide to go to administrator or employer of the perpetrator, don't go alone. Taking someone with you provides a witness to the event and gives you someone to "debrief" with when it's over. Write down what is said. Don't

believe what you hear just because they said it. Check it out with other sources before relying on what they tell you. Have a prepared time limit on how long you will meet with them and stick to it. Prepare ahead of time what you will and won't tell and stick to your prepared plan. Protect yourself. Take time after any meeting with administrators to "debrief" and go over what occurred. Keep track of all info you give them and exact details of what you tell. They are keeping track so you should too. ***Again, it is not advisable to meet with the administration that employed or managed the professional or volunteer who abused you without experienced legal representation.***

5. Seek alternative help. We recommend that you go to a trusted family member or friend, or seek professional help from a counselor. Many others have gone through a process of healing from sexual abuse. We do not have to "reinvent the wheel." We may as well learn from others and for many survivors a professional counselor is very helpful. ***In Delaware, survivors of sexual abuse can contact professional counselors, regardless of ability to pay, at www.soarinc.com.***

6. Learn your legal rights. The leaders of institutions that have a history of employing and retaining sexual predators have lots more information about our abuse than we do. They know our legal rights, but most of us don't know. We can choose to exercise our legal rights or not but it is empowering to make the choice. Without knowing we don't make the choice.

Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse have ignored learning about our legal rights because we assumed we didn't need to learn them because we thought the leaders we trusted would do the right thing. By the time we figured out that these institutions were not automatically going to do the right thing it was too late for many of us to exercise our legal rights to expose wrongdoing and to seek accountability and justice. We have noticed that in the past institutional leaders have strung victims along until the statute of limitations has run, or in layman's terms, the opportunity we had to file a claim was over before we knew it.

By the time many of us realized it was too late to do anything. That experience was so painful to many survivors because it was another moment of helplessness and powerlessness at the hands of our perpetrator or his or her supervisors.

Some things for survivors considering legal action to think about:

Research other cases and the attorneys who have handled them.

• Speak to other survivors or members of organizations that provide help to survivors, including but not limited to:

Child Victims Voice (www.childvictimsvoice.com)

Darkness to Light (www.darkness2light.org)

MaleSurvivor (www.malesurvivor.org)

National Association to Prevent Sexual Abuse of Children (NAPSAC)
(www.napsac.us)

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) (www.rainn.org)

Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) (www.snapnetwork.org)

and your certified, professional therapist.

- Interview attorneys carefully.
- Only make decisions that you are comfortable with.
- When you were sexually abused as a child you didn't have a choice but now as an adult you have a chance to exercise your discretion and use your voice.

PART 2

7. Healthy survivors: Many survivors have developed addictions or health problems. The pain and betrayal we felt while being abused was intense. We had no knowledge of how to cope with the experience of being abused as well as the feelings that came as a result of the abuse. All of us found a way to survive or we would not be here today. The problem is that many of the coping mechanisms we used to survive the abuse are not healthy for us today.

Here are just some of the types of problems survivors of childhood sexual abuse can suffer:

Alcoholism, drug addiction, over-eating, under-eating, bulimia or other eating disorders, co-dependency, finger-nail biting, promiscuity, detachment from intimacy, sleep disorders, religious fanaticism, stomach or intestinal problems, or just an overall attitude of anger wherein we have a “chip on our shoulder.”

If any of the above are a problem for you, you may decide to seek help. Now we are not being abused and so we don't need to rely on the unhealthy coping mechanisms we used in the past. Help for these types of problems will liberate and free us to be able to face the real issues of our abuse.

8. Facing the issues: Acknowledging and facing the issues of our abuse can be extremely time consuming and require lots of energy and emotions. As a result many of us have felt completely drained and had months of feeling tired and overwhelmed. When we feel this way it is easy to become irritable and short-tempered.

Many survivors have found it helpful to:

8A. Keep our “significant others” (spouses, parents, room-mates, bosses, anyone who is in close proximity to us) aware of what we are going through.

While they will never know what it feels like to be us they may find it helpful to deal with us (our mood swings, tears, tempers, etc) if they know what we are coping with and that we are in pain. Some of our “significant others” have found it helpful to get their own counselor to know how to help us get through the healing. Being a significant other to a survivor is not easy and we survivors need to be aware of how difficult it can be for those around us. However, we must keep clear that it is not our job to take care of them. It is their job to care for us.

8B. Take time off to “feel the pain.” If we attend counseling or a support group on Monday nights we find a babysitter for the rest of the evening, or take off work on Tuesday mornings. Frequently when we are dealing with our abuse new thoughts, emotions, memories, etc., come up, at any moment, with any trigger. Sometimes it is easier to deal with it knowing that there is a specific time that we will have to deal with the issue.

Doing the every day habits of life, like getting dressed, going to work, feeding the kids, caring for spouses and housework, etc., must go on.

Life cannot stop while we decide to heal from our abuse. Planning ahead can help us juggle our emotions with our responsibilities.

8C. Exercise. Of course dealing with our emotions can make us want to curl up into a ball and crawl under our desks rather than getting up and moving. But in the long run we will feel better if we get up and take a long vigorous walk, go for a bike ride, or whatever we can do to move our bodies. Getting our hearts to beat faster gives us an emotional lift too and makes it easier to cope with the painful emotions. Extending ourselves physically also can become a way to release pent up anger, guilt and shame.

8D. Do something soothing. Take a long hot bath. Drink some herbal tea. Eat a dark chocolate candy bar.

8E. Many survivors have found getting a massage helpful. For many survivors as our bodies are touched by safe, healing hands of an experienced, licensed professional massage therapist, the touch releases some of the pent up pain, shame and guilt that we may be holding. Sometimes survivors find they have had backaches, shoulder aches for years that go away after being touched in a massage. This can also become a time of our bodies remembering touches that were hurtful and wrong by our perpetrators triggering an onslaught of emotions. Many survivors who have experienced massages have found it helpful; however, you know yourself and your tolerance level for being touched. If it feels like it might be helpful, go for it. If it feels invasive to have a stranger touch you than a massage is not for you. It is appropriate to discreetly disclose that you are a survivor of sexual trauma to the massage therapist before it begins. You have the discretion or choice as an adult that was taken from you as a child.

8F. Set boundaries and keep them. The boundaries may be that we only talk about our abuse to certain people at certain times. Or it could mean that we set aside 30 minutes every day to care for our own needs. Setting limits protects us from sharing too much or from ignoring our needs.

Setting limits and keeping them empowers us to take control of some aspects of our lives. While we were being abused we were helpless and powerless.

Taking charge of our lives is empowering. Claiming power is a significant experience of healing. It enable us to take back what was taken from us when we were abused.

8G. Do something artistic or write in a journal. Many survivors have found this helpful, you might too. Writing and drawing has allowed our emotions to take over which released painful emotions. Some survivors have bought a sketch pad and “cray-paz” (mixture of crayon and acrylic paint in type of marker) and then went to it. We sat down and began to draw our emotions from the abuse. Both drawing and writing released emotions and allowed our story to be told. It seems that so much of the pain we feel is in keeping the secret. By telling the story in our journals or drawing it in our sketch pads we broke the silence and told the secret. Breaking the secrecy becomes healing and helps us face more of the truth. When we can use our discretion, following the boundaries we previously set, to determine who, if any one else, gets to see our drawings or read our journals is has also been healing. Even if no one ever reads what we write, or sees what we draw, the experience is still very helpful.

8H. Take time to rest. Dealing with our abuse is exhausting.

Acknowledge that and give yourself a break. Don't feel guilty when you take time to rest. The intense healing process will not last forever and when you are through it you might find that you don't need as much rest. Then you can resume your normal level of commitments. But if you feel like you need it now give yourself the time and space.

8I. No matter how bad it feels now, it will improve and you will feel better. Many survivors take years to work through the pain of their abuse.

Be patient. The end will come, even if you don't recognize it all at once.

Happier days will be there for you. Many survivors have felt that they would never be happy again but eventually we do end up feeling better.

8J. Create an opportunity to laugh. Many of us survivors noticed that we just did not find many things funny and had stopped laughing. So to make us laugh, we found it helpful to rent funny movies. Becoming immersed in a ridiculous story, with funny actors or plots for an hour and a half while watching a movie can be a great release of emotions. Lots of us started doing that and we found it helpful. We even laughed a lot just telling about the stupid movies and TV comedies we had watched.

9. Everybody is unique! Everyone's experience of healing from abuse is unique. While many of our experiences of abuse were similar everyone heals in their own way. Mostly, we have learned that its best to trust our own judgments and those of the people who know us best and love us most. By sharing our experiences safely with others we have learned from each other and continue to do so. What is right for one person might not be for another.

10. We are the victims (survivors)! The abuse was not our fault. We were children. No matter what we did or didn't do to stop it or prevent it. No matter whether it felt good or bad. No matter whether the perpetrator bought us gifts, took us out to eat, or to fun places. No matter if we enjoyed the perpetrator's company. No matter if someone else had warned us to stay away from him or her. No matter what, the responsibility for an adult molesting a child rests squarely on the adult and any institution, individual or entity that enabled the sexual predator the access to hurt us. He or she should not have touched

us. He or she abused a position of authority. The perpetrator used access and abuse of power to victimize us. He or she had no right to do this. He or she is a criminal and all forms of sexual abuse are criminal acts. We are victims of a heinous crime.

We are victims. We are innocent. We have been wronged. We deserve to have the wrong made right. That will mean different things to each of us but we all deserve to be made whole, as much as that is possible.

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**Survivors' Wisdom is a compilation of things that other survivors have learned and shared with each other at support group meetings. The above information is what we have learned from each other. If any of the above does not fit for you for, don't use it. If you have questions about how any of this applies to your situation seek help from professionals. We are not professionals in this area of sexual abuse but know about it because we were sexually molested. So the information presented is based upon our own experiences and advice we learned along the way that helped us. Mostly, we believe each survivor knows what is best for him or herself. The survivor is responsible for his or her path to healing.*

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Printable version (PLEASE LINK to MS Word document)

For more information, send an e-mail to info@childvictimsvoice.com.

Based on "Survivors' Wisdom," which was compiled by: Barbara A. Blaine, founder of SNAP. Used with permission.

For more information, survivors of abuse by clergy can read the original document here: http://www.snapnetwork.org/survivors_wisdom/Survivors_wisdom_1.htm

¹ Abel, G., Becker, J., Mittelman, M., Cunningham-Rathner, J., Rouleau, J., & Murphy, W. (1987). Self-reported sex crimes on non-incarcerated paraphiliacs. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2(1), 3-25.