Helping Yourself Heal

A Recovering Woman's Guide to Coping With Childhood Abuse Issues

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
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Introduction

Now that you're in treatment for substance abuse, you may begin to have many different feelings. At times, these feelings may be painful, and you may have a hard time understanding or coping with them. You may feel:

- Fearful
- Helpless
- Guilty
- Ashamed
- Anxious
- Depressed
- Angry
- Bad about yourself
- As if you can't connect with family or friends
- As if you're crazy
- Numbness or nothing at all
- As if you want to die.

Some of these feelings are common for any woman who starts treatment for substance abuse, but the same feelings may be stronger for many women who were abused in childhood. The pain may be so great that a woman may do anything to cope with her feelings, including using drugs or alcohol.

Some women in treatment for substance abuse don't clearly remember being abused, but they have some of the feelings mentioned here. Some women may have pushed the memories of the abuse so far away that they may not be able to explain why they feel intense anger, fear a particular person, have nightmares, or always believe something bad is about to happen. Sometimes, after people stop drinking or using drugs and are in treatment, memories may surface that were too painful to remember before or that were blocked from memory by drugs and alcohol.

Working through childhood memories or memory lapses can help you when you're in substance abuse treatment because facing past pain can help you focus on your present life.

What Is Childhood Abuse?

Abuse has many definitions, and sometimes it can be hard to know whether what you went through as a child was abuse. At the time, the way you were punished or treated may have seemed normal. Here are some questions to think about. **These questions ask about just a few experiences that are generally considered abuse.** You may have had other experiences that are not on this list but are still considered abuse.

Do you remember anyone when you were a child:

- Using extreme discipline or punishment on you?
- Spanking or hitting you so hard that it left bruises, cuts, or broken bones?
- Beating or punching you?
- Acting in a way that made you feel uncomfortable or powerless?
- Calling you names or abusing you verbally?
- Among family members or others close to you, criticizing or making fun of your physical characteristics, such as your hair, your skin color, your body type, or a disability?
- Talking to you in a sexual way, watching you undress or bathe, showing you pornographic pictures or movies, or photographing you in inappropriate ways?
- Touching you sexually or making you touch yourself or someone else sexually?
- Forcing you to watch others acting in a sexual way?
- Forcing you to have sex?

What Symptoms Could You Have If You Were Abused?

The effects of childhood abuse may be with you as an adult. As well as feeling angry, anxious, ashamed, or depressed, you may:

- Have flashbacks of the abuse
- Have frequent nightmares
- Be very sensitive to noise or to being touched
- Always expect something bad to happen
- Let people abuse or take advantage of you
- Not remember periods of your life
- Feel numb.

These feelings may get worse or become more intense when you're stressed or in situations that trigger memories of the abuse, such as when you fight with someone close to you. **If you feel like hurting yourself, or are thinking about suicide, tell your counselor immediately, or call an emergency hotline or 911.**

How Can You Address Childhood Abuse Issues While You're in Treatment?

For the first month or so of substance abuse treatment, you'll be focusing on getting the drugs or alcohol out of your system, clearing your head, and establishing healthy patterns of thinking and behaving. You may want to put off addressing painful past abuse until you are comfortable being drug and alcohol free, establish a strong relationship with your counselor, make new friends, and build relationships with people who do not abuse drugs or alcohol. Then you may begin to feel safe enough to think about this issue.

However, if the feelings are too overwhelming and painful, or if you feel that you must address them right away, know

that you can raise the issue **whenever** you want or need to. No matter what stage of recovery you're in, help is available for you. And remember: Many other women have worked through their pain and now lead happy, fulfilling, drug-free lives.

It's up to you to decide when to discuss abuse with your counselor, but it is important for you to raise the subject **when you are ready.** This may be the first time you've ever told anyone about what happened to you as a child. You may feel guilty or disloyal talking about a family member or another person close to you. You may fear how your family will react to you after you've talked about what happened. **All of these feelings and fears are very normal;** talk about them with your counselor.

Sometimes, it's hard to remember the difference between what you felt as a child victim and the choices you have as an adult in counseling. **You could not protect yourself then, but you can now.** As an adult, you **can** talk about what happened to you and you **can** begin to heal.

How Can Your Counselor Help?

It's important that you know that all States require mental health and substance abuse counselors to report abuse. If you're younger than 18, talk to your counselor about your State's requirements. If you're an adult, your counselor generally is **not** required to report the childhood abuse. The exception is when the abuser still has access to children and may harm them.

As you and your counselor or therapist talk about your experiences, your talks may become more difficult when painful memories and feelings arise and you look more closely at the past. Sometimes, these overwhelming feelings contribute to a drug or alcohol relapse. A counselor or therapist can help you understand the relationship between the abuse in your past and your substance abuse. He or she

can help you cope with your feelings better so that you won't become overwhelmed.

Your substance abuse counselor also can help you find a counselor or therapist who specializes in working with people who have been abused as children. Addressing child abuse issues takes time; you'll need to develop a relationship with a therapist who can work with you now and who will continue to work with you after you've finished your treatment for substance abuse.

In addition to helping you find a skilled therapist, your substance abuse counselor can help you find self-help groups, such as Survivors of Incest Anonymous. If you grew up in a family in which one or more members had addiction issues, groups like Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) or Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA) might also be very helpful for you (see back cover).

A Final Note

As a woman in recovery from substance abuse, you've faced great challenges and survived. It is a tribute to your strength that you've made the courageous choice to enter a substance abuse treatment program. You deserve the chance to heal and to live a happy, healthy life.

You will face challenges, but you have the ability to make things better. You can do this, as many have before you. Remember: **You are not alone.** Use the many resources and support networks available to help you feel safe and to keep you moving toward your goal. As you stay sober, your options grow. As you create a trusting relationship with your counselor or therapist, you begin to heal. And the courage you find to help yourself heal may one day help another person who is lost in addiction and pain.

Be patient with yourself. Healing takes time, but it's worth it—because you are.

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Federal Resources

- SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), www.ncadi.samhsa.gov, 800-729-6686, or 800-487-4889 (TDD)
- SAMHSA's Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator, www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov, 800-662-HELP
- SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center, www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov, 800-789-2647

Other Selected Resources

- Adult Children of Alcoholics, www.adultchildren.org, 310-534-1815
- Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA), www.codependents.org, 602-277-7991
- Emotions Anonymous International, www.emotionsanonymous.org, 651-647-9712
- National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, www.calib.com/nccanch, 800-394-3366
- National Mental Health Association, www.nmha.org, 800-969-6642
- National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse, www.mhselfhelp.org, 800-553-4539
- Parents Anonymous, www.parentsanonymous-natl.org, 909-621-6184
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Alliance, www.ptsdalliance.org, 877-507-PTSD
- Sidran Institute, www.sidran.org/resourcesurv.html, 410-825-8888
- Survivors of Incest Anonymous, Inc., www.siawso.org, 410-893-3322

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