

Crisis and Adult Survivors

What is crisis? The definition of crisis is: "a dramatic emotional or circumstantial upheaval in a person's life; a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, better or worse, is determined by a turning point" (Random House).

Many times when we think of crisis we think of something immediate and in the present. This is reflective of the way we deal with sexual assault. When we say someone is in crisis due to a sexual assault or abuse we assume that it is immediate and has only recently occurred. Unfortunately this can cause a huge disservice to someone who experienced the abuse as a child and is only now seeking crisis services.

Recently society has been forced to realize a fact that many of us already knew "children are vulnerable". With the intense media coverage of child kidnappings, molestation by priest, abuse by parents, and assaults within the pre-teen community people are trying to figure out what is going on, what is this epidemic? The reality is that it is not much different than the generations before. With the wonders of television we can now see what goes on behind close doors.

We have children's advocacy centers sprouting up everywhere, therapist working with children as young as one in hopes of alleviating any distress that may occur due to a molestation. The community has responded and the disapproval of these heinous crimes can be heard across the country. These children who have suffered such crimes will be lucky if they have someone who cares for them, validates them, and helps them. They will have better chances of developing a healthy and stable life in the future.

What happens to those who suffer abuse and never get help, those who get neglected not only by family, but by the system as well? These are the children that 20, 30, 40 years down the road will turn around and see how much their life has been affected. Some may pick up a phone and call a crisis line hoping someone will be on the other end to reach out to them. Some may seek other ways to cope with the pain, which may cause more harm than good.

A.M.A.C. Adults Molested As Children (technical term given to adult survivors of sexual abuse) is a large portion (1/3) of calls that we get through the crisis line each year. For many in this population a phone call to the crisis line may be the first time they have ever reached out. For others they may not have been believed by their families and were forced into silence, which will make them skeptical to assistance.

When dealing with adult survivors it is important to note that the way an individual is affected by their childhood abuse depends on a number of factors such as:

- The type of relationship with the abuser (the closer the relationship, the greater the disturbance)
- The duration and severity of the abuse
- The child's psychosocial development at the time of the abuse
- The level of support the child received after their disclosure

The crisis of an adult survivor can be very different to that of a recent victim/survivor. Adult survivors may live a majority of their life in crisis or some sort of turmoil and chaos (due to their abuse) and are finally after years they are able to identifying that it was their abuse that has caused such grief. A recent victim/survivor will address the current event as the cause of crisis and will usually see it as an isolated event. However an adult survivor will address several crises in their life and may have more difficulty identifying an isolated event if they were subjected to chronic abuse. In acute cases, the adult may also have difficulty identifying an isolated event because many times the abuse was followed by negativity by those around him/her which often triggered more abuse in terms of verbal, mental, and emotional.

There are several behavior patterns that are seen with adult survivors in crisis:

- Altered emotionally; such as depression, anxiety, hyper vigilance, and fixation with control issues
- Disturbed relatedness; such as poor social adjustment, fear and distrust of others around them, difficulty forming and sustaining healthy and/or stable intimate relationships and friendships. " Difficulty with sexual intimacy (not wanting to participate or destructive promiscuity) and sexuality.
- Avoidance and dissociation because of fear of being re-victimized or making themselves vulnerable to abuse. Many

times they will create a strong desire to escape emotions triggering alcoholism, drug abuse, and/or other destructive behavior.

- Dependence on or over idolization of those with whom they may have been able to form relationships with (i.e. therapist, crisis interventionist, co-worker, roommate, etc)
- Impaired self-reference; such as low self-esteem, self-degradation, self-blame, and many times a distorted body image which may lead to an eating disorder or self-mutilation.

As crisis advocates our main job when working with an adult survivor is to help diffuse the crisis and help them get started in their healing process. We do this by:

- Believing them: Many times an adult survivor has not addressed the issue of abuse for fear of not being believed or was rejected by his/her family because loved ones often times do not want to believe such a traumatic event could occur.
- Normalize their experience: letting them know that this happens to many people will help them know that they are not alone and will also encourage them to open up and seek help.
- Let them know it is not their fault: shame and guilt is a large part of what adult survivors deal with. They may feel that they were a "willing participant" in the abuse. Remind them of the vulnerability of children and that the perceived submission to the abuse was due to their fear, guilt, love, and/or loyalty to the abuser and it is important to stress they are not to blame for what occurred.
- Listen with empathy and respect; acknowledge their strength and what they did to survive.
- Many adult survivors may express feelings of incompetence because they have not yet been able to move forward and heal. Let them know that it is okay that they are still dealing with the abuse. Explain that it is normal and good to move slowly with recovery and that it usually takes time to heal from such a traumatic event.
- Always recommend that they seek therapeutic services. Let them know that seeking the assistance of a professional is not bad or shameful, but will help them in exploring their feelings and past, which will give them the ability to move forward in life.

It is possible for adult survivors to regain control of their life; it is a long road and a frightening one as well. Many adult survivors have never known what it is like to have control of their life and choices. Here at SACASA we are able to provide therapeutic and crisis intervention services to help them on the journey.

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