Survivors of Abuse

What is abuse?

There are many different forms of abuse--emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Abuse can be any behaviors directed toward a person by an individual who has power over that person. Such behaviors always involve a betrayal of the person's trust. The degree of harm a person experiences as a result of the abuse depends upon the nature of the act, the age of the victim, and the victim's environment.

Emotional neglect is defined as the failure of caretakers to meet a person's needs for nurturance and emotional support. Emotional abuse is defined as actions that can damage a person's emotional, social and/or intellectual functioning.

Physical abuse consists of assaults on an individual that produce pain, cuts, welts, bruises, burns, broken bones, and other injuries.

Sexual abuse is defined as any forced or coerced sexual behavior directed toward an individual by a person who has power over that individual. Some forms of sexual abuse include masturbation, intercourse, fondling, oral sex, and anal or vaginal penetration with objects. Other types of sexual abuse include exhibitionism, leering, sexual suggestiveness, and do not involve actual physical contact. Frequently, children are sexually abused by adults who are related to them or known by them or their families.

What is the prevalence of child abuse?

In a 1996 survey, it was estimated that 23% of cases reported to the child protective services were due to physical abuse, 9% was sexual abuse and 4% were emotional abuse, and 60% neglect. Forty-seven out of every 1,000 children in the United States are reported as victims of childhood maltreatment. Twenty percent of American women and 5 to 16% of American men have been victims of sexual abuse.

If it happened in the past, how do I deal with it now?

There are many reasons why children do not seek help at the time of the abuse. For example, they might fear retaliation from the abuser or feel they will not be believed. In addition, there are many factors that make it difficult for children to receive the help they need at the time of the abuse. It is important to reassure a victim of abuse that he/she is
not responsible for the assault. The effects of abuse do not need to be permanent. People can heal.

**What are the effects of the abuse?**

Survivors differ in their responses to abuse. In addition, different forms of abuse (i.e., emotional, physical, and sexual) may elicit different reactions and effects upon the victim. The long-term effects may be influenced by the severity of the abuse, the survivor's coping skills, and the support the person has after the event. In general, the following responses are experienced by many survivors.

- Self-esteem can diminish and self-blame may result. Frequently, a survivor feels humiliated, guilty, angry, powerless, and shamed.

- The survivor may suffer from sleeplessness, poor concentration, anxiety, loss of appetite (or over-eating), loss of self-confidence, stress-related illnesses, grief and despair.

- The survivor may become depressed and withdrawn. He/she may experience fear and a generalized loss of trust.

- A survivor's attitude toward his/her body may be negatively affected. This may lead to forms of self-abuse such as eating disorders, alcohol/drug abuse, self-mutilation, etc.

- A survivor may not want to engage in sexual intimacies or may become promiscuous and engage in risky sexual behaviors with others.

- A survivor may experience flashbacks or nightmares of the incident(s).

- A survivor may experience fear of being alone and fear of encountering future abuse.

**Saint Mary's College Resources**

**Other Resources**

**Community Resources**

Child Protective Services
Central Contra Costa County
Telephone: (925) 646-2881
Crisis Hotline (Contra Costa County)
Telephone: (925) 472-0999

Contact Care
Telephone: (925) 284-2273

Readings:


Additional Resources on the Internet:

NATIONAL COMMITTEE TO PREVENT CHILD ABUSE (NCPCA)
http://www.childabuse.org

THE NATIONAL VICTIM CENTER
http://www.nvc.org

THE SURVIVOR'S FORUM
http://eyecatchers.com/survivors

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST SEXUAL ABUSE
http://www.achiever.com/freehmpg/ncas