

Sexual Feelings during Abuse

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Many sexual abuse survivors have trouble dealing with the fact that their body was sexually stimulated and felt aroused during the abuse. They may feel guilty and ashamed that they responded to the stimulation, and confused about why they did.

Feeling aroused during abuse is not an issue for every survivor. Some survivors never felt any kind of sexual arousal during the abuse. Others felt some sexual arousal, but readily accept that it didn't mean anything more than an automatic reflex response to touch. Still others experienced some pleasurable feelings in their bodies during the abuse, but because those feelings were overshadowed by the pain of the abuse, it isn't an issue for them either.

However, there are many survivors who are deeply affected by their bodies' natural responses. Some agonize over how their bodies responded to the stimulation; they experienced the sexual arousal as a humiliation, and believe it reflects negatively on them that their body responded at all. They perceive their body's response as a betrayal, with the abuser "winning," and they hate their bodies for it. This is compounded by the fact some abusers deliberately try to force a victim to have an orgasm so that the survivor will mistakenly believe that they wanted or enjoyed the abuse. Any one can be forced to have an orgasm. To be forced to have an orgasm does not imply consent nor pleasure.

Other survivors enjoyed some of the bodily sensations that came from the stimulation, but feel guilty, ashamed, and/or secretive about that fact because they believe – or fear – that it means there is something wrong with them because they're "not supposed" to feel that way in the context of abuse. These survivors often keep their experience a secret for fear that no one will understand how they could have liked some parts of it. But what they liked was their body's own natural responses; not the abuse.

Some gay survivors remark that it was only during sexual abuse that they became aware of the possibility of same-sex sexual activity, and while they know that what they experienced was abuse, they learned something about their sexuality, and may have liked some of the stimulation. It is very concerning that some gay youth only learn about same-sex sex in the context of abuse!

In all cases, if a survivor found some of the stimulation during the abuse pleasurable, it does not mean that it was not abuse, that they weren't hurt by it, that it wasn't serious, or that it had less impact. Abuse is abuse, regardless of how the victim's body responded. For boys, achieving an erection does not necessarily mean that they were even aroused; boys can have erections when they are afraid.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE RARELY ADDRESSED?

The impact of having been sexually stimulated or aroused during abuse is rarely addressed, and when it is it is given minimal attention. One reason why this is such a neglected subject is that we live in a culture that is uncomfortable with the thought that children can have sexual feelings at all, let alone during abuse. Many people like to think that children are asexual, and believe that those who suggest otherwise are sexual perverts. To further suggest that children who are sexually abused might experience some sexual arousal is to risk being viewed as promoting sexual abuse, or at very least minimizing it. But how are we to help survivors deal with this issue unless we are prepared to talk about it while not minimizing the abuse? Just as it is shocking for many people to think that sexual abuse could lead a child to feel aroused or to feel pleasure in their body, it is equally, or perhaps more shocking, to survivors themselves to acknowledge this. Many survivors suffer about this issue in silence, wondering if their body's feelings and reactions

meant that they liked, wanted, caused, or encouraged the abuse, or worse, made them as bad as the abuser.

I understand not wanting to talk about this issue for fear that it will fuel the argument that “sexual abuse isn’t so bad because some kids like it” – a false argument which is used to minimize the impact of abuse. But by acknowledging that some children feel aroused reduces the emotional charge, or stigma, associated with it, and helps survivors to heal.

Feeling sexual arousal in the context of abuse does not mean that the abuse was okay, nor that the abuse did not negatively effect the victim. A parallel argument can be made that if the love of your life suddenly dies, and you receive tens of thousands of dollars from life insurance, money that you desperately need, this doesn’t mean that you like the fact that your partner died or that you’re not suffering from that loss. Liking that you have money to support you, or needing that money, does not change the basic fact of what happened, or how devastated you feel at the loss of your lover.

CHILDREN CAN FEEL SEXUAL FEELINGS

Given that children can feeling sexual feelings and can be sexual stimulated during abuse, it’s understandable that some children like the feelings of sexual arousal that can happen during abuse, however, that does not mean that they enjoy the abuse nor want to be abused or stimulated in that manner; they enjoyed their body’s natural reactions and sensations, and perhaps some aspects of how the perpetrator treated them. If the abuser gave them attention or was kind to them, that may have felt enjoyable too. It’s also understandable if that child, later as an adult, feels upset if someone tells them that they couldn’t have enjoyed any part of it because it was abuse. How does the adult survivor reconcile the reality that her/his body did feel sexual when they “weren’t supposed” to? They feeling guilty and ashamed. On the other hand, it’s also understandable if that adult survivor feels upset about her/his body having felt aroused since it occurred in the context of abuse.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS ISSUE

If you are a survivor and your body responded to the sexual stimulation during the abuse, it’s important to find positive ways to reconcile that reality within yourself without concluding that you are “sick” or “bad,” or that your body is. The first step is to acknowledge to yourself how your body felt, and later to a supportive and understanding person. Try to do this without judgement, but if you can’t, simply telling yourself and someone else (who is non-judgemental) how you felt will help reduce some of the guilt, shame, isolation, and secrecy.

If you feel judgmental about yourself, remember that feelings are simply feelings, nothing more. They are not facts or statements; they do not say anything about you or anyone else, other than you are a fully feeling human being. It’s normal to experience a range of feelings during abuse, and one of those feelings may be sexual. It might help to remember the other feelings you felt during or after the abuse, because you did not simply feel sexual feelings, but you also probably felt betrayal, sadness, fear, confusion, and hurt, even if you didn’t realize that until you were much older.

There are different ways of thinking about this issue, and survivors have come up with different ways of dealing with it. Some survivors conclude that the arousal they experienced was a physiological reaction that had nothing to do with the perpetrator, and everything to do with their own body’s natural responses. That is true. Others conclude that while there was some element of arousal that arose from the physical stimulation, the relationship with the perpetrator was important, and contributed to how they felt – for instance, they liked/loved the perpetrator, had a friendly relationship with her/him, felt taken care of during the abuse, and this led to feeling pleasure. They let go of their guilt or confusion by acknowledging that they felt a draw to the relationship out of their emotional needs, vulnerability, and/or neglect, and by recognizing that it was okay that they felt and responded that way.

Some survivors take the position that regardless of how they learned what they learned about their body and their sexuality (what they enjoy sexually, how to have an orgasm, that they are attracted to the same sex, etc.), they like what they know about their body and intend to enjoy it without guilt, because this knowledge is about them and their body, not the perpetrator. Even if they learned some of those things from what the perpetrator did, that doesn't mean that the perpetrator "owns" those things. They are the only ones who can own their body's responses and sexuality.

Some survivors find that they are able to accept their feelings of physical arousal, without judgement when they feel compassion for themselves, and other survivors include feeling compassion for their abusers. Their compassion helps them to let go of judgement, and to see themselves as the innocent children they were.

Some survivors find that feeling shame about having sexual feelings prevents them from fully processing their memories. As soon as they remember and feel sexual feelings, they distance themselves from the memory and can't go any further with it. They're stuck there, unable to release their emotions or fully process the memory. When they released some shame and could think about the whole incident(s) by writing the memory out or telling someone their story, they were able to step back and see the situation with a new perspective and understanding. That process helped them to accept what happened and feel at peace with themselves.

How you feel about having sexual feelings during the abuse (as well as when you remember the abuse and/or read about sexual abuse) has a direct impact on how you view the abuse and yourself, and what you think about the abuse affects how you feel, which is why it's important to work on releasing feelings and critiquing what you think. Some survivors need to think a lot about it first, and others need to feel their feelings first. If you're stuck in one mode, try the other mode. For example if you're stuck in the thinking mode, let yourself feel what you felt – then and now – without judgement. Your feelings will pass, in time, and that alone will help you to think about yourself with more objectivity and less judgement.

Some survivors are terrified to tell any one including their therapist that when they remember and talk about sexual abuse they feel sexual feelings in their body just as they feel other feelings and body sensations. They are afraid of being viewed as sexually inappropriate, attracted to the therapist or friend, or turned on by sexual abuse i.e. a perpetrator. Many survivors will also feel sexual feelings in their body when they see children or read books about sexual abuse because there is a learned association between these things. This does not mean the survivor is attracted to children nor their therapists. It means that they are having body memories and the feelings need to be seen as such in order to be processed and released. Telling your therapist, or acknowledging to yourself, that you are having sexual feelings while remembering or talking about the abuse will help to release those feelings. Sharing this information in a context of support and understanding is healing.

THE ABUSER IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ABUSE – REGARDLESS OF HOW YOU FELT

No matter how you felt during the abuse or feel now, you are not responsible for the abuse. Even if you felt some pleasure or enjoyment; or you wanted some aspects to continue; or you were sexually attracted to the abuser; or you sought the abuser out, the abuser is always responsible for the abuse and not the child. Think about it this way: if a child sought you out for sexual stimulation, would you do it? You are not to blame for what the abuser did, and you and your body are completely separate from the abuser. Even if it doesn't feel that way, it's still true. It doesn't matter what your body did or didn't do; you and your body were simply coping as best you could given the circumstances (which might have included a larger context of neglect and/or other forms of abuse and dysfunction too).

It helps to heal by acknowledging how you truly felt and how your body responded, to think about positive ways of interpreting those responses, to not judge yourself, to place the responsibility for the abuse on the abuser, and to view your body separately from the abuse and the abuse. Other things you can do to feel more comfortable with your body and sex include: being gentle with your body; holding and massaging emotionally charged areas with your hand and having a partner hold and massage the area as well (this will help the area to let go of some of the emotional charge – the feelings associated with the abuse); gently stroking any area of your body that defends, tightens, numbs, or otherwise reacts to sexual touch; taking sex slowly and stopping when you need to; breathing; laughing; and having fun with sex, touch, and holding. You are meant to – and can – enjoy your body and all of its beautiful sensations during sex.

IT'S POSSIBLE TO HEAL

Experiencing sexual feelings during abuse or while remembering or talking about sexual abuse is not something anyone should have to feel guilty about. Children feel what they feel during abuse, including sexual feelings, and there is nothing wrong with that. For some survivors the fact that they felt sexually aroused in an abuse context is embarrassing or shameful to admit but the more survivors – in fact, all of us – talk about this issue, the easier and less shameful it becomes. When we talk openly about something, we take away its power or emotional charge. Survivors reduce the emotional charge, connected to this issue, by talking/writing/drawing about it; not listening to anyone who tells them how they “should” feel; acknowledging and accepting how they felt and feel; recognizing that none of their feelings make them crazy or bad, or like the abuser; and by fostering compassion and understanding for themselves and their body. It's possible to feel better about this issue – one tiny step at a time.

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