

Sexual Abuse Recovery Journey



SAMPLE

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This map is intended to provide perspective and the general sequence of possible topics to be explored when helping an individual recover from sexual trauma. This map is by no means all inclusive. The very nature of trauma opens different doors for different people. This map can:

- Provide the counselor with a visual picture of the typical terrain in the sexual abuse recovery journey
- Enlighten a survivor's spouse as to the nature and extent of the recovery journey
- Be used with the survivor or recovery group to chronicle progress—"Look how far you have come!" (DO NOT share this map with a survivor just beginning the recovery process).



For survivors, the coping strategies that helped them survive are no longer working in relationships. Their desire is to have those behaviors changed. So their urgent need is to "Fix this!" However, this means that the therapist must address their feelings—"Don't touch this!" Ultimately, the survivor's thinking about their sexual trauma must be re-visited and that is "Sacred."

Behaviors "Fix this" → Feelings "Don't Touch This!" → Their Thinking "Sacred"

Minimization, rationalization, justification, dissociation and projection are some of the ways that survivors keep denial in place. They may tend to minimize the severity of an offense as to whether it was a big offense or a small offense. Consider that same analogy from the perspective of a glass window. If you throw a four inch rock through a window, what happens? It shatters. If you throw a two inch rock through another glass window, what happens? It shatters. You see, it isn't the size of the rock—it's the damage to the window. If you start talking "little" hurts and "big" hurts, or comparing one person's hurt with another's, you are comparing the sizes of the rocks, not the damage to the window. "How's your window?" is the question that survivors must consider.



When abuse occurs, the victim feels SAD. This quickly gets changed to bad; because the survivor reasons, "If I'm BAD I can be GOOD and if I can be good, I can CHANGE. If I can change that gives me CONTROL and if I can have control, I have HOPE."

What generates shame for the survivor is a sense of responsibility. Their sense of responsibility is influenced by their age, circumstances, development, support system and false beliefs. Should statements create responsibility.

- I should have yelled
- I shouldn't have been there
- I shouldn't have accepted the bribe
- I shouldn't have worn that dress

When the survivor thinks, "I am responsible", then he or she feels that they have control of the situation.

An effective tool to help access some of the coping strategies that were developed as a result of the abuse is to have the survivor list four lessons they learned as a child about any of the following: Power, Safety, Pain, Sex, Men, Families, Trust, Love, Feelings, Affection, Guilt, Shame, Secrets, Fault, Responsibility, Adults, etc. Then have them list the skills they developed as a result.

Example:

FEELINGS

LESSONS I learned about FEELINGS

- Feelings are not important
- A façade is more important than honesty
- Feelings are trouble
- Feelings added to the burden of the home



LIFE SKILLS I developed based on those lessons

- I tend to disengage and emotionally detach from others
- I fear sharing with others out of fear of rejection
- I have difficulty identifying what I feel, let alone talking about it.

The map begins with a caterpillar and ends with a butterfly. Change takes time...and courage. The old survival skills must be identified, challenged and replaced with relationship-building skills. It's in the process of replacing those survival skills that new energy starts to surge into the life. The journey may be long, but it is life-changing.



A butterfly says, "The caterpillar-me is history, my metamorphosis, a mystery, and today...today is a present, my struggle gifted me"

— Manali Oak