

**Breaking the Silence:  
Mothering in Women Who Were Sexually  
Abused as Children**

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**Introduction**

- This workshop examines the short-and long-term negative impact of early sexual abuse on a woman's mothering experiences, but more importantly it explores the protective factors in these women's lives that helped them overcome the traumas of the past.

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**Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse**

- The most common statistic used to indicate prevalence is that approximately one out of four girls, or twenty-five percent of all women, have had at least one CSA experience before the age of eighteen
- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than eighty-five million mothers reside in the United States
- If we use the most common statistic regarding sexual abuse rates nationally - one in four - then approximately twenty-one million mothers in the United States have been sexually abused

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**Definition of Sexual Abuse**

- **Overt Abuse** - is blatant and obvious, and it includes physical contact such
- **Covert Abuse** - is more hidden and includes exhibitionism, sexual staring and sexually intrusive commenting about a young girl's body

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**Definition of Child Sexual Abuse**

- Therapists use a definition of CSA which includes both contact and non-contact sexual experiences in which the victim is younger than eighteen and the perpetrator is at least five years older than the victim and/or is sexually more sophisticated

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**The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse**

- CSA, in particular, can have devastating consequences on its victims, but 20 to 40 percent of survivors will not develop the symptoms associated with abuse
- Why do some sexual abuse victims suffer from long-term consequences and others do not?
- To answer this question, it is important to identify the factors that act as buffers or protectors from the adverse effects of child sexual abuse

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**The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse**

- Whether or not a child will develop negative long-term consequences of sexual abuse depends on a number of factors
- These include:
  - Age of Child
  - Relationship to the Perpetrator
  - Reactions After Disclosure
  - Frequency and Severity

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**The Long-Term Impact of Child Sexual Abuse**

Complex trauma is a term used to describe a child's enduring exposure to chronic interpersonal and repetitive abuse and neglect and impacts the following:

- Shame and Low Self-Esteem
- Depression
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Complicated Grief
- Self-Mutilation
- Anxiety
- Eating Disorders
- Borderline Personality Disorder
- Drug and Alcohol Abuse

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**The Long-Term Impact of Child Sexual Abuse**

- The child victim of sexual abuse is not developmentally able to comprehend or emotionally manage the sexual experiences being imposed on her
- During the abuse phase, in order to psychologically survive the trauma, defense mechanisms such as denial, fantasy, disassociation, and repression are employed by children to manage their overwhelming feelings of betrayal and confusion

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**Traumatic Experiences and Adverse Health Outcomes – ACE Study**

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente conducted a longitudinal study comprising 17, 377 middle-class adults with an average age of 57 years
- The study examined the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on physical health and social functioning
- The ACE Study divided childhood adverse experiences into ten categories:
  - *Child Abuse*
  - *Child Neglect*
  - *Household Challenges*
- Participants were instructed to check the categories that reflected their childhood experiences on a scale from 0 to 10

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**Adverse Childhood Experiences – ACE Study**

- The study showed:
  - Adverse childhood experiences are common
  - Two-thirds of the participants had an ACE score in two or more categories
  - One in six participants had an ACE score in four or more categories
  - High ACE scores in the first eighteen years of life are linked to poor outcomes in physical and mental health and social functioning
  - An ACE score of six or more, decreased one's life expectancy by approximately twenty years compared to those participants with an ACE score of 0
  - An ACE score of 7 or more increased suicide attempts by 3,100 % compared to participants with an ACE score of 0

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**Resiliency: Risk Factors and Protective Factors**

- Resiliency theory explores why some individuals, despite stressful or traumatic life experiences are able to adapt and continue to function, while others are not able to overcome similar obstacles and have difficulty coping

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**Risk factors** are negative and adverse life experiences that impedes a person's ability to function and increases their vulnerability

**Individual**

- Difficult Temperament
- Physical or Learning Disability

**Family**

- Physical, Emotional, Sexual Abuse and/or Neglect
- Authoritarian and Permissive Parents
- Isolation and/or Chronic Disharmony or Conflict in Family

**Community**

- Impoverished Communities
- Lack of Community Resources including – Public Transportation - Underachieving Schools
- Inadequate and/or Sub-Standard Housing

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**Protective factors** are positive influences in a child's life that help support resiliency and the ability to overcome adversities and obstacles

**Individual**

- Easy Temperament
- Intelligent
- Good Sense of Humor

**Family**

- Financial Security
- Structure and Predictable Routine

**Community**

- High Achieving School
- Recreation – Public Transportation
- Spiritual or Religious Community

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**Mothering Challenges and Risks:  
Mental Health Status of Mothers**

- Mothers say their mental health symptoms interfere with their stamina and desire to be emotionally available and attentive to their children

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**Mothering Challenges and Risks:  
Negative Perceptions In Their Mothering Roles**

- Mothers who experienced child sexual abuse want to mother their children appropriately and desire to provide their children with better parenting than they received as children. However, they hold strong negative perceptions of themselves in their parenting roles and lack confidence in their parenting abilities

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**Mothering Challenges and Risks:  
Discipline**

- Women who experienced child sexual abuse have difficulties with discipline and often vacillate between using permissive practices and harsh punishments
- Some clients had a tendency to over-react emotionally to their children's misbehaviors and have difficulty managing their anger, act impulsively, and use harsh physical punishment
- Some mothers expressed fears that they might harm their children and re-enact the abuse they experienced as children. As a result, they relinquish their parental authority and become permissive

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**Mothering Challenges and Risks:  
Fears and Vigilant Mothering**

- Mothers fear that their child may be sexually abused and these feelings may emerge at the same age that they themselves were abused as children

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**Mothering Challenges and Risks:  
Lack of External Supports**

- Mothers do not let their children have a relationship with their own perpetrator(s) and report strained relationships and limited contact with their extended families because they are still actively using drugs or alcohol and have untreated mental illnesses

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**Mothering Challenges and Risks:  
Multiple Responsibilities**

- Mothers feel overwhelmed with the multiple tasks involved in caring for their children. They express that working full-time while managing household and mothering responsibilities left them feeling overextended and limited the physical and emotional energy they desire to provide to their children

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**Mothering Challenges and Risks: Poverty**

It is part of the human condition to be challenged and experience pain, but those who live in impoverished economic conditions encounter and bear a larger biological, psychological, and social burden than their counterparts with economic privilege

Chronic poverty impacts every aspect of a person's life and is a risk factor for unsatisfactory outcomes as it disposes individuals to multiple stressors including food insecurities, poor housing, violence, and increased vulnerability to physical and mental health problems

Poverty negatively impacts self-esteem, disempowers people by limiting their choices, and increases one's susceptibility to victimization.

The harmful impact of poverty is further exacerbated when it merges with the damaging consequences of Adverse Childhood Experiences

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**Poverty Related Trauma**

- Poverty negatively impacts self-esteem, disempowers people by limiting their choices, has detrimental effects on mother/child relationships, and increases one's susceptibility to victimization
- The harmful impact of poverty is further exacerbated when it merges with the damaging consequences of child sexual abuse

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**Poverty Exacerbates Trauma**

- High risk neighborhoods erodes the capacities of residents to form reliable and social supports decreasing the protective impacts that a social support network can provide mothers and children
- The connection between poverty, maternal stress, and the increase in the use of negative parenting practices makes poverty another path for intergenerational abuse

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**Re-Victimization**

- Survivors of child sexual abuse are two times more likely to experience re-victimization as an adult and are four times at greater risk of experiencing adult sexual assault
- Survivors of child sexual abuse are also at higher risk of experiencing domestic violence and for becoming homeless

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**Intergenerational Abuse  
and Re-Victimization**

- This dissociative state which protected the defenseless little girl does not serve the same protective function as an adult. Instead, it leaves a woman unable to identify potential danger in the environment and prevents her from taking appropriate precautionary action, making her and her children more vulnerable to danger
- Women who were sexually abused as children often take a subordinate and compliant position in their relationships. Compliancy and passive behaviors may have been used to protect herself as a child by not escalating the abuse by the perpetrator. As an adult the pattern leaves her powerless to protect her and her children

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**Intergenerational Abuse  
and Re-Victimization**

- Mothers diagnosed with PTSD may have hyper-aroused physiological states causing them to be vigilant, easily provoked, and inept at maintaining a sense of calm under stress
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- Chronic hyper-aroused states are physically and emotionally draining and overtime can diminish one's ability to sustain attention, make effective decisions, and discern between real and imagined threat. This reduces the individual's ability to respond effectively to real threats, leaving them vulnerable to re-victimization

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**Intergenerational Abuse:  
Intrapsychic Processes**

- The defenses a mother employs as a child to ward off the feelings of powerlessness, despair, fear, and/or anger during and after the abuse are the same defenses that later render her incapable of responding to her children

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**Sustaining Resiliency:  
Mothering, Family Supports and Friends**

- Despite risks associated with experiences of child sexual abuse, familial relationships were significant protective factors that offered nurturing bonds and provided a reliable support system
- Women shared that supportive spouses or life partners, parents, grandparents, and/or siblings are sources of strength in their roles and responsibilities as mothers

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**Mothering and Sustaining Resiliency  
Spirituality and Religion**

- Spirituality, religion and/or a belief in a God or higher power benefited all the women I interviewed
- Belonging to a religious group and having a strong spiritual belief was a protective factor that supported resiliency

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**Mothering and Sustaining Resiliency:  
Education - Books, College Courses, and Television**

- Women that lack appropriate models for mothering may augment their parenting abilities by exploring other models for mothering and utilize books, college courses, and television to increase their parenting knowledge and skills

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**The Therapeutic Relationship and Its Importance to Resiliency and Healing**

- Essential to resiliency of CSA survivors is having a person in their life who is thoughtful, caring, and attuned to them. For adult survivors, a positive relationship with a therapist offers the conditions necessary to establish and support resiliency

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**The Therapeutic Relationship and Its Importance to Resiliency and Healing**

- Many said that their therapist was the mother they did not have and an exemplar of how to be kind and caring. They used the therapist to model how to be a good friend to others, which helped to create long-lasting and supportive friendships
- The therapeutic relationship showed them how to communicate effectively, how to manage conflict, and deal with feelings appropriately

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**The Therapeutic Relationship and Its Importance to Resiliency and Healing**

- The therapeutic alliance is the contradiction of the experience of growing up in a family fraught with dysfunction
- By treating the client differently than she was treated as a child, the therapist assists in recreating trust and showing the client that she is valued and has significance

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**Group Therapy and Resiliency**

- Sexual abuse support groups are helpful for building relationships with other survivors, learning to tolerate the feelings associated with the abuse, exploring the skills necessary to maintain relationships, and providing an environment to engage in reflection, insight, and understanding
- Resiliency is fostered in reciprocal relationships where one can accept support and advice from others but also is afforded the opportunity to give back
- Women gain personal power in relationships process where they are able to accept the support of others and are given the opportunity to give back to others
- Reciprocity enhances trust, helps to build self-confidence, and increases the capacity to offer support, advice, and compassion to others

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**Therapist Self-Disclosure**

- Most clients appreciate a therapist's self-disclosure but only under certain conditions:
  - disclosure is enhanced by its *infrequent* occurrence
  - disclosures were helpful when the self-disclosure was relevant and reflective of the client's current concern
  - Clients also reported feeling uncomfortable when the therapist exposed private aspects of their life they are currently struggling with, but found it helpful when the therapist disclosed past issues that were already resolved, and were able to share the skills and lessons they learned

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**Strengthening Resiliency**

- To ensure treatment interventions are successful and to alleviate the long-term consequences for this vulnerable group, it is critical to understand the continued effects of childhood trauma on the next generation, and to promote resilient capacities among mothers sexually abused as children
- Interventions designed to accommodate the psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual development of this group of mothers can decrease the long-term risks associated with intergenerational abuse

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**Strengthening Resiliency**

Professionals can promote protective factors and increase resiliency by enhancing the supports they offer mothers, including:

- Therapy - Treating Mental Health and Substance Concerns
- Utilizing the Therapeutic Alliance
- Therapeutic Groups
- Parenting Education and Early Intervention
- Promoting Significant Relationships
- Religion and Spiritual Supports
- Using Mind/Body Therapies to Regulate Physiological Imbalances Occurred From the Trauma

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**References**

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**Psychology Today / Blog**

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/contributors/teresa-gil-phd>

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