

Observations on child sexual abuse

Tony White
Thursday, 23 April 2009

The will to survive

Anyone who has worked with people who were abused, particularly sexually abused, in childhood will know that sometimes the person who was abused will feel responsible for it. They will sometimes feel that somehow they caused it to happen and therefore it is somehow their fault that it happened. Many find this perplexing, because obviously a young child did not cause an adult to sexually interact with it.

Sometimes when these people grow up into adulthood they can be the overly responsible ones. The rescuers and carers and yes even sometimes the do-gooders. These people decided at a very young age that their role in life is to be responsible for others. They think and feel that they are responsible for how others act. In adulthood this person can become the co-dependent of a heavy drinker.



The woman who picks the irresponsible man who drinks too much and thus she can be responsible for him. The thing about the co-dependent of course is that often they subtly manage situations so that the dependent person remains dependent. What is the co-dependent going to do if she has no one dependent on her?. She feels lost and probably feels like she lacks worth and importance.

The feeling or decision that "I made the adult abuse me" shows just how creative and intuitive the Free Child ego state can be. It shows the human will to survive. The child is placed in a very difficult and powerless situation and to survive it turns things around so it feels empowered. For the child to have a sense that it caused the abuse allows the child to feel empowered

A child who is being abused will often feel totally powerless because they are totally powerless in that situation. If the Free Child can trick itself into thinking that it is caused the abuse then it will feel like it has power and control.

"I am the one making him abuse me therefore I control his actions". Much more importantly, the child may also think, "If I can make him do it then I must have the power to stop him doing it". Thus the youngster feels empowerment to some extent.

Often in counselling the survivors of child sexual abuse therapists will highlight the fact that the child was not responsible for the abuse. They try and convince the client of this so that he or she wont feel responsible and perhaps guilty for the abuse. Often clients are quite resistant to accepting this information. They will understand it intellectually but still feel responsible deep down.

This may occur because unwittingly the counsellor is also disempowering the client at the same time. Convincing the client that she was not responsible is also taking away the power that she felt at the time. The counsellor needs to firstly deal with the client's sense of loss of power and then she tends to more easily accept that she was not responsible for the sexual abuse.

Fight, flight, freeze and sexual abuse

When a child (or adult) is placed under great stress it will tend to react in one of three ways. In reaction to the abuse it will either fight the abuser, flee (Flight) the abuser or simply freeze. The freeze response is generally seen as a 'playing dead' response. The child thinks, "I am being threatened so if I play dead, eventually the threatener will loose interest and go away". The flight and fight responses are a more rebellious or defiant response to the abuser.

Generally speaking there are two types of sexual abuse

1. Forcible sexual abuse. This is where the adult makes the child comply by using physical force to overpower him. In these cases the child is resistant and thus the adult has to use physical force.

In such instances the child naturally uses the fight or flight response so the adult has to use physical force to sexually assault the child. This type of abuse is as much about power and aggression for the adult as it is about sex and the course of the sexual abuse is unpredictable because the child is clearly non-compliant.



2. Emotionally and psychologically manipulative sexual abuse. In this instance the adult does not use physical force but uses emotional coercion and manipulation. The child may be treated as special and perhaps given gifts. Alternatively the child can be verbally threatened with such comments as, "If you tell no one will believe you" or "The police will come and take you away" and so forth. This type is much more about sex than the other type. The course of this type of sexual abuse is far more predictable and is more likely to be ongoing and longer term because the child is not physically resistant.

In this case when the child is placed under great pressure by the perpetrator he responds with the freeze response. If he responds with fight or flight response

then the abuse cannot continue. The only way it can continue is if the perpetrator physically overpowers the child. That only tends to happen if the perpetrator is as much, if not more interested in the power and aggression than the sex as is the case with forcible sexual abuse.

The emotionally manipulative sexual abuser is not like this and has much more interest in the sexual component. Indeed this type of person would most often find the physical aggression a sexual turn off. In his eyes he sees himself as wooing or courting the child in the same way an adult male courts an adult female.

This view provides more insight into identifying the vulnerable child for sexual abuse. Particularly ongoing sexual abuse. The child who has a natural tendency to use a freeze response to stress is more at risk of sexual abuse than the child who responds with either fight or flight.