

# IT'LL BE ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT – MY EXPERIENCE OF SEX AFTER ABUSE



by Anonymous

I was sexually abused throughout my childhood. Some of it was in the home (incest). Some of it was with people I knew outside the home: family friends and acquaintances, teachers, Sunday School leaders. And some of it was by strangers that I was introduced to by other people. A lot of it was at what you might call the extreme end of spectrum. I developed dissociative identity disorder and I was amnesic for most of it until I was in my early twenties. Bits and pieces of memory then started to come out. I hadn't really done the whole 'boyfriend' thing when I was growing up – I was a bit averse to sex really, and looking back I realise that I just hung back and kept my distance because it was too triggering. It might

have made me remember, or bring into consciousness, what was going on for me in my 'other' life.

It was when I started my first proper relationship, when I was 20, that the walls of amnesia started to tumble down. Six weeks after starting the relationship – which became very physical very quickly – I had a kind of breakdown and was sectioned for the first time. While it was happening, I didn't make the link at all – there didn't seem to be any reason for 'going mad'. But afterwards I realised that the trigger was when my boyfriend tried to anally rape me. He wasn't very persistent, and when it didn't work for him (because I was so tense and frozen)



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he just gave up and that was the end of the relationship. He certainly didn't want to know me once I started acting a bit crazy, but it was just as well. I didn't see it as attempted rape at the time, but it was. There was no consent there and he just kept going, taking my freeze response and not being able to get my words out because I was so terrified as a sign that it was all ok by me. It's taken me years to realise that that's not the way it should be.

I avoided dating for quite some time after that - with mental health issues I didn't feel very date-able anyway! I managed to get my life more or less on track and through a mutual friend was introduced to a really nice, caring guy, and we hit it off, to start with just as friends. I wasn't all that interested in sex, but I did want to love and to be loved. He wasn't at all pushy and we took things really slowly. In effect we became best friends before we become lovers. We got married and everything worked out ok for the first few months.

I found sex a bit distasteful, without knowing why, but I wanted to please him and I wanted to make him feel loved, so generally speaking I was happy to go along with it. It was as if I went onto automatic pilot - something that later on I realised I was very good at doing. During sex, I would space out

and not be there. I used to think that people were exaggerating when they talked about watching themselves from above, as if they were looking down from the ceiling, but that was my standard experience every single time. And mostly, that got me through.

There were just certain positions and acts that I couldn't handle at all. I couldn't cope with anything going near my mouth, not even to be kissed. And I couldn't cope with feeling trapped. Mostly it felt like a game that I was playing - to stay one step ahead and to avoid anything I didn't want to do by having pre-empted it. It meant that sex was never relaxing, and actually fairly mentally draining.

Over time, I found it more and more difficult to deal with. I used to try to manipulate things so that I could make sure that I was at least partially drunk before we had sex, because that relaxed me enough to be able to cope with it. I began to find it increasingly difficult to reach orgasm, and sometimes I just couldn't get aroused at all. It was like my body was on strike. Deep down, I didn't want to be doing this. I wanted to say no, but I couldn't, so my body started to do it for me. Then sex started to become painful. I now realise how many body flashbacks I was beginning to have during intercourse itself. I was





finding it harder and harder to realise that it was my husband I was having sex with. It just felt like I was being raped all over again. I would spontaneously burst into tears during sex, and my husband would be distraught. The last thing he wanted to do was to cause me hurt or upset, and then I felt bad that he felt bad.

In the end I just avoided it as much as possible, and before long it was a no-go area. I felt terribly ashamed that things had become so bad, and I still didn't really know why. I'd had memories come back of lots of aspects of the abuse, but – crazy though this sounds – I didn't understand what it had to do with sex. It was like I was so used to my head doing one thing while my body was doing another that I couldn't make the link even when I was talking about it with my therapist.

My view of sex, fundamentally, was that it was something that I should get

on and do, that it would just happen, and that I didn't need to be engaged in it. My husband had increasingly complained about the lack of intimacy between us, that he felt sometimes that he was making love to a dummy, and he ended up feeling hurt because it seemed to him that I just didn't love him. He found my disinterest and then my aversion really difficult to handle, as if it was a judgment on him. He became quite insecure, wondering what he had done wrong, and wondering if he was sexually inadequate. It got to the point where we couldn't talk about it with us having a row.

Eventually we got some couples counselling with a sex and relationship therapist and that began to turn things around for us. We hadn't realised how much we had got stuck in the blame game, of thinking that the problem lay with the other partner, rather than the problem being the abuse. Over the course of a few weeks she helped us to start to look at the problem as something that we were going to work together on solving, and she gave us hope that it could be fixed.

By that time I had all but given up hope that I would ever be able to function 'normally' sexually ever again. I'd read so much stuff on online forums where there was this real hatred and despising



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of sex, where the peer pressure was almost at the level of suggesting that if you wanted to have a sex life then you hadn't really been abused. I had become very confused, where I didn't know if what I was feeling was normal, or whether there was something actually quite perverted about me because I wanted to be able to work things through and reclaim my sexuality.

Through couples counselling I got my confidence back a bit that we could work this through, and my partner began to understand some stuff about trauma which were real 'aha!' moments for him – things about triggers and dissociation where previously he'd just assumed I was reacting to him rather than to memories of the abuse. He began to feel not so powerless about it all, and the counsellor helped him figure out what he could actively do to help, as well as what he could avoid doing so as not to make things worse.

One of the big breakthroughs was one night when we were trying to have sex again. I got badly triggered and switched to another, younger, part of my personality, who was really distressed because they felt as if they were being abused all over again. When it had happened a couple of times previously, my husband had freaked out and gone off on his own for several

hours, out of the house. It had made him feel like a rapist, and he felt a bit vulnerable in it all – what if I suddenly turned around and claimed that he had in fact been raping me?

But on this particular occasion, he didn't run. He just became very gentle and very kind, and he let my little storm blow itself out, whilst helping me to calm down. He understood why I was reacting the way I was, and he didn't take it personally. And he stayed with me, until eventually we were both lying together in bed, cuddling up and being really close and intimate, and it was alright. That was so different to everything that had happened previously, where if I'm honest I'd felt abandoned and really really alone in dealing with it. Suddenly I didn't feel so ashamed, and I felt that he was on my side and that he was going to stick with me and not leave me because we weren't having sex successfully or often enough. It made the world of difference to me. He hadn't had to do anything to solve it. He'd just had to not run away.

Slowly, with the help of the couples counselling, we identified what my triggers were and we agreed strategies of what to do to manage them, or how we should respond if I really did lose the plot and switched. We talked



through things like consent – how would my partner know if I was really consenting? How would I know if I was really consenting? In the freeze response, I couldn't say 'no', so we had to work at finding ways to communicate before it came to that.

And we went back to basics and just started building up some really low-level stuff between us, so that we took away the pressure of full nakedness and full-blown sex. We figured out ways of getting me as the adult to stay present, getting my alters to cooperate so that they stayed in the background, and learning the signals that I was becoming dissociative. The slower we took things, the easier it got, and actually we were both surprised at how quickly things then shot forwards. By not trying, by holding back, it seemed to increase our desire for each other, and probably the best part of it was that by working through these things together and learning to talk openly for the first time about sex, we became much closer as a couple.

Sex began to feel very differently for me once there was that emotional closeness. It was less like this 'out there' act that people did, which felt scary and at times downright disgusting. It became more about wanting to be really really close to my partner, and

him wanting to be really really close to me, and sex being the vehicle for that, rather than sex as an end in itself. There were still a lot of things that I couldn't cope with, but there were a couple of things that we both realised. Firstly, I became aware of how my template for sex had been all about power, control, pain, and force, and that there was a big difference between that and the lovemaking I was now engaged in. And secondly my husband realised that pornography in particular had taught him that it was all about penetration and orgasm, but that focusing on that short-circuits the whole process and means that there's little or no intimacy.

So we both had to develop new templates of sex and sexuality, taking it out from my abusive past and what he'd been exposed to through pornography, and building something that worked for both of us. It became unique to us, and personal to us, and so it stopped being scary. Gradually, bit by bit, my brain separated out what I was doing now with my partner and what had been done to me as a child, to the point where now I just can't see a connection at all. It's like that link has been broken, and my brain and my body are both now able to enjoy sex as an expression of our closeness and our relationship rather than as the twisted thing that was forced on me as a child.



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I still get triggered sometimes, but that's no longer a problem, because it's not ruining anything: we're not into a 'performance'. When I get triggered, it's an opportunity for me to receive care and compassion from my partner. It presses pause on sex for a while, but it doesn't drive us apart any more. In fact, it often pulls us together.

For a long time, I assumed that if you'd been sexually abused, as I had, then you'd never be able to enjoy sex. Then I went through a phase of assuming that if I wanted sex then it must mean that I hadn't really been abused. Eventually, through pulling apart all the different strands, I've been able to claim back my sexuality and for me personally the most important aspect of it is that it's an expression of love within a committed relationship.

Sex isn't something we just do because of animal urges. It's a way of connecting. So it's nothing to do with abuse or power or lust, and that has really helped me see it as something positive and something that is so totally, utterly different from what happened to me as a child. I'm angry now at what happened to me as a child in the sexual abuse, but I'm also grateful that I've been able to work things through at least to the extent that I can engage in a mutual, consensual, safe, fulfilling sexual relationship with the man I love. It's only one part of a much bigger battle for recovery that I'm engaged in, and actually it's been easier to 'solve' than some of my other struggles, but at least there's one area that I've begun to reclaim and it's given me hope for the other areas too. It'll be alright on the night! •

