

# ROAD TO RECOVERY

**BLOG**

WWW.CAROLYNSPRING.COM

© **CAROLYN SPRING**  
reversing adversity



## MY RECOVERY FROM CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE



by Carolyn Spring

It feels a long time ago now, the time when my abuse sat silent within me. It's been over ten years. Back then, I didn't understand any of the dynamics of abuse. The things that had happened, the things that had been done to me, the things I had been made to do – they sat silently within me as heavy weights on my soul, fetid non-reminders of my badness, this toxic mush that I thought was me. I didn't consciously remember any of it. I held it at bay in my mind, all of it too terrible to remember. I couldn't bear to remember. I didn't know how to remember. This abuse just sat there, a silent infestation, eating away at me. It was my secret, my shame. It was a secret even from myself.

Back then, I didn't understand. I didn't realise that you could know about your abuse, and not know it, all at the same time. I didn't know the subtle games that

abusers play, to twist your mind so that you take the blame, so that they can sleep at night, blameless. The things they do, the things they make you do – they are unspeakable, abhorrent. They would keep a normal person awake at night, a writhing restless guilt at the awfulness of their crimes. But not abusers. They take the horror of their actions, and they pass it silently on to their victims, so that we feel bad, rather than them. It's a transfer of responsibility. That's what grooming is all about.

Grooming turns things upside down, inside out. The abuser passes along the shame to the victim, in order to keep them silent. All the time, we feel bad about what happened – dirty, disgusting, untouchable, unforgiveable – not realising that we were made to feel these things to keep us silent, to take the blame.



1



**CAROLYN SPRING**  
reversing adversity

[www.carolynspring.com](http://www.carolynspring.com)

# MY RECOVERY FROM CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE



by Carolyn Spring

We feel we are bad because of what was done to us – that we deserved it, that our badness shouted out into the universe, saying, ‘Abuse me!’ We don’t realise that we are made to feel bad by the abuser, to protect him or her. All the badness that belongs to the abuser is transferred to us, so we feel toxic and damaged and broken and unloved, while they walk free. They are so often the respectable ones, the pillars of society, the innocent, whereas we are the untrustworthy ones who are making up false, malicious allegations ‘for the money’; we are the ones with a psychiatric history, with a problem with drug abuse or alcohol abuse or anything-else-abuse, which we’ve used to numb our pain, but which our abusers twist to prove our untrustworthiness.

I didn’t understand any of this at the beginning. Nor did I understand that we didn’t choose how to respond. I didn’t understand about trauma, and I didn’t understand about survival instincts. I didn’t know that the brain reacts instinctively to threat, that it tries to flee, and if that doesn’t work, it tries to fight, and if that won’t work then instead it freezes. And it does all this automatically, to try to survive. I thought my freeze was collusion. I thought that if I hadn’t fought back, I must have been a willing participant: I must have wanted to be abused. I can’t remember what went on in my head, what thoughts I thought, because all I remember is the hollowness of not being there, while things went on around me. I drifted



away from myself, because it was all too unbearable. I didn’t know that that was dissociation. I thought it was my brain going mad. I didn’t know that, far from it being a sign of insanity, it was my mind protecting me by narrowing its focus, shifting away from what is unbearable, in order to survive. I didn’t realise that sexual assault feels like a threat to your life, and that you react to it automatically as if it is, and it’s that that stays with you forever.

I didn’t know about betrayal trauma, of the incessant basic need to not know that your attachment figures are hurting you. I didn’t know that the gaps in my memory, like black sidebars on old TV programmes, were not because nothing happened but because nothing good happened. I didn’t know that I am programmed to survive by attaching at all costs to the adults who ‘cared’ for me, and that I couldn’t switch that off when they also hurt me. I didn’t understand that paradox, that a child’s mind cannot hold ‘good mummy’ and ‘bad mummy’ as one and the same person, and so has to choose which to believe – and has





to choose the good one, even to the point of burying the memories of 'bad mummy' deep, deep down inside. Most people don't understand that, because their mothers are good, or at least good enough.

I didn't understand nearly enough about memory. I thought that we remembered important stuff, and we forgot unimportant stuff, and that was all there was to it. I didn't understand that when we are really stressed – when we're being traumatised – our brains are poisoned by stress hormones, which is a game-changer: traumatic memories are not stored in the same way as normal memories, or sometimes aren't stored at all. They exist as fragments, rather than as wholes. I didn't know that trauma trains the brain to focus its attention in certain ways, and that it picks up on some things, ignores others, and we're totally unconscious that it's doing it. But that unconscious shift of attention affects what we think about, what we see, what we discern in our relational transactions, for the rest of our life, and

we are tilted towards threat. I assumed that what I could remember about my childhood was what had happened to me, and that what I couldn't remember was insignificant and dull. I didn't realise that the mind hides information from itself, in order to try to cope, and that you can be completely amnesic for the most horrific things.

I didn't understand about 'explicit' memory, which has holes in it, and 'implicit' memory, which is where trauma lies. I didn't realise that our memory isn't just for episodes and facts, but for movements and situations and the unconscious awareness of 'something's not right here'. I didn't realise that traumatic memory could be stored out of consciousness and then intrude through flashbacks and behavioural reenactments. I didn't know that traumatic memory came back like a rush, as if it were happening all over again, and not as anything that I'd previously thought of as 'memory'. There was a lot I had to learn about memory before I began to understand what was going on, why I couldn't remember anything bad, but why I was so full of fear and self-loathing. Why I couldn't stand certain smells. Why I couldn't bear to be touched. Why I was convinced I was always just about to die. I berated myself for being 'mad'; it was a long time before I understood enough to know that my brain had been exceptionally clever at keeping me sane.





# MY RECOVERY FROM CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE



by Carolyn Spring

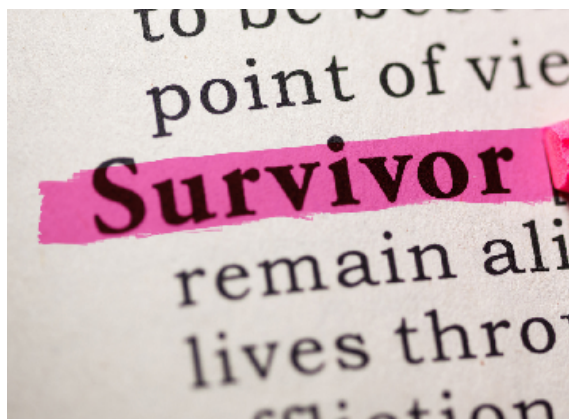
I didn't understand about the impact of abuse, either. From TV there seemed to be two camps of opinion: the judge or police officer who rules that the victim will be affected by this for the rest of his or her life. And then the critic, even ones who write in textbooks, who can't see why being abused could possibly affect anyone negatively. I didn't know what to believe. I was afraid that I was damaged forever, but I was also convinced that I wasn't affected at all. I attributed the symptoms in my life – the self-harm, the suicidality, the simmering self-hate, the difficulties in relationships, the physical illnesses, the shuddery emotions – to an intrinsic defect in me, not to the abuse. I didn't understand that this is what trauma does to you, and that if you hadn't been traumatised, you would think and feel and act very differently. I couldn't see trauma as the cause, because my mind had excluded the trauma from awareness, and I had done everything I could to distance myself from it. I'm just broken, I used to think, that's all there is to it. Broken by nature. No wonder I was so hopeless, so susceptible to despair.

There were so many things that I didn't understand, that I needed to understand in order to begin to heal. I had to come to terms with the fact that the abuse was a central, core experience in my life and in my psychological and physical development. It changed and affected everything about who I am. So there were going to be no quick fixes, because its impact was coarse and systemic. But



at the same time, I had to see the abuse as something separate to me – something that happened to me, not something that defined who I was. It affected who I was, but it didn't define me. I had to learn to reframe it, to see myself not as a powerless child who deserved to be abused (because I never was) but as a person who as a child was powerless, but who was also resilient and survived things so terrible that I can neither imagine them nor properly remember them. Was I weak when I was being abused, or was I – actually – strong? Starting to believe that I survived rather than having just been overwhelmed, and seeing myself as someone with resilience and worth, was a major healing step. I began to understand – slowly – that it's not what happens to us that defines who we are. It's how we view ourselves as a result of what happens to us that defines who we are. I could see myself as a guilty, defective victim, or I could see myself as someone to whom terrible things were done – illegal, immoral, indecent things – and it was the person who did them who was bad, not me. I was a child who survived, and now as an adult, I can





survive too, and having survived I can help others to survive. I'm not the bad one.

I had to learn to get used to the grayscales. Both the unrelenting abuse of my childhood, and the family matrix in which I grew up which allowed this abuse to happen – or at the very least did not prevent it – taught me to see the world in binary terms. People were good, or people were bad. Life was good, or life was bad. I was good, or I was bad. Everything was defined in black or white terms. I had no tolerance – and no experience – in the grayscales. I coped by excluding from consciousness all of my trauma and clung to the belief that 'Nothing bad ever happened to me.' In binary terms I had pushed it out of consciousness, into other parts of the personality. Those parts saw only the trauma, not the possibilities of getting on with everyday life, and when they burst through into consciousness and into overt, executive control, my life swung wildly for a time between their binary-opposite worldviews: 'Everything is fine',

'Nothing is fine'. I had to learn that life isn't made up just of blacks and whites, but that most of life happens in tinges of grey. Emotions change, situations change, people change, I change. I can hold that bad stuff happened to me, but that it's not happening now. I can hold that I was abused and it made me feel terrible and it impacted me in a million ways, but I no longer need to abuse myself now, and I can work at recovery, one aspect at a time, and I can live a fulfilling life. Life is not good or bad; life happens every second of every day somewhere in between those two poles. I had to learn, also, to put in the hard work of recovery. There's a line from a Coldplay song:

*Nobody said it was easy ... No one ever said it would be this hard.*

I used to sing that to myself frequently, not in a self-pitying way but as an encouragement. There's something thrilling about setting yourself a difficult task, and then achieving it. The fact that it's not easy adds to the va-va-vrrroom. So much about recovery is actually about not giving up. It's about showing up every day, however hard that day is, and doing the right things: breathing, looking after yourself, interrupting the stream of negative thoughts that tell you you're a worthless, unlovable shit, going for a walk, journaling, turning up for therapy, fighting for therapy, feeding the cat, eating vegetables.



# MY RECOVERY FROM CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE



by Carolyn Spring



So much of recovery is actually about getting a grip on the basics of life, and doing them, doggedly, every single day. Flashbacks are hard – horrendous, unbelievably so – but the cat still needs feeding and you still need to go for a walk today. Recovery is about taking tiny steps, and taking them every day, because it's the 'aggregation of marginal gains' that both wins people gold medals at the Olympics, and sees us recover our lives and be our own champions. We have to resist and push through and overcome in a way that we couldn't, just couldn't as children. We have to fight, rather than freeze, and we have

to fight, rather than run away from it all. Sometimes we get that we have to fight, but we fight the wrong thing – we fight other people, we fight (in a way that will never win) the 'system'.

Instead we have to fight the urge to give up. We have to fight the urge to beat ourselves up. We have to fight the urge to self-harm or commit suicide. We have to fight the urge to despair. Nobody said it was easy. No one will even realise just how hard it is. But that doesn't mean that we can't do it. We recover by keeping on going. •

