



TEN THINGS I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE



by Carolyn Spring

My earliest memory is of being sexually abused in a big, old-fashioned cot in a room with ornate, mock-gold picture frames and ornaments of shire horses and Greek gods. I was two years old, maybe three. If that's when I first remember, what was happening prior to that? I will never know. It continued until I was sixteen or seventeen when one of the perpetrators moved out of the home.

This is my history, but I have struggled to come to terms with it. My mind protected me by dissociating, for decades shutting off the trauma into non-memory. When the dissociative amnesia began to peel away, I rejected those memories because I didn't understand them; and, not understanding them, I denied they were mine. But I have come to understand that the experiences I had are common experiences, albeit they were crimes.

The survival strategies I employed are common strategies, albeit they led to dissociative identity disorder. And the post-traumatic symptoms I developed are a syndrome of symptoms, albeit that society would rather blame me for them by labelling me 'mad'.

I was abused in the home, outside the home, in organised groups, in settings that had a ritualised element to them, by people I knew and by people I did not. I was abused by men, by women, and by adolescents. The impact has been huge, but bit by bit I am building a life free of flashbacks, one that is attempting to draw together the many strands of my experience. I have disowned these strands, distancing myself from them. But now I am trying to integrate them together into a coherent whole, so that I can become a coherent whole, with



a coherent narrative and a coherent understanding of who I am.

I am a 'survivor' of child sexual abuse in the very best sense of the word. We can and we do survive. Understanding the dynamics around child sexual abuse, who the perpetrators are, how they achieve their ends, the impacts of abuse on us - all of this knowledge, this 'psycho-education', has aided my recovery. And so these are ten of the many things that I have learned about child sexual abuse, some of the insights that have begun to heal my shame.

1. FLASHBACKS WON'T KILL YOU AND THEY ARE YOUR MIND TRYING TO HEAL

I felt that I was going crazy. It was hard not to: my mind would flood, suddenly, unexpectedly, with images and repulsion and terror and dread. At all times, in all ways, the staccato interruptions of half-memories and body sensations would puncture my existence. I hated it. I wanted more than anything for it to stop, for my mind to return to normal, for the boxes in my head to stack neatly again and not divulge their contents. It was overwhelming. A noise, a sensation, a thought ... and suddenly I am assaulted by eye-scratching images of abuse. The steel-hard reality of normality around me fades and I am *back in it*, reliving it, as real in my body as it was back then. I feel pain, disgust, terror. I retch or crumple, even pass out. These experience were overwhelming and they were continual.

Dozens of times a day, every day of the week, for years. I'm not quite sure how I survived.

It was much later in my recovery that I realised that flashbacks weren't the enemy. The flashbacks were my mind trying to heal. It was trying to connect up the dots, fill in the gaps, make sense of this squabble of experiences that I'd tried, as hard as I could, to keep out of mind. But my mind veers relentlessly towards truth. It can only dissociate and avoid for so long. It is pre-programmed to recover. And these flashbacks, distressing and debilitating though they were, were my mind's insistence that we wouldn't live in the shadows any longer. We were going to bring this thing into the light, and we were going to deal with it. And then we would be free of it. I have come to believe that the symptoms of child sexual abuse are the beginnings of recovery. When it starts to affect us, it is a good sign. We are going to heal.

2. 'MONSTERS DON'T GET CLOSE TO CHILDREN - NICE PEOPLE DO'

These are the words of the late Ray Wyre, a respected child sexual abuse investigator. The concept of the stranger in the mac jumping out from the bushes is a stereotype and myth. The vast majority of children who are sexually abused know their abuser. Our children are more at risk from within the family than they are from without.





But we don't want to know that. We want the reassuring image of the sick paedophile, the monster – so we know who to watch out for. The idea of sex offenders dressed in Next and driving a Golf is too disturbing. So we force it out of mind and welcome the stereotype because it is easier to live with.

So *everyone* dissociates. Everyone pushes unwelcome truth out of their mind. A most unwelcome of truths is that respectable people abuse children. Accountants do, and bricklayers, and people who work on the tills at Tesco. All sorts of people. And we can't tell by looking at them.

When I considered the people who abused me, I struggled to accept it because they weren't evil all the time. They did normal things too. They ate, they laughed, they sang whilst baking shortbread. They did everything that everyone else – people who didn't abuse children – did. So I kept on refusing to believe that they had abused me too. For many years, I wanted the image more than I wanted the truth, because

the truth is painful. The truth is that nice people are not always nice and that 'monsters' live in four-bedroomed houses too.

3. THE TOOLS OF THE ABUSERS ARE DENIAL, MINIMISATION AND BLAME. BUT WE HURT OURSELVES WHEN WE USE THESE TOOLS TOO

To abuse a child, you need to distort the truth. Because the truth is hideous, and your actions are crimes. So abusers employ 'the triad of cognitive distortion'. Firstly, they deny altogether that they are abusing. They tut at the television when such things are mentioned and deny even to themselves that they are engaged with the same. *I'm not doing anything wrong. This isn't abuse.* But if truth is too forcefully imposed on their situation, then they move on to minimisation. *It's not hurting anyone. It's not that bad. It's not like it's rape or anything. It's only a bit of fun. I'm only looking. It's my way of showing affection.* If that doesn't work, then they resort to blame. *It's not my fault. She made me do it. She (or he) started it. It's what he (or she) wanted.*

In this way abusers avoid facing their crimes. In this way they shirk responsibility for the hurt they are causing. But it damages us further when we employ these tactics too. If by dissociating we deny that we were ever abused – *It didn't happen to me; it happened to another part of me* – or we



deny that it bothers us – *It's no big deal, worse things happened to other kids* – or we take the blame for it ourselves – *It's because I was bad, and I deserved it* – then we will drown in the abuser's cesspit of lies.

Recovery involves facing the truth, knowing the truth, letting the truth seep deep into our bones, and rejecting the reality imposed on us by the perpetrators. It's not our shame; it's theirs. It's not our guilt; it's theirs. It's not our fault; it's theirs.

It is a scary thing to place the responsibility back where it belongs, on our abusers – especially if they are also our family – but unless we do it then we are colluding with the denial, minimisation and blame that they used to hurt us, and we are missing the chance to heal.

4. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IS SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME, BUT IT DOES NOT DEFINE WHO I AM.

The impact of abuse runs right to my core. The experiences I had as my brain was first forming lay templates for me for the rest of my life. I assume I am bad, and toxic, and unloveable, because that is what I was told and how I was treated. The experience of abuse has at times completely entwined me, like Russian vine around a pergola. But recovery comes through recognising that I was a person before I was abused. I was a person during the abuse. And I am a



person now, after the abuse. The abuse is something that was imposed upon me, like whitewash on a building. However deeply I have felt contaminated to the very foundations of my self, in reality it is external. It does not define who I am. It says more about my abusers than it does about me.

I struggled at first to accept that I had suffered child sexual abuse, to identify myself as a victim of such monstrous crimes. I had to own those experiences which previously I had banished to the far reaches of my mind. I had to lay hold again of those memories, those beliefs, those thoughts, those feelings. But then I would disown them. And own them again. On and on in a spiral of ever-deepening rings. But eventually I could place those experiences outside of me, in a right way. *This is what someone did to me. It is not who I am. I am more than this. I am not the sum of my experiences. I am a person in my own right.* Having done that, it is easier to stand back from the trauma but still own it, to view the abuse as experiences I have had, rather



than as determinants of my soul. Abuse defines the abusers more than it defines the victim.

5. THE PERPETRATOR GROOMS NOT JUST THE VICTIM BUT THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY TOO

In grooming, the abuser prepares the victim to be abused. Resistance is eroded. Blame and responsibility creep onto the victim. Grooming protects the abuser and enables them to perpetrate, entrapping the victim with secrets, promises, threats and lies. *If you tell anyone, it will break up the family. You made me do this. I won't tell your mother you were drinking alcohol / taking drugs / skipping school / stealing biscuits. You're a naughty girl/boy for doing this, but I won't tell ...* Grooming deeply distorts truth and inverts responsibility, leaving the victim deeply impacted in ways that can take years to unravel and heal. *It's my fault. I wanted it. Everyone does this. They love me. This is for my benefit. I caused this. I deserve this because I am bad.*

Grooming is about trickery and deceit, and recovery from its effects involves reuniting with truth. But often that process is hampered because the wider network – the family, the church, the club, the school – have also been groomed. *She makes things up. He's trouble. I can babysit for you. Let me help you out. Doctors and teachers and police officers don't abuse.*



Society was groomed by Jimmy Savile. We believed his charity efforts. We smiled at his eccentricity. We succumbed to his power. Abusers groom everyone around them. They invite the belief that they are pillars of the community, whose version of events is *right*, the arbiters of truth.

Sexual abuse doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens in a manufactured reality that abusers can spend years creating. If you're willing to train to be a priest in order to gain access to children, or work in a nursery, or marry a single mother, then there's no limit to what you will do with that trust once you have it. That, sadly, is why abusers get away with it for so long. No one wanted to believe that Cyril Smith was anything other than fat. He was an MP. We have entrusted the country to men like him. So he is to be trusted. And children lie (or so they say).



6. POWERLESSNESS IS THE VERY ESSENCE OF TRAUMA, BUT WE ARE POWERLESS NO LONGER

The freeze response makes sense. In the face of overwhelming threat, when fight and flight are no longer an option, a child – just like an antelope or a possum or a rabbit – freezes to survive. Perhaps she will escape detection. Perhaps it will numb the pain. Perhaps submission will win the day. The freeze response is a work of evolutionary genius, but it cramps our style. If we freeze when someone raises their voice, if we freeze when we spill a drink, if we freeze when someone walks behind us, then the freeze response is no longer adaptive. We need to update our mental maps, because we are no longer little and defenceless and unskilled. We are adults now, with resources we didn't have before, with the right to say no, with the right to be heard. We can develop our skills to amplify our no until it is heard and respected. We were powerless as children, and inevitably overwhelmed.

But recovery is built on a new reality: we are no longer stuck; time has moved on; we have moved on. Powerlessness is a cage whose doors have opened, and we don't need to sit in it a moment longer. It takes time to learn this. It takes the dogged practice of every day, in some small way, *acting* rather than *freezing*. We need to build up new habits. But they are choices we are free to make now, and

choices we *need* to make now if we are to emerge from the cocoon of victimisation, to spread our wings and fly.

7. REMEMBERING IS NOT RECOVERING

At the moment of trauma, our memory systems fail. The event is stored in our survival-based 'back brain', a kinaesthetic and non-verbal imprint. In future, when faced with the same threat, we are primed to respond immediately and instinctively. It's clever, but it costs. Often then the event is not stored as a 'story' in our mind, the narrative explicit memory that composes our history. Instead the memory of abuse can be fuzzy, a barrage of body sensations and terror, not a neat bullet-point list of events. But it is all memory, and it is all valid. When our memory systems have been overrun by the cascade of stress hormones in our bloodstream, it makes remembering hard. We have the symptoms, we have the feelings, but we have no distinct story to tell. And so without a sense of history, we doubt if we can recover.

But remembering is not recovering. We can remember and still not recover. And we can recover without remembering. The indelible impression of trauma manifests itself in our symptoms and our behaviours: we jump at a sound, feel hopeless in the face of mild threat, flee at the faintest hum of conflict. Recovery is about relearning these reactions. The narrative is helpful



because it explains the whys, making it easier for us to understand ourselves and accept compassion. But sometimes the narrative is just in our body and in our emotions, and that is enough to work with. So often we fear 'false memories' but ironically they exist most abundantly in abusers who declare that our childhood was perfect and that they were perfect parents too.

8. FEELINGS ARE MEANT TO BE FELT, AND WE CAN LEARN TO ADJUST THE VOLUME

My home was a prison of avoidance where feelings were to be kept at bay: with dissociation, amnesia, alcohol, drugs, busyness, overwork. Feelings were my enemy. They obstructed my goals. They embarrassed me. They were unreliable, unpredictable. They were *bad*. My life was built around trying to avoid feelings, aiming for some nirvana where I could smile serenely with the wisdom of non-feel.

But feelings are meant to be felt. They are not meant always to be believed, or taken as the sole guide to action, or allowed to spit venom on people around us. They are just meant to be felt. Having been felt, they will pass. If they're ignored or repelled, they will keep coming back, clamouring to be heard.

But feelings have a volume. Some of us try to keep that volume low, muted if possible, to walk uninterrupted through our day without the white noise of



emotion. Others of us believe that our needs will be met if we ramp the knob up to ten, so our feelings drown out thought and reflection and the quiet, steady flow of relationship. Silent or ten. In dissociative identity disorder (DID), those extremes are experienced within discrete parts of ourselves – alternate identities, some of whom are emotionally numb, others who are frantic with the scream of unremitting pain.

Abuse is distressing, and it ramped up the volume whilst muting it too: our abusers managed *their* feelings by overriding ours. So we learned to live in the silence, in the blare, from everything to nothing and back again, a thousand times a day. We couldn't find the volume knob to amplify the quiet, fluttery sounds in our tummy. And we couldn't turn it down either, away from the squawk of unrelenting distress. Recovery has involved feeling my feelings and using the volume knob – less out-of-control, dysregulated distress, and less numbed-out, avoidant, dissociative spaciness too. We can learn to live in the middle,



accepting our feelings as part of us, part of what it means to be human, and part of life lived to the full where we feel positive feelings along with the negative ones.

9. THE STEREOTYPES ARE INADEQUATE

Women abuse. Boys are abused. Siblings abuse. Babies are abused. People in caring professions abuse. People with intellectual disabilities are abused. Parents abuse.

These are all true but they are not the stereotype and so our lives bed down in shame that somehow our abuse was extraordinary, out of the range of normal human experience. We feel doubly bad for having been abused by a woman, by a mother, by an older sibling, by a *younger* sibling. But as we've seen already, the stereotypes serve society's denial and are not good indicators of truth. There is something indelibly shocking about a mother abusing a son or even a mother abusing a daughter. It contradicts everything that we implicitly believe a mother to be. And when babies are abused, our attachment caregiving systems – that have evolved to nurture and protect the most vulnerable – scream with the horrifying wrongness of it. It happens – and more often than we care to believe. But I am not doubly bad for having suffered extreme abuse. There is nothing in *me* that caused it. I didn't deserve it. And there are thousands upon thousands of people like



me, who also are trapped by the shame of this abuse. But it's more typical than any of us dare to believe and it was all wrong, and it was all damaging, and you are not to blame.

10. WE ARE SURVIVORS

Child sexual abuse causes very real damage – to our brains, to our personality development, to our 'internal working models', even to our bodies' susceptibility to disease. Recovery is not swift. We need, in so many ways, to 'unlearn what we have learned'. We need to learn whom to trust and why. We need to develop skills for managing our feelings. We need to treat ourselves kindly, as worthy of self-care. We need to retrain our reactions and learn to handle flashbacks and triggers. We need to learn to relate to others well. We need to learn to assert ourselves in the face of someone else's power. These are hard tasks, but essential ones.

Healing doesn't come through denial or avoidance. It doesn't come through





wearing a brave smile and pretending that nothing happened. Healing doesn't come through perpetuating the lies of the abuser. Healing comes through embracing the truth. But what is that truth? It is many things, but it includes the breathtaking triumph that we survived and we are still here. So many of us carry the shame posture of a victim, believing that we are weak and defective and worthless, but instead we should be proud. We are resilient. When we were defenceless and unsupported, mere children, we coped with intolerable pain, we coped with betrayal, we coped with deceit, and somehow we have kept on surviving. We are not pathetic – we are heroic.

If we can change our view of ourselves, if we can reframe our experiences as us surviving unbearable suffering, if we can see that we are creative and resourceful and determined and strong, then we will begin to heal. It is not what happened to us that matters so much as how we view it. We are not damaged goods. We are gold refined in a crucible. The challenge for us is to believe that this is so, and live our lives on the strength of who and what we really are, rather than the self-protective lies of our abusers. If we can do that, we can heal. And we *can* heal – more than anything, what I have learned about child sexual abuse is that it is not a death sentence, and it is not a life sentence. We *can* heal, and we can be free. •

