

## **Sexual Abuse Counselling has a Beginning, Middle and an End... and it can help!**

If you were sexually abused, it is important to know that good counselling can help you overcome problems arising from the abuse. Knowing what to expect in counselling can make it easier for you to attend. Counselling can be thought of in three stages...

### **The Beginning Stage**

The beginning stage of counselling begins with disclosure and is characterized by issues of trust, self-doubt, and even feelings of shame by some survivors.

As a result of the disclosure, you may feel a rush of various emotions that in turn may trigger a variety of defence mechanisms. You may feel like fleeing, but hang in. Further, you may experience vivid recollections of past abusive events. These recollections can flood your consciousness during waking hours or intrude during sleep as nightmares. These are the hallmarks of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Important in the beginning stage of counselling then, is actually limiting your disclosure so you avoid overwhelming yourself. In future sessions as you acclimatize to the acknowledgement of the abuse, greater disclosure can proceed. The counsellor will help you with these feelings so you overcome them.

### **The Middle Stage**

The middle stage of counselling begins as a continuation of the first. Issues of trust, safety and security will be emergent and reoccurring themes. If there has been a prior unsuccessful counselling effort you may be ambivalent about the counsellor with concerns that the shortcomings of the previous experience will be experienced yet again. It is therefore important to discuss prior counselling efforts and concerns with your counsellor.

As counselling progresses and you are more comfortable, your defences will relax and more personal detail of the abusive events may be disclosed. However you may still find this overwhelming. The role of the counsellor is to normalize these reactions and help you pace the disclosure and exploration of events and thus help you gain control of your own emotions and reactions. Throughout, the counsellor will also help you make connections from past abusive events to present day symptoms.

In the middle stage of counselling you may experience relief and/or exacerbation of symptoms – ups and downs. This is to be expected and is normal in the recovery process. Don't

be alarmed and feel free to discuss these ups and downs with the counsellor. As counselling continues, you will learn that the abuse and current symptoms are not a function of your worth, value and humanity, but wrongful events perpetrated against you beyond your control.

You will learn to separate your sense of self from the abuse and the abuser and establish a healthier identity. You will then be in a position to appropriately assess your own interpersonal relationships and make better choices. Further, you will be able to identify and separate your needs and issues from others and choose how to best meet competing needs. Eventually, your symptoms will subside.

The middle stage draws to a close as you demonstrate enough symptom relief and improved psychosocial functioning to manage independently.

### **The End Stage**

By the end of counselling, you may feel gratitude and a reluctance for it to end. Your relationship to the counsellor may have been your healthiest inter-personal experience in that it was non-exploitive. This can give rise to a significant attachment. To ease the ending, you can request a more gradual reduction of meetings or meetings of shorter duration, "check-ins". You can also request the opportunity to reconnect if necessary as for a "booster shot".

The end of counselling can be the beginning of other services such as ongoing support groups or educational opportunities. You may explore a new lifestyle or job. In all cases, you will be encouraged to go out into life, manage ambiguity and uncertainty, learn and flourish.

Don't be held hostage by fear. If you have been sexually abused and it is affecting your life, consider counselling.

You now know what to expect!

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.