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## 'Men, experiences of sexual abuse and questions of sexuality: Prioritising choice'

Living Well Webinar  
16 June 2011  
Men's Health Week



**If I tell you I was sexually abused, will you...**

- ...judge me?
- ...believe me?
- ...see me as less of a man?
- ...add to my sense of shame?
- ...question my sexuality?
- ...think I will abuse?
- ...listen?

**living Well** livingwell.org.au provides information and support to men who have experienced sexual abuse, to partners, friends and family.

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## Overview

The Webinar will identify and carefully work through some particular challenges that men subjected to sexual abuse can experience in relation to sexuality, along with some ways of addressing these.

- Questions of sexual identity
- The sexual, bodily aspect of the experience of assault
- The influence of abuse on sexual interests and relationships in the present

In working through these identified difficulties, an emphasis will be placed on exploring and understanding problems within their social relational context, on supporting and prioritising choice in enhancing men's well being, relationships and sexual lives.

Please prioritise your own self care, in choosing to participate in and listen to this Webinar.

- **Questions are invited and welcomed**

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## Defining Childhood Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault

Variety of definitions exist. The essential points:

**Childhood sexual abuse:**  
 Sexual acts direct or indirect against a person under the age of 18.  
 Child/person has an inability to comprehend or understand the implications of the sexual act.  
 Includes, exposure to sexualised material or behaviour.

- Involves power imbalance
  - Age
  - Intellect
  - Experience
  - Size, Status and Authority


**Sexual assault:**

- Statutory offence that provides that it is a crime to knowingly cause another person to engage in an unwanted sexual act by force or threat;

**Note:** the offence and experience has a '**sexual**' component.

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## The context




- Research suggest that between 1 in 6 and 1 in 10 males are sexually abused whilst under the age of 18 years.
- 80% of childhood sexual abuse of males and 95% of sexual abuse of females is perpetrated by males. 20% of sexual abuse of males and 5% of sexual abuse of females is perpetrated by females
- Males most likely to experience sexual abuse when adolescent or preadolescent
- Risk of sexual abuse escalates if a boy is a runaway, has a learning or physical disability, is subjected to other forms of maltreatment in the home, comes from an impoverished and/or single-parent family, is indigenous, is same sex attracted, has spent time in a hospital or institutional setting.

Crome 2006; Dube et al 2005; Holmes et al 1998; ACSSA Wrap No.1 Nov. 2005; Gonsierek et al 1994

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## Clarification



Sex = biological status prescribed at birth, male or female, intersex (sex is also used to describe the act of 'sexual intercourse').

Gender = roles and behaviours that have become identified as masculine and feminine. These vary from culture to culture, throughout history and within cultures.

- Gender (gender identities) boy, girl, man, woman.

Sexuality = thoughts, behaviours and desires that represent our erotic lives (also used to describe sexual identity)

Sexual Identity = Prescribed ways of understanding, identifying and ordering our erotic attractions and relationships.



- heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual,
- gay, lesbian, straight, queer.

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## Being a man

Men face expectations to be:

- Strong and powerful - physically and mentally
- Rational, logical
- Not overly sensitive or overcome by emotions -
- Independent, self-reliant
- In control - of self and situations
- Heterosexual - the doers and instigators of sexual acts.
- Enjoy, ready and up for sex when opportunities arise throughout their life span
- **Not passive or a victim**



## Dealing with the Effects of

### Childhood Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault

There is no prescribed way of how people are impacted on by sexual abuse or assault, every one is different. However, we do know sexual abuse or sexual assault can have profound effects on people's lives and that questions of when, by whom, for how long and in what ways people were abused, can influence how the abuse impacts, becomes understood and is responded to.




## Common problems



- Depression/anxiety
- Overwhelming emotions/anger
- Decreased appetite & weight loss
- Guilt, shame, humiliation
- Suicidality/self harm
- Sleep difficulties
- Mental health problems
- Abuse of drink and drugs
- Sexual difficulties

Banyard et al 2004. Tewkesburg, R. 2007.


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## Impacts on sexuality

Men report struggling with questions relating to **sexual identity** and sexuality, including

- Feeling distress, shame or guilt about a sexual response
- Engaging in sexually compulsive behaviour
- Aversion to sex or specific sexual activities
- Difficulty trusting sexual partners
- Experiencing, panic attacks, disassociation or flashbacks during sexual activity. Hall 2008.

Sexual abuse can lead to difficulties in relationships, to confusing sex with love, care-giving, abuse, pain, being powerless or being powerful.

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## Men report having to confront questions relating to sexuality/sexual identity.

- *“He’s not really a man, he gave in, he must have wanted it”*
- *“He must be gay and is just too afraid to admit it”*

Men are not only concerned about what other people might say or think, but also will evaluate and question themselves in relation to whether they might be gay?

- *“It makes you wonder when you’re being raped. You know, some guy just had anal sex with me. You know, who am I? Am I gay or am I hetero? You know, you wonder?”* Butler, Samantha. “Against His Will.” In the Attitude series. Produced by J. Bayliss. Videorecording. Sydney: ABC, 1994.
- Men’s concerns extend beyond questioning whether they were complicit in the abusive act, to consider whether they might ‘really’ be gay, something the person abusing them could see, but that the man has not recognised or acknowledged yet.
- For some men this sense of uncertainty is added to by the physiological response of developing an erection or ejaculating at the time of the abuse.



## The Question of Pleasure and the Problem of Erection

- What if I developed an erection or gained physical pleasure from some aspect of the contact? Does this mean I am responsible? Does it mean I really wanted it to happen? Does this mean I am gay?
- It is not uncommon for males to develop an erection and ejaculate at the time of being assaulted. It is important to make men aware of this and discuss how this can influence an act becoming identified as consensual or non-consensual.
- Some people who perpetrate sexual assault work very hard to stimulate and arouse the other person! How might this work in favour of the person perpetrating abuse?
- Watch out for ideas that the truth of the person is within the body (the inner child, the true self, ideas of hidden/latent desire) and the suggestions that erection automatically signals desire.



## Regina versus Morgan - Legal Defence of Mistake of Fact and the Problem of Erection

- D.C. One thing you have not told the jury yet, is what you did right at the beginning of this incident?
- T. What do you mean?
- D.C. You got an erection right at the beginning, did you not?
- T. I didn't get an erection right at the beginning.
- D.C. When did you first get an erection?
- T. When he started playing with me.
- D.C. That is what you say is it?
- T. Yeah this is what I say and this is what is the truth.
- D.C. Alright, so you say stop according to you?
- T. Yeah.
- D.C. He plays with your penis and you get an erection, yes?
- T. Yeah.
- D.C. Although you are so scared you cannot say anything, you get an erection?
- T. Yeah.
- D.C. Not a sort of half hearted one, a full blown one no doubt?
- T. Yeah, I suppose so.
- D.C. Well you were there? Rumney 2001.



## Questions of sexuality and same sex attracted men

Men who identify as same sex attracted speak of being confronted with questions related to sexual identity:

- Did the sexual assault make me gay?
- Was I sexually assaulted because I am gay?
- If I come forward will I be treated differently and not be believed because I am gay?

Sexual assault can become mixed up with 'coming out'.

- What if a young man is exploring his sexuality with men and is sexually assaulted?
- What if he has not told anyone about his same sex attraction?



HOMOPHOBIA

Another significant and telling chapter in my life are the two occasions when I was raped. The first took place when I was seventeen. An older man lured me into his flat and brutally raped me. The second took place in a park as I was walking home from work. I left St. Andrews Hospital where I had been on a late shift and walked through the park on my way to the city. Five young men bashed and raped me. They kicked me and held me down while they took "turns", at the same time they called me names "poofter", "faggot", etc. It seemed strange that they should be performing the very act that is at the centre of their reason for despising me.

The reason I mention these incidents is that because of past experience I knew that I could not really seek help, even though I was severely hurt. I felt I could not go to the police, and I also felt that I could not go to a hospital because I would have been treated with contempt.<sup>CJC 1991</sup>

## living Well Problem of Homophobia - Prioritising choice

Homophobia and questions relating to sexual identity produce unnecessary confusion and move attention away from the use of violence, manipulation, coercion and the offensive nature of the crime of sexual abuse.

Discrimination and suggestion of the 'wrongness' or 'unnaturalness' of same sex sexual relations compounds problems for men, it can facilitate ongoing sexual abuse, add to a man's sense of confusion, guilt and shame, increase isolation and prevent him from naming and speaking of sexual abuse (It can even be a stimulus for some men to rape men).

Restrictive religious beliefs around sex, sexuality and 'homosexuality' make it more difficult to speak about sexual abuse or sexual assault!

Sexual identity categories are modern inventions that can be both enabling and constraining.

- Homosexual 1869
- Heterosexual 1892
- Latent Homosexual Desire 1898
- Note: Heterosexual and homosexual are commonly used as both nouns (a heterosexual person) and adjectives (a heterosexual act).

By **Prioritising Choice**, a focus is placed on ensuring sex is age appropriate, mutual, consensual, respectful and enjoyable for the persons involved (Queer Approach).

## living Well Some Useful Questions

- What would it be like to talk about sexual matters. Do you feel pressure to live up to the 'ideal' that men 'should' be sexually competent and in control?
- Many men I have talked with about their experience of sexual abuse have talked about confusion or fears it has left them with about being gay or being seen as gay by others. Has this been a question for you?
- How did the abuse convince you that it could define your sexuality? Where do those ideas come from?
- How has the prevalence of 'homophobia' added to these ideas?
- Could it be that people's lives do not fit into neatly boxed sexual identity categories?
- What difference would it make if we saw sexuality more as a continuum than a set of rigid categories, something that might change overtime?
- If you were able to stand apart from abuse prescriptions, what possibilities might arise for your sexual choices?

Adapted from Tim Harker, 'Therapy with Male Sexual Abuse Survivors: Contesting oppressive life stories', in *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The archaeology of Hope*, eds G. Monk, J Winslade, C. Crocket and D. Epston.



## Sexuality and sexual abuse of boys by women

20% of sexual abuse of males are committed by females.

Boys & men report confronting the suggestion that *"He should feel lucky if he has sex with a woman" or "A woman can't rape a man"*.

Some of them will say to you, *"Well you know – sexual experimenting."* And I told them, *"Well look, I was sexually abused by someone who was 18 yrs old approximately, and I was about 11. There's no sexual experimentation there, not on my part. I was abused I wasn't experimenting. I didn't even know what the hell sex was"*. Teram et al 2006

Males are less likely to identify sexual contact they had with an adult woman when they were a child as sexual abuse. Typically involves someone the boys know, e.g. a female babysitter, use of persuasion rather than threatened force Nelson & Oliver 1998.

Questions relating to sexuality continue to surface: 'If I did not like sex with a woman, does this then mean that I am really gay?'

Men report a subsequent mistrust of women, fear of overt female sexuality, varying degrees of discomfort with sexual intimacy with women. *"I can't make love because I feel dirty... There was a point where (my wife) wanted a lot of sex, and I couldn't do it...I felt really dirty and disgusted. After sex, I would take a bath and scrub down my skin"*. Denov 2004

## Identified foundations for good sex

1. Accurate information about your own sexuality, your partner's, and about sex itself.
2. Having or developing an orientation based on pleasure (arousal, love, lust, and fun), rather than performance.
3. Having the kind of relationship in which good sex can flourish.
4. Being able to communicate verbally and nonverbally about sex.
5. Being assertive about your own desires and able to focus fully on your own pleasure and also being exquisitely sensitive to your partner and being able to respond sexually with them.
6. Understanding, accepting, and appreciating sex differences. [Healthyplace.com](http://Healthyplace.com)



## Additional considerations

It is important when seeking to address any difficulties related to sexuality and sexual desire to consider the influence of alternative factors, which may or may not be influenced by or interact with the experience of sexual abuse:

- Stress
- Alcohol
- Sleep difficulties
- Medication
- Body image, obesity
- Erectile dysfunction and other physical factors
- Low testosterone
- Depression
- Relationship difficulties and the impact of parenting


Note: It is important for health care professionals to have an understanding of how sexual abuse can influence men's sexual lives and to adapt their service accordingly.

See *Handbook on Sensitive Practice for Health Care Practitioners: Lessons from Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*. Schachter et al 2009. Also see [Medicinenet.com](http://Medicinenet.com).



### How sexual abuse can shape attitudes to sex

Sexual Abuse Mind-set (sex = sexual abuse)	Healthy Sexual Attitudes (sex = positive sexual energy)
Sex is uncontrollable energy	Sex is controllable energy
Sex is an obligation	Sex is a choice
Sex is addictive	Sex is a natural drive
Sex is hurtful	Sex is nurturing, healing
Sex is a condition for receiving love	Sex is an expression of love
Sex is "doing to" someone	Sex is sharing with someone
Sex is a commodity	Sex is part of who I am
Sex is void of communication	Sex requires communication
Sex is secretive	Sex is private
Sex is exploitive	Sex is respectful
Sex is deceitful	Sex is honest
Sex benefits one person	Sex is mutual
Sex is emotionally distant	Sex is intimate
Sex is irresponsible	Sex is responsible
Sex is unsafe	Sex is safe
Sex has no limits	Sex has boundaries
Sex is power over someone	Sex is empowering





## Relationships

- Relationships are a place where problems related to a history of abuse can appear (men and women subjected to sexual abuse are 40-50% more likely to report relationship difficulties Dube et al).
- Relationships are also a place where difficulties, including difficulties with trust, intimacy and sexual relations can be worked through and resolved.
- It is important to provide information and support to partners, for partners preferences for sexual intimacy to be acknowledged and supported. Noting, it is not uncommon for partners also to have had an experience of sexual abuse and for this to shape their life and approach to sex.

Research with couples where the male partner had experienced sexual abuse has identified

- Increased confusion during sexual and emotional intimacy
- Difficulties when the man 'checked out' and emotionally disengaged.
- Increased emotional engagement and communication were correlated with improvements in the sexual relationship. Anderson Jacob & McCarthy Veach 2005



## Partner relationships, love, intimacy and sex

Remember - the sexuality is influenced by and mediated through the experience of sexual abuse and growing up male in our culture. It is useful to consider:

- What training have you had to live an emotionally engaged sexual life?
- How do you engage emotionally with your partner, with your self?

It might be useful to explore the expectations men, women, couples have around sex, to differentiate between acts of love, intimacy and sex. To consider

- How do you like to express and receive love in your relationship?
- How does you partner like to express and receive love?
- What were you taught about intimacy when you were growing up?
- What builds closeness and greater intimacy in your relationship?

Remember: expectations about sexuality and sexual relationships change - Ideas that people in long term relationships should have a full and satisfying sex life are recent.

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It is not uncommon for memories and difficulties relating to sexual abuse to re-appear during sexual contact.

- Situations or contact that replicates the experience of the abuse are likely to be particularly challenging.
- Develop an awareness of what are or might be the sensitive areas, scenarios, trigger points following an experiences of sexual abuse, e.g. who was involved, males/ females, relationship context, the ways of engaging or disengaging, the places, acts, positions, touches, smells, sounds, feelings.
- Emphasis on slowly developing understanding of sexual preferences on prioritising safety and choice, on becoming familiar and comfortable with your body, on talking, on being together and in tune with your partner and their body, wishes and desires.
- Be cautious of application of standardised sex therapy techniques for engagement and enhancing sexual pleasure that do not consider and adjust for the influence of an experience of sexual abuse.
- **Note:** Negotiating and enhancing sexual relationship with partner, where there are difficulties, can be a challenge if the partner does not know about the experience of sexual abuse (this can further isolate the man and have him trying to control, work it out or manage situations and bodily reactions).

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## Practitioner and service considerations

Services are confronted by the dilemma, of needing to be pro-actively gay and queer friendly whilst not excluding those men who are overtly homophobic.

Counsellors need to develop a working knowledge about sex and sexuality, to be clear about their own attitudes and beliefs and to be comfortable talking about diverse and intimate sexual practices.

Raise the topic; become comfortable talking about sex as a routine aspect of counselling; highlight that how sexual abuse can influence sexuality. It might be useful to acknowledge that you as a counsellor often have conversations about sexual preferences or difficulties, things that people don't typically discuss.

Be prepared to discuss the man's sexual history, his current sex life and interests, his sexual fantasies, use of pornography and masturbation

Do not presume that because someone has been sexually abused that they know all about sex, sexual or reproductive health.

It is important to be pro-active, to provide accessible and supportive educational material, to connect people in with suitable support, individuals or groups.

Reading about and talking with other men who have had similar experiences helps break down isolation Sanderson, Christiane. *Counselling Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, 3rd Ed. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2006.

## living Well Placing men's use of pornography and masturbation in context

- Some evidence exists that men who have experienced sexual abuse are more comfortable talking with men around sexual matters, use of pornography and masturbation.
- Although there are many similarities in men and women's expressions of sexuality, it appears men are significantly more likely to access porn, to masturbate, to express an interest in and participate in casual sex
- Australia 70% men and 30 % women access internet porn.
- Study of 16/17 year olds 73% boys 11 % girls have watched x rated video or porn.
- International studies report that significantly more heterosexual men than women watch porn (97.8%) and have done so within past 6 months (92.2%), month (82.5%), week (63.4%), 24hours (26.2%).
- Men started watching at younger age (13.2yrs), more likely than women to watch porn alone (79.6%) and to masturbate whilst watching (48.2%).
- The internet has increased interest in and access to diverse sexual practices. Men, twice as likely as women to watch anal intercourse (32.7%), oral sex (28.5%), group sex (22.2% one man – more women) lesbian sex (22.3%) and amateurs sex (19.4%) Hald, G. M. (2006)

## living Well Addressing problem behaviour

After sexual abuse, masturbation and use of internet porn can feel safe, it does not involve having to consider, negotiate or deal with another person's interests or desires. It can be a way of staying in control of a situation or 'looking after your self'.

However, internet porn usage and excessive masturbation or sexual activity can be problematic, re-enacting an abusive dynamic that disengages men from themselves and opportunities for respectful sexual relationships. Note: Internet porn sites use a series of strategies to keep the viewer engaged and stimulated in a way that impacts on sense of time and disconnects men from living an engaged life. .

It is useful to evaluate porn usage, excessive masturbation or sexual activity:

- How does this behaviour influence your sense of well being?
- How do you feel about engaging in this behaviour? (In the short and long term)
- How does a partner feel about you engaging in this behaviour?
- Does it influence you to become involved in uncomfortable, unequal or compulsive sexual activity?
- What changes might you make to increase emotional intimacy for yourself?

Note: The 12 step program is sometimes recommended to address porn and sex addiction. Be aware that aspects of this program can be particularly challenging/problematic:

- Step 4. Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves
- Step 5 Admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

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- Thank you for participating in this Webinar
- **Question and comments are invited?**
- Please contact us if you would like more information.  
[info@livingwell.org.au](mailto:info@livingwell.org.au)
- Wishing you all the best.

*Gary Foster*

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