

# A Young Persons Guide to ~ Abuse ~



**A Peer Counselling Handbook**

## Abuse

What do we mean when we talk about abuse?

Abuse is something which damages a person physically, mentally, emotionally or developmentally.

So abuse could be :-

- Physical - hitting for example - causing a bruise or a broken bone.
- Emotional - making someone feel bad.
- Verbal - saying harmful things or shouting.
- Sexual - making someone do something sexual that they do not want to or are too young to understand.

Think of some examples.

List all the ways that you think someone could harm you ...

What could they do	How would that harm you

Are there other ways that we can be abused?

The examples we have looked at involve 'doing something' to someone. We can also abuse by **not** doing things that should be done for example :-

- Not feeding a child - so starving the child.
- Not caring - so neglecting
- Not wanting - so rejecting
- Not loving - so emotionally depriving

A child or teenager treated that way will not develop normally in an emotional sense.

When we interact with other people we can do this in a positive, helpful way – being nice or good to them or doing something that will make them feel good about themselves. We can call these actions 'positive strokes'. A positive stroke can be something as simple as a smile or saying 'good morning'.

If we really care about a person, we will be nice to them whatever the situation and we can call that unconditional loving or unconditional strokes, but if we are only nice to them when it suits us or when they do something for us – then that is a 'conditional stroke' – do you care for them? ... it depends.

People who are used to getting only 'conditional strokes' will grow up feeling they have to please others – they have to be nice or no one will love them – and that they don't deserve to be loved for who they are. That is a kind of emotional abuse.

If we interact with people in a negative way and make them feel bad – we can call these actions 'negative strokes'.

Here are some examples – can you think of some others?

#### Strokes

Type	Positive	Negative
Physical	Hugs	Blows
Verbal	Praise	Criticism
Unconditional	I love you	I hate you
Conditional	I like you when you give me presents	I can't stand you when you bite your nails



### Abuse can affect us :-

- Now → Hurt us physically or emotionally
- Later → Harm our development – particularly emotionally
- In Future → Damage the way we cope with problems as adults.

People react differently to abuse. There are of course severe forms of abuse which are obviously harmful and hurtful to anyone – like beating or burning or rape - but then there can be more subtle forms of abuse – like emotional abuse or saying bad things to them, which might be more harmful and abusive to one person than to another. Someone who is really out to hurt you and make you feel bad will sense or know your vulnerable points and the things that can get at you and affect you most.

Also abuse will affect you differently if it is something that happens once or twice or if it goes on for a long time. Children who have been abused for a long time think that it is normal - they don't know anything else - they think all parents act like that - they expect to be hurt and they believe that they deserve to be hurt and abused. They get to think that it is because they are bad that they are hurt. They think that because bad things happen to them - then they must be bad.

To help these children and young people we need to make them realise that this is not true. Abuse is not normal. They do not deserve to be hurt - they deserve to be treated well. They need to learn that ...

## BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE

### How do we recognise abuse?

People who are being abused often try to hide it. Children will hide secrets about their parents hitting them and about someone sexually abusing them because they may be afraid that they will get into trouble if anyone finds out. They may feel guilty, feel responsible, feel that it somehow must be their fault. They feel dirty and shameful.

We need to help them to see that **it is not their fault** and lay the blame clearly on the abuser - who is often a cowardly bully. This bully will often threaten or blackmail the child or young person to keep quiet. 'Don't say anything or I will tell them it was your fault, I will hurt your brother, I will kill your kitten' all these things can be threatened. Or the abuser may try to



persuade the victim that 'this is our little secret' 'this is our special thing we do together'. All a pack of lies to keep the abuse going.

So we may not be able to get the victim to tell us what happened but we may be able to see that they are frightened or sad. We may notice bruises, marks which they try to hide. Maybe they try to avoid going home and stay out late to avoid their father. Or some days they may not come to school so that people will not see bruises. If something is going on at home they might avoid their friends visiting and try to keep others away from where they live.

Sexually abused boys and girls might be afraid to have normal sexual relationships or they may become promiscuous and have lots of boyfriends or girlfriends because they don't know how to behave with the opposite sex and grow up thinking that everyone wants sex with them.

### **Is there someone you know who might be hiding abuse?**

What makes you suspect?

Might you be hiding abuse yourself? Have you been abused in some way? Do you think you would realise it if you had or might you put it to the back of your mind and say to yourself that it is normal? If you think this might be so – make sure you talk to someone about it – a counsellor or a teacher or a doctor perhaps.

### **Why do people abuse others?**

There are all sorts of reasons- some parents cannot cope and are stressed and may strike out - sometimes the parents did not really want the child and they may see all their problems as being the child's fault ... if only I had not got pregnant ... if only I did not have this child ... then I might have finished my education, then I might have got a better job, then I might have more money, then I might not have married his father .... All these excuses. A man might suspect that the child is not his and reject the child and start abusing him or her.



Sometimes there does not seem to be any reason like that. The abuser could be on drugs or using alcohol or might have a mental illness and take it out on the child or young person. They might be disturbed or may actually gain some pleasure from seeing the suffering caused.

It may also give them a sense of power. Some people need to have power over others and try to achieve that by hurting those weaker and smaller than themselves - a defenceless child is an easy victim. This can be the case in domestic violence too or in sexual violence - it gives the abuser power over the victim.

**Think of an example of someone hurting someone else –**

Why do you think they did it?

It can be hard to imagine why some people abuse others – it is particularly hard to believe that someone will hurt a tiny baby or deliberately try to cause pain and injury to a beautiful innocent child – but this does happen and although it is not a pleasant thing to think about it – we need to realise that these things happen so that these children can be protected.

**How do we feel about abuse?**

Write down -

What emotions do you feel thinking about abuse?

Thinking about the abuser?

Can you be abusive yourself at times?



## **Reactions to being abused**

People have different reactions to abuse. Some people who have been abused as children feel bad about themselves for the rest of their lives and they become 'victims' who accept abuse from others. They may marry an abusive man or put themselves at risk of abuse and harm. They may also harm themselves.

Others grow up angry and revengeful. They want to get even because of the pain they have suffered - they want to strike back and sometimes they can become abusers themselves - its strange that someone who suffered like that as a child would do the same to other children - but that is the way they cope with their anger - taking it out on someone weaker.

The third group of people react to abuse by making sure it never happens again. These people want to protect others - they become carers, they may be social workers, teachers and they need to look after children who are suffering like they did as children.

## **What can we do about abuse?**

Are we able to cope with the idea of abuse? The important thing is to recognise it and to believe victims who say these things have happened to them. We may not want to face up to these awful stories but we do need to believe the victims and help them to speak out.

Breaking the silence and speaking out - breaking the secrets, that is the first step. Have we been able to cope with the abuse of a friend? Or maybe our own abuse? Talk to someone and begin to trust someone who may be able to help.





**Think of an example of an abuse situation which you know about.**

(Make up a story if you do not have an example)

What happened?

How did people find out about it?

How did you feel about it?

What could be done?

Could anything have been done to prevent it?

What do you think the results of this abuse will be? Will this person be damaged in the future?

**This handbook has been produced by Dr Diana Birch of Youth Support in conjunction with the peer counselling courses at the Women's Centre of Jamaica Foundation.**

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