

# Therapy With Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse Images

A summary created by the Phoenix 11, based on their own experiences

## Difficulties:

### Shock Factor:

Therapists often cry or otherwise react with strong emotions when survivors start to open up. Survivors feel the need to comfort or protect therapists over having their own needs met. They feel that they cannot really open up and can only share surface details. Some therapists react strongly to the surface details, leaving survivors to wonder how they can share the worst of what they went through with anybody.

### Expressing Experience Verbally:

It is so hard to find the words to describe such an intense experience. Some survivors do not feel that they have the vocabulary to adequately express it, or that no words could.

### Establishing Trust with Therapist:

Survivors worry about the consequences of opening up to a therapist. They worry about being judged for parts of their story. They worry that they will not be seen as trustworthy people for times they may have gone along with things, lied, or done other things to survive that some people might find questionable. Some survivors also see the therapist as a friend in what is a very lonely situation. For this reason, they hesitate to share certain details that they fear might threaten that relationship.

### Caseload Size:

Some survivors experienced therapists who had large caseloads and were not able to give them the attention required for their intense needs. Some of these therapists would need refreshers at the beginning of each visit on what the client's needs were and did not have a clear treatment plan. Survivors need therapists who really get to know them and their stories and who go over notes before each appointment and come prepared with a plan or direction. For this reason, survivors may require therapists with smaller caseloads who are able to give them more individualized attention.

### Therapist Lacks Training:

Many survivors experienced therapists who did not know what to do to help them. Survivors agree that treating them like a client who experienced sexual abuse alone is not effective because it does not address the other complicated symptoms of their ongoing trauma. Survivors need therapists who have training in working with complicated trauma and address issues holistically.



## **Therapist is Too Directive and Rigid:**

A few of the survivors experienced therapists that were too rigid and made them feel controlled or shamed. One therapist required the client to journal everyday, but the client had difficulty completing the journaling because it caused such great anxiety. When the client explained to the therapist why the homework was not completed, the therapist refused to see the client. This caused further harm to the client and made going to therapy that much more of a challenge. Therapists who work with survivors need to be flexible, really listen to client needs, and work collaboratively with the client to find interventions that will be helpful and not harmful.

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## **Issues Survivors Have Difficulty Resolving With Current Therapy:**

### **Nightmares:**

All of the survivors still struggle with nightmares and 9 out of 11 survivors struggle with insomnia. Therapy has not resolved these issues, despite some of the survivors being in therapy for several years.

### **Aging/Body Image:**

Survivors were taught by their abusers that their young, childlike bodies were beautiful and more desirable than older bodies. This cognitive distortion can cause additional distress about the aging process and body changes related to age, childbearing, and health issues.

### **Employment Issues:**

Many survivors have experienced difficulty working in service types of jobs that involve random people coming, going, and approaching them, such as retail or food service. Many survivors have quit a new job within the first week because of panic attacks. Some survivors feel conflicted between disclosing about their PTSD to their boss, to help them understand and work with them, or protecting their privacy and dealing with the consequences of appearing "flaky." Many survivors find it difficult to go to work on certain days when PTSD symptoms are worse and will call in sick on these days. For some survivors, working outside of their home has been too difficult at times because of anxiety, and it feels like a disability.

### **School Issues:**

Difficulty concentrating in school because of court going on, classmates recognizing from media, or social anxiety in general (wondering if classmates have seen image, are safe people) can lead to drop in grades despite ability. These things also make it hard to attend class. Some survivors have found online school to be more doable. However, online school also means speaking to people online that are strangers, which can be another source of anxiety.



## **Identity Issues:**

Survivors struggle to form a new identity after their story is disclosed. Many adults find parts of their identity in work, their education, or their relationships, but all of these things can be challenging in different ways for survivors. They may feel that they lack an identity they can talk about openly if they are not able to answer simple questions like, "What do you do for a living?" They may feel shame for where they are at in life and feel like they are so far behind their peers. If they do disclose to others, they are worried that they will be treated differently and always seen as a victim or defined by their traumatic story. Survivors need support in forming new identities apart from their trauma and learning how to talk about themselves in a positive way with others.

## **Social Anxiety:**

The social anxiety of survivors needs to be treated differently than regular social anxiety because it stems from a different cause. There may be many reasons for a survivor to experience social anxiety, and these would be best treated in an individualized way for each survivor.

## **Sexuality:**

Survivors may struggle with sexuality in their adult relationships, either learning to be comfortable with their own sexuality, communicating about sex with their partner (what they need & what they do not like), and responding to their partner. They may struggle to connect emotionally during sex or may find their body trying to disconnect and shut down. It can be confusing for their partners because they may be fine with something one day and averse to it the next. They may also be extra sensitive to and hurt/angered by the use of pornography by their partner.

## **Online Presence:**

Most of the survivors felt that they had to be cautious with their online presence. Many use variations of their name, rather than their actual name online to protect themselves from being approached by pedophiles who have seen their images or others who might troll them because of what has been written about them in the media. Survivors need to be careful about their privacy settings on social media. They may also need help dealing with the loss they feel for not being able to use social media as openly as their peers and missing out on things because of that.

## **Dissociation:**

Survivors may often lose track of time, zone out, and get stuck in thoughts that we cannot remember as soon as we snap out of it. Even as we recover from the other symptoms of PTSD, we may still struggle with dissociating in the small, quiet moments of our day.



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## What Survivors Need Therapists to Understand:

- We have difficulty having empathy for ourselves. It is easy to care about others first and neglect ourselves. We will reject ourselves before others reject us.
- We are lonely. Our experience is unique and makes us feel set apart from others.
- We require a unique approach. Our issues are more complicated than the abuse we experienced as children.
- Our identity has been messed with by our abusers and those who have viewed our images online. We need helping forming a new cohesive identity apart from our trauma. Difficulties with school or work make it harder to form a new identity.
- Opening up to friends or significant others about our traumatic past or the images of it is a huge step that we may need support with.
- Sex and sexuality are complicated for us and we may need help navigating that. Sometimes we are afraid to be sexy. It is difficult to trust others enough to be vulnerable. We will probably have good days and bad days in this area and need support to form healthy patterns.
- Having children or even thinking about having children brings up a whole new layer of issues for us. It may require re-doing some work on our trauma in a new context. There may be a lot of fear about bringing children into the kind of world where such traumatic things can happen to children. We may worry constantly about the safety of children in our life and act in ways that are hypervigilant and exhausting, such as refusing to let other people watch our children. Seeing our children in certain normal situations can trigger painful memories. We may be especially triggered by cameras around children.

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## Interesting Things Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse Images Had in Common:

- Most of us put off dating till late high school or after high school.
- Most of us have only had between 1-3 significant others.
- Most of us have dogs and find animals very comforting. They make us feel safe and less lonely. They never judge us. We can tell them anything.
- We all have had difficulties with employment because of anxiety and other PTSD symptoms.
- Most of us experienced difficulties with school because of anxiety and other PTSD symptoms, and some of us have found online school to be the better option.
- Most of us have had a negative experience with the media that made us feel exploited all over again.
- Most of us have triggers or worries related to kids, even those of us who have kids. E.g. "What if we have abuser DNA that we pass on to our kids?", "What if we develop inappropriate thoughts towards kids at some point?", seeing pictures of friend's kids in the bath on social media causes anxiety, etc.
- Most of us had fears about appearing "sexy" that affect the way we dress and our presence on social media.
- Many of us were worried about being "compared to each other" before we met.
- We all have really vivid and highly detailed dreams. Many of us have lucid dreams. Many of us struggle with recurring nightmares.

