

What Child Abuse can NEVER Be Your Fault

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As survivors of childhood sexual abuse, we often grow up blaming ourselves for the abuse that we suffered at the hands of others.

I know I never even questioned that it wasn't my fault. I was brought up to believe that the abuse happened because of something I did or didn't do - and to me it was as factual as the earth being round. As children, we are brought up to know that "adults know best" - and so when someone tells you (or implies to you) often enough that it's your fault, eventually you believe it. And when you think something for long enough, you don't even think to question the validity of the statement you're making. I was to blame.....end of story.

Although it's not the end of the story. Because once you get to the point of being able to question the validity of all the assumptions you have made about this self-blame all your life, you start to realise that *actually* there is no truth in it. You can come up with as many reasons as you like as to why you're to blame, but not one of them will stand up when exposed to closer scrutiny - because a child can never ever be to blame.

For me, as I child, I believed that the reason I was hurt so badly by people I cared about was simply because that's what I deserved. I deserved it because of who I was as a person. I was bad, worthless, pointless, nasty, ugly, stupid etc - and any other negative adjective you could think to throw in there. I'm sure many of you can identify with this. It wasn't so much what I did that made me "bad" - but more just something that I *was*....something that was in me in spite of how well I tried to behave or how good I tried to be. Nothing I did to be "better" made anything better or made people treat me better - and so, understandably, I concluded that I was treated badly simply because of who and what I was. If you have felt this, please know that it was an affect of the abuse you experienced, not a statement of truth.

Despite the self-blame that many children adopt in light of being abused, it's important to realize that the abuse was actually never about them at all, but about the desires of the abuser(s).

As I grew into an adult, I held on to the belief that the abuse was my fault. But I felt an increasing need to rationalize *why* it was my fault. It wasn't enough to just

say "It was my fault because I am a horrible person". I wanted concrete facts to back up exactly why it was my fault, which may sound strange. Why would I want to find concrete reasons to prove that the abuse was my fault? Yet despite the perceived illogicality of this, I sought reason after reason after reason to prove that it all happened because of me.

There are numerous theories to explain why we hang on so strongly to the concept of self-blame. One such theory explains that if we can attribute our ill-treatment to something we did, then we can control whether this ill-treatment happens again in the future by learning to moderate our own behavior. It gives us a sense of control over being hurt again. By letting go of the fact that the abuse happened through no fault of our own, it means that we also have to let go of that sense of control - which is very hard to do because, ultimately, we want to be able to protect ourselves. However, learning and accepting that we do not have control over everything in our lives and everything that happens to us is a necessary part of healing. What we can take away from this however, is that we can take control of the healing process....and that can be a very empowering experience.

As survivors heal, there can be a profound sense of sadness in letting go of self-blame. Self-blame enables us to protect our abusers because if we make the abuse about us rather than about them, we can maintain the attachments with these people who often play a very big role in our lives. Learning to let go of these attachments, even when associated with much pain, can be very sad - but learning to stand on our own two feet is also a necessary facet of healing.

As I've said, for me, as I entered the healing process, I tried to seek many ways in which I could blame myself....often starting the statement with "It's my fault because.....". So many times I've gone over the same conscious process of extracting reasons why it was all to do with me. And I know I'm not alone in that....and you're not alone in that either. Below are some of the ways in which those statements that go round and round in our heads can be refuted.

It was my fault because if I'd been a better son / daughter, perhaps my mum / dad would have loved me more and not hurt me.

A parent(s) should love and care for you regardless of how you behave or what you do. Their love for you should be unconditional. No child behaves perfectly. Children make mistakes. They push boundaries. They can be "naughty". They don't always do as they're told. All children can be a challenge and a hand full at times, but it is a parent's job to guide, love and protect their children despite all of this.

A parent has a responsibility to teach a child right from wrong - and sometimes

may need to punish their child. But punishment of a child involves things like telling a child off, or grounding, or stopping pocket money. It should not ever include acts that are physically or sexually abusive. No matter what you did wrong, or what you think you did wrong, you did not deserve to be abused.

Abuse from a parent does not happen because of some failure or inadequacy on the child's part. It happens because of some failing within the parent.

It's my fault because I didn't tell anyone.

All children who do not tell about their abuse have very good reasons for keeping silent. For example:

Your abuser may have threatened you.

You may have been scared that no one would believe you.

You didn't know how to tell or what words to use.

You were frightened that you may be punished.

You were very confused about what was happening.

You didn't know what was happening was abuse.

.....and many many more reasons.

Looking back as an adult at the reasons you had for not telling, you may chastise yourself or discounted these reasons as not good enough. Many times, adult survivors of child sexual abuse may say to themselves, "I was so stupid to believe that threat". But try to understand that the way you see things now is going to be completely different to how you saw things as a frightened and traumatized child. The fears you had about telling would have been very very real back then, and you shouldn't dismiss what a powerful silencer fear and uncertainty can be.

It's also important to realize that many children who feel unable to tell someone what is happening to them, may try to let people know what's happening in other ways. For example, they may say that they don't want to go to x's house, or they may start acting out, or self-harming. If you've done anything like this, you actually did try to tell.

For more on this, see [Understanding why you didn't tell.](#)

It's my fault because I let the abuse go on for so long.

You didn't "let" the abuse carry on. In all likelihood you felt (or were) pretty overwhelmed and powerless to stop the abuse. Your abuser would have had all the

power in this situation.

ONE episode of child sexual abuse is too much. Unfortunately, for most child sexual abuse survivors, the abuse reoccurs over a period of time.

It's my fault because I liked it happening because it felt nice and exciting.

Regardless of how it felt to you, what happened was still abuse.

When children are touched sexually, very often this stimulation will feel nice....maybe even exciting....and can lead to sexual arousal and orgasm. Very often, children do not understand what these feelings are, and the mixed feelings and sensations can be very confusing and difficult to understand. However, the fact that you had these responses does not make what was done to you okay. Being aroused is a physical response that you have no control over. Conditioned responses are automatic and they happen whether you want them to or not.

For more info on this see [sexual arousal and sexual assault](#).

It's my fault because I wanted that special time.

Sometimes, abusers can make it so that the children they are abusing feel "special" or that they are being devoted "special time" which they should be grateful for. Some adult survivors of child sexual abuse feel they are to blame because they remember they welcomed this feeling of being special, and of one person giving them the warmth, attention and physical contact that they so badly needed. It may have been that this was the only time that you felt wanted, needed or special. Abusers can be very good at making children feel like the abuse happens because they love you so much.

Regardless of whether you felt special or welcomed the warmth and contact that being with the abuser gave you, the abuse was still 100% wrong. All children need to feel loved and special, but this love should be delivered in an appropriate and non-abusive way. You abuser abused his knowledge of your emotional needs and wants, and used that to get what he wanted.

It's my fault because my abuser said it was my fault.

Abusers are committing a very serious crime when they abuse a child. Most abusers

are very fearful of what will happen to them if the fact that they are abusers is made public. They may fear what their families and friends will say to them; they may fear prison; they may fear losing their jobs; - they may fear a whole heap of things. And as such, they are going to try to ensure that the child doesn't say anything to anyone. ONE way of doing this is to tell the child that it's their fault that the abuse is happening. Telling the child it is their fault, is a way for the abuser to control the situation by making the child afraid that they will be blamed and get into trouble if they report it to anybody.

It's my fault because I didn't fight hard enough.

Children do not have the physical strength or the mental resources of adults, and in this respect they would usually be outmatched by their abuser.

Children who are abused are being confronted with a situation that they don't have the adult capacity to understand – and it can be impossible to get yourself out of the situation you're in. Many abusers are dangerous and could pose a real physical threat to a child's survival. Often there will be other threats hanging over the child's head if they don't do as they are told - and so they may feel totally unable to fight on any level.

Children do what they can to survive an attack and submission is not desire, it is survival.

It's my fault because I didn't say NO!

Many child survivors feel that they are partly to blame for the abuse because they didn't say "NO" when it happened. There are so many reasons why you might not have said no:

You were confused about what was happening.
You didn't know you were allowed to say no.
You didn't want to say no.
You were too frightened to say no.

Children cannot consent to a sexual relationship because they are below the age of consent. It is not the responsibility of a child to say "no" to sex.

It's my fault because I thought I wanted it or said I wanted it.

All children, especially as they reach their teenage years, start thinking about their sexuality and become interested in sexual exploration. This is perfectly normal, and even necessary for healthy sexual and social development. Understandably, children and teens who are reaching this age may become attracted to people who are significantly older than them, and may even desire or seek to engage in intimate interactions with them.

However, there are some abusers that take advantage of children and teenagers who are at this stage in their life. A responsible adult understands that children who are under the age of legal consent are not mentally, psychologically or physically ready for a sexual relationship, and therefore they should not engage with a teen in this way. Therefore, even if you initiated, wanted or "consented" to sexual contact with an older person (or a person in a position of authority) it was still abuse and it was not your fault.

It must be my fault because I was abused by different people who were unconnected to each other.

Unfortunately, some children are abused by more than one person in different episodes of abuse. If you have been the victim of multiple abuse episodes you may feel that you must be to blame because you keep getting chosen to be abused – and in fact some survivors talk about feeling they have a label on their head saying "hurt me".

Child abusers may target children who are more vulnerable – and undoubtedly children who are survivors are likely to be more vulnerable than non-survivors. For example, child survivors may find it difficult to distinguish between good touch and bad touch because of their previous experiences.

For more information, see our [Revictimization](#) article.

It's my fault that I didn't protect my brothers and sisters.

Some children feel guilty that they weren't able to protect their brothers / sisters (or other loved ones) from the abuse – and therefore believe they are partly to blame for this abuse. It is important to try to realize that you cannot be held responsible for anything your abuser did to you or to anyone else. Your abuser is the one in control, and your abuser is the only one that can take responsibility for what they've done.

Self-blame is something which is really important to try to overcome because it can serve as an obstacle to your healing because it results in avoidance of reality. The reality is that your abuse was the fault of the person(s) who abused you, and the responsibility lies with them entirely.

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