

Healing Sex: The Complete Guide to Sexual Wholeness, a DVD by Staci Haines
Interview Questions & Answers for Men

1. How is sexual abuse and child sexual abuse a men's issue?

If you asked them, most people would tell you they think child sexual abuse is wrong. The majority of the population believes that sexual abuse is a terrible crime that happens to someone else, somewhere else. But child sexual abuse and adult rape is everyone's problem. Given the statistics, each of us knows someone whose life has been directly impacted by child sexual abuse or adult rape, which makes us all bystanders. Because of the silencing and shame that surrounds sexual abuse, frequently neither survivors nor offenders disclose their experience to those around them. Child sexual abuse continues at an enormous cost to society, not only in terms of public health, but also in terms of personal relationships. To address and prevent sexual abuse we must each develop our ability to face it and respond to it effectively.

Statistics show that the majority of sexual offenders are men who identify as heterosexual, independent of the gender of whomever they sexually abuse. Women are sexual offenders, too. No one is born a sexual offender, but people can be raised to be one, through personal experiences, and more importantly, from the culture at large. Child sexual abuse and adult sexual assault is a men's issue, both because many boys and men are survivors and bystanders, but also because many men are offenders. Men taking accountability for interrupting sexual abuse, and changing the conditions that allow for it, is a key part of ending it.

2. Why can it be difficult for men to tell about their sexual abuse?

While statistics suggest that girls are more frequent victims of sexual abuse than boys, it is unclear whether or not those statistics reflect the reality of sexual abuse or just the dynamics of reporting. While there are a wide variety of cultural beliefs about gender and sexuality, many cultures remain more comfortable perceiving girls and women as sexual victims than recognizing the sexual abuse of boys and men. Homophobia and sexism perpetuate the myth that "real" men are not sexually victimized, and because of this myth it seems highly likely that the sexual abuse of boys and men is under-reported across cultures. Homophobia also makes it difficult for boys to disclose sexual abuse by men for fear of being labeled gay.

Men need to be believed, supported, and validated when they are courageous enough to speak openly about their experiences of child sexual abuse or adult sexual assault. As more and more men come forward, others will also gain the support and courage to do so.

3. Why is it important to speak out as a man who has been sexually abused or assaulted?

Men coming forward about their experiences of child sexual abuse and sexual assault breaks down stereotypes such as "Sexual abuse doesn't happen to men," or "It was just an early sexual experience and boys are supposed to like that." It is critical for men and boys to see representations of their own stories discussed when people broach the subject of child sexual abuse. Breaking the silence helps end the shame that plagues survivors. As more men come forward, and people see representations of survivors they can relate to, be it because of gender, sexual orientation, culture or class, others will also gain the support and courage to do so.

4. What is unique about men's healing?

Because men are not often seen as survivors of child sexual abuse or adult rape, there often is a unique kind of shame that men have to overcome to begin healing. Homophobia and sexism perpetuate the myth that "real" men are not sexually victimized, that men are "strong" (not vulnerable) and that men are the sexual initiators (and therefore could not be sexually abused). Homophobia also makes it difficult for boys to disclose sexual abuse by men for fear of being labeled gay. These barriers prevent men from being vulnerable enough to come forward about what has happened to them, and to get appropriate help. Too often the

responses to men talking about their sexual abuse is unsupportive and reinforces these gender stereotypes. Child sexual abuse and adult sexual assault hurt and traumatize men and boys in the same way it does women and girls. Men need to be supported, seen, believed, and engage in the process of healing.

5. Does being a male survivor of child sexual abuse mean that you are more likely to be gay?

While child sexual abuse, as well as adult sexual assault, impacts people's sexualities, sexual abuse does not "make" someone gay. Sexual abuse is an act of abuse misusing sex as the tool for harm. This often confuses sexuality with abuse, and people struggle to untangle this mess. Sexual abuse can leave someone suspicious about their own sexuality, confused about what sex is, and afraid to engage with their own sexual desires and wants. Some people do ask themselves the question, "Did my abuse make me LGBT?" This is part of that untangling. The important question is, "If I could define my sexuality, independent from abuse, what do I want? Who would I be?"

Stereotypes about gay people complicate the question about whether sexual abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, makes one gay. The misperception still exists that being LGBT is somehow "abnormal" and that something wrong must have happened to make people that way. The problem lies in the stereotype, not in facts about child sexual abuse.

6. Do men who were sexually abused as kids become perpetrators?

Current research suggests that only 1/3 of sexual offenders have experienced child sexual abuse themselves, although research also suggests that a personal history of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, or neglect as a child do act as risk factors for offending.

If you looked at a graph that charted the profile and demographics of child sexual offenders in the United States, it would match the profile and demographics of the average man in this country. This does not mean that all men in the U.S. are sexual offenders. Rather, it underscores the fact that sexual abuse is committed by a wide range of people rather than by a stereotypical offender. But despite the fact that there is no single profile for a sexual offender, recent research in the field of sex offender treatment suggests that some key factors are often present: very low self esteem, feelings of extreme powerlessness, a tendency to relate more to children than adults, little to no empathic ability, and strong projections of accountability onto others (it is all someone else's fault).

We need to both look for the personal factors that contribute to someone sexually offending, as well as the social factors like gender training, perspectives on having "power over others," and a lot of negative information combining sex and violence.

7. Are gay men pedophiles? Or Are gay men more likely to sexually abuse children than straight men?

No. Adult sexual orientation is irrelevant to the sexual abuse of children. The vast majority of adults who sexually abuse children identify as heterosexual, even those men who sexually abuse boys. Child sexual abuse and homosexuality are linked by a series of odd and unsettling connections in the public mind. Heterosexism, the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural form of sexual expression, tends to reinforce the belief that homosexual people are somehow sexually deviant. Once this belief system is in place, it is just a quick step to thinking that homosexuals might be more likely to sexually abuse children.

Child sexual abuse is about the expression of sexual power rather than the expression of sexual preference for one gender or another. Some sexual offenders have a preference for children of one gender or the other, but

this preference is not necessarily reflected in their adult sexual choices. This stereotype is part of broader cultural homophobia, which scapegoats gay men as sexual offenders.

8. How can partners and lovers help?

Partners and lovers are often the first to know or notice that the person they love is deeply struggling with something. They may notice the symptoms of sexual abuse or struggle with how these symptoms are impacting their relationship. Because sexual abuse deeply impacts a survivor's trust, intimacy, and sexuality, often partners are the folks who live most closely with the results of child sexual abuse or adult rape. Survivors often confide in their partners and look to this relationship for key support. Your love, care, and presence are vital, and getting support outside of the relationship is also important. Healing from child sexual abuse or rape is an experience that needs a great deal of support to help hold it and heal it.

It's not easy being the partner of a survivor who is in the throes of healing. The major mistake I see partners make is that they try to become rescuers and martyrs, "I'll help you, even if I have to deny myself. I'll make things as easy as possible for you, even if that makes them harder for me." At first, this seems noble, but it doesn't work for either partner over time. No one can "save" anyone else from the emotions or pain of sexual abuse. The best ally a partner can be is one who supports the survivor in healing, which means going into and through the pain of sexual abuse.

It is important as a partner to stay connected to your own boundaries, needs and joys. While these needs may not get met all of the time, denying them tends to backfire. I have seen partners edit themselves out of the relationship because they are trying not to do or say anything that will cause their loved one to feel pain, remind them of their history, or make them feel afraid. These feelings are part of the healing. Remaining as honest, sensitive, and authentic as you can be, while expressing your own boundaries, needs, and desires is the best bet as partner.

I urge partners working with healing from sexual abuse to engage others in this process. Who are your support people? Who else can you talk with honestly about the healing process? Your friends, family (when appropriate), and community play an important support role in healing.

It's hard to be in a relationship when one member is working to heal from sexual abuse. But those who hang in there usually find that the process is a major growth experience with a wonderful deepening of love and intimacy, and in the end, a better relationship with much better sex.