

Reading for week 8

Moving on: Steps to recovery and ongoing support

Welcome to the rest of your life

Many men who have attended SAMSUN groups find that meeting others who are also survivors in a safe space where the focus is on recovery, begins an exciting and rewarding time of their lives. We hope you have found that SAMSUN has a realistic and practical idea of what recovery means. It is a process that you undertake which forms part of your ongoing life journey. Recovery does not mean that the memories of abuse go away or that flashbacks won't happen anymore. But it means you will learn ways to deal with them. The memories of the abuse will lose their power to overwhelm you in the present as you recover from the effects of the trauma you experienced. The abuse remains part of your story but you truly understand it is in the past.

At times recovery takes centre stage. This is when survivors spend time and effort being aware that they have survived, that the abuse was not their fault and does not need to define who they are. This special time means that you can devote energy and time to your recovery so that you can take your life back from the effects of abuse. Telling yourself that your recovery is important means telling yourself that you are important. How long this intense focus on recovery lasts, varies for each person and it is OK, even advisable, to take a break if you need. But hopefully the overall journey of recovery will last for the rest of your life. It is like learning any new task. It is difficult at first, takes a lot of concentration and effort but slowly becomes something you just do. That's when you realize your brain has changed! At the beginning you can often find yourself asking, "Does all this effort help with my recovery?" Sometimes at the early stages things can even get a bit worse before they begin to get better. But trust the process because it does work, and you are worth it.

Are there some people you need to tell that you were abused?

For those survivors who were tricked, threatened or intimidated into keeping the abuser's secret, there are possibly people who do not know you were abused but who you may wish to tell. If this is true for you, it is your choice, but we would suggest some guidelines; Do it only if it is part of your recovery, work out how to do it safely and remember, **you** choose who to tell and **how much** you tell. Note the word we have used – "tell." We did not use words like "admit" or "confess" as these words suggest you did something wrong. In fact, you could approach it by telling them of your pride of surviving something that was really difficult. Of course, you cannot guarantee how people will react and if you begin to feel unsafe because of the way they respond, it is best to stop. Some survivors approach it by saying things like, "I am going to tell you something about myself and I would like you just to listen until I have finished." Others have found the best way to tell people is to think it through carefully, write it down and give it to the other person to read. Like all things related to your recovery, you need to do what works safely for you.

Working out who is on your side

The journey of recovering from sexual abuse is very difficult to do on your own. You need support from people you can trust and who you find safe. It is important that you trust yourself to work out who is on your side because no one else can make those decisions for you.

Those who are most helpful will let you recover at your own speed and will not label or criticise you. They will not tell you what you need to do as if **they** are an expert on **your** recovery. But they will also tell it like it is, even when you don't want to hear it. In other words, they are people who care about you and are willing to give you the space you need to continue your recovery. They will not blame you for being abused and they won't be critical of you because as a child you could not keep yourself safe. Be aware that some survivors have decided to tell someone they trust, only to have that person acknowledge that they too are a survivor. That leads to some interesting conversations!

Some of your support people might be family, friends, counsellors or other professional people you meet on your journey. You may also include other survivors you have met through SAMSN. But be prepared for some of the relationships you have with family or friends to change. As you recover you also change, which can in turn put pressure on those relationships to change. Some are likely to become stronger and others may not be so resilient. Some survivors find that their recovery journey even means leaving some people or coping strategies behind.

As important as knowing who is on your side, you should also work out who is not on your side. By that we mean who is unable to help you recover or is critical of your efforts. For some survivors this means confronting what is often a painful reality: that some or all of their family were not there for them when they were being abused and unfortunately are not still there for them now.

You are the best person to decide which people or activities in your life are helping your recovery and those that aren't.

Consider including SAMSN in your support network! One of the unique aspects of belonging to SAMSN is that support from other men who have been abused does not need to stop when the group finishes. SAMSN continues to provide a safe space to enable ongoing recovery. All men who have been through a SAMSN group are encouraged to continue contact through ongoing monthly support meetings. These meetings also use readings which follow on from the eight-week groups and have a clear focus on recovery. What better way to overcome isolation, continue to receive and provide support and remind yourself that you aren't the only one who was abused. It is a great way to see that recovery continues and is real.

Dealing with your family

Relating to your family now means recognising differences between your family then and now. The most obvious difference is that you are no longer a child and do not depend on them for your wellbeing, your food, your shelter or your emotional safety and nourishment. Using safety as the filter means that as an adult you are the best judge of who the supportive people are.

This often includes setting limits. This can be just standing up for yourself. For some it could mean deciding that your family is not a safe place for you and it is best seeing them less or even not at all while you are dealing with certain aspects of your recovery. If the abuser was from inside your family, it could mean only seeing that person with someone else present.

If the abuser was from outside your family you may need to explain to family members how the abuser got access to you. They may ask, "Why didn't you tell us?" This probably means that they don't understand how abusers groom and intimidate victims and their carers. You may have to explain grooming to them. Unfortunately, some family members may even blame you and continue to make excuses for the perpetrator. This may put more pressure on you and result in you feeling victimised again. You need to prevent this from happening. Don't buy into it. To maintain your safety, you may need to limit contact with such people. However, remember that some of their responses may be because they are feeling bad and guilty about not keeping you safe and not understanding that maybe they were groomed to.

What about the person/people who abused me?

"I realised that I needed him out of my life. He had dominated me for too long." This statement from one survivor is a good example of a man who realised that he was no longer at risk from the abuser and that the person who had abused him had already taken too much. Although he had not seen him for many years he still felt that the perpetrator was invading his space – and his head. Some survivors have even found it helpful to have a small ceremony to symbolically tell the perpetrator, "Get out of my life." They do such things as writing a letter to the perpetrator or drawing a picture of them and then burning it. It can feel great to see the abuser go up in smoke and blow away! Of course, this can also be an effective way of getting rid of a perpetrator who is already dead but is still haunting you. Dead abusers can still have their secrets handed back to them! Some survivors whose perpetrators are dead have visited the grave of the person who abused them, sat down and told them, "I remember what you did to me, I want you to know how much you hurt me but that I am a survivor, you did not take that from me." On occasions a written message has been left anonymously at the grave. In some ways it does not matter that the abuser is dead because it is not about them. It is about the survivor's ongoing recovery.

If the person who abused you is still alive, SAMSN strongly advises that if you decide you want to confront them, you do this with a support person who understands and supports what you are doing. This minimises the possibility of you being re-victimised, which could include your losing control and becoming violent. The person who abused you could also claim you harassed or stalked them and ask that you be charged. Once again, your safety is the first priority. Many survivors decide they do not need to waste another minute on the abuser and want nothing more to do with them because the perpetrator has already been banished from their lives.

Various legal options, including criminal, civil and National or State redress may also be open to you. Criminal action can include simply putting the offence on record by submitting a form reporting it to police without taking the matter further, or alternatively, making a formal statement to the Police that will require them to investigate your allegations. This may lead to charges being laid and the person who abused you going to trial. But realistically, this is unlikely. You first need to think through very carefully any legal action you may take, including making a statement to the Police.

Before taking action, get as much information and advice as possible (including good legal advice) to help you with your decision making. SAMSUN would recommend that any legal action should be taken only if it is part of your recovery.

Remember “historic sexual assault matters” as the police call them, are very difficult to investigate due to the passage of time, lack of evidence and witnesses etc. They are even harder to prosecute, that is, to get the matter to court. You may not get the result you want and in regard to criminal action, the matter is no longer under your control once you have made a formal statement to the police, though you can ask for the matter to be dropped at any time. This can be frustrating and confronting and any result is likely to take years to achieve. A number of men who have been supported by SAMSUN have been down the legal path and you may want to consider talking to someone who has experienced this first-hand before making a final decision that this is right for you.

What about forgiveness?

This is a difficult question and troubles many survivors. Unfortunately, some have even been told that they will not recover until they have forgiven the person who abused them. This is not helpful! It is an example of another person telling a survivor what they need to do in order to recover. Some survivors decide that forgiveness is part of their recovery. For them the meaning of forgiveness needs to be carefully thought through and a decision made about how they will proceed.

Of course, forgiveness does not mean excusing the abuse or saying that the abuse of children is unimportant and doesn't matter. This is not true and clearly does not promote recovery or the safety of children. It is denying the abusive nature of the behaviour and the impact that sexual abuse has on people. It is unlikely that many survivors would see this as a path to recovery!

It is also important for many survivors to think about who is being forgiven. This is because they have often blamed themselves for the abuse and this self-blame has gone on for many years. An important part of recovery is treating yourself with love and understanding. It is about accepting that at the time of the abuse you did the best you could to deal with a traumatic situation that you could not control and that since then you have done your best to survive and get on with your life. So, forgiving yourself for blaming yourself is an enormous part of self-care.

People recover in their own way and while forgiving the abuser is part of recovery for some survivors, especially if the abuser has apologised, for many others it is something they do not feel they can do. As Judith Herman has said, “True forgiveness cannot be granted until the perpetrator has sought and earned it through confession, repentance, and restitution.” Unfortunately, very few perpetrators of childhood abuse do this and as a result, waiting for an apology is usually a good way to delay your recovery!

Some survivors can find comfort in their religious or spiritual beliefs when tackling the question of forgiveness. If this is part of your recovery then it can help to talk it through with someone who is a member of your religious group or shares your beliefs. Forgiving the person without forgiving the behaviour is a path some people have found useful. But it is always your choice how/if you forgive and no one has the right to tell you what to do. Remember your recovery is about **you** and not the person who abused you.

How do I know that I am recovering?

Many survivors find that memories of the abuse have always been there but they avoided them. One survivor said, "I always had the memories but it was like they were in the attic of my brain. I knew they were there but I didn't ever go there." At this stage, usually before they talk to anyone about the abuse, survivors just cope the best they can, avoiding thinking about it, sometimes using such things as alcohol to block out the memories and keep their anxiety under control. But the abuse is not being dealt with and the memories of the abuse are not changing. It is like they are frozen in time, that time when you were a child. This could be called the early stage of recovery - just getting by.

When the recovery journey moves on from just coping to really dealing with the effects of abuse, it often means things get worse before they begin to improve. This is because the survivor is now thinking and talking about the memories he has done his best to forget, ignore or avoid. It is the first stage of processing the abuse experiences. Survivors begin to truly understand these memories are part of their past and not part of their life today. This is when they begin to think differently about the abuse – in other words this is when their brain begins to change.

One survivor saw a picture of a house where he was abused when he was a child. Because he had processed the memories he really understood the abuse was over and he was now safe. He said, "It was strange. When I looked at the picture of that house, I realised it was just a house. It was a house where some bad stuff happened to me but that was a long time ago." Up until that time he had not been able to think about the house because it meant being overwhelmed by fear. At the early stages he certainly could not look at a picture of it. But he found that he had moved on and the memories of the house and the abuse that happened there, were no longer so overpowering. His brain had changed.

So, this is how you know you are recovering. You realise the emotional power of the abuse, the fear, guilt, confusion and other emotions attached to memories of the abuse, begin to lose their power to overwhelm you. Some survivors have described this as, "the memories of the abuse seem to get smaller." It is gradual and most survivors find it is a process they find themselves in rather than a place they decide to go. It is literally your brain changing as the memory of being abused retreats back into your past where it belongs and where it has less power over you. The memories do not go away but they become much less able to disturb you in the present. In other words, you have updated the memories and are now looking at the abuse from the here and now, from the point of view of a man who has survived. Some survivors even say they feel like a different person – like an adult.

As we have said, child sexual abuse does not define who you are. It is something that was done to you, something from which you can recover. And that journey of recovery can be a rewarding and exciting part of your life. **Enjoy!**

Week 8 topic: Moving on - Steps to recovery and ongoing support

Focus questions for week 8.

- How safe/useful has it been meeting with other survivors?
- Pluses and minuses:
 - What/who are available to help my recovery?
 - What/who might be some barriers to my recovery?
- Do I have any unfinished business with the person/s who abused me (legal matters, confrontation, letters to them etc)? If so, how will I do this safely? If not, can I leave them behind?
- Over the life of the group:
 - Have my thoughts about being abused changed? How?
 - Do I blame myself less for the abuse?
 - Have I moved from being a victim to a survivor? What does this mean for me?
- Where does my recovery go from here? Is there anyone else I need to tell about being abused?
- Will I have any further contact with SAMSN or other men who have participated in the groups?



TEN TAKE HOME MESSAGES FROM SAMSN

1. Because something bad happened to you when you were young does not make you a bad person.
2. Being sexually abused is **never** the fault of the victim. The way you responded to the abuser's threats, trickery, coaxing, touching and their pretending to care for you was the **normal** response of a child or young person. It was not your fault you were young and vulnerable to being abused.
3. Sexual abuse is never the victim's secret. It is the abuser's secret. However, many victims are tricked, threatened or intimidated into staying silent and keeping the abuser's secret. Many stay caught up in this secret for years. Breaking the silence is a powerful step in recovery.
4. It is a myth that if a boy is sexually abused, he will probably grow up to be a perpetrator of sexual abuse. Like all adults, survivors can choose to abuse a child or not. And like most adults, nearly all survivors choose not to abuse children because they know what the effects are.
5. While the abuse was happening, you were a victim. Once the abuse stopped you set out on your recovery journey. You can now be a survivor.
6. Recovery can start at any time. It is never too early or too late. It means standing tall and proud, not being ashamed, guilty or embarrassed about what the abuser did to you.
7. For adults who were sexually abused as children it is the memory of the abuse that can still cause them pain. The abuse is over but because it was such a disturbing experience it can sometimes feel like it is still happening. But that is just the memory.
8. Sexual abuse is part of your story. It does not define who you are. Many other things have happened in your life. It is something that happened to you, it is over and now you can recover. **Your** recovery will be unique because it is part of **your** continuing story.
9. Talking to other men who have also been sexually abused can be a great source of support, understanding and assistance in your recovery.
10. Being abused as a boy/teenager does not make you any less of a man. In fact, men who have survived childhood sexual abuse are heroes!