



napac

The National Association for
People Abused in Childhood

Untangling the web of confusion

Booklet 5

Supporting recovery from childhood abuse



Untangling the web of confusion

"To know someone knows and understand what you're talking about makes you feel less alone."

I'm confused!
Why did I keep going back
to that person if I knew it
was wrong?

I'm confused!
My body reacted to the sexual
stimulation so how can I call
it abuse?

I'm confused!
I hate them for what they did
and yet I still love them...

I'm confused!
Why can't I remember
the details?

Did I imagine it?

I'm confused!
Why does it bother me that
my siblings got more attention
from the abuser than me?

I'm confused!
The person who abused me
was in my family...

Abusers want us to be confused. They want us to feel tangled up in a messy web of complexities not knowing which way is up and which way is down. They don't want us to see things clearly, for what they really are.

They know that if we start untangling the web, their cover will be blown and they'll lose their power and control over our lives.

So what are we waiting for? Let's start untangling this web together.

Let's look at some of the facts.

Abuse is never the child's fault. Abuse is always a choice made by the abuser. Abuse is always wrong. Abuse happens in many different ways but behind every type of abuse is a misuse of power and control. Abuse is usually perpetrated by someone the child knows, often a family member.

Whether these facts are fresh revelations or old news heard time and time again, they remain absolutely true. Along the way survivors have discovered that it's these very truths that abusers try to distort in order to confuse their victims.

‘Survivors start
believing the truths
and rejecting the lies.’

Let's start with the basic tactics used by abusers and then unpick some more of the details afterwards.

Here's an outline of what might happen:

- 1.** Abusers manipulate us into believing things to be true that aren't.
- 2.** We grow up still believing these lies to be true.
- 3.** Along the way we are introduced to the truth.
- 4.** We compare the lies (that we still believe to be true) to the truth and get confused when they contradict each other.
- 5.** We know they can't all be true so we have to decide which ones are really the truth.
- 6.** This is where the confusion kicks in because whilst we are drawn to wanting to believe the truth, the way we were manipulated by the abuser pulls us back to believing the lies.
- 7.** We never feel fully settled with knowing which is the truth and end up feeling more confused.
- 8.** The abuser's plan succeeds.

Now how about we add our own steps?

- NAPAC and other survivors spell out the tactics of abusers
- Survivors are empowered to take back control of their lives
- Survivors start to see the lies for what they really are
- Abusers lose. Survivors win
- Survivors start believing the truths and rejecting the lies

In order for us to confidently arrive at the point where abusers lose and survivors win it may be helpful to have some insight into three key things:

Firstly

How do they make us believe the lies to be the truth?

Secondly

What specific lies are they trying to make us believe?

Thirdly

How can we start learning and believing the truth?

Manipulation

How do they make us believe the lies to be the truth?

One word sums it up - **manipulation**.

To manipulate means 'to control, to influence, to use to one's advantage, to exploit...'

It can also mean 'to falsify, to rig, to distort, to alter, to change, to tamper with...'

Combining these two definitions can help us gain more clarity into what abusers do when they manipulate us:

They control us and exploit us by distorting and tampering with our minds.

Abusers blur the boundaries. And they blur them on purpose

One minute an abuser may provide for a child and tell them they love them...

...the next minute they may refuse to acknowledge the child's existence. One day an abuser may lavish a child with gifts and money... the next day they may act in a physically aggressive way or force the child to engage in sexual activities.

By blurring the boundaries they shift the blame

They cause survivors to question themselves rather than the abusers...

Why did I keep going back?

Why didn't I leave?

Why didn't I report them?

Was it my fault?

If you were sexually abused as a child you may find it useful to read about **the grooming process** on our website. This is a specific process of manipulation that sexual abusers use to blur the boundaries and ensnare their victims.

Blurring the boundaries is part of how all types of abusers get away with harming children. Perpetrators of physical abuse may also say 'This is for your own good'.

They don't want it to be clear cut. If it was, more children would feel able to tell and they'd be forced to stop.

So how do they do it?

Essentially abusers take advantage of the innocent and trusting nature of children.

They use the fact that it is natural for... children to be trusting

Here's how:

Children naturally trust people older than themselves.

Abusers therefore tell children lies from a position of authority.

Resulting in survivors believing lies to be true.

They use the fact that it is natural for... children to love attention

Here's how:

Children naturally love attention.

Abusers therefore combine abuse with giving the children attention.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that they wanted the abuse (because they wanted the attention).

They use the fact that it is natural for... children to compete for attention

Here's how:

Children naturally compete for attention.

Abusers may therefore create an attention competition between siblings or other children whilst combining it with abuse.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that they were jealous of others being abused more than they were (whereas in fact they were jealous of others getting more attention than they did).

They use the fact that it is natural for... children to love treats

Here's how:

Children naturally love sweets, presents, outings and other treats.

Abusers therefore combine abuse with giving children sweets, presents, outings and other treats.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that they accepted the abuse (because they accepted the treats).

They use the fact that it is natural for... children not to know the law

Here's how:

Children don't know the law unless told about it.

Abusers therefore tell children lies about how the law works. For example, abusers may say 'If you tell anyone about this you'll be put in prison' or 'I know the police and they say...'

Resulting in survivors believing lies about the law (because they have no reason to know otherwise).

They use the fact that it is natural for children to be protective over people and animals they love

Here's how:

Children are naturally protective over people and animals they love.

Abusers therefore tell children lies that harm will come to the people and animals they love if they don't comply.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that they are protecting their loved ones by complying and remaining silent (because they may feel it's too frightening and risky to find out if their abuser is lying).

They use the fact that it is natural for... children not to know how wide spread child abuse is

Here's how:

Children don't know how widespread abuse is.

Abusers can therefore easily make children feel like they are all alone.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that they are alone.

*They use the fact that it's natural for...
children to believe that the abuse is normal*

Here's how:

Children often believe that what's happening to them is normal.

Abusers can therefore manipulate children into believing that this happens to everybody.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that there isn't anything to report (because they believe it was normal).

*They use the fact that it is natural for...
children not to want to get into trouble*

Here's how:

Children don't like getting into trouble.

Abusers therefore threaten children with getting into trouble if they don't comply.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that the abuse is their fault and they will get into trouble because of it (because that's what they've been told).

*They use the fact that it is natural for...
children to believe you only get punished if you do something wrong*

Here's how:

Children believe that if you are punished it's because you've done something wrong.

Abusers therefore tell children they are being punished for something.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that the abuse was their fault (because they think they deserved it).

*They use the fact that it is natural for...
children to love family members*

Here's how:

Children naturally love members of their family.

Abusers who are related to their victims will know they will love them as family members.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that loving the abuser must mean loving the abuse (because they haven't been taught that it's possible to love a person and hate their behaviour).

Abusers also take advantage of other things that are natural or common

They use the fact that it is natural for... the human body to react to sexual stimulation

Here's how:

The human body naturally reacts to sexual stimulation. Consensual and non-consensual.

Abusers therefore stimulate children sexually and sometimes state to the child that if it feels 'nice' they must be enjoying it.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that if their bodies reacted to the stimulation they must have enjoyed the abuse.

They use the fact that it is common for... the media to focus more on sexual abuse than on other types of abuse

Here's how:

The media sensationalise child abuse and focus more on sexual abuse than other types of abuse (physical, emotional, neglect and organised abuse).

Abusers therefore know that if they abuse children in ways that aren't sexual the children are less likely to see it as being abusive.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that if it wasn't sexual it wasn't abuse.

They use the fact that it is common for... the media to focus more on stranger danger than on abuse within the family

Here's how:

The media focus more on the danger of strangers abusing children than the far more frequent cases of children being abused by family members in their own homes.

Abusers therefore know that children won't hear many stories of abuse within the family in mainstream media.

Resulting in survivors believing the lie that not much abuse within the family takes place (because they don't tend to hear about it in the media).

What lies do they try to make us believe?

Now we have some understanding as to how they manipulate us into believing lies, let's continue to untangle the web of confusion by unpicking some of the specific lies they are trying to make us believe.

We have already mentioned some of them above and have decided to repeat them again below for further untangling.

It may help to remember that each lie they want us to believe is serving a purpose.

A purpose that acts in favour of abusers rather than survivors.

As we look at each lie we have thought about how the lie helps the abuser and how it has a negative impact on the survivor.

Here are some of the lies that abusers want us to believe with the relevant purpose, truth and untangling following each one:

Lie - When you kept going back you were saying yes to being abused

Truth - When we kept going back it was for something other than abuse.

Purpose - To make survivors believe the abuse was their fault.

Untangling

We didn't go back for more abuse. So why did we go back? Abusers combine abuse with things they know we want.

Things like attention or treats. It's these things that we kept going back for. We were children. It's natural for children to want more attention and treats. It's also natural for children to be afraid of losing something or someone they love. Abusers can use this to threaten to withdraw something or someone the child loves and thus manipulates the child to comply with the abuse in order to prevent loss.

Lie - When you didn't leave you were saying yes to being abused

Truth - When we didn't leave it was because something was forcing us to stay.

Purpose - To make survivors believe the abuse was their fault.

Untangling

Most abuse takes place within the family. As children we may not have known how to escape from our family, so lack of knowledge prevented us from leaving. Leaving something familiar (however horrendous) for the unknown can make children fearful. So fear may have prevented us from leaving. As children we may have been threatened with things to prevent us from leaving. Children are not as physically strong as their abusers so it may have been physical force that prevented us from leaving.

Lie - When you didn't say no you were saying yes to being abused

Truth - When we didn't verbally say 'no' it doesn't mean we were saying 'yes'.

Purpose - To make survivors believe the abuse was their fault.

Untangling

Saying 'no' can happen in more ways than just a verbal response. The fact is that children should never be abused and it is never their fault. It is impossible for a child to consent to abuse. If a child is ever in a situation where they are seen to be 'consenting' to abuse it's because they have been manipulated and forced to do so. This isn't consent.

Lie - You can't trust your own judgements

Truth - It was the abuser not our judgements that betrayed our trust.

Purpose - To enable the abuser to maintain control over the survivor.

Untangling

Children don't make conscious judgements or decisions as to whether or not to trust people for the first time. Children are naturally trusting. It's not about being unable to trust our judgements, it's about not being able to trust child abusers.

Lie - It was no big deal so there's no point complaining

Truth - Child abuse is never acceptable and all who have suffered have a right to speak out.

Purpose - To trivialise the trauma and keep survivors silent.

Untangling

For abusers to continue harming children without any negative repercussions for themselves they have to make sure their victims don't speak out. One way of doing this is to make it seem like the abuse is normal, perhaps trivialising it. Making children believe that other children (who aren't complaining) are going through the same things and aren't bothered by it. The fact is, all abuse is wrong and none of us should be made to feel as though what happened to us was trivial.

Lie - If your body reacted to the sexual stimulation then it wasn't abuse because you enjoyed it

Truth - If our body reacted to the sexual stimulation then it's because our body was reacting in a normal and natural way.

Purpose - To make survivors believe it wasn't abuse.

Untangling

Sexual stimulation has nothing to do with whether a person is enjoying what's happening or not. Sexual stimulation is a sign that a person's body is reacting normally. It's a basic instinct. We don't choose to make our bodies feel like that.

Lie - You are all alone. Nobody will believe you

Truth - We are not alone and there are people who will believe us.

Purpose - To isolate survivors and keep them silent.

Untangling

Telling children they are all alone and they won't be believed prevents them from reaching out and seeking the support they need. The more times abusers say these things the more we believe them.

Lie - You deserve to be abused

Truth - No child ever deserves to be abused.

Purpose - To make survivors believe the abuse was their fault and to crush their self-esteem.

Untangling

Abusers will do all they can to prevent their victims from reporting them. By transferring the blame and crushing a child's self-esteem the abuser is attempting to put up permanent barriers preventing that child from speaking out.

Lie - You were in control over whether or not the abuse happened

Truth - The abuser had control over whether or not the abuse happened.

Purpose - To transfer the responsibility of the abuse to the one being abused.

Untangling

Abuse is about power and control. Abusers have power and control over their victims. Abusers want survivors to believe they were in control instead of their abusers. Abusers want survivors to believe they chose to be abused and hence want survivors to believe the abuse was their fault.

Lie - If you love your abuser then you love the abuse

Truth - We can love our abuser and hate the abuse at the same time.

Purpose - To make survivors believe the abuse was their fault and to confuse them as to whether or not it was actually abuse.

Untangling

Loving a person doesn't automatically mean loving their behaviour. Many abusers portray themselves to the outside world as very 'nice' people. It's normal for children to be brought up to love family members. Most abuse takes place within the family. So when we, as children, love our family members and they start abusing us, it's not our fault that we have an emotional attachment to them. Sometimes forming an emotional attachment to our abuser can be a way of helping us to cope with what's happening.

Lie - You could have protected your siblings more by allowing yourself to be abused

Truth - Abusers had complete control over who they were going to abuse and all of the abuse was their fault.

Purpose - To make survivors feel like the abuse of others was their fault.

Untangling

None of us should have been abused. Not us, our siblings, other children we knew... none of us. All decisions were choices made by the abuser. None of those choices was our fault. They were the ones in control and any decision they made, with regards to who they were going to abuse, could not have been influenced by us as children. They were the ones with the power. It wasn't our fault.

Lie - You were jealous when other children were abused more than you

Truth - We may have been jealous when other children received more attention or treats than we did – but we weren't jealous of the abuse.

Purpose - To make survivors believe they wanted to be abused and hence think the abuse was their fault.

Untangling

Again, this is an example of abusers combining abuse with things they knew we wanted as children. Things like attention or treats. It's these things we may have been jealous of. Not the abuse. We were children. It's natural for children to be jealous for more attention and treats.

Lie - If you were abused you'd remember all of the details... you're just making it up

Truth - People who are abused often don't remember all of the details.

Purpose - To make survivors believe they weren't abused.

Untangling

When traumatic things happen to us our memories can often become disjointed. Our minds try to block out the painful details as a way of protecting us from having to deal with them. It's a coping mechanism and a natural response to trauma. This psychological response is not

unique to child abuse survivors. Soldiers and car crash survivors, for example, can also have similar experiences of not being able to recall details of traumatic events (or the order in which things took place).

This list of lies isn't exhaustive but it will hopefully give some insight into the types of things abusers are hoping survivors of abuse will continue to believe.

Truths

How can we start learning and believing the truth?

We are all the experts of our own lives and it's clear from experience that what works for one of us may not work for another.

With this in mind we've compiled a list of suggestions of things that have worked for others.

Please feel free to leave the things that don't work for you, adapt the things you feel could work better and add completely new ideas that aren't even mentioned.

Be empowered and take control

There are many different routes to relearning the truth. What's important is that we get to the final destination.

We hope these few ideas help...

You may like to: **remind yourself about 'hindsight'...**

'Hindsight' means to look back at a situation with additional knowledge. Knowledge we have gained some time after an event took place. Knowledge we didn't and mostly couldn't have known at the time.

When we look back on our childhoods from an adult perspective it's easy to forget that there were certain things we simply didn't know then.

Abusers are longing for us to get confused about hindsight.

They want us to believe that we knew then what we know now.

They want us to think we made decisions as children in the same way we make decisions as adults.

They want us to forget the differences between how children think and how adults think.

Knowing that we are allowed and able to think differently now as adults may give us the freedom we need to start changing what we believe to be true.

You may like to: *Speak the truth out loud or write it down...*

We can choose to disown the lies that come into our minds. A powerful way of doing this may be to speak out or to write down the specific truths that replace the lies.

It's sometimes easier to be clearer and more focused with a spoken or written sentence than a thought sentence, because often there are other competing thoughts and not as many competing spoken or written words.

You may like to: *Put up visual reminders of the truth...*

We don't just have to wait for the lies to attack our thoughts before we can fight back with the truth.

We can be proactive in our counterattack. It may be helpful to write out the truths and put them around the place... truths like 'It wasn't my fault' or 'I am not alone'... we can stick them in our rooms, homes, cars, diaries and anywhere else we feel able to.

If we don't feel comfortable with others seeing them, we can be creative... for example, instead of writing 'I am not alone' we could simply write the first letters of each word, 'I.A.N.A'.

You may like to: *Ask others to remind you of the truth...*

If we know there are times when hearing the truth from others may be helpful, we could ask close friends or supportive family members to remind us of certain things every now and then.

That's why NAPAC exists. **To remind survivors of the truths and empower every survivor to take back control of their lives.**

Conclusion on confusion...

If you still have feelings of confusion you are not alone. Child abuse at its core doesn't make sense. Those of us who don't abuse children will probably never fully understand why abusers do what they do. Hurting children physically, emotionally, sexually, neglectfully doesn't make sense.

Child abuse shouldn't exist and yet it does.

Thinking about why child abuse exists can confuse us. But when child abuse happens we can remember abuser tactics, be certain of the facts and refuse to be confused.

"Contacting NAPAC has made me feel better inside"



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The National Association for
People Abused in Childhood

napac.org.uk

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Free from landlines and mobiles

Charity No 1069802

Scottish charity No SC049296

Company No 3565696