

Public release date: 23-Jun-2006  
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## **Male Sexual Abuse Survivors Struggle in Relations with Health Care Providers – Study**

New research reveals that male survivors of childhood sexual abuse face unique challenges that many health care practitioners do not recognize and understand as well as they should.

Canadian researchers have found that although both male and female childhood sexual survivors have similar anxieties and fears about their encounters with health care professionals, there are gender based differences concerning perceptions of victimhood, guilt, shame, homophobia and vulnerability.

“We found that it’s doubly-difficult for males to come forward after they’ve been sexually abused, because many men have difficulty identifying and expressing their feelings. There is also a common perception that males should be strong and shouldn’t ever admit vulnerability or ask for help,” said Gerri Lasiuk, a PhD student in the U of A Faculty of Nursing.

“Given the pervasive stereotype of men as strong, in control, and always able to defend themselves, even health professionals have a hard time recognizing men as victims, especially if their abuser was a woman,” said Lasiuk, who co-authored a paper on this topic in the June 2006 edition of the journal *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*.

“Many male survivors felt that health care providers are more skeptical toward male claims of abuse than they are of similar female claims. When the abuser was a woman, there was an attitude of, ‘So what? Isn’t that every boy’s fantasy?’” Lasiuk said.

Lasiuk added that abuse by a male on a boy often causes confusion around sexual identity as the boy grows up, and many male survivors do not disclose their abuse for fear that they will be considered homosexual.

Another issue for men is the myth that all survivors are predisposed to become abusers themselves.

“The research is clear that only a small percentage of survivors go on to be abusers,” Lasiuk said. “This erroneous belief causes tremendous hardship for male survivors, who

often have nowhere to turn to for care and support.”

Lasiuk and her colleagues compiled their research data from 46 interviews with male childhood sexual abuse survivors. The researchers found that in some cases health care providers – which include nurses, physical therapists, physicians, chiropractors, dentists and massage therapists – harmed more than healed the male survivors due to their lack of knowledge and insensitivity to the male survivors’ lot.

However, the situation is not totally bleak for male survivors. Lasiuk said that high profile disclosures – like former NHL player Sheldon Kennedy’s – are changing societal attitudes and making it easier for male survivors to come forward.

“Given that 5 to 10 per cent of men and 20 per cent of women are survivors of childhood sexual abuse, all health professionals encounter survivors every day in their practice no matter what their specialty. The key to sensitive practice with male survivors is to treat them with respect and to create a sense of safety by using language that communicates an understanding of their experience – one survivor referred to this as ‘malecentric communication’,” Lasiuk said.

“The onus is on health professionals to increase their knowledge about the health effects of childhood sexual abuse and to create safe health care environments. To do otherwise breaches the ethical obligation to ‘do no harm’.”

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