

Effects of Sexual Abuse on Survivor's Sense of Sexual Orientation

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“Does being sexually abused affect a person’s sense of sexual orientation?” This is a common question asked by both male and female survivors, as well as by their allies. For the purposes of this blog discussion, I will limit my comments to how this question pertains to male victims of sexual trauma during boyhood.

The short answer to the question is “no and yes.” How and why sexual trauma affects a male survivor’s sexual orientation is somewhat complex and nuanced. Whereas, sexual trauma does not determine or change the sexual orientation of a male survivor, it frequently does create much confusion. The following discussion is intended to offer some insights about this intriguing issue.

Let me begin by clarifying my working definition of “sexual orientation.” It’s important that we have a shared definitional understanding that distinguishes sexual orientation from sexual identity. Sexual identity is sometimes confused with sexual orientation. So, I will first define the term “sexual orientation,” to set the context for this discussion. I’ll circle back at the end and briefly address the entanglement with sexual identity.

Sexual orientation refers to a person’s natural preference in sexual partners. Sexual orientation involves sexual interest, energy, and/or chemistry. It defines whether one is sexually attracted to someone of the same or the opposite biological sex. Some people are exclusively homosexual (attracted to individuals of their same biological sex), while others are exclusively heterosexual (attracted to individuals of the opposite biological sex), while still others may be anywhere on a continuum between those exclusive attractions. The latter is generally referred to as bisexual (the capacity to be attracted to individuals both of their same sex and the opposite biological sex), either at any given time in their life or over the course of their lifespan. Homosexual and heterosexual individuals may experience some attraction to their non-preferred sex, but they are primarily erotically attracted to one sex over the other throughout their life.

Our initial sexual experience(s) –regardless of whether they happen in the context of love or trauma and no matter whether they are consensual or imposed - are usually very powerful at a visceral level. Sexual contact with another person releases an intense explosion of physical and emotional responses. The metaphor of computer software may help to illuminate the emotional charge that surrounds our introductory sexual experience(s): our emotional and physical body is the encasement for the computer – the hard drive - and our initial sexual experience(s) provides the installation of a software program. This software determines our future associations with intimacy and the ways we negotiate future sexual feelings and relationships.

For some males who experience boyhood sexual trauma, it is possible that sexual orientation is not adversely affected by such personal calamity. For these survivors, healing the sexual wounding and resolving the physical and/or emotional scars from the trauma is still necessary. But, for many male survivors, sexual orientation is not a casualty of the sexual trauma.

However, there are two pathways along which the impact of boyhood sexual trauma on sexual orientation can clearly be examined. These impacts may result from instances of abuse by a male or a female offender. Let me highlight the dynamics of those pathways and the resulting consequences:

A. Sexual trauma that occurs at a developmental age before a boy has been able to incorporate a sexual orientation into his personal identity creates cognitive confusion and emotional disturbance. Whatever sexual response patterns defined the trauma experience create an “overlay” that suppresses clarity about an authentic sexual orientation. If the boy became aroused or experienced any degree of pleasure during his abuse by a male, he may thereby assume that he is gay. An abuser may even tell the boy victim that his arousal is proof that he liked what was happening to him. A lack of awareness that arousal happens even during trauma may lead a victim to mistaken conclusions. Three scenarios about the impact on sexual orientation are possible along this pathway:

1. One scenario is that the boy victim grows into manhood believing that he is gay and thereby continuing his sexual interactions with other males and reenacting the dynamics of the abuse. He may never question the authenticity of his sexual orientation. Rather, he may unthinkingly continue to engage in same-sex sexual behavior even in the absence of genuine romantic or erotic attraction to other males. He may mistakenly assume that any degree of distress in his sexual relationships is a remnant of his sexual trauma. His radar may not be programmed to consider that his distress is more accurately reflecting the incompatibility of his sexual behavior with his sexual orientation. Resolution and healing from his sexual trauma hopefully provides deeper self-awareness and the discovery of his authentic sexual orientation.

2. Another scenario is that the boy victim grows into manhood knowing that he is homosexual or bisexual, but denying his authentic sexual orientation because it may be too closely identified with his sexual trauma. For this male, accessing his genuine sexual orientation may be a trigger because his adult sexual behavior is too closely linked to his childhood sexual trauma. Therefore, he may feel compelled to avoid any associations with his authentic sexual self. He may manage real or anticipated triggering by avoidance. He may struggle with intense feelings of guilt and shame if he surrenders to his desires and engages in any degree of same-sex intimacy. Resolution and healing from his sexual trauma requires that his physical and emotional desires be de-linked from his sexual trauma. This would allow the man to explore and engage in sexual experiences that match his personal needs. By doing this, he may find the calmness that allows him to accept and embrace his authentic sexual orientation.

3. Yet another scenario is that the boy victim grows into manhood knowing that he is heterosexual, but being physically and emotionally drawn to sexual practices with his heterosexual partner(s) that are stereotypically associated with “gay sex.” For example, he may desire anal stimulation as a method for sexual pleasure. If he and/or his partner(s) adhere to values and beliefs that are based in more traditional norms of masculinity, acting on these “learned homoerotic response patterns” may become a source of conflict or stress. Negotiating the landscape of opposite sex sexual intimacy may be difficult when his physical and emotional expression is perceived as being heterosexually unorthodox. Resolution and healing from his sexual trauma requires this survivor to gain acceptance that any sexual practice can be incorporated into an authentic heterosexual orientation. He will then be faced with the additional step of holding any sexual partner to this same standard of full acceptance.

B. A second pathway is created when a victim of boyhood sexual trauma becomes developmentally frozen. Sometimes a boy may physically grow into an adult man while his emotional self remains stunted at a much younger or less mature developmental age. This kind of boy may become stuck at a developmental stage of life that corresponds to a time period before, during, or after their sexual trauma. There are three possible scenarios about the effect on sexual orientation along this pathway:

1. One scenario is that the boy victim grows into manhood bonded to the sexual practices of his trauma. Repetitively engaging in sexual behaviors that are familiar may be more determinant of satisfaction than any concerns about the biological sex of his partner. For this survivor, his sexual abuse has become his sexual orientation. Resolution and healing from his sexual trauma requires that he be freed from re-living the cycles of his abuse. This then contributes to the process of his developmental maturation and exploration of which sexual experiences fit best for him. Gaining congruity between his physical and emotional identity allows for increased self-awareness. Self-awareness is a critical prerequisite for discovery, which allows this survivor to exercise curiosity about his authentic sexual orientation.

2. Another scenario is that the boy victim dissociates some or all of his sexual energy as a way to cope with his trauma. Sexual feelings are too closely identified with his victimization, so his response may be to block those disturbing feelings. Consequently, he may become asexual, sexually anorexic, or sexually ambivalent. For this survivor, his success in blocking his sexual desires becomes his sexual orientation. The intensity of fear about any sexual desires compels him to extinguish any physical or emotional responses that are even suggestive of sexuality. Safety is achieved and maintained by living in a world that is devoid of intimacy. Resolution and healing from his sexual trauma will require this survivor to establish safety about tolerating sexual feelings. As he can accept the naturalness of sexual desires that are not linked to sexual trauma, he acquires the capacity to know more about his inner self, to discover the possibilities for healthy intimacy, and thereby access his authentic sexual orientation.

3. Yet another scenario is the boy who becomes stuck in his identification with himself at the age at which his sexual trauma occurred. While his physical body continues to grow and mature, his cognitive and emotional awareness of himself remains frozen in time. His way of coping with his sexual trauma may be to lock himself in a time chamber surrounding his trauma. He may be fused with the boy self from that developmental time of his life, either living in fear of abandoning this part of himself or living in a desperate desire to conquer the trauma that was experienced at that stage of his development. For this survivor, his sexual sensibilities attract him towards someone who appeals to the age and biological sex of his emotional self. Because he is not attracted to younger children in the traditional trajectory of a pedophile (i.e., as an adult with sexual desires for a child), his behavior is better understood within the context of “sexual reactivity,” in which his sexual activity reflects a compulsive re-creation of his sexual trauma. As with the two previous scenarios, sexual reactivity may be his sexual orientation. Resolution and healing from his sexual trauma will require this survivor to internalize an awareness and the responsibilities of age-appropriate behavior. Behavioral changes can facilitate cognitive and emotional maturing, allowing him to grow beyond the immaturity of his sexual energy and expanding his awareness to discover his authentic sexual orientation.

It is important to underscore again that either of the above-mentioned pathways and the resulting scenarios are equally applicable to the male survivor regardless of whether his offender was a male or a female.

As mentioned earlier in this discussion, boyhood sexual trauma may also have an impact on a survivor’s sexual identity. Whereas sexual orientation determines the direction of a person’s sexual attractions (male, female, or both), sexual identity implies how a person lives out their sexual orientation or defines their sexual activity based upon cultural definitions. Gay, straight, mostly straight, pansexual, queer, fluid, and celibate are a few of the many ways individuals may define their sexuality.. Sexual identity is an umbrella term that includes the compilation of a person’s sexual orientation, sexual preference(s), gender roles, and the personal definition of one’s sexuality. It is important to remember that sexual identity does not necessarily imply

sexual orientation. For example, some individuals who identify as heterosexual socially may not be heterosexual in orientation or behavior.

Boyhood sexual trauma may be experienced as an assault on one's masculinity and gender role. For some male survivors, there is a resulting confusion to establish or re-establish an identification with masculinity. Survivors may respond either by internalizing extreme passivity or extreme hyper-masculinity. Either response portrays an external image about one's masculinity. The importance for this discussion is to understand how common it is for people to judge someone's sexual orientation by the cultural stereotypes and prejudices associated with sexual identity.

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