

## Sexual Abuse

### Introduction

Welcome to the Sexual Abuse session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session deals with the very painful topics of rape, sexual assault, and childhood sexual abuse. This session defines these criminal acts and explains the lasting psychological damage that victims may experience. This session also presents information concerning prevention of and treatment for the lasting effects of rape and childhood sexual abuse, and it provides some contact information for groups that can help.

### *What is in this session?*

This session has two major parts: (1) Rape and Sexual Assault and (2) Childhood Sexual Abuse.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
  - Understand how contrary and unrealistic messages about sex add to people's confusion about sex and sexuality
  - Understand what is defined as rape and what other types of sexual assault are
  - Understand that support is available to help rape victims deal with the police and recover from the trauma of the rape



**SESSION 28 HAS  
TWO MAJOR PARTS:**

1. Rape and Sexual Assault
2. Childhood Sexual Abuse

- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
  - Define childhood sexual abuse
  - Understand how childhood sexual abuse can continue to affect people during adulthood
  - Understand that recovery from the lasting effects of childhood sexual abuse is possible
  - Identify sources of help for recovery from childhood sexual abuse

### ***What will be asked of you?***

You will be asked to consider your own attitudes toward sex and sexuality. You will be asked to look at your own behaviors, both when you were in active addiction and now in early sobriety. You will also be asked to consider how you would respond to a number of different sexual abuse situations involving rape and childhood sexual abuse. Finally, if you have been a victim of rape or childhood sexual abuse, you will be asked to seek help from a professional and/or a support group.

The issues that you will deal with in this session will be deeply personal. If you are like most people, you may have never or rarely discussed these issues with anyone else. However, by exploring them, discussing them, and working through some of these issues, you can learn important things about how sexual abuse may have a role in your addiction and, therefore, may have a role in your recovery. By working through this session, you will gain another important tool to strengthen your recovery.

### ***A note to facilitators***

Sexual abuse issues are powerful and deeply personal. Many clients have never personally examined these issues or discussed them with others. Many clients will find it difficult to discuss these issues with others, and especially with members of the opposite gender. This is especially true for clients in early treatment and recovery. Consequently, please consider structuring the Sexual Abuse session as separate male and female groups.

## Part 1: Rape and Sexual Assault

The term *sexual assault* describes a number of different criminal acts, such as rape, statutory rape (sexual contact with a person who is under the legal age of consent, which varies from state to state), sexual battery, and certain types of sexual harassment.

Society's attitudes toward sex and sexuality have a strong influence on people's behavior. But often, a person must contend with contradictory messages about sex, which can lead to confusion and anxiety.

### Using Sex to Sell

Every day, people are overloaded with commercials, music videos, movies, and print advertisements that use sex to sell or to entertain. In particular, advertising and movies often present unrealistic messages about sex, intimacy, and relationships. These messages often make an association between some product and sex, implying that the use of a product will result in increased popularity or sex appeal.

These and other ads also show relationships that may seem perfect or ones that have no stress or problems. In those relationships, sex—rather than communication—becomes the way to solve problems.



### EXERCISE 1

Please answer the following questions:

1. Think about a recent television commercial or print ad that is using sex to sell a product. What is the commercial or ad selling? In what way is the ad or commercial using sex to sell a product?

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### LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:

You will

- Understand how contrary and unrealistic messages about sex add to people's confusion about sex and sexuality
- Understand what is defined as rape and what other types of sexual assault are
- Understand that support is available to help rape victims deal with the police and recover from the trauma of the rape



### DEFINITION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT:

A term that describes a number of different criminal acts:

- rape
- statutory rape
- sexual battery
- sexual harassment

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2. Is this commercial or ad making some “between the lines” point (such as “buy this product and you will meet an attractive man or woman”)?

Yes     No    *(If yes, please explain.)*

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3. Is this commercial or ad making a claim “between the lines” that is unrealistic or impossible?

Yes     No    *(If yes, please explain.)*

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In what ways can this be harmful to you and your recovery?

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**Sex: Negative and Contradictory Messages**

In contrast to a lot of media messages, which strongly promote sex, some people are taught at an early age that sex is wrong, dirty, selfish, or sinful. In many cases, parents who themselves received no sex education (or got bad information) went on to teach their negative attitudes to their children, who are now adults. Also, some adults were sexually abused while children, and they learned to fear sexual behavior and intimacy.

People will respond differently toward these negative attitudes about sex. For instance, some adults are aware of their dislike toward sex and try to “fake it” or hide their dislike from their partner. Others are unaware of their true feelings and experience fear, panic, or some physical problem before, during, or after sex.

Some adults have dangerous attitudes toward sex. They may use sex to bargain for other personal needs or to manipulate and hurt other people.



**Parents who themselves received no sex education (or got bad information) went on to teach their negative attitudes to their children, who are now adults.**



**EXERCISE 2**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Did you receive negative or contradictory messages about sex during your youth or later?  
 Yes     No

What were those negative or contradictory messages?

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2. In what ways have negative or contradictory messages about sex been part of your addiction? In what ways can negative or contradictory messages about sex harm your recovery?

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3. Overall, do you feel that you have a healthy or an unhealthy attitude about sex and intimacy? Please explain. If you have a sexual partner, are you able to communicate openly with your partner about sexual issues?

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4. Do you feel that sex and sexual issues might be a trigger or some other kind of problem for your recovery?

Yes     No    *(If yes, please explain.)*

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Do you feel that your recovery might benefit from professional help from someone who understands how sexual issues affect recovery?

Yes     No

If so, you may want to ask your counselor for a referral to a specialist.

### **Rape and Sexual Assault: Definitions**

The word *rape* is a legal term. The definition varies somewhat among the states. In general, *rape* describes the crime in which one person is forced to submit to sex against his or her will and without his or her permission. It is a violent act that deliberately humiliates and degrades a victim. Rape is a crime and a felony offense in every state.

*Sexual battery* is another form of sexual assault, and it involves touching a person in a sexual manner without his or her permission. Sexual battery is also against the law. In many states it is a felony.

Some states use the term *aggravated sexual assault* rather than rape. In many states, the law defines forcible sex between a husband and a wife as rape—but in other states it is a different type of sexual assault. In the past, rape was usually understood as an offense to a woman by a man, but many states have expanded the definition to include (1) a male raping a female, (2) a female raping a male, (3) male and female homosexual rape, and/or (4) incest of any kind.



#### **DEFINITION OF RAPE:**

The crime in which one person is forced to submit to sex against his or her will and without his or her permission.



#### **DEFINITION OF SEXUAL BATTERY:**

Another form of sexual assault, which involves touching a person in a sexual manner without his or her permission.

**Some states use the term *aggravated sexual assault* rather than rape.**



**EXERCISE 3**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Does the definition of *rape* on page 7 differ from your personal definition of *rape*?

Yes     No    *(If yes, please explain.)*

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If you have a different definition of *rape*, what is it?

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2. How can problems result when people define *rape* in different ways?

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### Rape: Anger and Control

Rape may occur between two people who already know each other. Although rape does not always involve physical injury, it is a violent crime motivated not by sexual desire but by the offender's need to dominate the victim. Indeed, the rapist may use forced sex as one of many forms of abusive and degrading behavior. Rape is not about sex or sexual passion. Rape is a crime of anger, control, and domination.

Alcohol and other drugs are strongly associated with rape, because they increase hostility and anger. They also lower inhibitions on the part of the rapist. Both the rapist and the victim are more likely than the average person to have been using alcohol or other drugs. Substances make it more difficult for a person to resist and fight off a rape. Some drugs, such as Rohypnol, or "roofies," are also given to potential rape victims in order to knock them out—these are called "date-rape drugs."

**Rohypnol, or "roofies," are called "date-rape drugs."**



#### EXERCISE 4

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Rape is described as a crime of violence and control and not sexual desire. What does that mean to you?

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2. If a person feels a lot of hostility and anger, what is the effect of alcohol and other drugs on that person's feelings? Please explain.

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3. In what ways can drinking and using drugs affect an individual's ability to think clearly and protect himself or herself from a sexually abusive situation?

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**The psychological effects of rape are often severe and include anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.**

**Rape: Physical and Psychological Effects**

A rape victim may suffer various physical injuries, often related to being choked or physically beaten. Genital injury is less common, but it may include swelling, bruising, or tearing of the anus or the area between the vagina and anus.

The psychological effects of rape are often severe and include anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which may cause flashbacks and nightmares. In addition, the victim may develop various sexual problems including a fear of sex, vaginismus (a type of muscle spasm that prevents vaginal penetration), the inability to have an orgasm, and a lack of sexual desire.

Both short-term rape crisis counseling and long-term therapy, including rape support groups, can help the rape victim deal with psychological trauma.

Often, people who have been raped do not report the crime because of shame, fear of rejection, fear of publicity, fear of retaliation by the rapist, and fear of dealing with the police and court system.



### EXERCISE 5

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. The physical effects of rape may seem obvious, but what do you think are the most common psychological effects of rape?

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2. In what ways could the psychological effects of rape have an effect on someone's alcohol and other drug use?

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3. In what ways could the psychological effects of rape have an effect on someone's recovery from alcohol and other drug use? How would his or her recovery program need to be enhanced?

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### Preventing Rape

Rape is sexual behavior against the will of a person. Even when two people agree to engage in sexual behavior of some sort, either person can decide not to go any further. It is that person's right. If one person decides not to go any further, to do so against that person's will is rape.

Rape victim advocacy groups and crisis centers have been established in most major cities to provide counseling and support to people who have been raped. These groups help the individual to be treated with fairness and concern by the police and court systems. In addition, shelters for women can provide a temporary living space if a woman needs to be separated from an abusive partner.

Although the responsibility for a rape is always with the rapist, not the victim, many women can help protect themselves by learning to be assertive or by gaining self-defense skills. Assertiveness training can teach people how to effectively and clearly express their wishes and possibly avoid miscommunication and date rape. In addition, self-defense training can provide skills to fight off physical violence.



**Many women can help protect themselves by learning to be assertive or by gaining self-defense skills.**



## EXERCISE 6

Please check true or false for the following statements:

1. A rape crisis center will help people deal with the trauma of being raped, but cannot do anything for them about the difficulty of dealing with the police or court system.
   
 True     False
  
2. Assertiveness training and the learning of self-defense skills are useful ways to prevent rapes from occurring.
   
 True     False



## Part 2: Childhood Sexual Abuse

Children can be seriously mistreated physically, mentally, emotionally, and sexually. The abuse of a child is usually done by a parent, but it can also be done by a stepparent, relative, parental friend, or someone who takes care of the child. Sexual abuse between relatives is called *incest*.

In most cases, childhood sexual abuse involves a father, close male relative, or male family friend who takes advantage of a child's affection in order to get sex from him or her. But it can also involve a female adult and a child.

Childhood sexual abuse includes vaginal, anal, and oral sex. It also includes many other types of behaviors. For example, forcing children to undress in front of adults, speaking to children in a sexually suggestive way, touching children in a sexual way, and prolonged kissing are all considered to be childhood sexual abuse. In fact, any sexual situation imposed on a child by an adult can be considered sexual abuse, regardless of the type of sexual contact that is involved. A child is never responsible for provoking sexual contact with an adult.



### LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- Define childhood sexual abuse
- Understand how childhood sexual abuse can continue to affect people during adulthood
- Understand that recovery from the lasting effects of childhood sexual abuse is possible
- Identify sources of help for recovery from childhood sexual abuse

**Sexual abuse between relatives is called *incest*.**

Most often, child sexual abuse is done in secret, because the adult is aware that the behavior is legally and morally wrong. Federal child abuse laws demand that people report to child protection authorities if they find out about any sexual act between any adult and a child.



**EXERCISE 7**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Your older cousin tells you that he recently had sex with his twelve-year-old sister. What would you say or do? What does the federal law demand that you do?

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2. A “conspiracy of silence” is common among families in which incest has occurred or is occurring. In what ways can this hurt someone’s recovery? In what ways should a recovery program be enhanced to overcome this?

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3. What are some of the ways that childhood sexual abuse can affect someone as an adult?

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### Remembering Sexual Abuse

Childhood sexual abuse will typically have an effect on people during adulthood. If someone has memories of being sexually abused as a child, he or she may experience a number of different psychological and sexual problems. The person may or may not be aware that these problems are connected with the abuse. Either way, therapy can help people to understand how the abuse has affected them and can help treat the problems.

Some people don't remember their abuse but have various psychological or sexual problems years later. However, most people remember all or part of what happened, even if they do not really understand it.

Many adults will deny that they were sexually abused, sometimes because they have no memory of it and other times because they still feel ashamed for what happened to them. Others may suddenly remember long-forgotten or repressed memories of being sexually abused. These memories may surface as the result of therapy or a major life event or crisis. Without treatment, these memories may cause great personal distress.

Abused children are often able to psychologically remove themselves from very traumatic situations. It is easier for them to believe that certain things are not happening to them. They learn to put certain experiences out of their minds, repressing these experiences from memory. (This is called *dissociation*.) Drugs are often used to suppress memories of sexual abuse.



**If someone has memories of being sexually abused as a child, he or she may experience a number of different psychological and sexual problems.**



**EXERCISE 8**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Why do you think that some people forget painful childhood experiences such as sexual abuse?

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2. What kinds of experiences do you think might suddenly make someone remember being sexually abused as a child?

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3. Why do you think it is important for someone who experienced childhood sexual abuse to work with a therapist who is a specialist in childhood sexual trauma?

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## Dealing with Sexual and Intimacy Problems

Many people who suffered sexual abuse develop problems relating in some way to sexual behavior, sexuality, and intimacy. Sexual dysfunction and intimacy problems are both common among adults who were sexually abused as children.

Some may respond by developing compulsive sexual behaviors, such as regularly getting involved in unhealthy, addictive relationships. Others may become sexually impulsive and have multiple sexual partners.

Adults who were sexually abused as children are also more likely to become child abusers themselves or have general problems with parenting.



### EXERCISE 9

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Why do you think that someone who experienced childhood or later sexual abuse might experience sexual and intimacy problems? In your own words, describe what kinds of problems the person might develop.

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2. If someone has intimacy problems because of previous sexual abuse (or other reasons), how might alcohol or other drugs become a way to deal with those problems?

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3. If you experience problems related to intimacy or sexual behavior, what are some ways in which the relationship between substances and sex may be a problem for you during recovery?

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4. If you experience problems related to intimacy or sexual behavior, what are some things that you should do as part of your recovery program?

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## Dealing with Psychological and Physical Problems

Survivors of sexual abuse experience a wide variety of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, panic attacks, low self-esteem, and self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse and eating disorders.

Many survivors experience great shame and guilt because they feel responsible for their own sexual abuse, for not saying no to the abuser, or for not fighting back. They may feel guilty for keeping the abuse or the abuser's problems secret.

Since some sexually abused children felt both sexual pain and pleasure, they may feel confused about sexual feelings. Many feel bad about their bodies and feel dirty. Some feel isolated, fearful, abandoned, and distrustful of others. Some are openly angry and hostile. They may feel anger at themselves or turn their anger toward others and engage in aggressive and antisocial behavior.

People who have been sexually abused may also experience physical problems such as backaches, headaches, insomnia, and stomach problems. These are often related to ongoing stress and anxiety.



### EXERCISE 10

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Why do you think that someone who experienced childhood or later sexual abuse might experience psychological and emotional problems? In your own words, describe what kinds of problems the person might develop.

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2. If someone has emotional problems because of previous sexual abuse (or other reasons), how might alcohol or other drugs become a way to deal with those problems?

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3. If you experience psychological or emotional problems related to sexual abuse, what are some ways these problems may get in the way of your recovery?

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4. If you experience psychological or emotional problems related to sexual abuse, what are some things that you should do as part of your recovery program?

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## Dealing with Repression and Rage

Individuals who experienced child abuse (sexual, physical, or emotional) can often feel abandoned and betrayed. These feelings can become transformed into rage and anger. When no longer using substances, these people may be flooded with intense feelings.

Also, some of these individuals began drinking or using drugs during their youth (between eight and eighteen years old, for example). During this time, youth should be learning to develop intimacy and deal with their feelings.

As a result, individuals who were drinking and using drugs during their youth can experience an upset emotional development and an inability to deal with strong emotions without using substances.

To survive childhood abuse, children learn to repress their emotions. They become intensely aware of the emotional state of their abuser in order to avoid the next abusive incident. Thus, many learn to be too aware about the emotional states of others and become less aware of their own feelings. As adults, they need to learn to identify and understand their feelings. They need to understand the intensity of their feelings.



### EXERCISE 11

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. How old were you when you first drank or used drugs? Do you remember thinking that you were doing so to stop feeling bad? Please explain.

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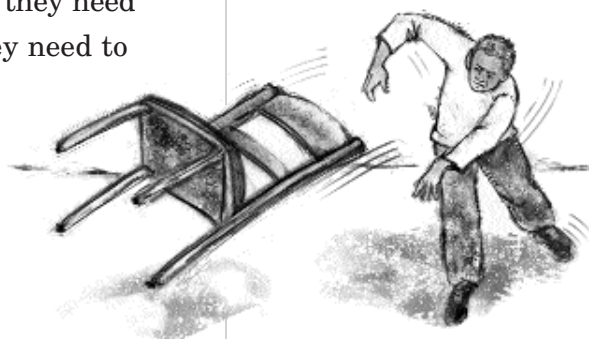
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**Individuals who experienced child abuse can often feel abandoned and betrayed. These feelings can become transformed into rage and anger.**

2. If someone drinks or uses drugs to stop feeling certain emotions, what do you think happens when he or she stops drinking or using drugs?

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3. If someone has been drinking or using drugs to diminish certain feelings and emotions, how might that affect his or her recovery process?

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4. If you have been drinking or using drugs to diminish certain feelings and emotions, what do you need to do to strengthen your recovery program?

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## Dealing with Attachments

Individuals who were abused during their childhood often have problems forming healthy attachments as adults.

People who experienced childhood abuse typically feel distrustful, betrayed, and abandoned. These feelings can make them feel disconnected from other people. Drinking and using drugs can help them feel a false sense of belonging.

Thus, many people who were abused as children must learn to reattach (or attach for the first time) to other individuals, to a community, or to a spiritual power. This important goal takes time. However, people can reach this goal by starting to do healthy things with other healthy people. This can take many forms, such as joining a Twelve Step group, joining a spiritual group, participating in group therapy, taking a class, or volunteering at a local nonprofit program.



### EXERCISE 12

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Do you feel that you are alone or part of a larger group?  
Please explain.

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2. If you feel that you are more alone than part of a larger group, what are some things that you can do to become part of a larger group?

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**People who experienced childhood abuse typically feel distrustful, betrayed, and abandoned.**

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3. What are some of the advantages to your recovery of being an active member of a group (even if the group isn't focused on recovery-oriented issues but is healthy)?

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### Dealing with Feelings

People who grow up in abusive households learn survival skills that let them function in hostile and unpredictable environments. They learn to be extremely sensitive to other people's moods and behaviors. They may develop a strong fear of intimacy. People often experience this fear as a fear of losing control, a fear of being abandoned, or a fear of being attacked or hurt. They may feel a lot of anxiety.

If you have these feelings, you should know that these feelings are understandable. This is what happens when you grow up in an abusive situation. It is important to know that these feelings can interfere in your relationships with others. The good news is that you can learn skills designed to overcome these problems.

You may need to learn what are called *interpersonal skills*. You may need to learn how to care about the feelings of other people while caring about your own feelings. You may need to learn how better to make people understand what you want. You may need to learn how to ask for what you need without feeling bad. You may need to learn how to draw personal boundaries by



**People who grow up in abusive households often fear being abandoned or being attacked or hurt.**



saying no to people. And you may need to learn how to deal with conflicts with others.

Some ways of learning these skills are to take anger management courses, assertiveness training classes, conflict resolution courses, and classes that teach you how to recognize unhealthy relationships.



### EXERCISE 13

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Do you sometimes feel that you can't express what you need or want, or feel bad when you tell someone what you need or want?

Yes     No    *(If yes, please explain.)*

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2. Are there some situations in which you get frustrated that you can't get the other person to understand your needs and wishes?

Yes     No

How would you like to change those situations?

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3. What are some interpersonal skills that you feel you would like to learn? How has not having these skills affected your addiction?

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4. In what ways would strengthening your interpersonal skills benefit your recovery?

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**Recovery from Childhood Sexual Abuse**

Since sexual abuse can cause severe psychological, emotional, and sexual damage, anyone who was sexually abused as a child should seek professional help. Even if the abuse occurred many years ago, and you don't feel like it is still a problem, you should meet with a therapist who is a specialist in sexual abuse and attend self-help groups for survivors of sexual abuse. Speak with your counselor to get a recommendation for a specialist therapist.

Self-help groups can be very helpful for sexual abuse survivors, because they let them know that they are not alone and can share their feelings and experiences with others who have had similar experiences. In addition to the groups listed on pages 29 and 30,

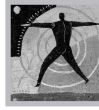
there are many local support groups and counseling services for survivors of sexual abuse, many of which can be found in your local phonebook.



### **Session 28 Summary**

In this session you have learned about rape and childhood sexual abuse. These are painful topics that are not easy to confront, and they are even more difficult to deal with if one has been a victim. The session defined rape and childhood sexual abuse and explained the lasting psychological damage that it causes for many victims. The session also has presented some ideas about prevention of and treatment for rape and childhood sexual abuse, and provided some contact information for groups that can help.

These issues are deeply personal. During this session, you may have thought about these issues for the first time or perhaps in a deeper way than before. This may have been the first time that you discussed these issues with anyone else. However, by exploring them, discussing them, and working through some of them, you have learned important things about the ways in which sexual abuse may have had a role in your addiction and, therefore, may have a role in your recovery. By working through this session, you have gained another important tool to strengthen your recovery.



## **Resources for Survivors**

### **MaleSurvivor**

PMB 103  
5505 Connecticut Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20015-2601  
Phone: (800) 738-4181  
Web site: [www.malesurvivor.org/](http://www.malesurvivor.org/)

This organization is for men who have been victims of childhood sexual abuse and rape. It hosts conferences, publishes a newsletter, and keeps a directory of therapists who specialize in this area.

### **Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)**

635-B Pennsylvania Avenue SE  
Washington, DC 20003  
National Helpline: (800) 656-HOPE  
Phone: (202) 544-1034  
Fax: (202) 544-3556  
Web site: [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)  
E-mail: [info@rainn.org](mailto:info@rainn.org)

RAINN is an organization that helps survivors of rape, incest, and childhood sexual abuse find counseling. It operates a twenty-four-hour, toll-free helpline that connects people with rape crisis counselors in their area. It also has an online database for finding free counseling, and it works to educate the public about this issue.

*Resources for Survivors continued*

**Survivors of Incest Anonymous**

World Service Office  
P.O. Box 190  
Benson, MD 21018-9998

Phone: (410) 893-3322  
Web site: [www.siawso.org](http://www.siawso.org)

This is a Twelve Step group for survivors of incest and other childhood sexual abuse.