

MEDICAL PERSONNEL

Although there are many glaring evidences of child sexual abuse taking place in large numbers it is often shrouded in secrecy. A victim of sexual abuse not only goes through physical damage, but is also affected emotionally. It is important to recognise the various signals that indicate if the child was sexually abused. Children are often scared to tell anyone about the abuse. Many cases are not even reported.

There are some symptoms that can determine if the child has faced sexual abuse. It is necessary to keep a check on their behaviour, personality and outlook. Symptoms of sexual abuse in children are similar to those of depression or severe anxiety and nervousness. There may be complaints of physical ailments like bowel disorders, such as soiling oneself ([encopresis](#)), eating disorders, such as [anorexia nervosa](#), genital or rectal symptoms, such as pain during a bowel movement or urination, or [vaginal itch](#) or [discharge](#), repeated head or stomach aches and sleep problems. The mental and emotional aspect of the problem can be displayed by disruptive behaviours such as using alcohol and street drugs or engaging in high-risk sexual behaviours, do poorly in school, have excessive fear or severe lack of self-esteem, and withdrawal from normal activities.

If sexual abuse is suspected, the first and the most important step is to get medical help. The child should be examined as soon as possible by a trained health care professional. The role of doctors and psychologists during the treatment, and their method of approach play a vital role in the healing process of the survivors. More importance is given to the medical examination and there is a general unawareness about the trauma that the survivor has faced. Thus insensitive and blunt questioning sessions to know more about a patient's profile can do more harm than good. It is important to know that abuse does not always leave physical traces. It mostly results in emotional wounds. So talking about such problems in an uncaring manner can make the patients coil into their cocoons as they might feel being abused all over again due to the breaching of their privacy. This may stand as a hindrance to medical examinations.

Doctors need to realise that reassuring the patient, that there is no need to be ashamed, is very important. It is the job of the medical personnel to instil confidence in them, hence it is necessary to be friendly and approachable. They should provide their patients with a non-judgemental environment so that they feel comfortable during their time in the hospital. Increasing the self-esteem of a victim is as important as conducting a medical examination.

For this the psychologists, paediatricians, family medicine doctors, and emergency room (ER) doctors are needed to be trained. In most of these cases the child is emotionally vulnerable or volatile, hence appropriate care must be taken. Therefore guidelines have been provided for the medical personnel in order to ensure that the patients are treated and assisted with maximum care and to the doctor's full capability.

PEDIATRICIAN'S RESPONSE

“The principles of Sensitive Practice”

Physical wellness is connected to one’s emotional state. If the survivor doesn’t feel comfortable or feels unsafe, then it can directly lead to the stalling of progress. A goal of Sensitive Practice is needed to facilitate feelings of safety for the client. There are a total of nine principles discussed below, which will guide the medical personnel on how to treat the victims of sexual abuse in general, for their effective recovery.

First Principle: Respect

Abuse undermines a person’s ability to respect oneself. Survivors often feel diminished as human beings and may be sensitive to any hint of disrespect. They also suffer from lack of self-esteem. The feeling of being accepted and heard is important. Showing respect involves giving attention and to have regard. It also means, seeing the person as a particular individual, with unique beliefs, values, needs, and history. It requires out of the medical personnel to provide the patient with a space, free of critical judgements. It is their job to make the patients believe in themselves. There is a need to assure them of the fact that, they too are the respectful individuals of the society like any other.

Second Principle: Taking Time

Due to the busy lifestyle and time constraint, it becomes hard for the medical personnel to give special attention to each and every patient. This leads to the survivors feel being depersonalized and devalued. Being rushed or treated like an object diminishes their sense of safety and undermines any care that follows. The clinicians also feel stuck in a cycle of never-ending time constraints thus resulting in lack of efficiency. In cases, such as sexual abuse it is important to treat each and every patient with full attention. It is important to remember, that feeling genuinely heard gives the patient the feeling of being valued and this is one of the most effective ways to make a survivor feel safe and comfortable. The medical examination thus can be carried on effectively.

Third Principle: Rapport

Rapport is essential to every therapeutic relationship. A medical personal managing to share positive rapport can make the patient feel safe and sound. A positive rapport facilitates clear communication and engenders cooperation. Clinicians need to show the right amount of professionalism as well as friendliness as it promotes a sense of safety and helps to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries. It can be developed with practice.

Fourth Principle: Sharing Information

Survivors do not know what health care practitioners do and therefore do not know what to expect during the treatment. So enlightening them about the treatment beforehand helps to alleviate their fear and anxiety and often prevents them from being triggered by unanticipated events. The element of surprise is really difficult to deal with, and if the patient is prepared in advance, it helps in the healing process better. It is necessary for the clinicians to begin the information sharing process before seeing the new patient by providing written information about what is involved in a patient appointment. Another method is to offer a running

commentary about the things the practitioner is doing as they are doing it. It is a tool for patient education, and is tremendously reassuring for them. Practitioners must also seek feedback from their patients regarding the exam, treatment, or intervention throughout. This will help them to give the patients better service in future.

Fifth Principle: Sharing control

A grave result of sexual abuse in an individual is the loss of control over one's body. So having a sense of control in interactions with health care providers who are more powerful is crucial to establishing and maintaining safety. So it figures that the health care practitioners have a greater responsibility in this area due to their higher social worth by the virtue of education and skills. The process of establishing informed consent is an important part of sharing control, as well as a legal responsibility. Seeking consent includes informing, consulting, and offering choices. Sharing control helps the patient to become an active participant in their own healing process. This helps in the growth of self-esteem as well as the feeling of worth. They start believing that they can make decisions on their own, and can take full control of their treatment. This certainly goes a long way in order to instil a sense of value and respect in them.

Sixth Principle: Respecting Boundaries

Respecting boundaries is a two way thing. Both the practitioner as well as the patient needs to respect the other's personal boundary. Due to the nature of these cases, it becomes inevitable for the clinician and the patient to work in physical proximity as well as discuss intimate details about the issue. Respect for boundaries is crucial to a sense of safety for most survivors. As, due to lack of time, the doctors end up asking blunt questions without taking any consent or sharing information. This leads to the feeling of being violated. The insensitive breach of privacy does a lot of harm. It can trigger negative emotions in the patient, which might affect their health adversely. It plays with the patient's need for control and autonomy. Rapport building is necessary before seeking intimate details from the patient, so that they feel safe and secure.

Boundaries may also be violated by survivors who sexualize their relationship with a health care practitioner, having learned as children to relate to their more powerful abusers in a sexual way. The right amount of professionalism and a calm stance will help overcome this difficult situation. The medical personnel needs to accept these problems positively, as it is a learning process for the patient. If the patient is wrong then it is the duty of the clinician to show them the right way.

Seventh Principle: Fostering Mutual Learning

Health care practitioners learn about the health effects the suffering of their patients and also about working effectively with survivors. The best teachers are the survivors themselves. They are interested in helping clinicians if they show genuine compassion and interest to learn about the health effects of interpersonal violence and about their particular needs.

On the other hand the survivors need encouragement to become active participants in their own health care. Small encouragements from health care practitioners help them to carry these into other life situations. If a practitioner shows belief and confidence and gives good advice, then it will surely make the survivor feel respected. Once they feel that they are of worth in this society, they will also learn to be assertive and will be better prepared to deal with any wrong happenings.

Eighth Principle: Understanding non-linear healing

The practitioner needs to understand that healing is not a linear process. So a survivor of child sexual abuse, might take shorter or a really long time to heal. Each person's trauma and suffering is different from the other. If a person has a bit more control of their emotions then they might take lesser time to heal than a person who's still striving for control and autonomy. Regular check-ups are extremely important in order to help them adjust their behaviour. Compassionate and understanding medical personnel can help in making the patient feel safe.

Ninth Principle: Demonstrating awareness and knowledge of interpersonal violence

It is imperative for medical personnel to be aware of the concept of interpersonal violence. They should be conscious about the various ways an abused person feels traumatised and what a victim in general must have faced. Survivors look for indicators of a clinician's awareness of issues of interpersonal violence. Once they are assured of it, it becomes easier for them to share their experience as they feel that there is someone who would understand their plight completely. Evidence of this awareness can take a variety of forms like posters and pamphlets from local organizations that serve those who have experienced violence.