

Numbing the Pain

Film discussion guide for addiction, rehabilitation and recovery services



Introduction

Are you aware many clients or service users with addiction will have experienced childhood sexual abuse (CSA), and that their substance use or addictive behaviour maybe a coping mechanism or a form of self-medication for this underlying trauma? Whilst the focus of your service is supporting clients to manage their addiction, what could your service be doing to support clients who are also survivors of CSA?

Numbing the Pain: Survivors' voices of childhood sexual abuse and addiction is a short film aiming to improve awareness of childhood sexual abuse and the challenges many survivors face.

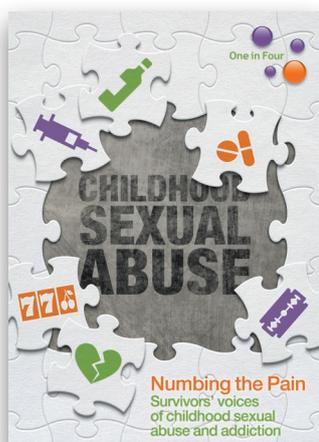
There is evidence of a link between substance abuse and CSA. Children who experience physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect or growing up with domestic abuse etc. are more likely to develop mental and physical health, including risk of addiction.

People experiencing more than four adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)¹ are:

- seven times more likely to become addicted to alcohol
- 10 times more likely to be at risk of intravenous drug addiction
- 12 times more likely to have attempted suicide.

The trauma of CSA can lead to unmanageable feelings – either very intense or a lack of feelings – which are easily triggered. Substance use can be a form of self medication to numb the pain or manage intense unbearable feelings, associated with abuse.

An estimated one in four women and one in six men are sexually abused as children. Most do not report or get support as children. To understand more about the link between sexual abuse and addiction, see *Numbing the Pain: Survivors' voices of childhood sexual abuse and addiction* – a report containing personal accounts by survivors and professional analysis about how the trauma of sexual abuse affected their lives, downloadable at goo.gl/3UAPcd.



Film discussion

It is important that services and all staff are prepared for disclosures of CSA and know how to respond. We invite you to watch this film with key workers, recovery staff and counsellors. The questions and exercises below will help a discussion of the issues raised. However, we recommend giving a trigger warning before showing the film as some staff may be survivors who have yet to process their trauma.

- How did you feel watching the film?
- What impacted you the most?
- How did watching this film make you feel towards your work and your clients?

Coping mechanisms

At times, everyone finds it hard to sit with difficult feelings and we all develop coping mechanisms. Common coping mechanisms include coffee, exercise, shopping, social media, Netflix, smoking, substance use, food etc.

- What are your coping mechanisms? Take a few minutes to write down your coping mechanisms. Notice how you feel doing this. Notice what triggers you to use your coping mechanism.

Disclosure

When someone discloses that they have experienced CSA it's a very important and brave step. How you respond to disclosure by a survivor is also very important.

Sexual abuse causes intense levels of shame, and many survivors have become people-pleasers as a way of surviving. This often means they will not tell you how they are really feeling or what is going on for them, because they want your approval.

The ability to trust is also an important and challenging issue for survivors. Their trust was betrayed as children and they need to know you will hear and can support them. Sometimes they can be defensive, putting up barriers to connection, or they are hyper-vigilant and very sensitive to every change in your voice, body etc – especially around their disclosure. Disclosure brings up shame and if you reject them, or they perceive that you reject them, they will feel further shamed and the opportunity to acknowledge the trauma will be lost.

#CSANumbingThePain

www.oneinfour.org.uk/survivors-voices-uk/

¹ Felitti, V. J. et al (1998) Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14 (4).

Practice disclosing

In pairs, share from your list of coping mechanisms. Notice how it is for you to share these? How does it make you feel? What do you notice? An alternative way of doing this exercise, is to stand with a partner, back to back and share your coping mechanisms. Experience what it feels like to know you are supported.

To think about how you might respond to a client's disclosure, you might like to watch this excellent RSA Shorts video about empathy at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw.

Discuss or practice how you would respond to a client's disclosure.

Discussion

How prepared is your service to provide specialist support for survivors? Consider the questions below and how your service can support survivor clients.

- How do you or your staff react to clients who disclose? Are you aware to allow clients to share what they feel comfortable with, and not to push for information? Are you or your staff able to contain clients who disclose, and not further shame them?
- Who will you direct these clients to? What is your process for this? What are your links to specialist childhood sexual abuse and trauma services?
- Do you encourage your clients to attend 12-Step or Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) meetings to help people get support for the shame of their addiction, a precursor to getting support for their trauma?
- Will you put up posters to inform service users that getting support for their trauma of childhood sexual abuse, following recovery is important? What literature do you have for services users about childhood sexual abuse?
- How will you enable disclosure? At intake or during client's work with you? Where do you record the disclosures, anonymously?
- Is there someone in your service designated as the CSA Lead? Do you refer survivors in your service to them? How do you support staff when there is a disclosure?

Other uses for this film

- Could you use the film with other statutory bodies or commissioners?
- Could you show the film to service users? We recommend the film be shown with support available to clients who may find the voices of other survivors supportive and encouraging.

Recommendations for services

- Record anonymised data of service users disclosing childhood sexual abuse
- Create pathways to specialist services for survivors of childhood sexual abuse following recovery. For details of specialist services visit www.thesurvivorstrust.org.uk
- Develop trauma-informed staff, through training about childhood sexual abuse and trauma, and provide access to resources
- For training and resources, visit www.oneinfour.org.uk or email admin@oneinfour.org.uk.

The Numbing the Pain pocket guide

This guide, written by child sexual abuse specialist Christiane Sanderson, identifies the links between CSA, complex trauma and addiction within the context of damaged relationships and lack of emotional self-regulation. The focus is to support practitioners working with addictions and substance misuse to develop a deeper understanding of the link between addiction and complex trauma and how to respond more effectively to survivors of childhood abuse who self-medicate. It will identify the impact of complex trauma, the barriers to disclosure, such as dissociation, fragmented memories and shame, and introduce the principles of trauma-informed practice such as the use of psychoeducation and stabilisation to aid emotional self-regulation.

To restore control over dysregulated emotional states the guide introduces a range of resources such as grounding skills and mindfulness to reduce the need for external sources of self-medication and create a personalised recovery toolkit. In addition it will emphasise the importance of restoring relational worth and how to facilitate post-traumatic growth.

The guide will be of interest to both health and mental health practitioners, drug and alcohol workers, those working with rough sleepers and in the criminal justice system, as well as counsellors, therapists, GPs and anyone working with survivors.

The guide will be available summer 2019 from www.oneinfour.org.uk.