

The Stages of Healing

The decision to heal

Once you recognize the effects of sexual abuse in your life, you need to make an active commitment to heal. Deep healing only happens when you choose it and are willing to change yourself.

The emergency stage

Beginning to deal with memories and suppressed feelings can throw your life into utter turmoil. Remember, this is only a stage. It won't last forever.

Remembering

Many survivors suppress all memories of what happened to them as children. Those who do not forget the actual incidents often forget how it felt at the time. Remembering is the process of getting back both memory and feeling.

Believing it happened

Survivors often doubt their own perceptions. Coming to believe that the abuse really happened, and that it really hurt you, is a vital part of the healing process.

Breaking the silence

Most adult survivors kept the abuse a secret in childhood. Telling another person about what happened to you is a powerful healing force that can help you get rid of the shame of being a victim.

Understanding that it wasn't your fault

Children usually believe that abuse is their fault. Adult survivors must place the blame where it belongs – directly on the shoulders of the abusers.

Making contact with the child within

Many survivors have lost touch with their own vulnerability. Getting in touch with the child within can help you feel compassion for yourself, more anger at your abuser, and a greater intimacy with others.

Trusting Yourself

The best guide for healing is your own inner voice. Learning to trust your own perceptions, feelings and intuitions becomes a basis for action in the world outside.

Grieving and mourning

As children being abused and later, as adult struggling to survive, most survivors haven't felt their losses. Grieving lets you honour your pain, let go, and move into the present.

Anger: The backbone of healing

Anger is a powerful and liberating force. Whether you need to get in touch with it or have always had plenty to spare, directing your rage squarely at your abuser, and at those who did not protect you even if they could have done so, is essential to healing.

Disclosures and confrontations

Directly confronting your abuser is not for every survivor, but it can be a dramatic, cleansing tool.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness of the abuser is not absolutely required as part of the healing process, although it is often the most recommended. The only essential forgiveness is to forgive yourself.

Spirituality

Having a sense of a power greater than yourself helps you in your healing process. Your spirituality is unique to you. You might find it through traditional cultural practices, through organized religion, meditation, nature, or a support network.

Resolution and moving on

As you move through these stages again and again, you will reach a point of integration. Your feelings and perspectives will stabilize. You will come to terms with your abuser and other family members. While you won't erase your history, you will make deep and lasting changes in your life. Having gained awareness, compassion, and power through healing, you will have the opportunity to work toward a better world.



Excerpt from *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, by Laura Davis and Ellen Bass Harper & Row, New York, 1988, pages 58-59.