



Innocence Shattered - The Deep Emotional wounds caused by Abuse

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Received: 27 May 2025

Published: 03 June 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15688238>

“People who are sexually abused, that's not the trauma, that's the traumatic event. The trauma is the shame that makes them give up on themselves. The trauma is that they believe they don't deserve anything better. The trauma is that they believe it's their fault. The trauma is that they disconnect from their body, because it's too painful to be connected so disconnection becomes a frequent coping mechanism.” **Gabor Mate**

A study published by the Brazilian Bar Association – Rio de Janeiro (2009) shows that around 61% of children and adolescents who are victims of sexual exploitation in Brazil have had suicidal thoughts. Of these, more than 58% have actually attempted suicide. Among the reasons cited, 20% linked the desire to die to sexual violence.

According to the "Maio Laranja" Platform, which runs awareness campaigns against child sexual abuse and exploitation: every hour, 3 children are abused in Brazil. Around 51% are between 1 and 5 years old.

A UNICEF survey conducted between 2017 and 2022 found: *“Brazil recorded 179,277 cases of rape or statutory rape involving victims up to 19 years old – an average of nearly 45,000 cases per year. Among them, children up to 10 years old accounted for 62,000 victims. The violence differs depending on the age of the victim. Children often die as a result of domestic violence perpetrated by someone they know. The same applies to sexual violence committed within the home by close individuals.”*

According to the SBT News platform, in 2023, Brazil registered 71,687 reports of online child sexual exploitation, a 77% increase over the previous year - the highest number in 18 years.

In his book, Bessel Van Der Kolk (2020) refers to a study identifying child abuse in the United States as the country's greatest public health issue. The study indicated that the overall cost of the problem surpassed that of cancer and heart disease and that eradicating child abuse would reduce the general rates of depression by more than half, alcoholism by two-thirds, and suicide, drug use, and domestic violence by three-quarters.

The Scars of Abuse as Witnessed in Clinical Practice

I began my clinical practice in São Paulo, Brazil, working in psychiatric hospitals and later in rehabilitation clinics and social institutions. I started with adults and gradually moved into treating children and their guardians. Emotional relationships and their complications - loss, misalignment, incompatibility - are recurring themes. As a student of psychoanalysis and the mind-body interaction, it was essential to study psychopathology and human sexuality. I quickly realized how frequent the theme of abuse was in clinical

settings - and its effects on the family of origin and later relationships. Verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Bodily marks, memories, and emotional scars that echo across time as impossibilities, rejections, insecurities, despair, vengeance, and even annihilation.

Unfortunately, in many sessions I witnessed how deeply abuse can scar a person's body, experiences, and potential. Sometimes, so deeply repressed and buried in the unconscious, it resurfaces through the body - as symptoms of impossibility, denial, incompatibility with intimacy and affection, self-discovery, and the potential for transformation. A subject, a body, marked by early trauma. While sexuality is a driving force for human development, when it is introduced prematurely or violated - it can numb, block, stifle, or drown emotional growth, relationships, and the future.

The Wound That Remains Open

I recently read a heartbreaking article about a mother describing her daughter's long battle with depression, hopelessness, and low self-esteem, which eventually led her to attempt suicide. Sadly, such accounts are not uncommon - at least not in clinical settings. Emotional wounds inflicted at a young age are the hardest to process and overcome, as they occur during a time when emotional, neurological, and physiological maturity, adaptability, and defense mechanisms are still under development.

There are many types of abuse: physical, verbal, moral, psychological, sexual. As adults, we often feel helpless in the face of aggression committed against us by someone in our social circle. It's even worse when this happens to children. Innocence, immaturity, and a lack of psychological resources characterize childhood and demand care, support, and protection from responsible adults.

Childhood innocence and vulnerability magnify the impact. Our lack of understanding, experience, and knowledge—combined with fear, shame, guilt, and resentment - often leads us to bury the abuse deep within our bodies, injuring ourselves again and again. Abuse causes trauma, which can seriously and profoundly fragment a child's developmental process. Such violence occurs too early, too intensely for the young victim—not just during the event, but long after it ends.

The Devastating Consequences of Abuse

In psychology, trauma is defined as a psychological wound that remains distressing and painful following an intense and often early experience that exceeds a person's ability to cope. It becomes a lingering presence - bringing back emotions, thoughts, and negative beliefs that disrupt relationships, perceptions, and behavior.

According to an article by "Psicologias do Brasil" (2016):

“Traumas arise from events involving real or perceived threats to life or physical integrity. They underlie a range of psychological and hormonal disorders—from depression to substance dependency, including obesity, OCD, Acute Stress Disorder, and PTSD. Many substance abuse cases are linked to childhood trauma. Studies show that early exposure to trauma rewires a person for life, altering the developmental course of their mental structures.”

Similarly, França (2020) states:

“People who were sexually abused may develop self-destructive behaviors, including suicide, or other harmful patterns like drug and alcohol abuse. They may constantly feel down, inappropriate, compulsive. Even when abuse is no longer occurring, they continue in a self-destructive cycle. Childhood maltreatment, including sexual abuse, is a major risk factor for mental disorders and suicide.”

In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2020), Bessel Van Der Kolk highlights the lasting impacts of child abuse on adulthood and relationships. Abused children are hyper-alert and hypersensitive, distrustful, defensive, and withdrawn. Incest survivors, for example, struggle to distinguish danger from safety - their trauma distorts not just perception but the body's ability to feel safe. Common consequences include dissociation and a loss of self-regulation. Nothing feels safe - not even their own body. They distrust others, repress curiosity, and question their own senses and reality.

As Silva & Teixeira (2017) explain:

“Trauma is intimately linked to ego helplessness, an overload of mental excitation that hinders the subject's ability to symbolically process the event, resulting in symptoms. When adults deny or minimize a child's suffering, they invalidate the experience, leading to feelings of abandonment, confusion, and loneliness.”

German psychotherapist Franz Ruppert (2022) argues that trauma arises when reality becomes so unbearable that we create illusions to survive. He defines sexual psychotrauma as the moment when one's body is used to satisfy another's desires, resulting in unbearable emotions - pain, fear, grief, rage, disgust, guilt, and powerlessness.

The victim feels fragmented - like a shattered mirror reflecting a distorted whole. Thoughts, fantasies, sensations, and relationships are all impacted.

In a 2003 publication, I explored how child sexual abuse leaves lasting wounds, especially on the victim.

Health professionals agree that a portion of these victims may become abusers themselves - caught in a cycle of unresolved pain. These individuals may struggle to form healthy social bonds and recreate abusive behaviors in adult sexual relationships as if trapped in an identity model they cannot escape. In underprivileged communities, sexual abuse is a fast track to child prostitution, both male and female - fueled by a lucrative international sex tourism industry.

Therapeutic Possibilities

Despite the pain and complexity discussed here, there is hope. Professionals in health, education, and law are developing approaches for both victims and perpetrators. This issue affects everyone—it is socio-economic, political, and cultural. It must be acknowledged, questioned, and processed.

Today, multiple support systems exist—psychotherapy, medical follow-up, family counseling, therapeutic, educational, social, and religious institutions. Healing is typically a long-term, careful process, done at the pace of each individual and their family system.

As KOLK (2020) notes, the best way to understand the impact of violence and abuse is by listening to survivors - their stories, their feelings, their beliefs. These individuals had their internal world map shattered. As psychotherapists, we must help them rebuild that internal world map - slowly, without judgment, with respect for their unique pace and experience.

Therapy offers a space for listening and support - for the client and often for their family. The goal is not to erase the event, the perpetrator, or society, but to find the resources to move forward in spite of the trauma.

To listen, allow expression, and promote recognition, differentiation, and awareness... is to break the cycle of intimidation, stigma, isolation, guilt, shame, and self-destruction.

It is possible. It is delicate and requires great care. But with humanity and respect, it can be done.

I (in)conclude with a verse from Chico Buarque's 1978 poem "*Despite You*":

"Despite you,

Tomorrow will be

Another day."

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