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Treatment, therapy there for victims of sex abuse

A multi-part series looks at the incidents of sex crimes in the Newberg area, its causes, prosecution and treatment options

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(Editor's note: some names in this series have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of victims and allow them to speak frankly about their experiences).

One of the consequences of child sexual abuse is that victims can grow to be adults suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the same way that military personnel returning from combat have been documented to relive traumatic experiences, or be set off by apparently harmless gestures, so too can people who've been sexually abused as children.

Joelle McCormick, a licensed clinical social worker who works for Yamhill County and in private practice, said there are telltale signs of abuse but that treatment exists and can be effective.



A common sign that a teen-ager is or has been abused is extreme sexual behavior, McCormick said. While the stereotype is that victims of child sexual abuse turn into promiscuous adults, it's also possible for them to completely forgo any sexual contact. While teen-agers normally discover sex with persons of their own age and at their own pace, for victims of sex abuse "that normal experience is robbed of them," she said.

Children who are in school might show decreased grades, McCormick said, adding that fears such as that of going places alone can also be a sign.

"Difficulty sleeping, that's a big one," McCormick said. "That can look like ADHD when really its trauma, because the symptoms are the same."

One of the goals of treatment is to undo "grooming," those behaviors the abuser used to set up the abuse. These are the methods he (abuser are most often men) used to gain the trust of the victim and their parents, make progressively more invasive sexual contact appear to be "normal," and often make

the victims believe that they are the ones asking for the abuse.

One of the keys to success is how soon after the abuse took place does the victim undergo therapy. Through therapy, the victim is encouraged to take “their power back and (be) able to fully place the blame on the offender,” McCormick said.

Those who suffer from PTSD will be taught how to detect triggers, the precursor signs of a crisis. “It’s not that the triggers are going to stop,” McCormick said, but the client will be given skills to cope with the triggers so that they are better equipped to shorten the effects and diminish the intensity.

“It’s something she’ll be dealing with her entire life,” McCormick said, adding “it doesn’t mean that she’ll always have PTSD, the flashbacks and the nightmares”.

It’s not uncommon for victims to be reminded of their abuse at major biological steps in their life, she said, such as puberty, pregnancies, menopause or “whenever there are changes in the body.”

Victims are at their weakest when they feel they don’t have control. “They want things to be predictable, they don’t want to be surprised again,” McCormick said, because “(the abuse) wasn’t about pleasure, it was about power and control.”

Substance abuse often happens because “people try to cover up the pain” and self-medicate to dull their senses.

While McCormick practices a form of talk therapy, she said there are multiple tools available to therapists. The end goal is to form new pathways in the victim’s brain so that they can leave the trauma behind. That isn’t easy and sometimes patients can get stuck.

One of her colleagues uses a form of therapy called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). With this method, patients are submitted to visual stimuli while recalling trauma. Because both halves of the brain are stimulated simultaneously it can be effective at allowing patients to create new brain pathways and “get unstuck,” McCormick said.

Melissa (her story appeared in the Oct. 3 issue), was offered a different kind of therapy when as a child she disclosed she’d been sexually abused by her father.

Reunification, the kind of therapy offered to Melissa after she disclosed the abuse her father was subjecting her to, is rather rare but not unheard of. Unlike what Melissa experienced, though, McCormick said that today’s guidelines call for both the victim and the offender to have completed treatment before reunification therapy can take place and only “if the victim at that point is wanting reunification.”

Also, McCormick said the non-offending parent would have to be in a position where the outcome of the therapy wouldn’t affect their independence “so that regardless of the outcome nobody’s feeling that they need the other person for financial reasons”.

Recovering from child sexual abuse, she said, is “something that’s very workable.”

Resources for sex abuse victims

Victims of sex abuse in Yamhill County have multiple resources available to them.

The Newberg-Dundee Police Department can be reached at 503-538-8321 for non-emergency calls. The Yamhill County Sheriff’s Office non-emergency line number is 1-503-434-7506 and the general emergency number for all law enforcement agencies is 9-1-1.

Henderson House in McMinnville specializes in care and support of sexual assault victims; they can be reached at 1-503-472-0244 (toll-free at 1-877-227-5946). They also have a crisis number: 1-503-472-1503.

The National Sexual Assault Hotline is 1-800-656-HOPE (4673).