

FINDING A WAY THROUGH ADDICTION

There are many ways of dealing with the distressing after-effects of childhood sexual abuse. One way is to become addicted. Being addicted to something means being out of control in your use of it. You can become addicted to many things:

- **Alcohol**
- **Drugs**
- **Sex**
- **Masturbation**
- **Gambling**
- **Strenuous exercise**
- **Overwork**
- **Overeating**
- **Taking risks**
- **Violence**

Do you feel, or have you felt, out of control with any of these things? If your answer is yes, then you may be wondering, ‘what has that got to do with being sexually abused as a child?’ Well, being abused is extremely painful. Such pain is hard to cope with. There may have been no one around to listen to your pain. If you have become addicted try not to beat yourself up about it. It’s important to understand that addictions serve many valuable short-term functions:

- **They help to blot out the pain of abuse.**
- **They can temporarily reduce tension.**
- **They might help you feel good – briefly.**
- **They might help you control distressing symptoms like flashbacks or lack of sleep.**

Unfortunately, with addiction there’s always a price to pay:

- **Your physical health might suffer.**
- **You might suffer financially.**
- **You might lose time at work, or even your job.**
- **Under the ‘influence’ you might be more likely to get yourself into situations where you might get hurt, or hurt others.**
- **If you are having thoughts of harming yourself you might be more likely to do it ‘under the influence.’**

All these things are potentially dangerous. In addition, it’s hard to begin your recovery whilst you are in the grip of addiction. This is because recovery

involves expressing and feeling your feelings. This can be very hard and painful. The point of addiction is to try and blot out painful feelings. So, while you're addicted it's hard to get to your feelings.

What to do if you think you're addicted

- **It may seem obvious, but make a decision that you want to deal with it. Talk through the decision with someone you trust.**
- **Remember that the addiction has served a purpose. It has helped you survive.**
- **Seriously consider professional help. Getting over addictions is very hard. In the case of alcohol/drugs it can even involve going somewhere to 'dry out'. We include a list of useful numbers at the end of this pack.**
- **Reach out to people around you who you can trust. This may include friends, a therapist or counsellor, professionals, or family members. When you break an addiction you can feel very distressed. It's important to be able to talk about this.**
- **Make sure you're doing something about flashbacks, panic attacks, sleep problems. See the other entries in this pack. When you break an addiction these symptoms can really hit you. If you've not found ways to handle them you might be tempted to go straight back to addiction.**
- **If you're in counselling or therapy weigh up very carefully whether you're able to explore your abuse whilst you're still addicted. Whilst it's necessary to talk about what happened to you it can also be extremely painful – so painful that you're tempted to take more drink, drugs, etc. to cope with the pain. Talk this through with your counsellor/therapist and with others you trust. There's no hard and fast rule. Some survivors have found it useful to sort out their addictions before therapy or in the very earliest stages of it.**
- **Always remember that you did what you did to survive. Try to appreciate your great resourcefulness in surviving. Hold onto this thought if you feel guilty or ashamed about the ways you've coped.**