

## Managing Trauma and Effects from Childhood Sexual Abuse – A Primer for the Psychiatric Health Care Professional

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the profound and lasting impacts of psychological trauma from childhood sexual abuse.

Psychological trauma from sexual abuse can be categorized into acute, chronic, complex, developmental, and secondary trauma, each affecting mental health in unique ways. Trauma generally leads to emotional distress, cognitive disruptions, physical symptoms, strained relationships, and altered behaviors, impacting day-to-day functioning and quality of life.

Childhood sexual abuse, often perpetrated by an adult in a position of trust, has severe and enduring effects on victims' mental and emotional health. Abuse can manifest in forms such as contact abuse, non-contact abuse, exploitation, and grooming, with each type contributing to long-term psychological damage.

Preventing childhood sexual abuse involves educating children on boundaries, promoting healthy relationships, screening adults who work with children, and ensuring internet safety. The importance of community involvement and support systems is emphasized in prevention and providing support for survivors.

Management of this sensitive issue revolves around social support systems and professional guidance. Support systems provide emotional validation, reduce isolation, rebuild trust, and foster resilience, which are crucial for coping with trauma. Professional guidance offers structured approaches for managing trauma's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral impacts, ultimately helping individuals toward recovery.

In conclusion, childhood sexual abuse is a traumatic experience with deep and lasting scars. With appropriate support and understanding, survivors can work towards healing. Raising awareness, fostering prevention strategies, and supporting survivors are essential steps society can take to address the impacts of abuse and ensure safer environments for children. This paper underscores the importance of a holistic approach, combining community support and professional interventions to promote healing and resilience among abuse victims.

### 1. Introduction/Background

Psychological trauma encompasses any distressing event or experience that disrupts a person's ability to cope and function effectively, due to rapid (although often transient) deterioration of emotional, physical, and psychological wellbeing. Most individuals face at least one traumatic event at some stage in life. The emotional and/or cognitive response to distressing or harmful events sometimes overwhelm an individual's capacity to cope, leaving a lasting impact on their emotional and psychological health. Any form of mental trauma is complex, encompassing a variety of emotional responses and symptoms that stem from distressing experiences.

Childhood sexual abuse causes a specific type of psychological trauma. Childhood sexual exploitation is identified when a minor is subjected to non-consensual sexual activities by someone in a position of authority or power. This abuse often has severe and enduring effects on the mental and emotional wellbeing of the victim. Child sexual abuse includes a range of exploitative activities, such as inappropriate sexual contact, molestation, statutory rape, trafficking, exposure to sexually explicit material, incest, and other forms of exploitation. This issue spans all demographics, affecting children across all socioeconomic backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and both rural and urban communities. It is, therefore,

imperative to understand the various dimensions, causes, and symptoms of childhood sexual exploitation related psychological trauma, as well as the approaches to recovery.

## **2. Types of Psychological Trauma**

Psychological trauma can be sub-divided into five categories: acute, chronic, complex, developmental and secondary.

**Acute Trauma:** Trauma that stems from a single, sudden, and catastrophic event. Examples include road traffic accident, natural disaster, or sexual assault. These are unlikely to have a lasting effect beyond a brief period of grief with the right support system.

**Chronic Trauma:** Trauma that develops due to prolonged and continuous stressors, like enduring an abusive environment. These have a long lasting impact on the personality and mental make-up of an individual.

**Complex Trauma:** Trauma resulting from exposure to multiple inter-related traumatic incidents, which are often interpersonal and frequently occurring in childhood. The manifestations of this trauma are often insidious and usually last throughout a person's lifetime.

**Developmental Trauma:** Trauma experienced during critical developmental stages, which can have lasting impacts on emotional and psychological growth.

**Secondary Trauma:** Trauma experienced by professionals who work with trauma survivors, caused by indirect exposure to their clients' traumatic experiences.

## **3. Types of Childhood Sexual Abuse**

Childhood sexual exploitation/abuse may manifest in various forms – contact, non-contact, exploitation and grooming. A brief account to distinguish between the various forms is presented below:

**Grooming:** A process through which an abuser builds an emotional relationship with a child to gain their trust. The abuser then gradually introduces sexual content or activities to sexually abuse the victim.

**Non-Contact Abuse:** No physical abuse is performed, but, certain sexual acts that include exposing a child to sexual content in electronic or physical media, encouraging them to observe sexual acts, or forcing them to participate in sexual activities with other children or adults.

**Contact Abuse:** Involves direct physical contact between the abuser and the child, including inappropriate touching, fondling, penetration, or other forms of physical interaction.

**Exploitation:** Involves using a child for the sexual satisfaction of others, such as through prostitution, child pornography, or other means of sexual exploitation with an associated financial gain.

## **4. Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse**

Any sexual abuse and in particular child sexual abuse has a very long lasting detrimental effect on the psyche on the victim. The culmination of the abuse can be categorized into (but not limited to):

**Emotional Distress:** Trauma frequently causes intense emotional responses, such as anxiety, depression, guilt, and deep sadness.

**Cognitive Effects:** Trauma can impair cognitive functions, making it difficult to concentrate, remember details, and make decisions.

**Physical Manifestations:** The stress from trauma may appear physically, leading to issues like sleep disturbances, headaches, and other psychosomatic symptoms.

**Disrupted Relationships:** Trauma can strain personal relationships, causing challenges with trust,

communication, and forming connections.

**Behavioral Changes:** Individuals affected by trauma may show behavioral changes, including withdrawal, self-isolation, or engaging in risky behaviors.

**Daily Functioning:** Trauma can impact daily functioning, affecting work performance, relationships, and overall quality of life.

**Flashbacks and Triggers:** Experiencing flashbacks or encountering triggers can be distressing, often causing intense emotional and physical reactions.

**Barriers to Seeking Help:** Feelings of stigma, fear, or isolation can prevent individuals from seeking professional help, prolonging trauma's effects.

## 5. Preventive Measures

Preventing child sexual abuse requires a comprehensive approach involving education, awareness, and action across all levels of society. Helping children understand the concepts of sexual behavior empowers them to set boundaries, recognize unsafe situations, and seek help. Parents, caregivers, and educators play a key role in providing age-appropriate education on personal safety, consent, and healthy boundaries.

The key strategies for prevention of child sexual exploitation are:

### 5.1 Education and Awareness

- Teach children about their bodies, boundaries, and consent from a young age, helping them distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behavior.
- Educate adults, including parents, caregivers, teachers, and community members, on recognizing signs of child sexual abuse and responding appropriately.
- Encourage open communication between children and trusted adults so children feel safe reporting any abuse.

### 5.2 Healthy Relationships and Boundaries

- Teach children about healthy relationships, respect, and personal boundaries, encouraging them to speak up if they feel uncomfortable.
- Model appropriate behavior in interactions with children, showing them what healthy boundaries look like.
- When teaching children about personal safety, it's essential to discuss "good touch" and "bad touch":
  - **Good Touch:** Physical contact that is comfortable, wanted, and appropriate, such as hugs from trusted family members or high-fives with friends.
  - **Bad Touch:** Physical contact that feels uncomfortable, unwanted, or unsafe, like touching private parts without permission or contact that makes the child feel scared or uneasy.

### 5.3 Screening and Supervision

- Conduct background checks and reference checks for individuals working with children, like teachers, coaches, and childcare providers.
- Establish proper supervision protocols in places where children gather, such as schools, sports clubs, and religious organizations.

### 5.4 Recognizing and Reporting Abuse

- Educate adults on the signs of child sexual abuse (e.g., unexplained injuries, changes in behavior,

reluctance to be alone with certain individuals, or advanced sexual knowledge).

- Encourage the reporting of suspected abuse to child protective services or law enforcement.

### 5.5 Internet Safety

- Monitor children's online activities and educate them on internet safety, including risks associated with online predators and the importance of not sharing personal information.
- Use parental controls and filters to limit children's exposure to inappropriate content.

### 5.6 Support for Victims and Survivors

- Provide support services for victims and survivors, such as counseling, therapy, and legal assistance.
- Create safe spaces for survivors to share their experiences and access resources without fear of judgment.

### 5.7 Community Involvement

- Engage communities in prevention efforts through awareness campaigns, workshops, and partnerships with local organizations.
- Promote a culture of responsibility where everyone plays a role in protecting children from abuse.

## 6. Role of Support Systems and Professional Help

Medications have limited role in management of psychological trauma related to sexual abuse. The principal management of psychological trauma after sexual exploitation revolves around support system and professional counselling. The various mechanisms of psychotherapy for this complex trauma can be summarized as follows:

**Emotional Validation:** Support networks provide essential outlets for individuals to share their emotions, offering understanding and affirmation.

**Reducing Isolation:** Connecting with others helps reduce the isolation that often accompanies trauma, fostering a sense of community and belonging.

**Building Trust:** Supportive relationships aid in rebuilding trust, a vital aspect often damaged by traumatic experiences.

**Professional Expertise:** Mental health professionals offer specialized knowledge and skills, providing tailored strategies for managing trauma.

**Structured Guidance:** Professional assistance provides structured guidance to help individuals work through the complexities of trauma and its effects.

**Learning Coping Strategies:** Therapists can teach effective coping mechanisms, enabling individuals to handle stress, triggers, and emotional difficulties.

**Safe Environment:** Supportive friends, family, and therapists create judgment-free spaces where individuals feel secure in sharing their experiences.

**Holistic Approach:** Combining informal support with professional guidance creates a comprehensive approach that addresses the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of trauma.

**Encouraging Resilience:** Support systems, along with professional help, foster resilience, helping individuals overcome challenges and progress toward recovery.

## 7. Legislative Measures – The Pocso Act, 2012

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 was implemented in India with

the aim to protect children from sexual abuse and harassment, and to punish the offenders. The major components of the act are as follows:

**Offenses:** The act covers five offenses against children: ranging in spectrum from sexual assault, to sexual harassment, to using a child for pornography. It also punishes attempts to commit these offenses.

**Punishment:** The act provides for punishment based on the severity of the offense. The 2019 amendment to the act made the punishments more stringent, including the possibility of the death penalty for aggravated sexual assault.

**Support for victims:** The act provides compensation to victims, regardless of whether the accused is found guilty. It also sets up a system to support victims and rehabilitate them.

**Special courts:** Special courts are established to try offenses against children.

**Gender neutrality:** The POCSO Act is gender neutral, meaning that both men and women can be punished for offenses under the law.

**Reporting and investigation:** The POCSO Act includes provisions to ensure that children's statements are recorded properly, and that they are not detained in police stations overnight.

## 8. Conclusion

Any sexual abuse and childhood sexual abuse, in particular, causes profound psychological trauma, with impacts that echo throughout an abuse victim's life. Yet, with empathy, understanding, and the right support, survivors can begin a journey of healing and regain control over their lives. By increasing awareness, promoting prevention, and offering comprehensive support for survivors, society can help break the cycle of abuse and create a safer environment for all children.

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## Figures:

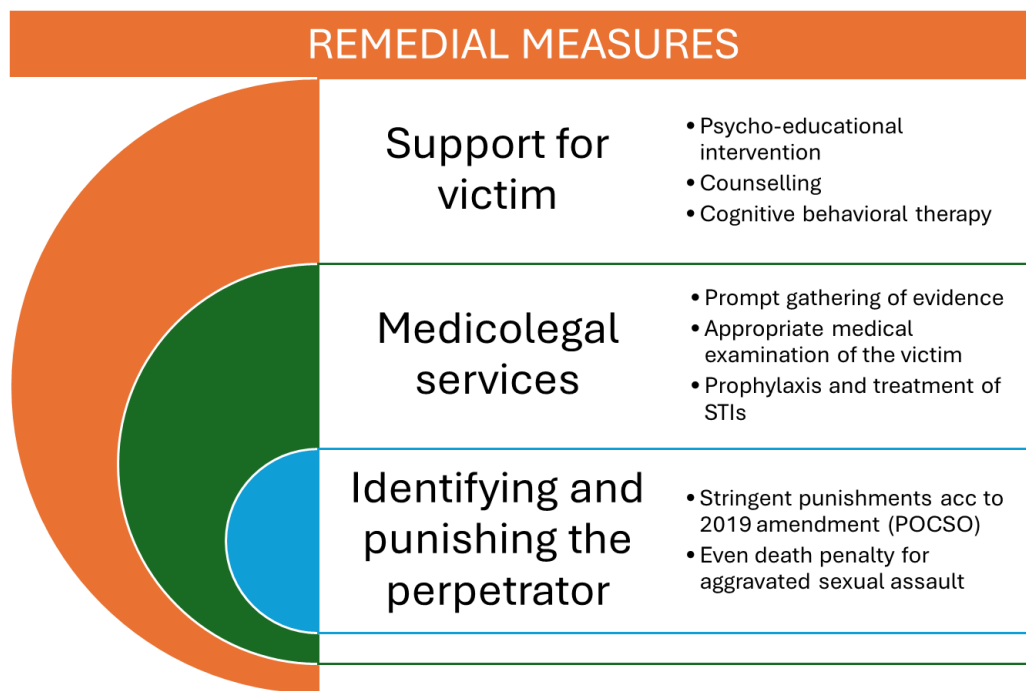


Figure 1. Remedial measures include support for the victim, medicolegal services and measures to identify and punish the perpetrator.

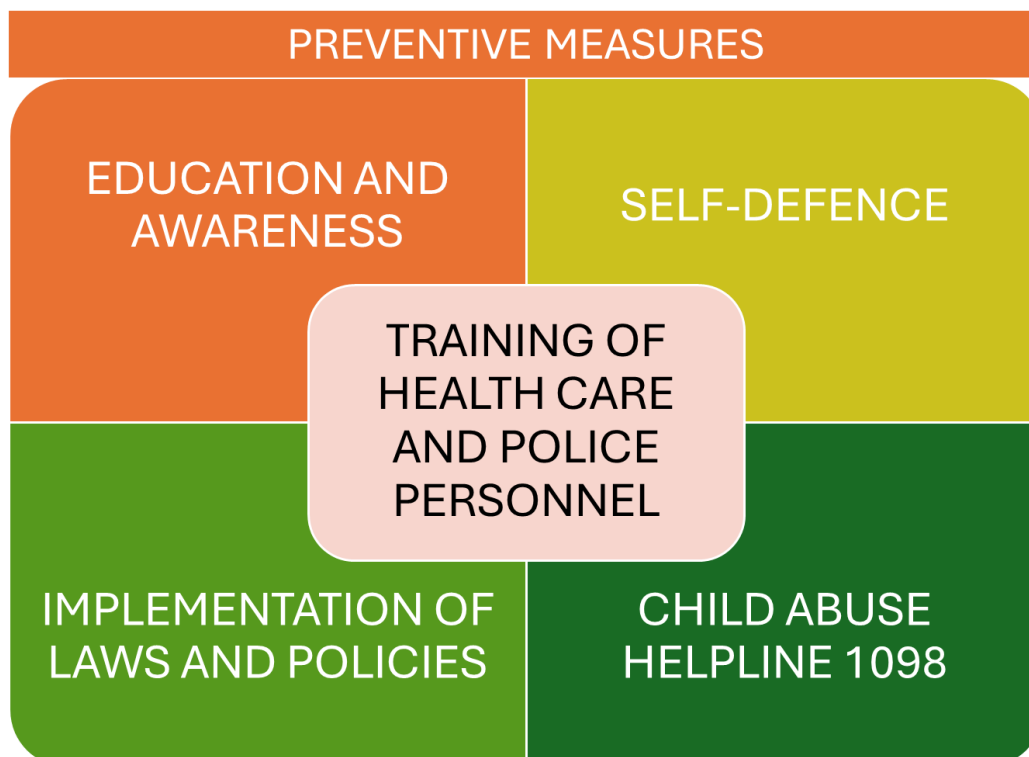


Figure 2. Preventive measures include various sociopolitical measures with training of professionals involved in care at the center of all efforts.