

Childhood Sexual Abuse & Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder



THE KAVANAGH SISTERS

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Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder



Published by Joyce, June and Paula Kavanagh
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Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

*"You can recognise survivors of abuse by their courage.
When silence is so very inviting,
they step forward and share their truth,
so others know aren't alone."*

Jeanne Mc Eivaney

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WELCOME

"There is nothing more powerful than a broken woman that has rebuilt herself"

Hannah Godsbey

We are the Kavanagh sisters from Dublin. We were sexually abused by our father from infancy till our late teens and it has taken us more than double that time to truly understand and overcome the impacts of our childhood abuse. Only through fully understanding how our abuse impacted us were we able to arrive at a place where we can say that we have finally made peace with our past.

Through writing our books 'Click, Click', and 'Why Go Back? 7 Steps to Healing from Childhood Sexual Abuse', we have gained a greater understanding of ourselves, allowing us to forgive all involved. Much to our surprise the hardest person to forgive from our past was ourselves.

The crime of sexual abuse is unique as we know of no other crime where victims take the lion's share of responsibility for what happened to them. Victims carry on abusing themselves long after their abuse is over, through self-hatred, self-judgement and self-criticism.

In our experience the hardest impacts of abuse to uncover and identify are the psychological impacts, making this crime extremely difficult to put behind you and move on with your life.

With this in mind we have developed a number of information booklets. We are passionate about putting an end to the pain and suffering that goes hand in hand with this particular crime. We believe that we endured

years of unnecessary suffering because we didn't possess the information in the booklets when our healing journey began. We could have saved ourselves a lot of unnecessary pain and heartache had we known.

Most forms of abuse leave similar internal scars and so we feel the information contained within this booklet will be a beneficial resource for anyone embarking on their healing journey.

Joyce, June and Paula

Complex -Post Traumatic Stress Disorder & Child Abuse

*Knocked Down, but not our; Crying, but still Breathing;
Broken, but Brave; I'm still strong enough to survive this.*

Gaining a clearer understanding of the possible disorders and conditions that victims of childhood sexual abuse may develop, is important if we are to ever overcome the damage of abuse and move forward. There are many more people being diagnosed with either PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) or C-PTSD (Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Looking at the symptoms of this disorder and seeing how it manifested in our lives we hope will go some way to helping others to see how it may have or be influencing their lives.

Although most of us are familiar with the term PTSD from either the news or in war movies, the perception has been that this disorder is only suffered by war veterans. This can be misleading as this disorder can in actual fact, be experienced by anyone who has witnessed or experienced a traumatic event. Events such as a natural disaster, a car accident or a sexual assault can cause this disorder to develop.

The symptoms of PTSD can develop directly following experiencing a traumatic event or may take years to materialise. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.

However, when it comes to those of us who have suffered childhood sexual abuse, PTSD does not encapsulate the severe psychological harm that happens when your trauma is repeated over a long-sustained period of time.

The difference between PTSD and C-PTSD is the duration or exposure to trauma. If you experience long term exposure to trauma where you were held in captivity or were under the control of a perpetrator, then you are more likely to have developed CPTSD. This disorder can occur as a result of repetitive, prolonged, sustained abuse.

Developing C-PTSD as a Child

“Trauma restructures a child’s neural networks, it affects attention and memory. In addition to executive functioning skills, such as organisation, planning and self-regulation.”

Glenn Cook

Growing up in a home where my father sexually abused us all almost daily from the age of 3 right up until we were around 17 meant that it was unlikely that we would not develop some type of psychological disorder. We now know that we developed C-PTSD very early in my childhood, even though we were totally unaware of it at the time. Just how this manifested in our lives was never explored until researching for our second book ‘Why Go Back? 7 Steps to Healing from Childhood Sexual Abuse.’

There are a number of symptoms connected to C-PTSD that when seen in a list form, may do nothing to help you identify if you have suffered from this disorder. Each symptom on its own can be related to other mental health issues but if you display all the symptoms you are then likely to suffer with C-PTSD. Just how those symptoms manifested in your life can influence how you were and are in the world. In our case when we looked at each symptom separately, we could relate with each one at different times in our lives. But as children we believed that we displayed all of them to different degrees. If these symptoms had been identified earlier, we could have avoided many years of pain and suffering that with a little help could have been prevented.

To be diagnosed with C-PTSD the following group of symptoms must be detected:

1)Emotional Regulation. Poor emotional control that leaves you vulnerable to explosive anger, or inhibited anger, persistent sadness, suicidal thoughts, bouts of paralysing anxiety.

2)Self-Perception. Negative thoughts about yourself, feelings of helplessness, shame, guilt, unworthiness and a sense of being completely different from other human beings.

3)Perceptions of Danger.

Feelings of being unsafe or vulnerable. Becoming preoccupied with the relationship to the perpetrator or preoccupied with revenge.

4)Consciousness. Forgetting traumatic events or having vivid memories of trauma (flashbacks) or feeling detached from your thoughts or body (dissociation).

5)Relationships. A pattern of participating in unstable, dysfunctional, and unsustainable relationships. Feeling isolated, distrust of others, or a repeated search for a rescuer.

6)Avoidance: Feeling unsafe, vulnerable for no apparent reason. Going to extreme lengths to avoid environments or situations that may trigger flashbacks.

OUR EXPERIENCE of C-PTSD MANIFESTED

“Often it isn’t the initiating trauma that creates seemingly insurmountable pain, but the lack of support after.”

The Fresh Quote

1. Emotional Regulation. *Poor emotional control that leaves you vulnerable to explosive anger, or inhibited anger, persistent sadness, suicidal thoughts, bouts of paralysing anxiety.*

JOYCE

The only emotions I was familiar with as a child and well into my adult life was fear and confusion. I cried a lot in school, for what, I neither knew nor understood. This fed into the self-hatred I carried around with me daily. I know now that being centre stage threw me into the depths of fear. Whenever my name was mentioned my heart skipped a beat and when I was asked a question fear took over and I was unable to speak so I cried. I felt stupid and was always afraid someone would find out about me, again this is not something I understood, and I never really questioned what that meant or what exactly people would discover.

Suppressing feelings was a way of life for me, this was due to the abuse I suffered daily for all of my childhood and was supported by the culture I was living in. From what I witnessed growing up anger was a luxury awarded only to men, under no circumstances would it be accepted from a woman. So, if, and when I felt anger, I didn’t acknowledge it and as I was an expert in denying my life, denying anger was just as natural.

In my teenage years I only recall expressing anger twice and although during each bout of anger I felt power like I had never experienced before the overwhelming fear that followed swallowed me. The fear of not being able to think clearly or weigh up the consequences of my actions as well as the fear of what I was capable of while angry was enough to ensure I avoided the expression of anger again.

It took a lot of counselling for me to name what I was feeling on any given day, so you can imagine how long it took to uncover the feelings I had buried. Even now being aware or in touch with my emotions does not come naturally, I really have to make an effort to focus on checking in with my body and not allowing my mind to run away with itself.

JUNE

My early childhood memories are very poor but as I approached age ten or eleven, the effects of being raped on an almost daily basis was really taking its toll. I hated what he did to me. I felt completely powerless. My heart sank every time my father clicked his fingers and having to do exactly what he wanted was beyond infuriating. Every time I had to walk up those stairs, go into my room, remove my knickers and wait for him to call me, I wanted to die. I wanted to scream NO, FUCK OFF, YOU BASTARD. But said nothing and did what I was told.... for years. I had such rage inside me towards him, but he also terrified me. All the anger and hate filled thoughts I had running through my head, and it was followed by self-criticism for being a coward. It was an awful place to be, inside me.

Growing up in a highly critical household provided me with some tools to let off a little of my aggression through words. I regularly observed and copied my older brothers banter as they annihilated each other and anyone else in close proximity. They could be quite cruel and as I was often the target for their regular slagging matches, I learned to give as good as I got, and it was a release of sorts for my anger. My sharp tongue and angry outbursts helped me feel strong and powerful, but it was all a front as I was still a frightened little child on the inside. In my mind I rebelled against being the doormat I saw my mother being. I swore no one would walk over me and so developed a persona that appeared strong, confident and aloof. The reality was I had no confidence and spent most of my time feeling frightened of everything and everyone.

In my teens I was becoming more and more aware of how sad and alone I felt. All through my teenage years I spent a lot of time crying in my room listening to music. Although I loved music, Gladys knight and the PiP's, The Eagles and the Carpenters was some of the music that I really felt a strong connection to on sad days.

PAULA

Those symptoms identified under emotional regulation fit perfectly with my experience. I was always sad and angry at the same time. It was the most familiar state for me to be in. I had no ability to express my anger. I could feel so enraged inside but, had no idea how to manage or release those feelings. I hated myself for even allowing things to make me angry and so I repressed my anger for the majority of my life.

I tried so hard not be like my father. He was always screaming, shouting and smashing things in the house and I was determined not to behave like him. So, I mimicked my mother's behaviour of never raising her voice or getting angry. I thought that was the right way to behave. I had no concept of the damage I was doing to myself.

I now understand that you cannot pick and choose which emotions you suppress. I ended up struggling for years with expressing any strong emotion at all. Inside I was in turmoil all the time. I believe that I manifested physical pain just so I could feel something. I also felt that I was always overly sensitive to criticism. I took what someone said very personally and if anyone pulled me up on something I did or said wrong, I was devastated. In the past if something happened and I made a mistake, rather than face the consequences, I would avoid the person or situation and if possible would walk away and never go back.

Now as an adult, I can still struggle to recognise what I am feeling, strong emotions like excitement and anger can sometimes feel the same to me if I don't check in with myself. It takes an awful lot to get me to the point that I would shout and roar. I have conditioned myself to see expressing anger as losing control. But it does happen, and I now allow myself the freedom to say what's on my mind without worrying about the outcome.

2. Self-Perception. *Negative thoughts about yourself, feelings of helplessness, shame, guilt, unworthiness and a sense of being completely different from other human beings.*

JOYCE

Although I was a wimpy child I don't think I was sad all the time. Due to my ability to suppress my feelings and to wipe the abuse from my mind immediately after it happened I do remember having fun with other children on the road. I think because of this, no one would have suspected that anything was going on in the home.

I always remember feeling guilty, I didn't understand the level of guilt I felt but I do know it was constant and nothing could remove it. Holding the secret of what was happening in my life made it impossible for me to reach out but if I am honest I don't know I would have reached out anyway as I never connected the abuse with how I felt about myself.

In my teenage years I suffered with depression and spent much of my time alone listening to the most depressing music I could get my hands on. I starved myself regularly as a way of punishment for the bad person I believed myself to be and once I attempted to kill myself. I wanted the pain to stop but I couldn't explain the pain nor understand what it was about.

I believed I must be so bad that I deserved the abuse and it was my fault. I took the secret to be mine and carried with that the belief that I was doing something wrong. I was ashamed of myself so put a lot of energy into justifying that shame through self-criticism. I wet the bed until I was a teenager, I wasn't good in school, I would never be a clever child, I trusted no one and I didn't believe things would ever change.

It was only through counselling that I discovered the connection with how I felt about myself and the abuse, but it took years before I realised that I had a choice and I could change my thoughts.

JUNE

I don't remember even seeing myself in the mirror before age ten or eleven, but around that age I remember thinking I was ugly and fat. I had begun to gain a lot of weight in my early teens. I just liked sweet things, it made me feel good and at the time that's all I cared about.

My extra weight only provided my siblings with more ammunition for slagging me, but I never even considered cutting out sweets. I was trapped in a cycle of self-abuse that continues to this day and didn't even know it. I hated my body and myself. I felt I was ugly, fat, wore glasses and had big feet. I found it hard to find anything positive about myself.

At the time I never connected what my father was doing to me and how I felt about myself, my appearance and my growing self-hatred. Now I just feel sad when I look back at my life and how the abuse impacted my entire childhood experience.

PAULA

Growing up I always felt my life was awful and for the majority of time I could see no hope of it ever improving. I hated myself and all those around me. I felt helpless and really believed that I wasn't like everyone else. I hoped one day to discover that I was adopted so I could explain why I was so different to my brothers and sisters.

At the same time, I didn't think I did anything bad enough to warrant such feelings of hatred that my father felt for me. What was even more disturbing to me, was the fact that I continued to try and get his approval. I needed him to love me and that was unacceptable to me.

I have always struggled to look at myself in the mirror. My self-image is not one I wish to see and so, I have perfected the art of only seeing tiny parts of myself at any one time. I cannot express just how distressing and upsetting I have always found pictures of myself.

I have been so lucky in my life to have visited some of most beautiful places in the world, but I will never be the one boring you with photos of me in front of this building or that mountain as I have always refused to get into a photo. I often find myself getting annoyed with others when they insist that I get into a group photo.

When we were young, my mother had a big metal tin in the cupboard at the bottom of the stairs that she would place all the family photos ever taken. When I was around 16 years old I took the box out and went through it destroying any photos of myself. To this day I cannot look at images of myself without cringing. Considering we have been on TV and in the papers, you would think I would have gotten over that by now, but I haven't.

I am aware of where this originated, but it doesn't really help. It came from my father's constant barrage of insults about how I looked. The rape on my holy communion impacted me so deeply. Following the rape my father was told to take me over to my aunty (his sister) as was the tradition at the time. His sister wanted to take a photo of me and he asked her "why would you want a pic-ture of 'that'," meaning me. It never left me and formed the foundation of how I felt about my phys-ical appearance, especially as that was the day that started off with me feeling I looked so pretty.

There have been times in my life I didn't feel so awful about how I looked. Our Book Launch and funny enough, my mother's funeral being a couple of those occasions. At the funeral a good friend of Joyce's, 'Carmel', who has since passed away, told me I had turned into a beautiful swan. Don't get me wrong, I never felt a beautiful anything, but I was able to not feel repulsed at myself for a short time.

3.Perceptions of Danger. *Feelings of being unsafe or vulnerable. Becoming preoccupied with the relationship to the perpetrator or preoccupied with revenge.*

JOYCE

It always amazed me, and I was embarrassed to admit it to anyone, but, the only place I felt safe was in the home where I was in most danger. I didn't understand why I didn't see school as the escape it could have been, yet all I experienced when in school was fear and constant worry that I wasn't and would never be good enough.

I was afraid of my own shadow when I was outside the home, yet as I appeared to function so well no one would have been aware of that. I wanted to be saved but was unsure what I was being saved from or what that would look like if it happened.

I did not hate my father and I worked hard to please him, I didn't blame him for what he was doing but instead took the blame for being unable to meet his needs. When he misplaced his glasses, (Paula often hid them), which was a regular thing I jumped and searched everywhere until they were found for fear of his reaction. I lived in fear, yet it was a fear I became accustomed to. No one liked my father and although that was understandable I didn't like them telling me, and always felt I had to speak up for him by scrolling to find something positive to come back at them with. I never understood how people couldn't see his strength and power the way I did but it was all down to me believing my very survival depended on him.

No relationship I entered in my adult life ever lasted due to my expectation that they should know what I need and how I am feeling regardless of the fact I didn't know that myself. It stemmed from my belief that I couldn't hide anything from my father, he always seemed to be able to read me and tell me things about myself that even I didn't know.

It took writing of our second book for me to realise my alignment with him was simply a survival mechanism. I wasn't aware of what I was doing or that aligning myself with him was a survival technique and perfectly normal for a victim of abuse. The years I took responsibility for his actions makes me feel quite sick and this understanding has set me free in more ways than I can describe.

JUNE

I spent a lot of time hating my father. Because of the sexual abuse I viewed all men in a negative light. I didn't feel safe with men at all and I believed that I could tell if someone was being friendly or looking for sex. And most men I knew, wanted sex. I didn't know what to do about that as sex frightened and disgusted me. It was safer for me to just avoid men altogether, that seemed like the best solution.

I was terrified of becoming pregnant. I didn't trust any man to be responsible or care about me, and as I was mortally afraid of getting pregnant, I believed the onus was on me to ensure that didn't happen. Besides, I didn't know or like anyone enough to want sex with them.

I could see that having children took away what little choice or freedom women had. I was so frightened of becoming trapped and responsible for a child. I wasn't even capable of looking after myself.

The problem with my plan was I was getting more and more sexually frustrated as the years went by. I was also very lonely and wanted nothing more than to be in love with the man of my dreams. I was, and still am, a dreamer, who believes in fairy tales. I wanted a knight in shining armour to turn up and save me. After many years of hoping I eventually gave up. This should have been the best time of my life, yet, all I remember is fear and regrets. I was in my mid-twenties before I decided to be brave enough to have sex with someone. To be honest, it was always frightening to me as the fear of becoming pregnant never left me.

PAULA

I have always struggled with insomnia and can go for days on very little sleep. However, even though I struggled to sleep at night I could get into bed in the afternoon and fall asleep no problem. This contradiction in my ability to sleep meant that I didn't feel the need to look at the why I had problems sleeping at night.

It took me years to connect my poor sleeping with my abuse and the fear of shadows on the wall in the dark. As a child my father would creep into the room at night and I was often woken with his hands touching me under the blankets. I would freeze and pretend that I was asleep while my sisters slept in the bed across from me. It may sound obvious that my sleeping difficulties were connected to my childhood abuse, but it took me many years to join the dots.

The unconscious need to be on alert when your body should be shutting down remained with me for many years. Even now I can click back into old sleep patterns if I am not minding myself.

As a teenager I became preoccupied with the desire to get revenge on my father. I did everything I could just to piss him off. I hid his glasses, moved his work, sat in the bathroom while he shouted at me to get to work. I often dreamt of sneaking into his room and stabbing him in the middle of the night. Every time he left the house I prayed that he would crash the car and be killed instantly. I hated myself for feeling that way, but I wanted god to either kill him for being an evil bastard or strike me down for thinking the way I did. I felt it was a win win for me either way.

4. Consciousness. *Forgetting traumatic events or having vivid memories of trauma (flashbacks) or feeling detached from your thoughts or body (dissociation).*

JOYCE

I remember much of my childhood but to be honest it makes me cringe even now to recall the abuse I suffered. I always believed when the abuse was over I could have a normal life but that was not the case. I abused myself far more than he was capable of, which is all down to the lack of understanding of how the abuse impacted me.

Dissociation was the tool I used to escape as a child, I did this by focusing on a spot on the ceiling and although it did not remove the pain or save me from what was happening somehow it allowed me to switch my body off. With my body in this mode I could lie to myself that I felt nothing, I could switch off the noise of sex and the awful smell that came with it. Personal hygiene was not my father's strong point and often the smell of him was worse than the rape itself.

However, this continues to be a huge issue for me as I didn't realise when I switched off from my body I was unable to switch it back on. It was only when I learned about orgasms and that women could masturbate in my early thirties, that I decided to try it, but it had to be abandoned when my partner's hand went numb and the batteries of the vibrator ran out. I was unable to feel my body, so was also unable to get a reaction from it. Although this has improved some, it still takes a huge effort on my part to connect with my body. I have to really make a conscious effort to connect and staying connected can be such a struggle.

This has led to a lot of issues in my relationships over the years and it annoys me that natural feelings during intimacy did not come naturally to me. I work on it continuously but if I am honest there are times I just can't be bothered as it feels like more work for me. Besides the sexual end of things dissociation has led to really bad habits for me, as being disconnected allows me to starve myself for days on end without ever really being aware of how hungry I am or having to be told by my family that I am upset when I should know that myself. It is one of the most damaging tools I ever picked up and because I didn't know I did it, too many years passed, making it more difficult to rid myself of it.

JUNE

I have always been aware that I was sexually abused. I didn't block out that fact, but I cannot remember a lot of my childhood. I'm okay with that, I know enough to understand that's what trauma does to you.

I have also always struggled taking in what's happening around me. I thought I was stupid for a long time. I now feel very impressed with myself and other victims of this awful crime for the many ingenious ways we have found to cope with and get through the most difficult times and experiences. I am getting much better, I don't suffer with stuff the way I used to.

The more I'm learning about how the abuse affected me, the more I'm forgiving myself and letting myself off the hook for stuff that wasn't my fault. The trauma also affected my ability to show and feel affection. I thought for the longest time that I was incapable of loving and being loved and I'm happy to say, it isn't, and never was true. I had just never experienced it myself and I had to learn from scratch all about love and what it looks like in my life.

PAULA

As a child I could push what was happening to the back of my mind during the rapes. I would escape into the back of my mind and shut down. I could forget what had happened almost as soon as it was over. This allowed me to carry on with my day. I wasn't aware that this was dissociation, a survival method developed to make life bearable. I can't tell you the damage this particular coping skill has caused in my adult life.

The inability to really feel physical sensations during intimacy has caused so much hurt and pain to both my partner and myself over the years. I believed that I was just abnormal. I didn't understand why I couldn't really feel anything past a certain point. I had no idea I was dissociating from my body. I only felt that I was not human and there was something missing inside me.

I found for a lot of years that avoiding sex was much easier and a lot less hurtful. It also ensured that my abuse stayed firmly in control of my life until I understood what was happening and that I could take control. For me this survival method is probably one of the hardest to overcome.

5.Relationships. *A pattern of participating in unstable, dysfunctional, and unsustainable relationships. Feeling isolated, distrust of others, or a repeated search for a rescuer.*

JOYCE

My relationships throughout the years have been repeat disasters and although I would like to blame the men in my life I have to admit the one common denominator was ME. It was through my experience of abuse I learned that no one could be trusted and no matter how much or how many times they told me of their love for me as far as I was concerned they could not be believed.

I had many unmet needs but as I hadn't got the ability to identify or convey what those needs were, meeting them was impossible. I always seemed to choose the same kind of person and when the honeymoon period was over slowly but surely, I would spot elements of my father in each of them. As soon as this discovery was made I worked on an exit plan. I convinced myself that this could never work, and I would be crazy to stay with anyone who was in anyway like my father.

I believed I had to be the strong one in all of my relationships. I was independent and made it clear they were not needed for my survival. Even writing that, makes me see things clearer. My fear of relying on anyone as I did on my father left me feeling weak, powerless and needy and I made a promise to myself that would never happen to me. But with that promise came the isolation, the belief that things would never be any different than how I felt as a child. I discovered what I was doing whilst in therapy, but it was only through writing our second book that I fully understood myself, my beliefs and the impact they were having on my life. I had lost the ability to trust myself,

so lived out of the belief I was incapable of making good decisions.

Understanding my behaviour and its roots has made a difference and thankfully I am happy in my current relationship where I can be honest and vulnerable without fear of disapproval or punishment.

JUNE

Keeping the secret of my abuse for my entire childhood was very isolating. I always felt like an outsider. I never had a sense of belonging anywhere but in my family home where the abuse took place. I would have chosen it over anyone else's home. If you tried to remove me, I think I would have been distraught as it was all I knew. My home was probably the only place I didn't have to worry about being caught out. I always knew what to expect.

In my early 20's I lost the weight I carried throughout my teens. However, I was a late developer and had very small breasts. I didn't have periods until around sixteen or seventeen. This just added to the list of things that I thought was wrong with me. This was yet another flaw to be slagged about by my siblings. I felt so self-conscious of the size of my breasts, it made me feel like I wasn't a real woman. Looking back now, I believe I was unconsciously delaying growing up. The world in general seemed like a scary place and any responsibility frightened me. I didn't think I could cope with becoming a grown up.

I was totally ashamed of my body which added to my fear of any man touching me. Privately, I longed for a relationship for the longest time. When I look back now, I know I had unrealistic expectations. The person I was waiting for was out of a fairy tale. He simply didn't exist. It appeared that the only people that approached me were 'special'. Although it was funny to laugh about the 'weirdo' that asked me for a dance at a disco or approached me in a pub. I used to wonder why no one 'nice' ever asked me out or showed an interest in me. I spent a lot of time feeling lonely and believing there was something wrong with me.

Because of my loneliness I often questioned if maybe I was just being too fussy. I did make myself go out with a few people I probably shouldn't have. I am sure I'm not the first person to feel like this. Most of the people I went out with were nice. But, the whole experience was so traumatic for me because of my fear around intimacy, the mixed emotions of wanting to love someone but at the same time being too afraid to let anyone close ensured it was a very difficult time in my life.

PAULA

When I look at how my relationships with others were as a child, it is not surprising that this particular group of symptoms fit with my experience. I always felt very separate to all my siblings and being isolated became a very comfortable way of being. I didn't trust anyone. I managed to make a life for myself outside the home when I was in my late teens by developing another personality. I did all I could to ensure that my two worlds never crossed. I needed the illusion of a better life. The problem was I always felt it was just out of my reach. I knew I was never going to be strong enough to make it on my own.

I grew up like most women of my age, with the belief that I needed to be married to a man, have children and stay at home looking after them all. That was what I was mentally preparing for. I was convinced that I was incapable of getting any job I had nothing to offer other than I was really good at cleaning a house. I am sure that I came across as desperate. I felt crippling loneliness and in my late teens and well into my twenties I never really dated anyone. I had a lot of sex down alleyways and in the back of cars waiting for someone to offer me a better life, but they never filled any need other than to give me more things to hate about myself.

I denied my sexuality for years because I felt that if I accepted that I was gay, I would have to look after myself. Crazy as it seems, I never considered for a moment that two women in a relationship could look after themselves. If I chose the life I wanted I would have to give up on the promise of a better life. I never thought that I could get from a woman the support and love that a man could provide. I fell into different gay relationships, never instigating anything so I could hedge my bets of one day discovering I

was not really gay and Mr right was just around the corner. Being gay is not all there is to me, but it has been such a big part of my struggle for self-acceptance that it tends to influence every relationship I have. Today I am happy to identify as a gay woman and see it as a strength not a weakness.

6.Avoidance: *Feeling unsafe, vulnerable for no apparent reason. Going to extreme lengths to avoid environments or situations that may trigger flashbacks.*

JOYCE

I have missed out so much in my life by avoiding situations or places for fear, of what, I am not sure. The feeling of not being safe outside my own home didn't leave me as an adult but as it was now my norm I didn't question it either. I had come to accept being afraid in unfamiliar company or places was who I was. Anything outside my circle felt threatening to me, it triggered memories of not only being told, but believing that I was stupid, and I would be found out.

It was only after the writing of our first book, *Click, Click*, that I began to challenge that belief when I was asked to give a presentation in work. Needless to say, I made an ass of it as I was so nervous and spoke so fast to avoid having to answer questions that nothing I said made sense. However, I approached my boss after the meeting and asked her to keep challenging me in this field as I needed to learn how to move past my fear. It took many attempts before I felt any semblance of confidence in what I was doing but I got there.

It saddens me that the fear I held, ensured I lived in a small circle which prohibited me ever breaking free from my own thoughts and fears. Speaking out about my abuse diminished the power it held over me and allowed the healing to begin.

JUNE

Abstinence is what I used to avoid having to deal with my past. I was too scared of men but wouldn't openly admit it. I didn't know that my body language and attitude was pushing the opposite sex away from me, while I wondered why no one ever asked me out.

A lot of my life was lived out of unconscious fears. My fear was so great and so constant that it was all I knew. I believed I was no good and didn't deserve the space I was taking up in the world. To cover up this fact I walked around with a permanent smile on my face (still do), I think I was trying to be happy, or at least, look happy to others, so no one would know me or be able to control me or have any part of me.

I spent a lot of my life feeling like a fraud. I held the belief for the longest time that I was fundamentally defective or not good enough. I don't recall ever finding anything in my life that I thought I was good at. Nothing I could do better than or even as good as anyone else. This led me to believe that what my father told me (that I was stupid and useless) was true.

I believed that relationships were for grownups and I never really felt like one. I feel like I spent years pretending that I was the same as everyone else, but that's not how I felt on the inside. I kept hoping someone would see through my smile and know without me telling them how utterly miserable I was and save me. It took me a lot of years to realise that I had to save me. No one else could do it, it had to be me.

PAULA

I have turned down so many opportunities to do things go somewhere, to be around people but I am aware of my limitations. I spent the majority of my life feeling lonely and isolated. Unfortunately, I also find the contradiction to this is the absolute need to spend time alone. On one hand I love being with people. I am especially comfortable in groups as I find the one on one situation too claustrophobic and demanding. Being around people can be emotionally draining and can only do it in short bursts. If I am drinking I can do it for a longer period of time, but sober, I need to have a purpose, not simply just spending time together sharing small talk, I can't do that.

I have always been an expert at avoiding anything that makes me feel uncomfortable or vulnerable. A really simple example of how this manifested in my life is the fact that all the girls I hung around with in my teenage years in basketball would to this day be convinced that I was just a lazy cow, that wouldn't even go to the bar to get herself a drink. At the time I could never have explained how difficult I found such a simple thing as ordering a drink at a bar. I was aware of just how irrational it was, but on top of my anxiety of having to order a drink at the bar, I had a bigger anxiety of being made fun of for being stupid.

Standing at a bar trying to get a barman's attention was so difficult. The self-talk went into overdrive. My self-talk could look something like this 'You're so ugly he can't even look at you' 'you don't even know the price of the drink', what if you don't have enough money?' you can't even remember the order you f.....g idiot', 'look he is serving everyone but you.' The worse thing about it was it would continue even when I went back to my seat. So, I drank more to drown out the voices and then suffered the self-

derogation in the morning about what I said and didn't say while I was drunk.

I realise to most people this seems such a stupid thing to be anxious about. But for me, any situation that brought up feelings of vulnerability triggered how I felt around my father and his constant barrage of criticisms.

Treatment

"You're not a victim for sharing your story, you are a survivor setting the world on fire with your truth. And you never know who needs your light, your warmth and raging courage."

Alex Eie

The diagnosis of C-PTSD can be complicated by other mental health disorders like depression and anxiety. The symptoms can be extremely debilitating, but they can be treated, and with understanding of why and where they developed you can overcome their effects.

There are a number of different therapies and medications that are often used to treat C-PTSD. Some choose to go down the medication route and although the medications may only treat the symptoms and not the cause, they can provide relief, reducing the intensity, making your life more manageable.

The two most common therapies being Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) designed to help you see the way your behaviour and thoughts affect your mood and then help you build new habits. And Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) designed to help you talk about then write in detail about the abuse. This will allow you explore the origins of your thoughts, beliefs and behaviours as a result of the experience of abuse.

Our Experience

"You can't get to curage without walking through vulnerability."

Brene Brown

It was a long time before we even knew what C-PTSD was. Although it is helpful to put a name to your pain, it makes little difference when you are suffering. Things do not change until the healing journey begins.

The names of these conditions and understanding the many ways in which they materialise in our lives, gave us somewhere to go in terms of understanding what we were feeling and reassuring us that we were not mad.

It is always easier to deal with something when you understand its origins. For us, it has taken many years to understand how our damaged emotional, mental and physical states were connected to our abuse. We carried around the belief that there was something fundamentally wrong with us for far too long. The information in this booklet alone would have helped us so much and we hope by sharing our experience it will help you put your life back together again, as we did, piece by piece.

wThe more we learned and understood how the impacts of our abuse manifested in our lives the more we healed and the less power any of these issues had over our lives.

About the Authors

"You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it."

Maya Angelou

We are three sisters from a family of ten children who grew up in Dublin, Ireland, in the 1960's. We were strongly influenced by our surroundings of poverty and a culture where no one spoke about what happened in their homes.

This culture ensured we keep our 'Secret' without ever questioning if we had a choice. We were each being sexually abused daily by our Father and regardless of how we felt about what was happening, at the time we each believed it was only happening to 'ME'.

It's hard to imagine how we lived through the trauma or how we all emerged out the other end, but here we are. We can now look back with gratitude that our experience set us on a path of self-discovery and personal growth.

It is through our deep understanding of ourselves and our behaviors and all of the complexities that arise from sexual abuse that we now believe we are in a position to help others.

It is our intention to contribute to the eradication of childhood sexual abuse using our knowledge and understanding of the impacts that sexual abuse has on its immediate and secondary victims.

Our aims are to promote open discussions on childhood sexual abuse. Encouraging recognition that a change in perspectives on how perpetrators are currently viewed by society is necessary. We will through the telling of our own story provide an in-depth; picture of childhood sexual abuse to prevent minimizing or underestimation of its impacts. We will strongly push for compulsory and substantial training on all crimes of a sexual nature for all members of the legal system but with particular emphasis on judges. We also wish to raise awareness of the suffering of the many secondary victims in our communities who can often find themselves ostracized for a crime they did not commit.

Previous Publication

"It has never been easy for me to understand why people work so hard to create something beautiful, but then refuse to share it with anyone, for fear of criticism."

Elizabeth Gilbert

'Click, Click', our first book was published in 2011 and tells the story of our childhood abuse. It took us 20 years to complete and was a very difficult book to write.

Our intention when writing the book was to ensure that we provided the child's perspective to ensure that there was a clear understanding of exactly what abuse is and also to prevent abusers romanticizing or lying to themselves about what they were doing to children. This required that we each revisit our abuse and write about it as if it was actually happening then and there. The process along with our discussions about the insights we gathered while writing are what is contained within the book.

Our approach to writing was not easy and we often had to walk away from the book for months or even years at a time to allow healing to occur. We knew we had to complete the book so no matter how difficult it was to write, we kept returning to it until it was done. Healing the wounds of our past meant we could finally move forward with our lives and that is exactly what we have done.

Our second book *'Why Go Back? 7 Steps to Healing from Childhood Sexual Abuse,'* published in 2017 took six years to complete. This book demonstrates all the learning and growth that has occurred since the completion of our first book.

Initially it was a surprise to us that people were constantly asking us how we 'got over' our abuse as it was something we never thought about. We soon realised we had more work to do, not only on ourselves but for the many other victims of sexual abuse. We began our process of discussing, writing, challenging, researching and at times, just as with *'Click, Click'*, we had to walk away for a period of time to allow us to integrate the learning and allow more growth to occur.

With this book we finally felt like adults, standing on our own two feet, taking control and full responsibility for our lives. We grew up with this book and it was not without a cost. Growth can be painful at times. Finally, *'Why Go Back? 7 Steps to Healing from Childhood Sexual Abuse,'* was complete and we were filled with pride. The process of writing this book has healed a lot of our past hurts and we know in our hearts it will do the same for others.

We have come so far and the process of writing the content for *'Click, Click'* and later *'Why Go Back? 7 Steps to Healing from Childhood Sexual Abuse.'* is a huge contributing factor. Changing the beliefs, we held around our personal responsibility for what had happened to us was vital for us to move forward.

Today we are happier than we could ever have hoped to be and want to help other survivors of childhood sexual abuse take their own healing journey.

We are now the proud Authors of two books. *'Click, Click'*, and *'Why Go Back? 7 Steps to Healing from Childhood Sexual Abuse.'* We are also publishing a number of FREE to download booklets in 2018 so to ensure that those who need this information can easily access it.

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