

Workbook Chapter Thirty-Seven Establish a Satisfying Sex Life

Self-Assessment Tools:

***SELF-AWARENESS ACTIVITY: HOW DO YOU KNOW
IF YOU WERE SEXUALLY ABUSED?
(Weinhold and Weinhold, 1989)***

The following is a short inventory of adult behaviors that can help you discover the symptoms of childhood sexual abuse, even if you don't have any memories of such abuse. Read each question and answer each one "yes" or "no."

- Do you have a fear of going "crazy"?
- Do you have large time gaps of memory loss about your childhood?
- Are you more than 50 lbs. overweight?
- Were you physically abused as a child?
- Have you ever sexually abused someone else?
- Does sex turn you off?
- Do you have trouble maintaining an intimate relationship?
- Are you ashamed of your body?
- Do you sexualize relationships even when you don't want to?
- Do you regularly experience migraines, gastro-intestinal or genital-urinary disturbances?
- Do you have a general sense of depression that you can't shake?
- Do you "freeze" in certain situations, such as when you encounter an authority figure or in certain sexual situations?
- Are you afraid of having children or afraid of being around them?
- Are you accident-prone?

If you answered "yes" to *two or more* of these questions, you may have experienced sexual abuse as a child. If you have these symptoms, but no memory you can (1) read accounts of how others remembered, (2) talk to other people who experienced sexual abuse as a child, or (3) enter psychotherapy.

Case Example:

Sharon called for an individual appointment to work on a problem of frigidity that she was experiencing in her relationship with Gary. They had not had sex for almost six months when she came to therapy. Gary was very impatient with Sharon's problem in the bedroom and wanted her to get fixed. Rather than moving directly

into working with the sexual dysfunction, I decided to find out more about Sharon's childhood.

Her alcoholic parents separated when she was about nine-years old, and she spent the next four years shifting back and forth between them. She remembered going along to the bar with her father at this age when he went drinking and when he entertained his cronies playing poker at his house. In both situations, her father would invite his drinking buddies to notice how pretty Sharon was and would encourage them to "get friendly" with her. As she matured, their friendliness turned into seductiveness. By the time she was 12 or 13, her father was offering her sexually as a favor to his friends.

Shortly after her 14th birthday, Sharon's father died, and she went to live with her father's brother and his wife. They had two younger children and expected Sharon to help with the housework and the childcare. Her aunt related mostly to her as hired help, while her uncle alternately criticized her and teased her in sexual ways. By the time she was 15 and well-developed physically, her uncle began accosting her in secluded areas of the house.

He would rub up against her breasts, pat her buttocks, and make suggestive remarks about how sexually appealing she looked to him. That was followed by attempts to get her to undress and to touch his erect penis. His insistent pursuits began to frighten her so much that she started staying away from the house with her friends. Sharon found places where she could stay overnight and failed to return home two or three nights a week. Sometimes she took drugs and drank beer with her friends. When the boys in the group began to make sexual advances toward her, she would return to her aunt and uncle's house for several days.

One night when Sharon was 16, she was out dancing at a western bar and she met Gary. He was big and strong-looking, though kind of quiet. He bought her a drink and they sat and talked. She liked Gary's quiet strength and began spending more time with him. Eventually, she began to stay overnight with him with the understanding that they were just friends.

Sharon spent less and less time at her uncle's house by splitting her time between Gary's place and hanging out with her friends. Her prolonged absences began to irritate her uncle. One evening he followed her to a friend's house. After watching for a while outside, he burst in. He was furious when he found several of her friends using drugs; and he exploded in a fit of anger at her. He called her names and accused her of being a "doper" and gave her one day to get her belongings out of his house.

At the age of 17, Sharon had few options about where to move. She told Gary about her eviction and asked if she could stay with him for a few days while she decided what to do. Gary said it would be fine with him if she wanted to move her things there for a while. Her stay turned into weeks, then months.

During this time, she slept on the sofa in Gary's living room and continued to be his friend. One night after they had gone out dancing and drinking at a bar, Gary got drunk. Sharon had to help him into the house. He passed out on the sofa and fell asleep, so she decided to sleep in his bed. Near morning he woke up and came into his bedroom and got into bed. He curled up with her and held her for a while. After a while their closeness turned into sex.

During the next few weeks their relationship became very sexual and intense. Gary, a few years older than Sharon, decided he wanted to get married.

Sharon, thrilled that someone finally wanted her, accepted his offer, and they were married when Sharon turned 18.

Sharon had managed to finish high school with good secretarial skills and found a job soon after marrying Gary. The first year or two they had a wonderful time being together, especially Sharon. For her it was her first experience of having permanence and stability with a person who cared about her. She reported to me that her sexual relationship with Gary was great, up until about the end of the second year of their marriage.

At that time, she began to notice things about Gary that she had not seen before. He tended to be messy at home and not look very attractive. He also lost his full-time job and began working temporary positions. The time between his temporary positions grew longer and longer. He would stay at home drinking, watching television, or playing games on his computer. Sharon began providing most of their financial support, as Gary worked less and less. She even came home and cooked and cleaned, even though he had been home all day not working.

After a period of this discontentment, Sharon began to feel herself growing repulsed by Gary's behavior and appearance. She started pulling away when he made sexual overtures and often avoided sex, if she could. Her distancing behavior provoked Gary into drinking more, either at home or at a bar. During drunken episodes, he would pursue her and try to force her to have sex. After several months of this, Gary finally exploded and told her that if she wasn't willing to have sex with him, she was to get out of his house.

This frightened Sharon, for it reminded her of her uncle throwing her out of his home. In desperation, Sharon began to talk to her friends at work about her problems with Gary. It was through them that she found counseling with me.

Once I heard her story, I suggested that Sharon's background of sexual abuse might be the source of her sexual dysfunction. I also suggested that Gary to come with her to counseling, so that he could learn how to support her while she healed the wounds of the abuse from her father and uncle. Gary was very reluctant to come for therapy and insisted that he was not sick and that the problems were all Sharon's. However, he did agree to come for one session with the agreement that the therapy would focus on Sharon.

When they arrived, I spent some time discussing with the two of them how childhood sexual abuse will create difficulties in adult sexual relationships. I also described the approach I used in treating couples where one of the partners has been sexually abused and gave them both support for seeing their problem as fixable. Once Gary had this overview, he agreed to come with Sharon to a series of six sessions over three months. During that time, he would try out this approach and see if it helped.

I began by helping Gary see that Sharon had never developed a sense of ownership about her body and that she had been routinely invaded by both her uncle and father. I also affirmed the positive aspects of their relationship by acknowledging that he has helped make it safe enough for her issues of abuse to surface.

I also helped them both see that Sharon's incomplete learning experiences from her past means she now has to learn to set appropriate boundaries about her body. I suggested that she could learn how to do this by being in charge of their sex life during the next three months. She was to say when, where, and how she

wanted sex. Gary groaned at the idea. I reminded him that he couldn't be much worse off than he was, since he had been without sex for nearly six months. Finally, he agreed to cooperate.

I sent them home with a Sexual Communication Exercise that is in your online workbook and encouraged to not have sex for a week. They could only cuddle and hold each other. After the second session, sex was permitted at Sharon's initiation. For another two weeks, Sharon made absolutely no sexual advances toward Gary.

In therapy, Gary complained that she wasn't learning much and said he felt she would never want to have sex again. I encouraged him to stick with the contract and keep allowing Sharon to be in charge. With the support Sharon got in therapy, she began to grow stronger and become more assertive. When she finally did approach Gary for sex, they both were excited. Gary liked being pursued, and Sharon liked being the initiator.

Towards the end of their six sessions, the tension between the two of them had decreased significantly. Each time they came for a session, they appeared happier and more playful, like the young people they really were. By the end of the three months, Gary decided the experiment was working and wanted to stay married to Sharon.

At their termination session, they created a new three-month contract around their sex life. During this period, they could approach each other for sex and either of them had the right to say no. If Sharon didn't feel sexual, Gary had to surrender to her need for boundaries and safety. Gary hardly ever said no to Sharon, so that was not really a problem. I warned them that healing sexual abuse requires a lot of time and patience and that they needed to give themselves at least a year to get beyond the awkwardness of the appropriate boundaries that Sharon had set.

I also helped Gary see how his invasive, self-serving attitude of wanting Sharon to be sexual at his demand was not supporting intimacy between them. I also continued to encourage them to keep talking about their feelings toward each other and about sex.