

Coping Strategy for Sexually Abused Victims in Anambra State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Sexual abuse is usually accompanied by some problems. In a bid to cope with these problems, victims adopt some strategies which may not have been effective at tackling the problems associated with sexual abuse. Therefore, this study investigated the coping strategies adopted by sexually abused victims in Anambra state with a view of assessing the effectiveness of these strategies. The study formulated three research questions and reviewed literature on sexual abuse. The study anchored on trait theory as propounded by Gordon Allport because, it effectively explains the adoption and effectiveness of a coping strategy for sexually abused victims. The study adopted a qualitative research design because; qualitative method of data collection technique and data analysis was adopted in this study. Data was derived through Key Persons Interview (KPI) and secondary sources of data collection technique. 6 males and 6 females; from different religious, ethnic, educational and occupational background who are resident in Anambra state and have been sexually abused in one way or the other were selected for this study using a snowball sampling technique. The data derived from the study was analysed using an ethnographic summary and verbatim quotation for better comprehension. Findings revealed that sexually abused victims suffer physically and emotionally. It was also reviewed that, while some of the victims relied on time to heal their wound, some others reported to their parents, while others found solace in participating in church activities. However, none of these strategies was an effective coping strategy. It was recommended that, parents build a friendly relationship with their children. Also, government and non-government organization (NGOs) to establish a formal body or agency that will provide social support for sexually abused victims.

Keywords: Abuser, Coping Strategies, Sexual Abuse, Victim.

Introduction

Sexual abuse incorporates a lot of acts. It has to do with indulging minors into sexual activities; with or without consent and also, indulging individuals into sexual activity, forcefully. While consent may be a primary determinant of sexual abuse, in the case of a minor, consent is not considered. According to the World Health Organization (1999) this may include a minor who is unable to give consent or is under compulsion, fear or any other circumstances and not prepared physically, mentally or emotionally for sexual activities.

Maltz (2002) explained that, sexual abuse occurs whenever one person dominates and exploits another person sexually. It occurs when a person forces someone to succumb to his/her sexual demands. Ratican (1992) added that, this act can be overt or covert; between a child and an adult or two adults; through seduction, coercion or manipulation. Black et al., (2011) and Women's Health (2016) asserts that females

are more vulnerable to sexual abuse than their male counterpart. According to them, nearly 1 in 5 females and 1 in 71 males have been sexually abused and about 15 million adolescent girls experience forced sex worldwide (UN Women, 2020).

In previous years, attention seems to have focused more on sexual abuse against females by male abusers. This however does not negate the fact that sexual abuse can be perpetrated by same sex; in the case of lesbians for females, and homosexuals for males. This can be in various ways like; sexual touching of the body, breast and genitals; fingering of the vagina and anus, kissing, sucking of breast and genitals, putting penis in the vagina or anus etc. and can happen anywhere; in the neighbourhood, workplace, in the home, church, market, road etc. by family members, neighbours, friends, parents, guardians, strangers etc. This tends to cause a lot of physical and emotional harm on victims however; the severity on this harm may vary from the personality, nature of abuse, the age of the survivor and the relationship between the victims and the abuser.

In line with this, Ratican (1992) stated that the impact of sexual abuse varies from person to person and from case to case. In a study, he compared the experiences of women who are familiar with their abusers with women who were not and found out that women who were familiar with their abusers reported a higher level of depression and anxiety when thinking about the abuse. Also, those who experienced more severe abuse, or experienced abuse at a younger age; leading to their first sexual encounter reported a higher level of distress (Hartman, Finn & Leon, 1987). In a similar context, Courtois (1988) opined that the nature and severity of the abuse may cause more serious impact for victims but, many other factors like, the individual's level of support may influence the degree of harm experienced by victim. Berliner & Elliott (1996), Browne & Finkelhor (1986), Hecht & Hansen (1999) & Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen (1993) further added that the impact of the abuse on individuals, is determined by; the gender of the survivor and abuser, the type and severity of abuse, the duration and time since the abuse and the family reaction following the abuse.

It has been argued that indecent dressing is one of the factors that influence sexual abuse however, Mishra & Biswal (2018) asserts that those who live in disadvantaged neighbourhood that are prone to exhibit anti-social behaviour are vulnerable to sexual abuse. Johnson (2014) added substance abuse influences sexual abuse and increases the vulnerability of individuals to sexual abuse. Similarly, Thekaekara (2018) argued that the media; mass and social media also, influences sexual abuse, to a large extent.

The effect of sexual abuse as recorded in several literature vary from physical, social to emotional. Physically, sexual abuse may lead to physical injury and cause harm to the victims' genitals, anus, mouth etc. It can also, cause harm to a persons' health by leading to the likes of, unintended pregnancy and its concomitant implications like abortion (Grover, 2019) and the transmission of sexually transmitted infection (STIs) (Sexually Transmitted Disease Evaluation and Care, 2019). Socially, the individual may develop some maladjusted behaviour and become abusive; physically and sexually. This may make the individual unfit for the society and cause them to become a social problem. In explaining the psychological implication of sexual abuse, McCrory et al, (2010) asserts that, victims could suffer emotional problems like trauma which may reflect negatively in every aspect of their life.

In a bid to shun these negative effects victims of sexual abuse adopt different strategies to cope with their experience of sexual abuse. Therefore, this study tried to find out the coping strategies adopted by sexually abused victims in Anambra state.

Statement of the Problem

Coping strategies for sexually abused victims has to do with the technique adopted by those who survived sexual abuse in their bid to cope with the negative implications of sexual abuse. Victims of sexual abuse tend employ different strategies like withdrawal, avoidance, social assistance/aid and substance abuse to cope with sexual the abuse. But these strategies may not have effectively served as a coping strategy.

Withdrawal and avoidance may seem an effective strategy for victims as they may not have further contact with their abuser or have any discussion that would remind them about their experience. Nevertheless, this also tends to increase their vulnerability to trauma and depression, which may as well lead to suicidal thought and self-harm.

In other cases where these victims try to access aid or social assistance from parents, guidance, family members and the law enforcement agencies, they may suffer stigmatization and in worst cases suffer hatred from their loved ones. In some cases, these victims tend to be blamed or, are forced to blame themselves for their abuse. In other cases, their abuse is kept as a family secret to protect the dignity of the survivor and the family especially, if the abuser is a member of the family.

In whichever way, abusers are likely to be free from justice and perhaps, continue in their life of sexual abuse while these victims continue to blame themselves and face blame for their abuse and perhaps wallow in self-despair and depression.

In view of this, this study aimed at assessing the coping strategies adopted by sexually abused victims in Anambra state with a view of assessing the effectiveness of these strategies. The study answered the following questions. They are;

1. What are the coping strategies employed by sexually abused victims in Anambra state?
2. How effective are the coping strategies employed by sexually abused victims in Anambra state?
3. How best can the coping strategies employed by sexually abused victims in Anambra state effectively tackle the aftermath of sexual abuse?

Literature Review

Causes of Sexual Abuse

Southall & McDonald (2013) established a strong link between poverty and child abuse. According to them, poor people living on roadsides get prone to sexual abuse. They added that, parents who are poor engage their children in begging and hawking on streets, where they could experience violence and exploitation. Joshi (2018) argued that, these parents also live in disorganized and neighbourhood that are prone to crimes thereby, increasing their vulnerability.

Cohen & Felson (1979) explained that, the absence of a capable guardian or parents increases the risk of sexual abuse especially as many parents lack information about sexual abuse and do not take into cognizance that abusers could be family members, acquaintances, neighbours etc. (Finkelhor, 2008).

The increasing rate in the accessibility of sexual content or pornographic content on internet and media allows a distorted view about sexuality and relationship in the mind of viewers. According to Johnston (2019) this has become an international problem that calls for immediate attention.

Johnson (2014) added that, substance abuse like; alcohol, drugs etc. depresses the mental stability of individuals and makes them to commit offences like, sexual abuse which they may later regret. Abusers who use substance, gets intoxicated and are more likely to use physical force to abuse their victims sexually. Same also, people who use substance are vulnerable to sexual abuse when they are intoxicated.

Furthermore, the inability to enforce severe punishment against abusers motivates abusers to indulge in further abuse. While sexual abuse may not be reported, when they are, the police may be insensitive to the report, the evidence may be tampered with, there may be delay in trial and conviction all of which may work in favour of the abuser and exempt him from punishment. Thus, the factors influencing sexual abuse can be subsumed under; social and economic factors.

Effect of Rape

Sexual abuse can often exert long-standing, deleterious changes in individual functioning. Individuals who experience sexual abuse tend to exhibit symptoms of depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress (Atkeson, Calhoun, Resick, & Ellis, 1982; Boudreaux, Kilpatrick, Resnick, Best, & Saunders, 1998; Ellis, Atkeson & Calhoun, 1981; Kilpatrick, Resick, & Veronen, 1981; Santiago, McCall-Perez, Gorcey, & Beigel, 1985) and mood disorders (Boudreaux et al., 1998). Livingston (1987), Mc-Clellan et al., (1995) & Wells, McCann, Adams, Voris & Ensign, (1995) added that these individuals suffer poor self-esteem, suicidal ideation and attempts, nightmares and sleep disturbances, somatic complaints, and feelings of isolation.

Einbender & Friedrich (1989), McClellan et al., (1995) & Wells et al., (1995) observed that the presence of externalizing behaviors, such as self-abusive behaviors, cruelty, problems with school performance and concentration, problems with relationships and social competence, substance abuse problems are associated with sexual abuse. Briere & Runtz (1988), Conaway & Hansen (1989), Kolko (1996), Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen (1993) & McCord (1983) further added that these externalizing problem manifests as interpersonal problems, aggression and violence inside and outside of the family, conduct problems and criminal behaviors, self-injurious and suicidal behaviour while the internalizing problems manifests in the feelings of hopelessness, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, somatic problems (Ammerman, Cassisi, Hersen and Van Hasselt, 1986; Briere & Runtz, 1988; Conaway & Hansen, 1989; Kolko, 1996; Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993).

Singh (2019) argued that sexual abuse can leads to social stigma, long lasting on the physical health challenge like; chronic pelvic pain (in females), (Harrop-Griffiths et al, 1988), genitourinary problems, fatigue and headache (Candib & Dickinson, 2015), Pelvic fractures, urethral injuries (Wright & Wessells, 2007), urinary retention, injuries or bruises on neck, head or thighs (Cohen & Cohen, 2013) and STI (WHO, 2018).

In view of this, sexual abuse can also emotional and health problems. But by extension, it can as will lead to social and economic problems. While the social problem can be seen in the interpersonal relationship these victims, the economic problem could be seen in the expenses incurred, taking care of the physical and emotional health of victims.

Coping Strategy

The coping strategies utilized by sexually abused victims following sexual abuse are highly influential in their recovery (Arata, 1999; Frazier & Burnett, 1994; Gibson & Leitenberg, 2001; Santello & Leitenberg, 1993; Ullman, 1996; Valentiner, Foa, Riggs, & Gershuny, 1996). Snyder and Pulvers's (2001) provide an understanding to what may lead victims to engage in particular coping strategies through their coping model. This model posits that, these strategies could be as a result of; approach coping and avoidance coping.

Approach coping is chosen when the victim assesses the experience as one for which he/she has sufficient coping resources and involves active strategies that are either focused on the problem at hand. In contrast to this, when the victim assesses the experience as one for which he/she does not have sufficient coping resources, he/she is likely to employ avoidance strategies, such as denying that the experience exists and avoid thinking about the experience.

Extensive reliance on avoidance strategies has several adverse effects. Wegner, Schneider, Carter & White (1987) suggested that attempts victims to suppress thoughts about the experience leads to hyper attention to the experience. Additionally, the ineffectiveness of reactive strategies leads the victim to focus on himself/herself and how he/she is not handling the situation effectively. This heightened self-focus results in disruptive thoughts and emotions regarding the experience as well as the individual's inability to cope successfully (Snyder & Pulvers, 2001).

Flannery (1990), Folkman & Lazarus (1990), Silver & Wortman (1980) & Terry (1991) asserts that victims social support networks can provide a forum for expressing their emotions as well as assist in developing strategies for coping thereby, making it less likely that victims to rely on avoidance coping (Flannery, 1990; Folkman & Lazarus, 1990; Silver & Wortman, 1980; Terry, 1991).

According to Silver & Wortman (1980) social support enhances victims' autonomy and self-confidence and increases their confidence in their ability to enact approach coping strategies. In some cases, members of victims' social support networks may challenge their denial or distortion of the experience thereby, decreasing their likelihood to use of avoidance strategies.

An adequate support network could act as a buffer to changes to aspects of victims' worldview that are common following abuse, such as loss of belief in the benevolence of others or one's own worth (Hyman, Gold, & Cott, 2003). It could serve to reassure a survivor that there is good in the world and that she has value as an individual. These victims tend to feel comfortable discussing concerns regarding these beliefs and are more likely to have negative beliefs challenged by members of their support network.

In a study on sexual abuse, Tremblay, Hebert, & Piche, (1999) opined that, victims of sexually abused who had a supportive relationship with their parents had higher self-worth as compared to those who did not have supportive relationships. These individuals feel more comfortable discussing concerns about their sexual abuse and may be more likely to have self-blaming statements rebuked by members of their social support network.

Non-Effective Coping Techniques

Passive

Passive has to do with exhibiting little or no effort to deal with the sexual abuse. Some examples of a passive coping technique are; denial, dissociation, repression, and suppression (Johnson, Sheahan, & Chard, 2003).

Maladaptive

Maladaptive are cognitive and behavioral techniques that lessen the distress without actually addressing the source of distress itself. These techniques can include cognitive disengagement (e.g., blocking out thoughts), behavioral disengagement (e.g., social withdrawal), denial, and use of substances to cope (Sesar, Šimić, & Barišić, 2010).

Dissociation

Dissociation refers to the mental processes that create a lack of connection in the person's thoughts, memories, feelings, actions or sense of self. In dissociating, a survivor is trying to dissociate and "numb" themselves of the pain. Dissociation is commonly referred to as being 'spaced out,' 'blocking things out,' and 'being out of touch with one's emotions (Oaksforf, & Frude, 2003).

Splitting

Splitting refers to the failure to integrate the positive and negative qualities of self or others into cohesive images (Oaksforf & Frude, 2003). Observers will report these individuals as numb, robotic, non-reactive, 'daydreaming,' 'acting like he was not there' or 'staring off into space with a glazed look (Oaksforf, & Frude, 2003).

Denial

This involves the individual denying that the abuse ever happens than to admit and confront the situation.

Rationalization

Rationalizing is another coping technique is when victims construct a rationale to justify their abuse perhaps that, they are bad and deserves to be punished (Robboy, & Anderson, 2011).

External Comfort

A coping technique survivor's use when they are unable to establish a sense of safety due to the abuse, they frequently seek external sources of comfort. These individuals sometimes seek the affection of those who abuse them or use substances like, alcohol and drugs (Oaksford, & Frude, 2003).

Effective Coping Techniques

Self-Care

Examples of self-care are; walking, physical exercises, listening to music, reading, creative activities, hobbies or meeting with friends. The basis of self-care is taking time out for yourself to love and take care of yourself.

Posttraumatic Growth

This is referring to a positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with trauma (Walker-Williams, Eeden, Merwe, 2012). In this process, growth occurs as a result of individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma.

Support Groups

In this technique victims talk to each other for support and do not isolate themselves. With support from others, a survivor may feel less alone, optimistic, more understood and loved.

Theoretical Framework

The theory anchored on trait theory as propounded by Gordon Allport. This theory opined that personality can be understood in relation to the believe that all people have certain traits or characteristic ways of behaving. Theorists postulated that personality traits reflect that people's characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours which may differ from person to person based on the strength and intensity of basic trait dimensions.

Same also, people tend to react differently when they are sexually abused. These differences are based on their personality as individuals. This also, influences their thought patterns, feelings and behaviours and also, the coping strategies these individuals are likely to adopt.

While those who are extroverts may be more likely to adopt the approach coping mechanism, those who are introverts may adopt the avoidance approach of coping with their abuse. This to a large extent determines how the individual apply this coping mechanism thereby, influencing effectiveness of these approach.

Thus, one's personality does not just influence the coping strategy employed by victims, it also determines the effectiveness of these strategies and the rate of recovery among victims. Though this theory failed to categorically explain the problem of sexually abuse, it effectively explains the adoption and effectiveness of a coping strategy for sexually abused victims.

Research Methodology

Anambra State is located in the south eastern region of the Nigeria. The State was created in 1991 and bounded by Delta State to the west, Imo State to the south, Enugu State to the east and Kogi State to the north. The population of the state is over 4.1 million according to the 2006 census with Awka, its capital growing from approximately 300,000 to 3 million residents between 2006 and 2020 thereby, making it the eighth populous state despite its small land mass (World, Population Review, 2022).

The indigenous people of Anambra state are Igbos. The state is rich in natural gas, crude oil, bauxite, and ceramic (Ogbu, 2020). It has good arable soil that supports its agricultural activities. The state also, engages in other agro-based activities such as fisheries and farming, as well as land cultivated for pasturing and animal husbandry.

Ikechebelu *et al.*, (2008) opined that the rate of sexual abuse especially, among hawkers has increased over the years. According to Aroh (2020) Anambra Rape Centre Records 107 Sexual abuse Cases In 2020. This record however, is based on the cases of sexual abuse that were reported as many more cases may not have been reported.

In a study that examines the counselling strategies for dealing with sexual abuse among primary school children in Anambra state, Obineli (2013) reviewed that sexually abused victims are affected socially, psychologically, emotionally and academically by their abuse. These individuals exhibit fear and nervousness and in most cases do not talk about their abuse. Thus, this study focused on assessing the coping strategies used by sexually abused victims in Anambra state. It also examined these strategies to determine their level of effectiveness in coping with sexual abuse.

The study adopted a qualitative research design because; qualitative method of data collection technique and data analysis was adopted in this study. Data was derived through Key Persons Interview (KPI) and secondary sources of data collection technique. The interviewees comprised of 6 males and 6 females; from different religious, ethnic, educational and occupational background who are resident in Anambra state and have been sexually abused in one way or the other. The snowballing sampling technique was adopted in selecting these interviewees. The data derived from the study was analysed using an ethnographic summary and verbatim quotation. This method of data analysis ensures comprehension of the research data at a glance.

Research Findings

All the interviewees agreed to have been sexually abused. All the males stated that they were raped as minors, 3 females stated that they have been raped, 1 female stated that a friend tried to rape her, 1 stated that an acquaintance tried to finger her as a minor while 1 stated that a customer intentionally touched her breast. While all the males stated that they were abused as children, 2 of the abused female victims stated that they were abused as adults, 2 stated that they were abused as adolescents, 1 stated that she was abused as a child while the other 1 stated that she was abused as a teenager. None however, admitted to have been abused by same sex; like in the case of lesbianism and homosexuality.

4 of the female and 2 male victims stated that they suffered emotionally as a result of the abuse. 3 female victims stated that they suffered physical injury as a result of the abuse while all the male victims stated that they did not suffer any physical injury.

All the victims except 2 female victims stated that they did not tell anyone about their abuse to avoid being flogged, punished or stigmatized. One of the male victim stated that his abuser was a tenant, 2 stated that the abuser was a neighbour, the other stated that his abuser was his sister's friend who was accommodated to sort out her accommodation issues, the other stated that his abuser was his mother's friend who lives close to them and the other, was a family friend. They stated that their abusers usually would give them food and money of lower denomination (₦20, ₦10) to buy sweet and biscuit.

For one of the female victims, the abuser was a robber, the other stated that the abuser was a friend, the other stated that her abuser was a family member, the other stated that her abuser was a customer in her aunt's shop, the other stated that her abuser was an acquaintance while the other stated that her abuser was a customer in her uncle's shop.

Two female victims reported their abuse to their parents but none of the abuse was reported to the authorities formally. While one was blamed for the abuse, the other stated that her parents did nothing "..... maybe because he is a member of the family." They both stated that reporting to their parents did not help them in anyway.

One of the female and male victims stated that they found solace in the things of God and partook in most activities in the church so as to create a distraction from their abuse. One of the female interviewees stated that, "..... that is why I belong to scout, drama, choir and many other groups in church." This strategy

did not help females who were raped to cope with their abuse but, males who were abused and females who experienced other forms of sexual abuse were able to cope using this strategy. According to a raped female victim, “..... I still experience shock..... Sometimes, I wish it’s a dream but it’s not..... going to church and participating in church activities was helpful but I will not say I have overcome the shock and trauma.”

A female victim who escaped being raped stated that ‘it wasn’t easy because the shock lasted for months and I had to withdraw to myself’. On the other hand, a female who was raped stated that, “it is difficult to forget that experience; I took in, was humiliated, had an accident, lost the baby, ended up marrying an abusive husband....” “I can’t forget. I still suffer from shock, sleep disturbance and I’m just trying to come out of depression..... My husband has been supportive”. The other female victims who were not raped stated that, they overcame as time went by.

They suggested that victims of sexual abuse should not be punished or stigmatized. They further suggested that victims of sexual abuse talk to someone or their parents about their abuse and that sexual abuse be reported to the appropriate authorities.

Discussion of Research Findings

Findings revealed that males suffered abuse more as children than females. This may be because, the safety of the girl child is socially prioritized and, in some cases, at the expense of the male child. Most of these abuses were revealed to have been carried out by those who are heterosexual. This could mean that the rate at which people are abused by the same sex is low or that generally; sexual relationship between the same sex is abysmally, low. It was revealed that males suffer adverse effects emotionally, basically from worrying from the thoughts about the implication of being caught in the act. On the other hand, abused females suffer both physically and emotionally basically, as a result of the use of force by the abuser during the abuse.

It was revealed that the abusers were stranger, customer, family member, tenant and friend. Thus, abusers could be anyone. It was revealed that abusers give their victims money and food to prevent them from telling anyone about their abuse and also, warn them about telling anyone. But the study found out that, victims did not talk about their abuse because of the fear of being stigmatized or punished. Thus, it was revealed that most victims did not report their abuse; not even to their parents or guardian.

They however, coped by seeking solace in church activities, repressing and avoiding memories of their abuse. It was reviewed that, this coping strategy was effective for those who experienced other forms of abuse except, females who experienced rape. It was found out that telling people; especially ones parents and guardian, when being abused is the best coping strategy for sexually abused victim especially because, it helps the victim to get legal, medical and emotional help.

Conclusion

The act of sexual abuse is in different forms. It may not necessarily be new to our society but, in recent times, it has attained an unprecedented height; which has made it more worrisome. While some victims die in the cause of their abuse, victims who live to tell the tale are victims. These victims suffer physical harm like, bruises that may be due to the use of force by their abuser during the abuse and emotion harm like, shock, trauma etc. as a result of the abuse itself.

Abusers try to make their abuse secret by warning their victims against telling anyone and by giving them food and money. But, this seems not to have influenced the decision of victims to make their abuse a secret. Rather, victims were motivated to keep their abuse secret by the fear of being flogged, punished or stigmatised.

The church was used as a coping mechanism to cope with the emotional challenges accompanying sexual abuse nevertheless, victims failed to explore the social support which the church offer. Instead, the church was used as a strategy to avoid the reality of their abuse. Therefore, even when these victims may have

focused on coping with their abuse, the strategy employed is usually not destructive but ineffective at tackling sexual abuse; especially, extreme abuse like rape.

Recommendation

Social support: there is for government and non-government organization (NGOs) to establish a formal body or agency that will provide social support for sexually abused victims. This body or agency should employ the services of counsellors, psychologists and sociologists and allow sexually abused victims to talk freely about their abuse with no fear of being blamed, judged or stigmatized. By so doing, they can correct some misconception and rebuke some utterance if need be. victims of sexual abuse should also, seek and access these supports.

Parent-children relationship: parents should establish a friendly bond with their children. This will give them the avenue to tell their parents when they are abused without any fear of being punished or stigmatized. In doing this, they should also endeavour to educate their children about sexual abuse and observe their children vigilantly for the warning signs of a sexually abused victims.

Protecting the male child: there is need to take into cognizance that males are also victims of sexual abuse and protect them accordingly.

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Conflict of Interest

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Appendix

Interview guide

1. Have you ever experienced any form of sexual abuse? Please, explain the type of sexual abuse.
2. How did your experience affect you?
3. Did you tell anyone about your abuse?
4. How did you cope with your abuse?
5. How best can sexually abused victims cope with their abuse?