

# Breaking SILENCES

Survivors, researchers  
and practitioners speak  
about Child Sexual Abuse

**THIS ZINE** is dedicated to all survivors of child sexual abuse. We acknowledge in particular those who have not had their story heard. We are indebted to the survivors whose anonymous testimonies are included here.

# Foreword & FORWARD

We felt the need for a network for promoting change in response to non-recent child sexual abuse, and established this in 2021. It is a collective of survivors, clinicians and academics all of whom identify with two or three of these labels.

We are a diverse group, but what unites us is a commitment to understanding and alleviating the suffering of child sexual abuse survivors; through education, ally-ship and awareness-raising.

We hosted our inaugural conference in May 2022 on the subject of talking about non-recent child sexual abuse. We are also developing an edited book, to

be published in 2024. However, we wanted to reach beyond traditional forms of knowledge sharing, to offer something more widely accessible and engaging. This is where the idea for this Zine came from; a motivation to reach out using creative media to share some of our thoughts on how we can find new ways of talking about this age old social and ethical problem. We dedicate this Zine to all the survivors who have not yet had their voices listened to.

**Jo Stubbley  
& Danny Taggart**

Founders, Non-Recent  
CSA Network



# YOU ARE NOT ALONE

## 3.1 MILLION PEOPLE

The Crime Survey of England and Wales estimates that **7.5%** of adults aged 18-74 years experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16.

Over **6,000** adult survivors spoke to the Truth Project. This was part of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales; **5,862** people consented to contribute to research.

**47%** of people had been sexually abused by a family member

**42%** were sexually abused in their home

**88%** reported an impact on mental health

**53%** reported an impact on relationships

**41%** reported an impact on school or employment

**35%** reported an impact on physical health

**27%** told someone about the sexual abuse at the time, and **81%** after the sexual abuse ended.

**47%** of those who told at the time had no action taken, and only **5%** said that they were believed.

# BEHIND THE STATISTICS...

When someone has experienced being sexually abused as a child, it can result in trauma that might be experienced for a long time.

## TRUST HAS BEEN BETRAYED.

It is inevitable in such circumstances that the survivor's relationship to help is now complicated by powerful feelings of wanting to be careful about who to trust, fear of being disbelieved and the fundamental problem of many trusted adults showing they could not hear the truth.

” the person who abused me kept telling me people won't believe you

” I tell you I tried to disclose... it was brushed under the carpet. I was told I was making too much of it...

**JAKE**



# Journey

Language is powerful. What we say, how we say it and our body language can have a huge impact on the people we are speaking to. By its very nature, trauma impacts language and the ability to communicate.

Survivors speak of the importance of time to establish the trustworthiness of the people they need to entrust with their vulnerability before being

willing to disclose past abuse or current trauma related distress.

While survivors know some of their issues arise from betrayal by the abusing adult - on whom they depended for safety - this was not the only reason for their caution before sharing.

More often it was multiple experiences of having attempts to disclose...

**challenged**  
**rejected**  
**ignored**  
**minimised**  
**or silenced**





# Silences

People can be silent for many reasons. We learn to be silent.

Silence can be imposed on us and deny us the chance to speak.

These silences can link to individual past experiences, ongoing challenges of coping with the impacts of abuse, national collective silences and amnesia surrounding child sexual abuse.

Memoirs of sexual abuse written by survivors reveal how silences act powerfully in our lives.

Silences can be more powerful than words.

But words can tell us much about the interiority of silence.

“...we spend our lives saying that children are liars, they’re not.”

RACHEL

“I left my appointment with him (psychiatrist) feeling like I hadn’t been listened to, feeling judged, feeling worthless, feeling like he thinks I’m a failure of a person, a terrible mother”

ANNA

“I did have a counsellor in the past who just sat there and listened and I felt like I was just talking into a hole in the wall...”

BETTY

\*Betty didn’t disclose to a professional again for another 35 years.

“...As he stands impatiently staring and waiting and the nurse doing the same. The silence in the room was hellish. This was too much now, I’d had enough, I curled myself up in a foetal position like ball and couldn’t speak in any more than one word whispered and mumbled sentences, as the world slowly began to drift away from me”

ANNA

# INSIDE SILENCES

As the long ago presses into the here and now of each present moment, both survivor and the person listening may feel stilled by wordlessness.

For survivors, trauma is often held within the body; dissociated, unformulated and without words.

The experience of sexual abuse - shame, secrecy, silence and lies - can entrap the survivor with the abuser. This is part of what isolates the survivor, leaving them feeling that the badness of what happened to them is inside them, a part of who they are.

” ...sometimes  
I would go and  
we'd just sit  
there in silence

RUBY

” I can push it  
all down and  
not experience  
it necessarily like  
but yeah my body  
will let me know.

CAROLINE

” I think because  
I've been able to  
put those  
places, that guilt, that  
shame, that blame, and  
there is shame, there is  
guilt there is blame  
around abuse but it's  
never the victim's it's  
the perpetrator's.

JAKE

# SECRETS

Bonds made in blood  
Secrets kept in shame  
Tears shed alone  
Yet, still I bear the pain.

Mumbling and talking in my sleep  
Fear in childhood dreams  
No-one sees the distress  
No-one hears the screams.

Carrying the burden  
Wondering why I was born  
Longing to be free and clean  
In secrets I am torn.

Khadj Rouf



# TELLING

Many experiences of disclosing sexual abuse are characterised by fear and by shame, which may be caused by past experiences and the behaviour and response of the person listening.

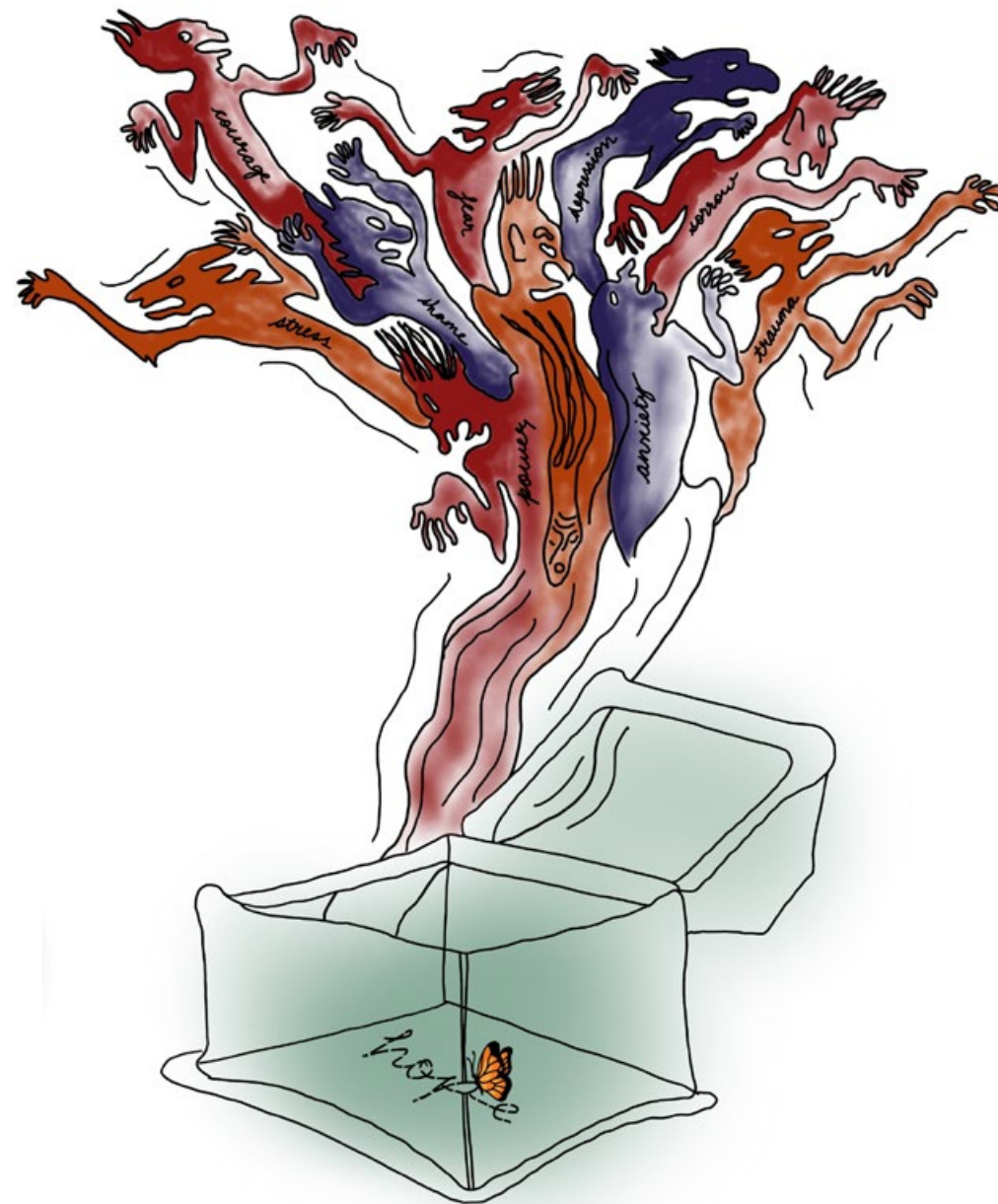
For the survivor, there is often fear of negative judgement, of opening Pandora's Box, of not being believed, of not understanding or being understood.

“ ...I didn't feel like people could handle it

RUBY

” I find it difficult to like say anything because they just don't get it, like, because this whole sentiment of like 'oh, it was years ago, move on', but when you're having to relive those things....she just didn't understand that (at) all, she was just so nasty to me about it

JULIE



# CAN I TRUST YOU?

## Survivors often 'test the water'

Sharing 'small' aspects of their experience to gauge the response of the other person, gradually revealing more if the relationship feels safe enough.

With these gradual, careful steps, the survivor judges whether to continue disclosing or to end the relationship.

When faith in the stability of a family structure has been blown apart and safety with those in authority is no longer reliable, there needs to be something more nuanced than the offer of support and help from a professional system

” It's like a process...you give things in dribs and drabs you give them something, test the water see how they react...

**MILLA**





# ACTIVE WITNESSING

When a survivor turns to a psychotherapist for help the relationship becomes crucial to moving forward. It is both needed and feared.

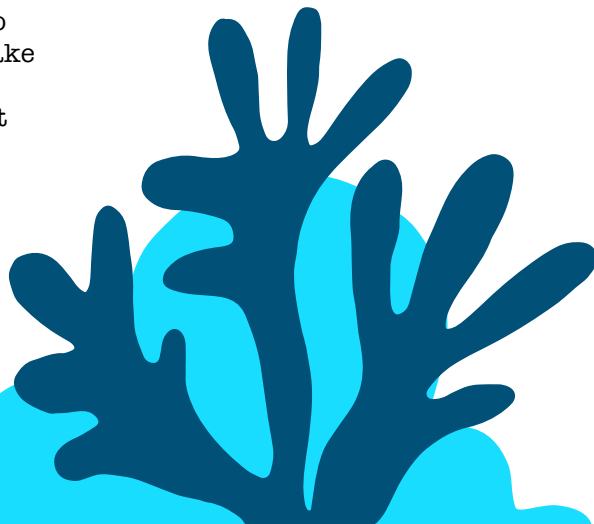
This is the terror of knowing and finding out.

Sometimes it is the fear of having to know, to discover just how terrible things were, to really take in the inhumanity and aggression in the world, which feels unbearable.

For the listener, the wish to know and not know can make us feel helpless, useless, confused, frightened and at worst, is damaging to the survivor.

” ...and it’s also about not being heard... not being heard so anything where somebody is not hearing what I’m saying will make me mad and totally lose any trust

**HELEN**



# BEYOND WORDS...

When it becomes hard to think or reflect it can be helpful to use the arts to explore wordless states.

Art is a way to understand and move beyond words.

“ We don't talk about our problems, nobody knows why anyone is there, that's not what it's about, we just drink tea and chat and we make crafty stuff but it feels, we don't need to know why they're there we take comfort feeling that we're just kind of around people that know, they just get it... I've never felt somewhere, found anywhere I can just be me...”

**ANNA**





# AT THE MARGINS

When the person disclosing is also at the margins because of aspects of their identity and lived experience, the burden of disclosure can feel heavier and more dangerous.

We must understand how issues of identity like sex, sexuality, skin colour, ethnicity and religion can additionally complicate not just the experience of telling but also of hearing what's being said.

” Yeah, and I think it helps that they're both women and they're both black so in fact all three of my therapists are female and all three of my therapists are black and that makes me feel comfortable because there's a cultural understanding

**RACHEL**

# TRUTH

The Truth about abuse has been obscured. Services have responded to trauma with blankness.

Who built these services and on what norms?

We can't talk about trauma without talking about power.

And we can't talk about power without talking about justice.

” I was very mistrusting, it's, this sounds, ah, this sounds terrible because I was feeling like I was in no-man's land, because (of) growing up as a mixed-race child...

**PATRICK**

TRUSTWORTHY SYSTEMS ARE:

**TRUTHFUL**  
**THOUGHTFUL**  
**EMOTIONALLY**  
**ENGAGED**

” There was something about him I knew I could trust, ... we started talking and I opened up, I didn't tell him everything that day, it took me a little bit of time but he knows absolutely everything now, but then we started from there and there was a process

CHLOE

# Healing & Hope

The central impact of child sexual abuse is to leave people isolated from others.

Some survivors find being together with other survivors can be powerful. Hearing other survivor's stories, and telling one's own within a safe space, can enable a feeling of being accepted and believed which is fundamental to challenging shame.

For some, being together can create space for shared witnessing of each other's suffering and isolation. It can ease solitary struggle and bring collective strength.

” [what] happened to me in my childhood, I'm not accountable for that, it's taken a while to realise that

WILL

” ...we are survivors but that's the base line, anything else you can create whatever you want, I am a survivor but I'm also creative and a person in my own right... I'm a healer, I'm more than just one word”

HELEN



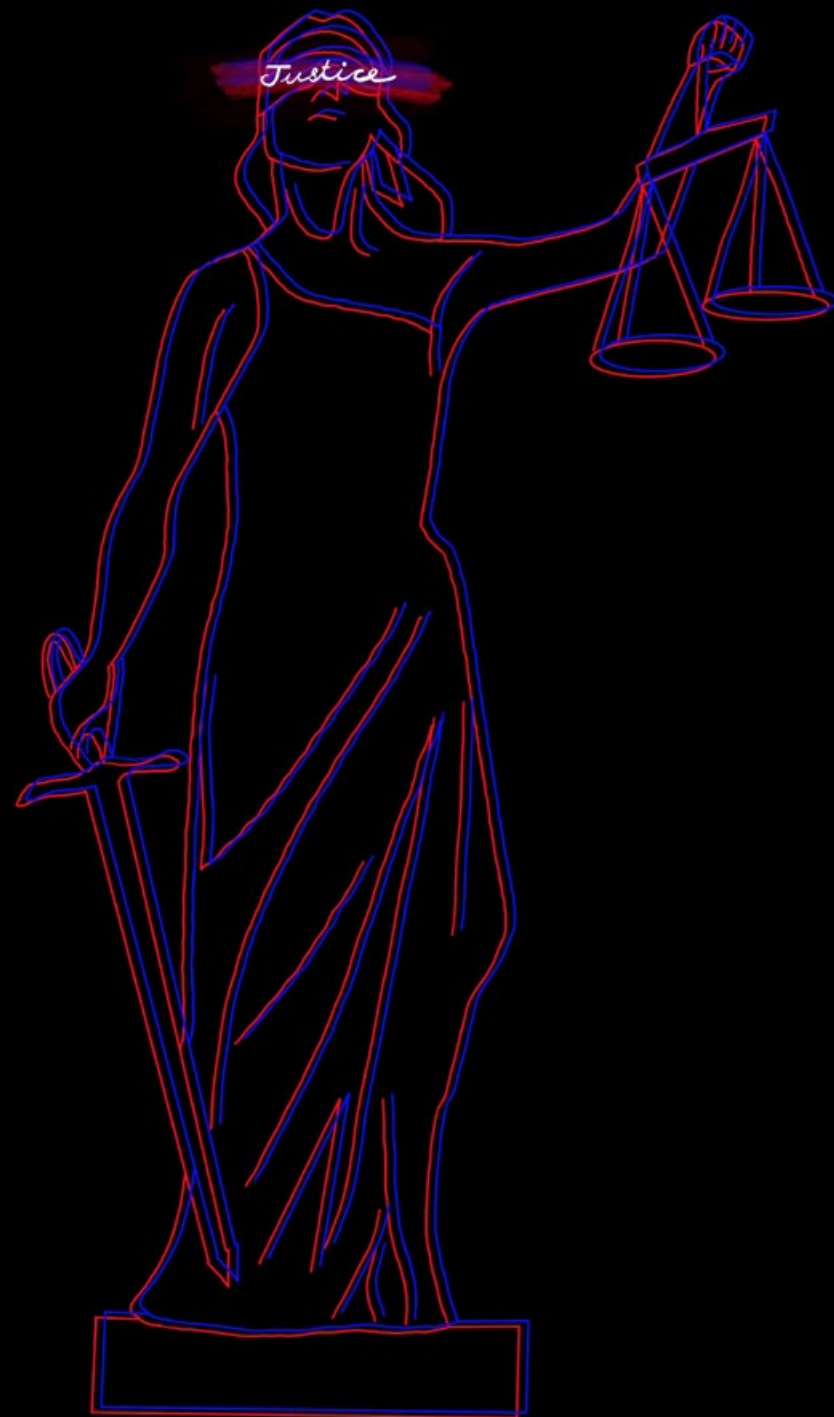
# JUSTICE

Through talking about child sexual abuse we can build a bridge between private pain and collective recognition.

This can turn stories of individual suffering into social storytelling that can act into the world, making sense of unspeakable experience, finding a new language and recognising child abuse victims as human beings, as worthy of justice and with something important to impart as citizens.

” I think there is a massive lack of awareness of the enormity of what child abuse does to you subtly as well as overtly with the depression or with the chronic long-term mental health problems, the subtle things it does to you about your self-esteem and confidence, how you appraise the world

JAKE



”

...I am a person. I am me.  
I am, and it's a bit like that  
Pinocchio story, isn't it,  
I am real, I am a real person...

CHLOE





If you have been affected by the issues here,  
please see sources of support:

## NSPCC

### NSPCC

[nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/our-services/nspcc-helpline](http://nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/our-services/nspcc-helpline)  
Helpline **0808 800 5000** or  
emailing [help@NSPCC.org.uk](mailto:help@NSPCC.org.uk)



### National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)

[napac.org.uk](http://napac.org.uk)  
Free, confidential support line:  
**0808 801 0331**



### Rape Crisis England

24/7 Support Line is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year: Visit the website for free online support  
[rapecrisis.org.uk](http://rapecrisis.org.uk)  
Call free on **0808 500 2222**

## SAMARITANS

### The Samaritans

[samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/talk-us-phone](http://samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/talk-us-phone)  
Tel: **116 123**



### Survivors Voices

[survivorsvoices.org](http://survivorsvoices.org)



### The Survivors Trust

[thesurvivorstrust.org](http://thesurvivorstrust.org)  
Helpline: **08088 010818**



### Survivors UK

[survivorsuk.org](http://survivorsuk.org)

If you are worried about a child or young person, please get in touch with your local social services, the police or the NSPCC.

More information about our Network's work can be accessed here - [networknrca.com](http://networknrca.com)

We are indebted to the survivors whose testimonies provide the quotations throughout this publication. All names and identifying details in the quotations have been pseudonymised to protect the identities of research participants. All appropriate permissions to share quotes have been sought through research and ethics processes. The research was conducted by Susanna Alyce for her PhD at the University of Essex.

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