

Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse Coping Mechanisms¹

The coping mechanisms common in adults who experienced sexual abuse as children are the same strategies that child victims of sexual abuse use to manage their pain and isolation. While these coping mechanisms may “work” for them as children to escape some of their pain, they lose their effectiveness in adulthood, often resulting in increasingly dysfunctional and/or self-destructive behaviors and thoughts that keep these victims isolated and out of healthy, functional relationships.

Coping mechanisms include:

- **Minimizing:** “It wasn’t that bad.”
- **Rationalizing:** Explaining away the abuse.
- **Denying:** Pretending it didn’t happen or it had no impact.
- **Forgetting:** Repressing memories, either short or long term.
- **Splitting:** Separating the offender’s behavior from the offender.
- **Dissociation:** Leaving one’s body; feeling separate and unconnected.
- **Control:** Needing to control anything and everything.
- **Chaos:** Maintaining control by creating chaos.
- **“Spacing out”:** Not being present.
- **Super-alertness:** Avoiding surprises, always know what is happening.
- **Busyness:** Keeping very busy to escape.
- **Escape:** Running away physically or emotionally.
- **Mental Illness:** The line between fantasy and reality blurs.
- **Self-mutilation:** Hurting one’s self and believing that physical pain is better than the emotional pain of abuse.
- **Addiction:** Temporary means of escape.
- **Isolation:** Cutting one’s self off from people; if no one is close, no one can hurt.
- **Relationship Addiction:** Going from relationship to relationship (may or may not involve sex).
- **Suicide Attempts:** The ultimate (or final) escape.

¹ Adapted from Bass, E., & Davis, L. (1994). *The courage to heal: A guide for women survivors of sexual abuse*. New York: Harper Collins.