

Danish Parliamentary Hearing about the long-term sequelae of sexual abuse in childhood and youth.

Long term sequelae

The physical consequences of sexual abuse in childhood and youth

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All children need an upbringing without spiritual, mental, physical, and sexual abuse and without negligence from their Parents or caregivers.

This is not the case as Children are exposed throughout the world for various types of abuse/assaults.

And this is not something they will ever forget.

Time does not heal all wounds.

Many children do not recover from this abuse/assaults; in other words, they have long term sequelae as adults.

Anne-Luise Kirkengen and Ane Brandtzæg Næss have in their book:

'How abused children become sick adults', written about what happens to children's brains when they are exposed to abuse/assault.

Our brains are only fully mature when we are about 25 years old.

The brain has *neuroplasticity* and this means that it can change throughout our lifespan, and different abilities can be lost or developed.

All our experiences affect the brain and Children who are subjected to abuse will have developmental changes in important areas of their brain:

- 1) **Prefrontal cortex,**
- 2) **Amygdala,**
- 3) **Hippocampus,**
- 4) **Corpus callosum (bridge between the two brain halves).**

The **prefrontal cortex** controls decisions and learning, the **Hippocampus** governs ours

memories and feelings, and the **amygdala** remembers trauma and react if we feel threatened. **Corpus Callosum** - The connection between the two brain halves.

- becomes compromised.

These 4 areas of the brain change and are influenced by the emotional atmosphere that surrounds these children in their early developmental years due to the ongoing and repetitive abuse they experience.

We call this neural plasticity. MR scans of the brain of these children who have been subjected to abuse/assault and then compared to scans of children who have not suffered from any abuse/assault found that the brains had changed in the structure of children who had been subjected to abuse/assault.

When we experience danger, a lot of hormones are activated in the brain and this affects all parts of the body

This is due to the **HPA-axis (hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis)**. There are hormones like adrenaline, norepinephrine, adrenal cortisol, endorphins, and oxytocin.

The brain / The body becomes stressed, but is created so it can return to a normal state when the traumatic situation is over.

If the brain repeatedly experiences exposure to stress, our brain changes and so this affects our whole body. Consequently, sexual abuse in childhood leads to long term sequelae.

These sequelae have a major impact in all areas of the adult survivor's life, Family, Social life, Work, Education, Decision Making, Memory, Immune System, Ability to resist sicknesses, the length of the expected lifespan is shortened and mental illness.

We are aware today that adults who have being exposed to sexual abuse in childhood have an

increased risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes (there are studies indicating that survivors have about 60% higher chance of developing diabetes, stomach and intestinal diseases, joints, and muscular diseases).

Many people have weight problems, which may be due to the reduced ability of their thyroid to produce the hormones that regulate metabolism as these are damaged.

In the gynecological and obstetric department, there is knowledge that survivors of CSA (Childhood Sexual Abuse) have unexplained pain in the genitals and when having intercourse (it is now known that the pain level is lowered in the part of the brain that has control over our sexuality)

The corpus callosum is not as dense in this area (as well as in the area that belongs to mouth and face).

Many women are afraid to give birth and often can have trouble with breastfeeding.

Today we know that female survivors more often than the normal population will experience removal of the womb. The average age for this operation is 32 years.

Also, now known is the fact that the length of life can be reduced by up to 20 years, as the sexual abuse/assault affects the copying ability of DNA in the cells. Telomeres are the caps at the end of each strand of DNA that protects our chromosomes, like the plastic tips at the end of shoelaces. This causes the DNA strands to become damaged and our cells cannot do their job.

The immune system is also affected, and this means that the survivor will become sick with infectious diseases, due to the weakened immune system.

In some survivors, we see autoimmune reactions. There have been victims of abuse/assault that experience somatization, the person has bodily symptoms without detecting a physical cause. Today we know that hidden sexual trauma always will express itself through bodily symptoms.

Many adult survivors have had many medical examinations, had operations performed and other medical interventions (*which often have been unnecessary*) without ever finding a physical reason for these symptoms.

In the medical world, we are so used to distinguishing between body and psyche, we rarely take into consideration that the psyche and the body mutually affect each other.

There are 5 times as many women than men who have signs of somatization. Not so few have functional diseases - BDS -Bodily Distress Syndrome. It can be fibromyalgia, chronic irritable bowel, heart-lung trouble, general symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, reduced memory, extreme fatigue, headache, and dizziness.

We have a growing knowledge that these diseases are due to problems in the brain.

One can say that there are holes in the normal filter in the brain that should protect against feeling pain. In fact, there is an increased sensitivity in the brain to feel pain.

In addition, there is all the psychological problems such as depression, PTSD, personality disorder, suicide attempts, self-injury, eating disorders, substance abuse and alcohol abuse.

Today more research is needed to study the effects of sexual abuse, how this affects us at brain level and thus the survivor's life.

We need to look at the survivor's life from a holistic perspective and not to continue to split the person into soma (body) and psyche.

We need intensive research, in this area of sexual abuse in childhood and the long-term effects on the whole body across the life-span.