

Not Quite Healed: Coping Mechanisms

Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from Cecil Murphey and Gary Roe's 2012 book, *Not Quite Healed: 40 Truths for Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*.

Two therapists interviewed me for a state-funded group called something like "Men Who Were Sexually Assaulted in Childhood."

I told the two men I had been dealing with my abuse for about three years. After we talked for almost an hour, one of them said, "You learned coping devices that helped you survive childhood. You don't need them anymore."

I asked him what specific devices he meant, but he shook his head. "We'll discuss that during the year-long meetings." The topic never came up—specifically—during the year, but I've become increasingly aware of my coping devices.

For me, denial was the strongest and most powerful. I often refer to it as amnesia. It's not something I figured out and tried. It was unconscious. It's important to mention that because that's the core of my personal coping devices.

They are not consciously chosen. We were children who were too immature to grasp such things. Because we were fragile and innocent, we resorted to what worked for us.

We can't change what took place in our childhood, and our molestation will always be part of our history. *We can move away from self-destructive and self-defeating behavior.*

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Gary also speaks of denial being the most obvious coping mechanism for him.

For four decades I didn't remember what happened to me. That's serious denial. And the denial took other forms as well. I pretended it wasn't happening. I would have described my family as a loving, caring family. I would have said back then that my mother loved me and was a good mom. I made excuses for everyone's behavior. And, most pervasive of all, I developed the habit of seeing people and the world not for what they were, but what I wanted them to be.

I lived in my private fantasyland. By calling it fantasyland, I don't mean a land of sexual lust or whimsy, although for some of us it may include that. Fantasyland is the world as I see it, through the lens of my past abuse. I can now say clearly that my fantasyland was a distorted concept of life. It's a worldview full of lies, and because I accept those lies, I can make the rules.

Instead of living in the present and dealing with real issues, I avoided the past by fretting about the future.

My denial also created anxiety, because I had to work hard to keep the fantasyland going. I had to control situations and fix things to stay in denial and try to get things to work out the way they should. That anxiety was immensely time and energy-consuming. It kept me worn out. It takes tremendous energy to live on a level that avoids facing reality. My denial kept me inside a fictional world and I avoided the truth. Therefore, it prevented me from fully engaging in the present and drastically affected the quality of my relationships.

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Occasionally I hear men justify the abuse and realize that's their form of coping. In the state-sponsored group one man insisted early in the year, "If I hadn't been so handsome, he wouldn't have done that to me." Later that man told us that the perpetrator said that to him and he believed it.

Most of the methods we struggle with are known as *maladaptive*. They may have helped us survive at the time (and we need to be thankful for them), but as we matured into adulthood, they became handicaps. They kept us from engaging in healthful, peaceful living.

If we allowed them to be part of our arsenal of coping, they became habits and formed part of our character. They become our automatic, reflex reactions to life

I call those maladaptive coping mechanisms *character handicaps*. I can easily trace my dysfunctional behavior back to them. Those character handicaps were the driving force behind the thoughts and behaviors that kept me stuck for years.

Here are other examples of character handicaps with which we survivors struggle.

- **Fear**. It's not the terror that overwhelms as much as it is the emotion that wants us to hide from what's happening.
- **Negative thinking**. We seem unable to grasp things as positive or good; we're programmed to focus on the bad side of people and situations.
- **Self-condemnation**. Not only do we see the negative side of things, but we're aware of our attitude. Instead of changing, we blame ourselves for the way we think or perceive the world.
- **Passivity**. This is the inability to act even when it's a simple loving act. Or we can't speak up against those things with which we disagree.
- **People-pleasing**. We need the approval of others, especially the important individuals in our lives. We base our actions on whether others will like us.
- **Lust**. We list lust because sometimes situations arouse us and foster unhealthy desires or appetites that often lead to sexual acts.

- **Self-importance.** Because of our neediness or sense of powerlessness, we cover up and overcompensate by seeing ourselves as powerful, important, or better than others.
- **Self-justification.** We defend ourselves by explaining or rationalizing our behavior. One of the common responses we give when confronted is, “Yes, but if he hadn’t . . .”
- **Lying.** We probably resent the word but we lie by silence, by exaggeration, or by allowing other people to believe we’re something we’re not. For example, we may imply we have a more prestigious job than we do or that we have greater financial assets than our bank account shows.
- **Obsession.** We focus on a person, an object, or a goal. That fixation controls our lives. It may be getting ahead in our careers, having the cleanest yard in the community, of being the parent of the brightest student in the local school. It’s anything that stirs such a passion in us that we can’t let go or and we think about it constantly. We could refer to prejudice and ethnic cleansing as powerful examples.

Some people get caught up in a political issue—probably any topic can work. Take abortion or a woman’s right to choose. It doesn’t matter which position you take, but if that issue controls your thoughts, your anger, your commitment, that’s obsession.

Other examples of character handicaps might be gluttony, greed, laziness, criticalness, perfectionism, procrastination, resentment, envy, intolerance, and insensitivity.