

I was sexually abused between the ages of 3 and 5 by a man named Michael who was involved with the Church In Melbourne, which was at [REDACTED]. I knew that he had done something bad to other kids and I knew that I felt really upset when I thought about him, and then when I was 14 years old I actually had flashbacks and remembered more of what he did to me. This was triggered by a friend giving me a Rolo chocolate, which brought back that he used to give them to me. He gave them to me for about 12 months before the abuse started, which I now understand was grooming me, and he would give me one after each time. I remember specific little things, like one of the first times he asked me to take my clothes off and he would give me the chocolate. Mostly I just remember flashes. He called me honey pot and I remember the big door in the church, and leaving the room afterwards feeling disgusting and having to put my clothes back on. I remember him touching me and me touching him. Sometimes I am sure there was no penile penetration and then other times I feel sure that there was. I have no memory of there being any anal penetration but there is a lot of scar tissue there to suggest that there was. There is also scar tissue in my vagina and my perineum. A lot of my memories bring up feelings rather than images, like disgust, embarrassment and shame. Towards the end when it escalated further I felt some fear of him as well. It took a long time, though, for me to realise that it wasn't normal or ok.

I have vague memories from when I was in primary school of my mum telling me that he was in prison because he had hurt some other children. I remember thinking at the time that she meant he hit them, and I thought, well, he never hit me. I tried to tell my mum when I was little and again when I was 14, but she did not feel up to dealing with it. As an adult I have heard further rumours about him abusing other children but have never spoken to them directly.

It took me a long time to be able to enjoy sex with anyone. I used to just "check out" and I had to learn not to do that. Even now it's a conscious effort not to do that and to stay present. I started becoming sexually active when I was 15 and it was very painful, and I used to think that the physical pain was just what sex was. I couldn't use tampons and in fact the first time I tried to, I hurt myself so badly that I couldn't walk for two days. I went to see a specialist at the Women's who diagnosed it as vagismus, where my vagina would spasm shut when I tried to penetrate it. She also diagnosed vulvadinia and dyspareunia, which describes vulval pain and pain during sex. When I was pregnant with my son it caused pain and problems with check ups and physical examinations.

I have undergone physical treatments for these symptoms and also a lot of counselling. I currently see a psychiatrist who I have been with for about ten years. I was diagnosed with depression when I was only in grade three, although I don't know if I agree with that label. I definitely have anxiety as

well but overall I'm not comfortable with labels and she knows that, so I don't have a specific diagnosis.

My mum put me in counselling in grade three because I was acting up at school. I started doing better although I did used to have a lot of anger management issues in primary school and high school. My mum had bi-polar disorder and my dad was physically abusive, and looking back, I think this made me less inclined to tell them what I was going through. My dad was never sexually abusive. I don't have a relationship with either of my parents anymore, and due to not seeing my mum, I don't see my younger brothers anymore either.

All my relationships have been affected by the abuse. I've never had good friends. My husband is very good and so are his family, but otherwise my relationships have suffered. If I start associating feelings from back then, especially feelings of helplessness, with the person I'm in a relationship with then I can never look at them the same way again. I will never, ever have anything to do with a church ever again, and I would never leave my son with anyone unless I really know and trust them. I'd never send my children to a Catholic school. If I ever have a little girl I would probably worry about something similar happening to her.

Regarding the church, I remember thinking of it was being like a cult. When I was eleven I stopped going and wouldn't have anything to do with them anymore, although my parents kept going for several years. I didn't fit into the church, they had a very "children should be seen and not heard" attitude, and a view that girls were second class citizens. Women were there to get married and breed, and I never agreed with that, even as a child. I remember trying to tell a church elder that my dad was hitting me and he said that sometimes I did things to deserve it. I wonder if he thought I just meant smacking, or if he understood how serious the abuse was and still said that to me. I remember they also said that my mum's bi-polar was caused by demons.

The way that I deal with it now is that when I have flashbacks and memories, I see it as a movie. It's something I can pause, stop, rewind, and put away, and not something that can hurt me now. I tell myself that what happened was in the past, and so my memories can't hurt me. They're mine, I own them and can control them.

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