

# Dealing with child abuse

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Child abuse could have repercussions well into adulthood, resulting in mental health and addiction problems as well as marital breakdowns.

British psychotherapist Lynne Kaye said there is no question that child abuse victims have many problems in later life, including issues of intimacy and commitment.

Mrs Kaye, who works for the UK's Centre for Personal and Professional Development and was here to deliver a seminar to psychologists, said: "Intimacy is excruciating for victims of abuse and they will do anything to avoid it.

"Someone who has been abused and feels dirty, guilty and shameful as a result will not want intimacy as it is too scary to let people get really close," she said.

Many a time, victims of abuse resort to drugs and other addictions. "They turn to something that numbs them and takes away the pain," she said, explaining that, especially during adolescence, a victim is very susceptible to addictions as a form of escapism.

Victims also tend to veer towards something that is familiar to them, so it is not unlikely that they unconsciously enter into an abusive relationship. It is not uncommon for victims of child abuse to meet and get married.

Asked about their relationship with their children, Mrs Kaye said victims tend to be extremely polarised - everything will be either black or white, terrific or horrific, with no middle ground.

There have been cases of victims of child abuse in turn abusing their children, with males being more likely to do this.

Abuse can take different forms although many people think it only constitutes of penetrative sexual abuse or a child being hit. Abuse could also be verbal, which can really damage a child.

Sexual abuse does not only mean a child being touched inappropriately but it can also be parents having sex and/or engaging in other sexually-related action in front of the child.

Humiliation is one of the core elements of abuse.

Statistics indicate that one in four girls and one in six boys were inappropriately touched by the age of 18. The influx of mass media has helped in promoting the need to care for the victims of abuse. A prime example is the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the UK whose campaign, Cruelty To Children Must Stop, Full Stop, has spelled out the different types of abuse.

Mrs Kaye said it was a pity that the promotion spots forming part of the campaign were no longer appearing on mainstream television in Britain. Certain cable stations available in Malta run the adverts, one of which shows children suffering from various types of abuse, including neglect, being hit and being verbally abused.

The subject, however, is still blurred by stigma. Because of this, children often keep the trauma to themselves. Very often the perpetrator is somebody who is close to the child - such as a family member

"They would have been told categorically that this is a secret and they must not tell anybody or else daddy would go to prison, mummy would not want them anymore or that their pet would be killed. One

heads of your dolls will come off. And so the child keeps everything bottled up," Mrs Kaye said.

If the perpetrator comes from outside the immediate family, and the child feels safe enough inside the home, he might tell the parents.

"If the family believes the child and supports him, this might create a way of healing. But it is not uncommon for the child not to be believed, so you can imagine how he would feel."

Since most times the perpetrator is somebody close to the child it is not enough just to tell children to be wary of strangers. In fact, this could lead a child not realising that what was happening to him was wrong because it was being done by somebody close to and not a stranger.

Mrs Kaye disagreed with the practice of removing the children from the family home when a family member is abusing them.

Complications arise when there are no words to describe the abuse. "If somebody touches a body part for which the child does not yet have a word, it is more difficult to say anything."

She mentioned the case of a 10-month-old baby who was raped by her mother's boyfriend and appeared in the media being held by Prince Harry during his visit to Africa. "Her eyes were dead, there was nothing in them. It is a core abuse of the psyche."

Asked about the symptoms of child abuse, Mrs Kaye said the most clear cut one was sexual acting out - like when a child touches another child sexually.

Other indicators are excessive withdrawn behaviour and pro-

night in bed.

Mrs Kaye referred to internet pornography as a big problem because it brings pornography straight into the home.

Even if a person was not into child pornography but was downloading copious amounts of adult sites, child porn sometimes leaks through.

## 'Internet pornography is a big problem'

"So if a person is already aroused from seeing adult pornography, and he gets the imagery of a child and retains his arousal, it could lead to serious problems.

"Today there are places where one can go to speak about this subject which a few decades ago nobody spoke about. We have to be open to the fact that there is more information and we also have to accept the fact that child abuse is not uncommon," she said.

Anyone requiring help over child abuse can phone the support line 8007 2377.