

# Spotlighting Change: Making a Difference During Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivor Awareness Month

In honor of Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivor Awareness Month, Caring for Denver program officers Jacquie Esquibel and Raymael Blackwell recently sat down with experts from [The Blue Bench](#) and [Wings](#). These organizations are at the forefront of providing critical resources and fostering community for those affected by sexual assault. During this insightful conversation, we explored the complex challenges survivors face, the profound impact of stigma, and the vital importance of creating safe spaces for healing. Their insights shed light on the resilience of survivors and the transformative power of connection in the journey toward recovery.

Sexual assault is a pervasive issue that happens far more often than many realize, affecting millions of people globally. This deeply traumatic experience can lead to significant emotional and psychological challenges, profoundly impacting survivors' mental health and well-being. Survivors often grapple with feelings of isolation, shame, and anxiety, which can hinder their ability to seek support and complicate their healing process. Understanding the nuances of this trauma is crucial for both survivors, care providers, and loved ones who wish to support them. In this interview, we turn to the insights of two dedicated professionals who work tirelessly to support survivors: Laura Patlan, Co-Director of Client Services from The Blue Bench, an organization committed to providing resources and support for those affected by sexual violence, and Jenny Stith, Executive Director of Wings, which focuses on the unique needs of adult survivors of [childhood sexual abuse](#). Through their expertise, we gain a deeper understanding of the mental health implications of sexual assault and the various interventions available for healing.

**Q: How does stigma and shame impact the mental health of individuals who have experienced sexual assault?**

**Jenny Stith:** Stigma and shame significantly impact the mental health of sexual assault survivors, particularly those who experienced childhood abuse. Because most children who've experienced this are abused by someone they know and trust, they often internalize blame and shame, believing they are bad or responsible for the abuse. It's very difficult for a child to comprehend. This deeply rooted shame often stays with a survivor as they age and develop into adulthood. Healing can involve learning to disown this misplaced shame. What was done to them is not their shame. They had nothing to do with that. However, overcoming stigma and shame is a major challenge, and hopefully we can help them do that.

**Laura Patlan:** I echo everything Jenny said. Stigma and shame from sexual assault lead to withdrawal, isolation, and a lack of connection with others. You have this feeling that you can't lean on the people around you because they either won't believe you or won't fully understand what's happening. Survivors depend on community for support and a network of resilience. When we don't have that, it does feel like a very dark space to be in. This isolation can lead to depression, low self-worth, and in severe cases, suicidal thoughts. I think that comes up a lot with survivors. There's a feeling of, "there is so much pain that I am feeling, and I don't know who to go to, to talk about this". The taboo around discussing sexual

violence and sex, particularly in American culture, intensifies this struggle, making it even harder for survivors to seek help.

**Jenny Stith:** Laura, I love everything you added. I just want to emphasize that for adult survivors, some may not even have clear memories of being sexually abused as children. So they could be experiencing all the things you mentioned—like isolation, shame, and mental health struggles—without realizing that these are connected to an experience of sexual abuse. Many survivors also face revictimization later in life, which adds to the complexity. Some may be grappling with serious mental health challenges without understanding the root cause. This is why it's crucial to educate people that sexual violence can happen at any age, and sadly, often starting very young. The more we can learn about it and find supportive, affirming spaces to unpack those experiences, the better. It's incredibly hard work, and when you're carrying those feelings without knowing why, it becomes even more difficult.

**Q:** Jenny, you noted that most adult survivors of childhood sexual assault are assaulted by individuals they know. Laura, are you seeing a similar pattern with the survivors you're currently working with?

**Laura Patlan:** Yes, the percentage of survivors who experience assault by someone they know is pretty high. This often includes partners, family members, acquaintances, or even people they've only briefly met but who are within their social circles. That's still someone they know. Another pattern I've noticed, is individuals being sexually assaulted on a first date after meeting someone through a dating app. While these are brief connections, it's still a person they know. No one expects that to happen when they're trying to build relationships.

**Q:** When someone is assaulted by someone within their close circle, it adds a layer of complexity to discussing the experience due to the nature of the relationship. How does this dynamic affect mental health?

**Laura Patlan:** When someone is assaulted by someone within their close circle, that sense of trust is deeply broken, which leads to further isolation because you start questioning who you can trust. Essentially, you are part of this community where harm has been caused to you. This is especially challenging for individuals who've been socialized as women, as they often feel pressure to not "rock the boat" or create conflict within their community. It becomes hard to speak out, especially if the person who harmed them is a family member or mutual friend. There's a sense of responsibility to maintain harmony, so survivors may keep their experience to themselves to avoid disrupting the group dynamic. On the other hand, when a survivor chooses to share their story, there's the risk of not being believed. Friends may ask questions like, "Are you sure that's what happened?" or want to hear the perpetrator's side, which creates doubt and makes it harder for survivors to feel supported or validated within their community.

**Jenny Stith:** That's beautifully said. Sexual assault is deeply traumatic at any age, with significant physiological and neurobiological impacts that survivors must navigate, creating immense challenges. For adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, the trauma is even more complex because it disrupts their childhood growth and development. As their brain, body, and nervous system are still growing, the abuse often causes developmental trauma, leading to additional difficulties as they mature. By the time they

recognize the abuse and its impact, many survivors have developed unhealthy coping mechanisms to manage the pain.

[When abuse happens within the family](#), it's especially hard, as the very people the child should be able to trust are either causing the harm or are part of the abusive system. Most children who are abused—about 90%—don't report or receive help during childhood. As adults, they seek support from organizations like The Blue Bench and Wings to start their healing journey. However, if the abuse occurred within the family, it's common that support is often lacking because family members may not want to confront the fact that someone they love has caused harm. Often it can be an intergenerational pattern that's been happening for quite a while. Families may respond by blaming or minimizing the survivor's experience.

This is why it's important survivors have a community of providers who are trained to understand and validate survivors' experiences, offering the support they may not get from their families. This validation is often enhanced by connecting with other survivors who are navigating similar healing journeys, through programs like [support groups](#). The community and loved ones need to acknowledge the painful reality of abuse, even though it's uncomfortable, in order to foster healing.

**Q: Are there specific symptoms of childhood trauma that would help someone providing support or intervention recognize it and offer appropriate care—or does it generally present as conditions like depression, anxiety, or PTSD?**

**Jenny Stith:** There are many symptoms, and we often refer to the [Five Impact Areas: mind, body, spirit, emotional, and relational impact](#). Relationship challenges are common, as is the risk of being assaulted again later in life. Unfortunately, there's often a pattern—if someone is abused in childhood and that trauma isn't addressed, they may find themselves in situations of intimate partner violence later on.

Other symptoms can include eating disorders, various forms of addiction, like pornography, gambling, or substance misuse, and severe mental health issues. In my experience over the past eleven years, it's very common for individuals to discover a history of childhood sexual abuse when they start examining their life and challenges more deeply. The ages of abuse can range from infancy to kindergarten, to teenage years, with the average age being nine. It's much more common than people realize.

However, survivors don't typically come to a provider saying, "I was sexually abused as a child." They usually seek help for other mental health concerns, like the ones you mentioned, and through exploration, we often uncover the underlying trauma.

**Q: In your work, do you encounter situations where you support someone who has been both a perpetrator and a victim, or do you primarily work with individuals who have only been victims and never perpetrators?**

**Laura Patlan:** From what I understand, it's not common for survivors of childhood sexual abuse to become perpetrators themselves. While people who cause harm may have experienced harm in their own lives, it's not always in the form of sexual violence. Often, it's other types of trauma that can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms in adulthood. If someone experienced violence or trauma as a child, they

might develop coping strategies that helped them survive at the time, but as adults, those coping skills may lead to harmful behaviors or strained social relationships.

It's important to acknowledge that, regardless of someone's past actions, they still deserve support when dealing with the impacts of the sexual violence they've experienced.

**Jenny Stith:** Well said, Laura. You're absolutely right—most people who are sexually abused do not go on to abuse others. However, there's a dynamic where some children who are sexually abused may engage in reenactment, either during or after the abuse, while still young. It's also important to acknowledge that older children can abuse younger children, so it's not always adults harming kids. We need to educate children of all ages about not engaging in such behaviors because it can be very harmful.

When it comes to providing services to survivors, especially those who may have reenacted as youth, it's crucial to take those complexities into account. In our support groups, we do serve survivors who may have reenacted sexual abuse up to age 13. If someone was older than that when they abused a child, we would refer them for other services, which may require a different type of treatment. For example, in Colorado, the Sex Offender Management Board provides specific guidance for addressing older individuals who sexually offend, as these cases often involve cognitive distortions and manipulation.

It's essential to recognize the broader societal conditioning that contributes to this issue, while also maintaining accountability for those who have caused harm. Providers need to be trained in these complexities so they can navigate these situations responsibly and offer the right support.

**Q:** What types of interventions are supportive in addressing the mental health needs of adult survivors and children?

**Jenny Stith:** We often recommend that survivors start with individual therapy, especially with a therapist who is trained to support adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. There are many therapeutic approaches that can be helpful for survivors of sexual violence. Traditional talk therapy, where individuals unpack their experiences, is one effective option. However, many survivors may also benefit from somatic therapy at some point in their journey. Somatic therapy focuses on addressing how trauma is stored in the body and helps to release it.

It's also important to understand how the nervous system is impacted, particularly when it comes to developmental trauma from childhood abuse. For me personally, as a survivor, these types of healing have been life changing. There's both the learning aspect—understanding what you've been through—and the relational aspect of having a trusted person to process these experiences with. Both are essential in supporting mental health recovery.

**Laura Patlan:** At The Blue Bench, our therapists are trained in a variety of therapeutic practices, such as talk therapy, EMDR, and other approaches. The therapists on staff are truly incredible, and I'm always amazed by the support they provide. Our model involves working with survivors for up to six months in individual therapy. We also offer group sessions, which are primarily aimed at adult survivors—whether they experienced their assault at a younger age or as an adult.

These groups focus on building skills to navigate both life and the healing journey. We have groups for female-identified individuals, male-identified individuals, and a separate group for LGBTQ+ folks who may

not feel comfortable attending the other groups. In addition to these, we sometimes offer other forms of group therapy, such as yoga and art therapy.

**Jenny Stith:** I love that. It's so important to recognize that healing from sexual violence is not a quick process. The six-month model you described makes a lot of sense, and for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, the healing often requires even more time due to the complex developmental trauma they've experienced. Many children are sexually abused repeatedly, sometimes by multiple people, which creates deep and long-lasting trauma.

Often, the healing journey for these survivors takes far longer than what most insurance plans will cover— such as, traditionally, six sessions for mental health visits, which is nowhere near enough time to address complex trauma.

There's also a lack of understanding about this issue, so we use a [healing guide](#) in our support groups to educate survivors. Think about how society responds to other health issues like breast cancer, where people are embraced and supported through their journey. Survivors of sexual violence deserve that same support. The group environment helps survivors learn how their childhood trauma is affecting them today and what steps they can take to move forward in new ways.

One of the most [powerful aspects of group support](#) is combating stigma and isolation. Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse think they're the only ones going through it and feel unable to talk about it. But once they connect with others who have had similar experiences, they realize they're not alone. Time and time again, we hear from survivors that for the first time, they don't feel "crazy", and they don't feel alone. Understanding that their trauma is shared by others and learning more about it are critical components of being able to move through this with resilience.

## Q: How can the broader public support survivors of sexual assault?

**Laura Patlan:** Start by believing survivors—that goes a long way. But beyond that, the public can really help by educating themselves about what sexual violence is, how it shows up, and [understanding the rape culture that we live within](#). We live in a society where [rape culture](#) has historically been accepted, and sometimes even romanticized or glorified in mainstream media. This sends harmful messages, especially to younger generations, about what's considered normal in relationships. For example, many young people grow up thinking that if you go on a date, you're expected to be okay with someone pushing for sex, because that's the narrative they've been fed through media.

There was a social study done in schools where students were asked questions related to rape culture, and many of them considered those problematic behaviors to be normal because of what they had seen or learned from media. So, challenging rape culture is crucial, and one of the best ways to do that is through primary prevention education. Teaching kids and young adults about boundaries, consent, and healthy relationships is key. Unfortunately, this kind of education isn't happening everywhere, though it really should be.

As for addressing accountability at a community level, there are promising practices emerging through restorative and transformative justice, particularly in smaller communities. There's a book called [The Revolution Starts at Home](#) that touches on how advocacy spaces can handle sexual violence, using restorative justice to hold individuals accountable while still supporting the survivor. These approaches work to address harm without shaming or isolating the person who caused it, which can prevent future

harm. It's a complex issue, and while there's much more to explore, this focus on community-based solutions is an important part of the conversation.

**Jenny Stith:** Also, one thing we need to address is the sexualization of children. If you look at some of the cartoon characters from the '80s, for example, decades later you can see they were drawn with features like "sexy eyes" and other traits that are deeply disturbing. This kind of imagery, along with other aspects of rape culture, starts to infiltrate the minds of younger generations, contributing to the normalization of harmful attitudes that you mentioned.

I also think girls and women face this in unique ways in our culture, but it's important to recognize that sexual violence affects people of all genders. You mentioned earlier that you work with men, and we do, too. We support people of all gender identities. There are harmful stereotypes and myths that affect people of all identities, and we need to break those down.

Years ago, we participated in the screening of a film called [The Mask You Live In](#), which explores the damaging stereotypes boys face. It's crucial to break those stereotypes and foster real conversations about well-being and emotional authenticity. When we're more connected to ourselves and each other, it's harder to be manipulated by others.

We also need more education around the specific needs of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, including how to avoid victim blaming. At Wings, we're working on a series called "[Champions of Healing](#)" to help educate the community on how to respond to adult survivors with care and compassion. We even created little pocket cards with simple steps on how to respond to survivors, because often, people want to say the right thing but don't know how.

This idea came from a survivor, [Marilyn Van Derbur Adler](#), who once shared a story about how she had to educate someone how to respond to her, after disclosing her experience of incest. The person was frozen, unsure of what to say. Her wisdom inspired us to provide resources that can guide people in those crucial moments. Ultimately, by modeling and normalizing these conversations, we can begin to change the culture around sexual violence. And it starts with discussions like this one.

**Laura Patlan:** I really appreciate you bringing that up, Jenny, because it's crucial to acknowledge that sexual violence can happen to anyone. It happens to men and boys much more often than we realize. And when you mentioned how children in media can be sexualized, I think it's also important to highlight the cultural aspects.

In the U.S., certain cultures, particularly Black and Brown youth, are often sexualized or "aged up" in media. For example, an eight-year-old might be referred to as a "young woman," when she's just a child. There's this aging up of certain communities that doesn't happen to white children in the same way. There's a real need for more education around cultural awareness and how these biases show up in media.

**Q:** What support is available for loved ones of sexual assault survivors?

**Laura Patlan:** The Blue Bench does offer a workshop for secondary survivors called "[Someone I Love](#)." It's available in both English and Spanish and can be attended in person or virtually. It's a space for folks to learn more about the impact of trauma, how it might show up, and how they can best support their loved one. Additionally, we try to let folks know that our hotline is for anyone who has been impacted by sexual violence, not just someone who is a survivor.

**Jenny Stith:** Similarly, we offer a group for loved ones because we want the [loved ones of survivors](#) to be educated, so that they can be supportive. They also need to engage in their own learning and healing journey. This issue shouldn't just be on the shoulders of survivors of sexual violence; it's something we all need to lean into. Our [healing guide](#) includes a section specifically for loved ones. Additionally, the "Champions of Healing" series will include a track for loved ones, allies, and professionals, because we want to make it more likely that survivors will receive a supportive response versus victim-blaming, denial, or minimization.

\*Note: [Click here](#) to learn more about how to respond to friends or family who may share they have been sexually abused as a child.

## Q: What training or resources can help mental health professionals better support sexual assault survivors?

**Jenny Stith:** We've conducted two phases of a needs assessment in Colorado, collaborating with the CO School of Public Health and more recently, with The Gemini Group, particularly focusing on the needs of survivors within communities of color. We aimed to understand access to support, specifically for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and the findings revealed a significant gap in training for professionals on this topic. The demand for training is quite high. Feedback from clinicians who serve as our support group facilitators indicates that many haven't received adequate training on this community's needs in their graduate programs. The stigma and denial are prevalent, not only culturally, but also within professional and academic settings.

Wings is actively working on developing training programs to address this gap. If you're a [provider](#) recognizing a lack of training in this area, I encourage you to reach out to us. It's also vital for professionals to make strong referrals to specialists who are trained in serving the needs of adult survivors, as no one can be expected to know everything. But if an adult survivor goes to a therapist and gets a bad response, like victim-blaming, that can often cause equal harm to the abuse they originally experienced. It's crucial that we work together to ensure that survivors receive compassionate and informed support.

For Providers wishing to refer survivors to Wings, this [resource](#) is available.

**Laura Patlan:** In terms of where folks can access some of this training, I recommend checking out [CCASA's](#) YouTube page, which features some informative webinars covering various aspects of sexual violence. These resources serve as a great primer for understanding the topic.

Additionally, we didn't delve into an important area that deserves attention: supporting survivors with disabilities or chronic illnesses. This demographic has unique needs and experiences that differ from those of able-bodied individuals. A valuable resource for this is an organization called [Activating Change](#), which offers webinars focused on working with survivors with disabilities, including specific topics like supporting deaf survivors. They provide practical insights that can enhance understanding and responsiveness. I encourage people to explore these webinars and consider subscribing to their newsletters for ongoing updates and information.

Healing is possible for survivors, and they can move from the impacts of trauma to resilience and even post-traumatic growth. Sexual assault is a serious injury, and while the journey of healing is not easy, many survivors have demonstrated remarkable progress in reclaiming aspects of their lives. That's what we want to support and encourage. It's crucial for the community to support survivors and engage in collective healing, as we don't have to accept the prevalence of these issues. Survivors should know that their experiences are normal responses to abnormal situations, and loved ones can gain insight into how to support them. The healing process is often bumpy, with good and bad days, but community support is essential in navigating this journey together.

Thank you for engaging in this conversation for change. If you have any additional questions, need clarification, or would like to connect with the speakers, don't hesitate to reach out.

- Jenny Stith, [Wings](mailto:jenny.stith@wingsfound.org)—jenny.stith@wingsfound.org
- Laura Patlan, [The Blue Bench](mailto:lpatlan@thebluebench.org)—lpatlan@thebluebench.org
- Jacquie Esquibel, Caring for Denver Foundation—jacquie@caring4denver.org
- Raymael Blackwell, Caring for Denver Foundation—raymael@caring4denver.org

Read more about Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivor Awareness Month [here](#).

We look forward to continuing this dialogue with you. Together, we can foster collective healing and support for survivors of sexual assault.