

## Can't Touch My Soul: A Guide for Lesbian Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

Author: Donna Rafanello

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Alyson Publications. £12.99

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There have been many books written by and about survivors of child sexual abuse, which centre on the healing and recovery of survivors. This book breaks new ground in that it focuses entirely on the experiences of lesbian survivors, and as such it offers a significant, innovative and original contribution to the current literature of child sexual abuse. Through the stories and words of sixty women who have contributed to her book, Rafanello has written extensively about the impact of child sexual abuse on every area of our lives as lesbian women. I was particularly struck by the comprehensiveness of her research; not only has she chosen to concentrate on areas habitually neglected, but she brings a particularly lesbian vision and illumination to these themes. I found this to be both exciting and inspiring.



*Leah Davidson*

Rafanello describes the parallel issues pertaining to childhood sexual abuse and to homophobia, and the double stigma confronting lesbians who are survivors. She tackles the contentious cause and effect question of child sexual abuse and sexual orientation and, quoting extensively from research into the subject and from survivors, effectively dismisses it, concluding that 'any attempt to find a cause for lesbianism is homophobic', and as such undermining. Much of her research with survivors revealed that questioning their sexuality was part of women's internalised homophobia.

Rafanello quotes from researchers who describe the parallel experiences of being lesbian and a survivor of child sexual abuse; the sense of being doubly oppressed or victimised; the possible need to deal, once again, with secrecy, isolation, grief, shame and a sense of having been wronged, abandoned or scorned by society. Lesbians, like abused children, both face the challenge of disclosure and its repercussions; chaos, conflict, anxiety and blame. In some cases the need to protect family members from shame and pain is likely to lead to a distancing of themselves in order to do this.

Because this book is for lesbian survivors, I found the specifically lesbian focus on sex and relationships following childhood sexual

abuse to be both liberating and healing - for once our relationships are the central theme and not an addendum. In talking about lesbian survivors and relationships, Rafanello states, 'given that almost 40% of lesbians are incest survivors, at some point in her life almost every lesbian will be affected by childhood sexual abuse. If they weren't abused themselves, they're very likely to find themselves in a relationship with a woman who was'. She quotes research citing that 38% of women may be survivors, and 38% of lesbian women may be survivors. She explores the issues faced by lesbian survivors where in some couples both partners may feel that the abuse issue is a permanent presence. This creates the dilemma within their sexual intimacy of recreating the abusive situation. She cites research findings proposing that abuse history among lesbians results in issues of negotiated sex and concomitant lack of spontaneity. In a more positive light, however, she also suggests that the emotional bond and understanding of the female experience can create a higher level of acceptance of the partner who is a survivor of child sexual abuse than is possible in heterosexual relationships, and many women interviewed describe their great affinity with other women whose friendship and love made healing possible.

Rafanello suggests that the depth of this bond may also be crucial to the partner's involvement and acceptance of contact with the abusive family. In writing about the challenges facing survivors who choose to continue to relate to their family of origin when the abuse occurred within it, she again brings a particularly lesbian vision to the dilemma, maintaining that 'lesbians' relationships with their mothers are particularly complex', due to the difficulty of coming out and being accepted. This fact, in addition to a relationship possibly already strained due to divulging sexual abuse, can feel insurmountable.

This book contains much useful information about aspects of healing and recovery; in a chapter about healing, Rafanello summarises cognitive techniques that can help with internalised shame and guilt, and describes how therapy can be useful in the healing process. She quotes research outlining how abuse may have interrupted women's' emotional and psychological development and includes research which illustrates the recovery process. She includes current research and information about post traumatic stress disorder and various treatments. Healing therapies and resources specifically for lesbians are included, although her research and subjects are American and therefore are not wholly relevant to a British experience.

I found this book to be written in an accessible and engaging style. Sections on theory and ideas are interspersed with women's' stories and quotes and the combination of the 'academic' and the personal works well. Rafanello considers every area of lesbian life; from coming out to relating to families of origin; from sex and intimacy to lesbian parenting; from alcohol and drug misuse to eating disorders; and explores the myriad ways in which a history of child sexual

abuse may have impacted on the women she interviewed. It is a unique and distinctive book, which will provide a valuable resource for lesbian survivors, the women who love them, and for counsellors and therapists.

#### **Further Resources:**

The following resources may be useful for women needing help or support in the UK.

One in Four – a national charity offering one to one counseling and group support, where all the workers are survivors. This organization is for men and women.

0208 697 2112

The DABS Directory – Directory and Book Services –contains listings of all current resources for sexual abuse.

01709 860023

The Survivors Trust is a national umbrella organization for all specialist services around sexual abuse.

01788 551150

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## **The Complete Gay and Lesbian Parenting Guide**

Arlene Istar Lev  
Berkley 2004. 364 pages

### **For Lesbian Parents**

Suzanne M Johnson & Elizabeth O'Connor  
Guilford Press 2001. 242 pages

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The irony of agreeing to review two parenting books is that between sharing care for my two-year-old son and a busy therapy practice, I don't have time to read whole books. But I'm glad I read both of these, especially the Johnson and O'Connor. I read them both cover to cover and for gay parents and therapists, their benefits are, like all good parenting books, as reference texts to consult for ideas about a parenting issue.

Both books draw on real parenting experience with studies and examples gleaned from a specific research study in the case of Johnson and O'Connor and through client information and internet networks in the case of Istar Lev.

Both also cover basically the same territory including descriptions of different types of family, how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)