

## **What is Ritual Abuse?**

The term 'ritual abuse' was first used in the early 1980's, to describe a particular form of abuse, (predominantly of children), involving organised ritual as a central feature. The term first appeared in North American literature and was used in Australia from 1984 onwards (Scott, 2001). Since this time, the term ritual abuse has been defined in various ways, by various people, including survivors, academics and workers from professional fields that come into contact with survivors and perpetrators e.g. police, social workers, psychologists etc.

Ritual abuse has existed for longer than the last twenty years. Survivors talk of their childhood experiences of ritual abuse, occurring in the 1950's and 60's. Ritually abusive practices within families are often trans-generational, meaning they are practised by various generations of family members over many years. Evidence, derived from court cases and personal accounts, indicate ritual abuse existed as far back as the 16th century.

The extent to which it is practised in Australia is hard to determine due to a number of factors, including the highly secretive nature of ritual abuse practices and a culture of disbelief which further hides it and, which influences and impedes political and social institutions' responses toward it.

The 1989 Report by the Ritual Abuse Task Force of Los Angeles County Commission for Women, defined ritual abuse in the following way:

*Ritual abuse usually involves repeated abuse over an extended period of time. The physical abuse is severe, sometimes including torture and killing. The sexual abuse is usually painful, sadistic and humiliating, intended as a means of gaining dominance over the victim. The psychological abuse is devastating and involves the use of ritual indoctrination. It includes mind control techniques which convey to the victim a profound terror of the cult members and of evil spirits they believe cult members can command. Both during and after the abuse most victims are in a state of terror mind control and dissociation. (ASCA, 2002).*

Survivors of ritual abuse may give varying descriptions of their experiences. However, a number of factors generally feature across accounts including:

- The abuse includes physical, sexual and psychological abuse.
- The abuse constitutes a range of criminal acts.

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- It is systematic, can be ceremonial and often occurs within a group setting (usually more than one perpetrator at a time, but not always).
- Like all abuse, ritual abuse is about power and control, but is designed to more expressly meet the needs of a group, with the specific purpose of indoctrination into that group's belief system or ideology.
- Mind control techniques or programming plays a significant part in keeping group members faithful to the group and its needs. Much of this programming is about engendering a sense of terror within group members, so that they will not leave the group or expose the group's criminal practices to outsiders.

Survivors' accounts of their experiences of ritual abuse also include attempts to clearly distinguish this kind of abuse from other kinds of abuse they may have experienced. For example, in Sara Scott's book, *The politics and experience of ritual abuse: beyond disbelief* (2001, p.62-80), women survivors of childhood abuse, including ritual abuse, clearly distinguished between their experiences of more "regular" forms of familial abuse, and their experiences of abusive cult ritual, prostitution and child pornography. However, all of these women's accounts illustrated that the different kinds of abuse and exploitation they survived were interconnected within a culture where the abuse of women and children is normalised – a daily reality.

Survivors have also questioned the fact that the term ritual abuse has become too broadly applied. For many survivors ritual abuse, where a belief system or ideology plays a key role in abusive ritual, must not be confused with "ritualistic abuse" – abuse which is perpetrated in a habitualised manner, such as the sexual abuse of a child perpetrated on a daily basis.

The term and practice of ritual abuse has also been closely linked with other categories and practises of abuse, including: –

- a) "organised abuse", which refers to the abuse and exploitation of children through organised crime (prostitution and pornography) and paedophile rings;
- b) institutional abuse, which refers to the abuse of persons within political and social institutions, such as within schools, orphanages and mental health facilities etc;
- c) "organised, sadistic abuse" which is often used as an umbrella term across these kinds of abuse, wherein ritual abuse features as a more extreme example.

## **Who Perpetrates Ritual Abuse?**

Initial discussion of ritual abuse in the late 1980's and early 1990's predominantly implicated satanic cults in the perpetration of ritual abuse against children. However, not every group or cult dedicated to satanic worship practices ritual abuse.

Moreover, ritual abuse is not exclusively practised within such groups. Groups or cults organised around other religious or quasi-religious belief systems, including Christian cults, have been associated with the use of abusive ritual to maintain control over members. Ritual abuse which occurs within religious groups is often called "cult-based ritual abuse" (Kelley, 1988, p.229).

Religion is not always a defining factor of groups who practice ritual abuse. White supremacy groups such as Nazi cults and the Klu Klux Klan have been associated with such practices. Groups involved in organised crime and paedophilia have also been identified as sites of ritual abuse. Ritual abuse which is not part of a developed belief system, but which is primarily about the sexual exploitation of children has been called "pseudo-ritual abuse" (Kelley, 1988, p.229).

Groups who practice ritual abuse are always hierarchical – the abuse is used to maintain this hierarchy and to benefit those at its higher levels. Benefits may include power and prestige, sexual gratification and financial wealth.

Ritual abuse may be practised within family groups across generations, or it may be associated with groups or institutions external to survivors' families. For example, some reports concern the recruiting of children from orphanages and day-care centres, for abuse within paedophile rings. Ritual abuse may be perpetrated through connections between families and external groups.

## **Impact on Survivors**

Impacts of ritual abuse on survivors ritual abuse has profound effects upon the lives of child and adult survivors. The range of psychological symptoms and emotional effects survivors may experience include:

- Trauma related symptoms such as flashbacks, dissociation, amnesia and triggered flight or fight reactions to circumstances which in some way remind the survivor of abusive experiences.

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- Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) or Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD).
- Self-harm and eating issues.
- Suicidal thoughts and attempts.
- Confusing concepts of good and evil.
- Preoccupation with death.
- Memories of ritualistic practices such as Black Masses and sacrifices to Satan and those which involves gang rape, murder, the abuse of animals and being buried alive..
- Memories of symbols and ceremonial objects used in rituals such as inverted crosses, swastikas and chalices.
- Memories of perpetrators dressed in ceremonial and bizarre costumes.
- Memories of being tortured and/or deprived of sleep, food and water.
- Memories of being drugged during rituals.
- Phobias of symbols associated with rituals, blood, certain colours, drugs, incense, candles and being confined in small spaces.
- Shame, guilt and blame.
- Addictions.

This list is not exhaustive, but simply gives us some idea of the immense impact that ritual abuse has on survivors. It also illuminates the tremendous strength of those who survive ritual abuse. Surviving in a culture of disbelief adds to the immense impact of ritual abuse on survivors, is the frustration and despair of attempting to survive within a wider culture where ritual abuse experiences are disbelieved and denied. The culture of disbelief is further compounded through the very social and political systems and institutions, which are supposed to promote the best interests of survivors, as those requiring special personal support and legal protection and justice.

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Australian Governments have been unwilling to acknowledge that ritual abuse exists. It has been suggested that the association of ritual abuse practices with government institutions (for example, orphanages and mental health facilities) has rendered governments afraid of litigation, should they fully acknowledge its existence. For whatever reasons, governments have not encouraged adequate responses toward the issue from those systems which come into contact with survivors and perpetrators. This includes the criminal justice and health-care systems, which are responsible for the provision of services that promote the health and well-being of survivors of sexual violence.

## References

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