

# Sexual abuse: hope for survivors

by Steve Cornell

---

They suffer in silence and shame. Outwardly, they often appear cheerful, but they do this as part of their struggle to survive. Life does not feel normal to them. This was the case for a bright university student who attended our Church. She always appeared to be exceptionally cheerful and eager to participate in Church activities. Yet inwardly, she battled turmoil, fear, confusion and depression.

As she increasingly fought to maintain control of her life, those close to her knew she needed help. At the recommendation of a caring friend, she hesitantly agreed to meet with me to talk about her struggles. In this meeting, she gained the courage to reveal that she had been sexually molested by a family member when she was a young girl. I was the first person to hear her painful story. This began a challenging yet necessary path to healing. Today she is doing well and able to help others facing similar circumstances.

## **A time to learn:**

Several years earlier, during a graduate course in pastoral psychology, I impatiently asked myself, "Why we had to have a whole section on sexual abuse?" We even had to read an entire book about it *and* listen to a guest lecturer. Although I knew little about the subject, I didn't expect to encounter it often. I was very wrong—and very humbled by God's grace in equipping an impatient pastor.

For more than a decade now, I've counseled many people dealing with a history of sexual abuse. I've also repeatedly recommended the book I was assigned in that class. I remain humbled by how kind God was to equip me to help those struggling to overcome the life-debilitating consequences of sexual abuse. During my graduate class, my eyes were opened to a world of darkness that holds victims in silent pain. The more we learned about the issue, the more my heart grew heavy for the many victims of this evil. More recently, I've teamed up with other counselors who are uniquely gifted to help victims of sexual abuse.

Most of my counseling has focused on those who were sexually abused as children by family members. They come to me as adults who are struggling to live normal lives. They battle feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Since their abuse involved manipulation and force, they long to feel a sense of control. They often try to gain this feeling through excessive and controllable behaviors like exercise and dieting. Yet they easily spiral out of control. Inability to function and overall lack of motivation can inexplicably grip them.

It's not unusual for survivors to experience profound loneliness, abnormally extended times of sleep and loss of appetite. Mood swings plague those battling the grip of sexual abuse. Unusual gregariousness can give way to unexplainable periods of depression and crying. Other unexpected waves of emotion include self-hatred, panic attacks, irrational phobias, guilt, shame, overall sense of humiliation, unexplainable anger and rage, lack of normality and feeling trapped.

Survivors of sexual abuse sometimes turn to other forms of abuse to escape their pain. Obsessive behaviors ranging from alcohol and drug abuse to sexual addictions and promiscuity become a way of escape. Sometimes victims engage in self-mutilation and entertain suicidal thoughts.

Without help from a caring friend, most victims do not recognize how badly they have been affected. They tend to suppress the past to survive the present. Victims often conceal their pain and keep others at a distance. Relationships don't come easily to these adults. Trust, a main chord of healthy relating, feels out of reach because of their experience of betrayal. Yet they long for close relationships as much as they fear them. They fear that allowing someone to become a caring friend will cause suppressed feelings to emerge. Vulnerability is risky but necessary for gaining freedom.

## **Marriage and sexual abuse**

Those who enter marriage relationships without first addressing their history of sexual abuse rarely do well in marriage. To flourish in marriage requires vulnerability, transparency and trust. These are painfully difficult qualities for victims of sexual abuse. Marriage can provide a helpful context for recovery and renewal but it requires large amounts of love and devotion from a spouse. It also requires assistance from a wise counselor.

The person who marries a victim of sexual abuse is often surprised by the effects of the abuse. It's not uncommon for the mate of a victim to feel frustrated, confused and helpless. They typically interpret the behavior of the victim as a personal affront. When the walls come up or the emotions shut down, they interpret it as rejection or a failure on their part. The intimacy and closeness of marriage requires a level of vulnerability survivors feel unable to give. Adults who are victims of child sexual abuse must seek wise counsel if they want to enjoy healthy relationships.

**Overcoming the past:**

The only thing we can change about the past is how we allow it to effect us in the future. One victim of abuse expressed her pursuit of freedom as a refusal to tie her soul to her abuser any longer. As hard as it will be, victims must courageously acknowledge their pain and confront their past.

The path to freedom requires dealing with the past but the most formidable obstacle is often fear. Those who have been abused should remember that they have been victimized by the evil actions of others. They must reject self-blame and all blame that others try to project on to them. Although difficult, they must reject the powerful emotions of shame, guilt and fear that hold them in bondage.

The book I was assigned to read, *"A Door of Hope: Recognizing and Resolving the pains of Your Past"* by Jan Frank, emphasizes the importance of confronting your past. As Jan Frank explains, this must also involve some form of confrontation of the abuser. After counseling others through this painfully necessary process, I know for sure that the freedom awaiting the victim is worth the challenge of confronting the past.

**Relating to God**

Relating to God is another difficulty for victims of sexual abuse. "How can I trust God if He didn't protect me when I was vulnerable?" they ask. It is hard to fully understand how God's control relates to the evil actions of people. And these kinds of questions mixed with feelings of worthlessness and anger combine to obstruct faith in God. Such hesitations and struggles must not be treated lightly. Scripture reminds us to "be merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 22).

Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse need a merciful and wise guide to help them in their struggle to trust God. They will especially need help to understand the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation, see: <http://thinkpoint.wordpress.com/2007/07/28/forgiveness-is-one-thing-reconciliation-is-another/>.

Many others (like the student who entered my office) have walked this path and have found faith and freedom. It is possible to know the joy of freedom from bondage to a painful past.

<http://thinkpoint.wordpress.com/2011/02/01/sexual-abuse-hope-for-survivors/>