



HEALING THE WOUNDS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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NORTHSTAR INSPIRATION

*Emotional
Health Insights
from a Christian
Perspective*



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THE WOUNDS

Adult sexual contact with children is a universally prohibited behavior, yet sexual abuse and incest have been reported in almost every civilized society. The most common forms of incest are father/daughter, stepfather/stepdaughter, uncle/niece, and brother/sister. Child sexual abuse and incest may also be homosexual.

The frequency of incest and sexual abuse varies with different research groups. Some research indicates as many as 25% of college-age females report sexual abuse and molestation incidents. There are no cultural, economic, geographic, racial, or religious barriers that make one immune from this abuse.

Scripture offers guidelines to keep sexual relationships within the context of marriage. Non-marital sexual relationships within a family are against God's plan and are prohibited. (Leviticus 18)

LINGERING EFFECTS

Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse may show evidence of their abuse through symptoms in physical, behavioral, emotional, and spiritual development.

Physical Effects

Physically, victims may have symptoms involving chronic tension, migraine headaches, insomnia, nausea, and stomach ailments.

Behavioral/Emotional Effects

Behavioral/emotional symptoms may include difficulties with initiating or maintaining personal relationships. Some of the most difficult issues survivors face involves establishing intimacy with others. According to research, 89% of incest survivors reported an inability to trust people, while 86% also struggled to develop close relationships (Lundberg-Love, et. al., 1987).

Other behavioral and emotional symptoms include tendencies toward self-harm, such as eating disorders and suicidal behavior, fear of separation from others, or tendencies to withdraw from social interaction. Effects of abuse may influence the personality of survivors and they may demand perfection from themselves and others. Some survivors become extremely controlling or manipulative of others, while others are unable to act independently and become passive.

Survivors may experience difficulties related to low self-esteem, guilt, anger, or alienation. These effects of abuse not only impact victims as individuals but also have a strong influence on relationships with their spouse, friends, and other family members. The repercussions of abuse may also lead to problems in parenting as the cycle continues and children may become victims of abuse by adult survivors.

Spiritual Effects

Spiritually, survivors face many challenges. A survivor may become



overly active in the church but may not experience peace or joy. They may feel burdened with behavioral/emotional and physical symptoms and experience little or no freedom in the Spirit. While anger with God or the church are common, many victims have difficulty expressing their anger. It may be difficult for them to forgive or receive forgiveness. Many search for quick-fix answers to problems that have developed over a number of years.

Abuse victims often develop distorted images of God in which they impose negative characteristics, similar to the perpetrator, on Him. God may be seen as unforgiving, demanding, angry, punitive, critical, and judgmental. Seeing Him as a God of love and kindness, personally interested in their lives can be life-changing.

GETTING HELP

The nature and complexity of an abusive experience leaves survivors needing a strong support system and network of trusted individuals in whom they find comfort and encouragement.

Unfortunately, there are several common barriers in the process of acquiring a strong support system:

- Denial, such as stating, “It didn’t happen, it didn’t affect me.”
- Blaming oneself for the abusive incident
- Believing nothing will help
- Feeling spiritually inadequate or full of shame
- Feeling too embarrassed or ashamed to look for or accept help

WHAT SURVIVORS CAN DO

- Identify and own the abuse and the resulting problems. Examine yourself carefully, looking at mood, fears, relationship problems, spiritual condition, bad habits, self-image and sexual problems. (Psalm 139:23)
- Allow previously trapped emotion to surface. Suppressed emotions affect every area of life. (2 Corinthians 10:5)
- Share your painful experiences. Find a trusted, non-judgmental support person and share your hurts and pain. This could be a counselor or trusted friend, preferably someone who does not have a relationship with your abuser. (Romans 12:15)
- Reject tendencies to blame yourself. You have been victimized by a perpetrator and are not responsible for the abuse.
- Gain knowledge and understanding. You can read and talk with others who share similar experiences and pain. Learn from those who now live healthy and balanced lives. (James 1:5, Proverbs 4:7)
- Forgive those who hurt you. Acknowledge the specific pain, hurt, and injury inflicted on you. Release the perpetrator, letting go of resentment, anger, bitterness, and hatred. Forgive, not because they deserve it, but so you are free from bitterness. There are many complicated blocks and deceptions in this area. Be willing to seek help. (Matthew 6:12)
- Identify current vulnerabilities. Satan uses your pain and hurt against you. Know where you may be attacked. Develop a spiritual defense, then take a stand against the enemy of your soul. (Ephesians 6)
- Be restored to a right relationship with God and others. Do not let mistrust and anger from the past destroy your relationships into the future. (1 Corinthians 1:8-9, Colossians 5:17)
- Begin to reach outside of yourself. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4) God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. (Psalm 147:3) This promise assures believers of God’s understanding of their deep physical, emotional spiritual pain. He promises us understanding, comfort, and assurance of His never-failing love. He is ever-faithful and has promised not to leave us or forsake us.

EMOTIONAL HEALING

“Letting go” is essential in healing from sexual abuse. It is important to not confuse “letting go” with burying or suppressing the emotional turmoil associated with the abuse. It is crucial to deal with the difficult feelings such as shame, guilt, rage, grief, and fear. Trying to bury these feelings never makes them go away. It is only when these emotions are acknowledged, addressed, and adequately processed they can be truly released.

This process is difficult without help. Seek out the counsel of a pastor, trusted friend, or professional counselor. Be patient with yourself. Healing seldom happens overnight—it often takes months, and even years, to fully process the difficult residual effects of sexual abuse.

Don't let bitterness drag the pain of the past into the future. Restoration, healing, encouragement, and hope are available to us through God's love and with the help of God's faithful servants.

SOURCE

Lundberg-Love, P.K., Crawford, C.M. & Geffner, R.A. (1987). *Personality characteristics of adult incest survivors*. In R. Geffner (Chair), *Characteristics and treatment of adult incest survivors*. Symposium presented at the Southwestern Psychological Association annual meeting, New Orleans, LA.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This information in this publication is not intended as a substitute for professional help or to be used as a diagnostic tool. If you have serious difficulties with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, please seek professional help.