

When a Spouse Has Suffered from Childhood Sexual Abuse

In response to a call from a distraught husband whose wife had just begun therapy for childhood sexual abuse, I asked a member of the sexual abuse prevention organization Darkness to Light (www.D2L.org) to recommend some resources. I received a detailed description of the recovery process, book recommendations for the husband, and websites where he could find an appropriate therapist. Mindful of my ignorance about this issue, I read the books and visited the websites to learn how to offer him understanding, encouragement, and hope.

I learned the importance of listening compassionately when someone begins to talk about traumatic childhood experiences. Although we might react initially with shock and horror, survivors need to know that someone believes them, and they need assurance that whatever happened was not their fault. Many are already deeply wounded by the disbelief and denial of those who should have protected them, and we do not want to add to that damage just because we have heard stories of false accusations and distorted memories.

I also learned that it is urgent to help persons impacted by child sexual abuse find qualified therapists. A survivor needs to work with an effective therapist who understands the impact of child sexual abuse, preferably a certified sex therapist also certified in EMDR (www.emdr.com), a highly effective tool for gentle emotional memory processing. The spouse of the survivor will need a therapist experienced in dealing with these issues too, and the couple will also need to work together with a trained couples therapists experienced in dealing with child sexual abuse issues and with whom they both feel comfortable.

Wikipedia defines Child Sexual Abuse as any attempt by an adult or adolescent to use a child for sexual stimulation, perhaps by indecent exposure, display of pornography, sexual talk, sexual contact, or production of pornographic materials involving the child. The Darkness to Light website indicates that one out of every four women and one out of every six men will be sexually abused by the age of 18. Many survivors of child sexual abuse repress memories of such experiences until triggered by some life event, such as the birth of a child or the death of the perpetrator, or by their own readiness to face the truth. Survivors and their families are usually traumatized when they realize and begin to recall what actually happened.

Laura Davis and Ellen Bass, in *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, note that the healing process often does not begin until after the age of 30. The surfacing of repressed memories can cause acute emotional upheaval and acting-out behaviors. Survivors must work actively for healing, participating in therapy for sorting out whatever details and feelings they can recall. They need to release their sense of shame by talking about happened, especially if they were accused of lying or were threatened to keep the abuse secret. They need to understand that they were in no way at fault, that the abuser is entirely to blame, and that they can trust their own perceptions, feelings, and intuitions. Confronting the abuser and those who failed to protect them, if possible, can provide a dramatic breakthrough, but most of all survivors need to forgive themselves for the mistaken belief that they “let” the abuse happen. Some find release in forgiving the abuser, but this is not always possible.

In the meanwhile, however, the spouses or partners of survivors go through their own trauma, wondering if their relationships will ever be the same. They may experience distancing by

the survivor and will usually need to allow space for the healing to take place. They will need support to remain strong, patient, and hopeful when pushed away by their loved one and treated as the enemy. Most will have their own issues to deal with, for which a trained therapist is essential, but good friends and support groups can listen when they need to vent and offer empathy without encouraging destructive behavior.

Given the statistics, many congregations are likely to have members who have experienced Child Sexual Abuse. Spirituality can play an important role in healing, but those who would facilitate healing need to understand the impact on persons of the betrayal of their childhood innocence and trust. Pastors and other church leaders will find the following resources helpful for locating appropriate therapists and for offering survivors and their families understanding and support.

Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child, by Laura Davis (NY: HarperCollins Publisher, 1991). The author, a nationally recognized workshop leader and expert in healing from child sexual abuse, provides partners of survivors with clear insight into the challenging dynamics of their relationships. She notes that while healing is possible, it is not easy or quick, and she offers sound practical advice for both self-care and relationship healing.

Ghosts in the Bedroom: A Guide for Partners of Incest Survivors, by Ken Graber, (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1991). The author describes his wife's growing realization that she was an incest survivor and his realization, when she sought out a therapist to help her heal, that he had issues he needed to work on as well. He describes clearly the thoughts and feelings he experienced during this process, which were confirmed by other participants in support groups for Partners of Sexual Abuse Survivors, and he offers sound advice for coping with and growing through such an experience.

The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse, by Ellen Bass and Laura Bass. The authors intersperse descriptions of the dynamics and impact of child sexual abuse with explicit and dramatic stories of some of the many survivors with whom they have worked. They discuss how children cope with these experiences, how memories surface, and the different stages of recovery, as well as what they need in order to heal: assurance that the abuse was not their fault, that someone believes them, that healing is possible, that their feelings of grief and anger are accepted. The authors also address the concerns of partners, family members, and counselors and provide an extensive list of healing resources, including books, organizations, support groups, and counseling.

The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Relationship: How to Support Your Partner and Keep Your Relationship Healthy, by Diane England, Ph.D. (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2009). The author explains how a traumatic event can overwhelm a person's ability to cope and cause ongoing fight-or-flight symptoms and other acting out, even when danger no longer exists. Whether someone's distress results from war, natural disasters, or physical or sexual abuse, trauma deeply affects his or her partner and other members of the family. The author describes therapeutic options and provides practical helps.

Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering from Sexual Child Abuse, by Mike Lew (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2004) Written by a psychotherapist/sexual abuse counselor, this book speaks to the needs of male survivors of incest and sexual abuse.

www.siawso.org (Survivors of Incest Anonymous)

www.supportforpartners.org (Support for Partners of Child Sexual Abuse Survivors)

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