
CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EVICTION PROCESS

This book is different from the many books published for adult survivors of sexual abuse. The symptoms and consequences of abuse have been written about many times, providing the good advice that “it wasn’t your (the survivor’s) fault.” However, many survivors, especially men, may believe that it was their fault for “allowing” the abuse to take place, not fighting back or not reporting the abuse. This feeling persists because, despite efforts by the survivor and others to reduce the sense of blame in the victim, the role of the abuser has not been examined for what it was. The goal of this book is to help male survivors and those supporting them to understand how abusers are able to do what they do. It will also help the survivor understand how the perpetrator manipulated and conned the victim into a belief system that can perpetuate that feeling of victimization in the survivor’s mind for many years after the abuse took place. It provides a guide to removing the perpetrator’s control over the survivor.

Perpetrators have been characterized in terms of their selfishness, cruelty, betrayal, lack of empathy, and other factors that from an emotional standpoint often reinforce their power over their victims long after the abuse has ended. One survivor told me about how, at the age of 56, he was finally able to disclose to his parents what had happened to him as a child. A few days later, sitting with close family members in an entirely safe setting, he was suddenly overwhelmed by fear and panic. When his father asked him what was wrong he replied, “I’m afraid it will start all over again. I can’t make him stop.” The fact that this survivor knew the abuser had been dead for more than a decade had not weakened the perpetrator’s lingering power over him.

In this instance, the emotional feelings of helplessness and fear overpowered the survivor’s intellectual understanding that his perpetrator was long dead and unable to hurt him. For many survivors, the emotional perception of the helpless child is louder and more salient than the adult’s rational and logical understanding that he is now safe from the abuse.

As long as the perpetrator remains a feared and powerful presence to the victim, he (or she) can still emotionally control the survivor long after the abuse has stopped. So one

of my goals in writing this book is to provide a better understanding of how sexual perpetrators manipulate their child (and adult) victims and create tapes of helplessness in the survivor's mind that can endure for many years.

BREAKING THE POWER OF THE ABUSER

It is this power issue that many survivors live with, even though the abuse ended decades ago. The perpetrator may be long gone or dead, but his power still affects the victim/survivor. Problems related to the abuse may be magnified when there are multiple perpetrators, and the effects on the survivor may be different from those experienced by the survivor victimized by a single abuser.

The abused child is a victim. Once he begins the process of healing, he becomes a survivor. If you are reading this book as someone who was abused in the past, you are on the road to becoming a survivor – whether you are a teenager or an adult, or even late in life.

This book is about empowerment. By understanding how perpetrators work, the survivor and those supporting his recovery can become more knowledgeable and gain another useful tool in breaking patterns of fear, hopelessness, confusion, and self-defeating behaviors that are part of the legacy of sexual abuse. The fear and helplessness that the child victim experienced are frequently carried into adulthood, and the survivor – now an adult and generally no longer vulnerable to the abuser – feels and reacts to the abuse and the abuser as if he were still a child. It is these lingering emotions and their power over the survivor that this book seeks to address.

This book is written for male survivors. Although much of what is written here is applicable to women as well, the book is focused on the consequences for the male victims that are not necessarily applicable to females. In many respects, the male victim has experiences, physical responses, thoughts, and feelings that may be unlike those of his female counterpart.

The recognition of these differences, and indeed, of the impact of sexual abuse on boys and men more generally, is a fairly recent development. It was only 20-plus years ago that groundbreaking books like Mike Lew's, *Victims No Longer* and Mic Hunter's, *Abused Boys* were first published. These works, and the numerous books about sexually abused boys that followed, describe the special obstacles that many male survivors face due to their gender and/or the gender of their perpetrators.

Many survivors do not care or want to understand how their abusers manipulated, coerced, or exploited them. They may have intense angry feelings that are justified but ultimately unproductive for a more complete healing. Survivors have different perspectives and feelings about the person(s) who abused them and sexual abusers in general. I have spoken with or read the postings of thousands of men who were victimized. Some of the abusers were close to or related to the victim, and others were abused by strangers. Some survivors have relationships today with their abusers, others choose to have nothing to do with the perpetrator, and others have no choice because the abuser is dead or whereabouts unknown.

There is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel about sexual abusers. While few people, if any, would believe it is okay to sexually abuse a child, the feelings of the victim or survivor are his alone. No one, therapists included, can or should tell a survivor how to feel about the person who abused him. What is a concern for me, as a therapist, is when the anger and upset are so paralyzing for the survivor that he loses his direction for healing and concentrates his emotions on rage at the abuser or feels helpless to do anything about the abuse or abuser.

Anger, as noted in Chapter 9, almost always comes from underlying emotions. Once you look at what is behind it, the anger you feel can be productive if it is channeled to help you heal. When it is spinning its wheels in rage at the perpetrator without useful movement in healing, it is like a car that is stuck in a snow bank while the driver just guns his engine full blast in his frustration at being hung up there. There may be a lot of noise and smoke, but the efforts will not likely free the car.

I believe that survivors can become unstuck and move toward emotional health if they can let go of the fear and anger they feel towards the perpetrators and concentrate on the difficult job of healing. This is not to say that survivors should not feel fear or anger. Being angry with someone who has done so much damage to you is a normal reaction and makes sense. However, if the anger doesn't help mobilize healing in a way that will move the person to a place of better understanding and recovery, it is basically fruitless and a waste of valuable emotional resources that could be put to more positive use. For example, if a football player becomes angry with an opponent and lets his resentment cloud his thinking, he might retaliate and pick up a penalty that could hurt his team. On the other hand, if he skillfully channels the energy of his anger, he may feel more powerful and focused, putting out extra effort (for example by sacking the opposing quarterback) that can help him and the team.

Likewise, the fear that survivors have of the perpetrator long after the abuse has ended can immobilize them and limit their growth and healing. I can't and I won't tell survivors how to feel, but my experience in working with both survivors and abusers makes a strong case for the empowerment that happens when a survivor suspends his fear and anger towards the abuser. This is not to say that you "should" or need to give it up entirely or "forgive" the perpetrator; you have a right to your feelings. But as you read this book try to bear in mind that by "letting go", what you are really doing is reclaiming your own power. You are working towards denying the abuser any further control or authority over your feelings and behavior.

Again, I am not saying that you should forgive the perpetrator (see Chapter 15). It is a matter of taking back the space in your brain that the abuser is occupying.

Things you read here will likely trigger unpleasant feelings and memories for you. Remember that emotions and memories are not by themselves fatal. Though you may feel you are re-experiencing the abuse, keep in mind that you are now an adult and are likely quite safe from the abuser. This is another example of how the turmoil you feel about the perpetrator can still have control over you.

This book represents my experience and understanding as a licensed clinical social worker who has worked with male survivors and juvenile and adult sexual abusers as my area of specialization for over thirty years. It takes healing for survivors a step further in understanding the dynamics, manipulation, tricks, methods, and other factors used by the abusers. As you read further, try to use the information as an additional route to empowerment – the healing counter to the sense of vulnerability, weakness, powerlessness, shame, and pain that many survivors still feel when thinking about the abuse and/or the abuser.

DYNAMICS OF ABUSE

Chances are that you are acquainted with hundreds of people. Of all the men you know, how many of them do you think share a history of sexual abuse as a child? Research has identified that approximately one in six men unfortunately have had this experience.¹ But now think of how many men you know who actually have been sexually abused and have told you about it. It is likely that few, if any of them, have disclosed the abuse to you. Chances are that unless you have been in a male survivors' group or retreat, you may know of just a handful of such survivors, or none.

If one in six men had heart disease, colon cancer, or some other major illness, there would likely be a huge national movement to address the problem. Although the sexual abuse of males is significant and affects a large number of people, little is said about it and there are no major public health education campaigns to help survivors and to inform the public about the problem.

Prior to the late 1970s and early 1980s, most people assumed sexual abuse of children was a relatively uncommon phenomenon. Occasionally, the newspapers identified a child molester who had abused a child or two, or a serial pedophile or clergyperson with numerous victims might make the headlines for a while. Incest was seen as a problem of the rural South, and television talk shows paid scant attention to the topic of sexual victimization. If prisoners were raped in jail, it was seen as a joke: “don’t bend over to pick up the soap in the shower” or “they got what they deserved.”

We know now that sexual abuse, particularly of males, is much more prevalent than was believed 20 or 30 years ago. It is a significant contributing factor in substance abuse, mental health problems, and delinquency and crime. Research is now showing that abuse (trauma) not only affects the way we function but also can change the physical structure of the brain.

Male sexual abuse is not talked about much, nor is it the subject of television documentaries. Therefore, male survivors generally do not know that the feelings, thoughts and behaviors they experience may be very common among other men. This ignorance can bring on a sense of being different, as well as feelings of isolation or shame. It is very gratifying when survivors posting on the MaleSurvivor (www.malesurvivor.org) discussion board, or sharing stories in a healing retreat, hear the “Aha!” go off as they realize that others have had similar experiences or feelings and that they are not unique in their emotions, thoughts or experiences.

Knowledge gives you power. It is through the process of gaining knowledge that people can be empowered and overcome the effects of abuse. When a child is sexually abused, he experiences physical sensations and confusing thoughts and feelings. He usually cannot share them with anyone to help him figure out what is normal or what is not. That is to say, the child needs to explore the abuse with a trained therapist who is experienced in this area. When the child is able to discuss his feelings, thoughts and experiences with such a professional, he is better able to put the abuse in perspective and move through the healing process.

So, for example, if the child enjoyed some of the physical sensations of the sexual abuse, he may tell himself (or the abuser says or implies) that he truly wanted it to happen, or if the abuser was male, that he must be gay for liking the physical feelings. When that child, now an adult, discovers that it is absolutely normal for a boy's body to respond when his penis is stimulated, he can begin to shake off the belief that he must be gay or that he was in some way responsible for the abuse. And for the boy who is gay, the confusion of his own feelings may be exacerbated by the abuse, thus obstructing his normal sexual development as a healthy gay man.

It may be useful for some survivors and family members to have a checklist of common symptoms and issues that male survivors experience, and many of the books currently available provide such information. However, people tend to feel nervous when they see an inventory of numerous problems and become overwhelmed by a feeling that they are "damaged goods."

Rather than present a checklist of symptoms and behaviors frequently seen in sexual abuse victims and survivors, I address some of the more common and least talked-about ones that affect males in this book. Since the majority of the effects of abuse are emotional rather than physical (although physical injury does sometimes happen), we will be looking at the psychological harm that has been done to you.

Having said that, we know that abuse not only manifests itself in the psyche, it can also cause physical changes to the brain. So before we move on to other issues it will help us to look briefly at how the brain works and what it does with traumatic experiences and information. By understanding how the perpetrator has "messed" with your brain and the emotions that are processed through this organ, you, the survivor, are taking a major step in reclaiming what is rightfully yours – peace of mind and healthier functioning in life and relationships. This is what we will do in the next chapter.

Chapter 1 Endnotes

1. See, among many others, Holmes & Slap's 1998 detailed review of the literature, which cites general-population studies indicating this prevalence rate.

ABUSE AND YOUR BRAIN

If you experienced a physical injury, such as a broken leg, no one would expect you to dance gracefully or walk without a limp for a period of time. Sexual abuse needs to be seen in a similar way. It usually does not cause any sign of physical damage or create limitations that one can readily see, but the survivor of sexual abuse typically suffers psychological or emotional injuries that can be just as harmful or debilitating.

People who are unfamiliar with sexual abuse might ask the survivor why the damage is still so profound for him, many years later. They offer a frequent piece of advice from their own lack of understanding: “Just get over it.” Or they may be so uncomfortable with the topic that they can do little to comfort the survivor. The term “soul murder” used by some survivors to describe the effects of abuse on their lives has little meaning to those who do not live with a survivor or understand how deep the impact can go. Both survivors and those who care about them need to understand that the invisible emotional and psychological injuries caused by sexual abuse can be just as catastrophic as the most terrible-looking wound.

One of the first male survivors I worked with explained it to me this way: he and a non-survivor could be walking on a beach. The wind on the surf is producing a fine mist that falls on their skin. The non-survivor feels it as a cooling spray, but the survivor’s skin has been sanded; it looks normal but is covered with tiny, nearly invisible abrasions. To this survivor, the cool salty spray stings his abraded skin; sexual abuse had had the effect of taking sandpaper to his skin, so he experienced his environment differently and more painfully than the non-survivor. This is the invisible injury that many survivors have from the abuse – hardly noticeable to others, yet painful for them.

This injury suffered by survivors of sexual abuse is stored in the brain. Therapists and researchers who study the effects of trauma on the brain know that trauma, including sexual abuse, actually affects the brain’s structure and its ability to handle and process information and the various emotional responses that most of us who have not experienced trauma take for granted.

This portion of the book is intended to be a “Trauma and Your Brain for the Non-Medical.” Much of the information given here on brain biology is paraphrased