

# The Innocent Victims of Child Abuse

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"I'M NEAR 40 now," says Eilene. "And even though my problem is over 30 years old, it still haunts me. The anger, the guilt, the problems in my marriage! People try to understand, but they just can't." Eilene's problem? She is a victim of childhood sexual abuse, and for her the effects have proved to be long lasting.

Eilene is far from alone. Surveys indicate that an alarming number of women—and men—have suffered such mistreatment. Far from being a rare act of deviant behavior, then, childhood sexual abuse is a widespread affliction, one that cuts across all social, economic, religious, and racial lines.

Fortunately, the vast majority of men and women would never even think of mistreating a child in this way. But a dangerous minority have this sick inclination. And contrary to stereotypes, few child abusers are drooling homicidal maniacs who lurk around playgrounds. The majority are persons who have cultivated a convincing veneer of normalcy. They satisfy their perverted lusts by targeting naive, trusting, defenseless children—usually their own daughters. Publicly, they may treat them kindly, tenderly. Privately, they subject them to threats, violence, and humiliating, degrading forms of sexual assault.

Admittedly, it is difficult to comprehend that such horrors could take place in so many seemingly respectable homes. Even in Bible times, though, children were used "for the momentary gratification of . . . sensual passion." (The International Critical Commentary; compare Joel 3:3.) The Bible predicted: "But know this, that in the last days critical times hard to deal with will be here. For men will be lovers of themselves . . . having no natural affection . . . without self-control, fierce, without love of goodness." Therefore, it should not surprise us that child abuse is taking place on a large scale today.—2 Timothy 3:1, 3, 13.

Childhood molestation may leave no physical scars. And not all adults who were victimized as children are visibly distressed. But as an ancient proverb observed: "Even in laughter the heart may be in pain." (Proverbs 14:13) Yes, many victims have deep emotional scars—secret wounds that fester inside. Why, though, does childhood molestation wreak such havoc in some? Why does not the passage of time alone always heal its wounds? The magnitude of this distressing problem demands that we address it. True, some of what follows may be unpleasant to read—especially so if you have been a victim of childhood abuse. But be assured that there is hope, that you can recover.

### [Footnotes]

All names have been changed.

Because definitions of sexual abuse and survey methods vary greatly, accurate statistics are nearly impossible to obtain.

Most victims are molested by their biological fathers or their stepfathers. Abuse also takes place at the hands of older siblings, uncles, grandfathers, adult acquaintances, and strangers. Since the vast majority of victims are female, we will generally refer to them in the feminine gender. For the most part, though, the information presented herein applies to both sexes.

\*\*\* g91 10/8 4-6 The Secret Wounds of Child Abuse \*\*\*

## The Secret Wounds of Child Abuse

"I just hate myself. I keep thinking there's something I should have done, should have said to stop it. I just feel so dirty."—Ann.

"I feel alienated from people. I often deal with feelings of hopelessness and despair. Sometimes I want to die."—Jill.

"CHILDHOOD sexual abuse is . . . an overwhelming, damaging, and humiliating assault on a child's mind, soul, and body . . . The abuse invades every facet of one's existence." So says *The Right to Innocence*, by Beverly Engel.

Not all children react to abuse in the same way. Children have different personalities, coping skills, and emotional resources. Much also depends on the child's relationship to the abuser, the severity of the abuse, how long the abuse lasted, the child's age, and other factors. Furthermore, if the abuse is exposed and a child receives loving adult support, damage can often be minimized. However, many victims suffer deep emotional wounds.

### Why It Devastates

The Bible offers insight into why such damage occurs. Ecclesiastes 7:7 observes: "Mere oppression may make a wise one act crazy." If this is true for an adult, imagine the effect of brutal oppression on a small child—particularly if the abuser is a trusted parent. After all, the first few years of life are critical to a child's emotional and spiritual development. (2 Timothy 3:15) It is during those tender years that a youngster begins developing moral boundaries and a sense of personal worth. By bonding to her parents, a child also learns the meaning of love and trust.—Psalm 22:9.

"With abused children," explains Dr. J. Patrick Gannon, "this process of trust building gets derailed." The abuser betrays the child's trust; he robs her of any semblance of safety, privacy, or self-respect and uses her as a mere object for his own self-gratification. Small children do not understand the significance of the immoral acts being forced upon them, but almost universally they find the experience upsetting, frightening, humiliating.

Childhood abuse has thus been called "the ultimate betrayal." We are reminded of Jesus' question: "Who is the man among you whom his son asks for bread—he will not hand him a stone, will he?" (Matthew 7:9) But the abuser gives a child, not love and affection, but the cruelest "stone" of all—sexual assault.

### **Why the Wounds Persist**

Proverbs 22:6 says: "Train up a boy according to the way for him; even when he grows old he will not turn aside from it." Clearly, parental influence can last a lifetime. What, though, if a child is trained to believe that she is powerless to prevent sexual intrusion? Trained to perform perversions in exchange for "love"? Trained to view herself as worthless and dirty? Could not that lead to a lifetime of destructive behavior? Not that childhood abuse excuses later inappropriate adult conduct, but it can help explain why abuse victims may tend to act or feel a certain way.

Many abuse victims suffer an array of symptoms, including depression. Some also seethe with persistent and at times overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, and rage. Other victims may suffer emotional shutdown, an inability to express or even feel emotion. Low self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness also afflict many. Sally, who was abused by her uncle, recalls: "Each time he molested me I felt powerless and frozen, numb, stiff, confused. Why was this happening?" Reports psychologist Cynthia Tower: "Studies show that often people who were abused as children will carry through life a perception of themselves as a victim." They may marry an abusive man, project an air of vulnerability, or feel powerless to defend themselves when threatened.

Normally, children have 12 years or so to prepare for the emotions that awaken during puberty. But when lewd acts are forced upon a young child, she may be overwhelmed by the feelings aroused. As one study showed, this may later impede her ability to enjoy marital intimacies. Confesses a victim named Linda: "I find the sexual side of marriage to be the hardest thing in my life. I get the most dreadful sensation that it is my father there, and I get panicky." Other victims may react in just the opposite way and develop compulsive immoral desires. "I led a promiscuous life and would end up having sexual relations with complete strangers," admits Jill.

Abuse victims may also have difficulty in maintaining healthy relationships. Some simply cannot relate to men or to authority figures. Some will sabotage friendships and marriages by becoming abusive or controlling. Yet others tend to avoid close relationships entirely.

There are even victims who turn their destructive feelings on themselves. "I hated my body because it had responded to the stimulation of the abuse," admits Reba. Tragically, eating disorders, workaholism, alcohol and drug abuse, are common among abuse victims—desperate attempts to bury their feelings. Some may also act out their self-hatred in more direct ways. "I have cut myself, dug my fingernails into my arms, burned myself," adds Reba. "I felt I deserved to be abused."

Do not jump to the conclusion, however, that anyone who feels or acts in such ways has necessarily been abused sexually. Other physical or emotional factors may be involved. For example, experts say that similar symptoms are common among adults raised in dysfunctional families—where their parents battered them, belittled and humiliated them, ignored their physical needs, or where the parents were drug or alcohol addicts.

### **Spiritual Damage**

The most insidious effect of all that childhood abuse can wreak is the potential spiritual damage. Molestation is a "defilement of flesh and spirit." (2 Corinthians 7:1) By performing perverted acts on a child, by violating her physical and moral boundaries, by betraying her trust, an abuser contaminates a child's spirit, or dominant mental inclination. This can later impede the victim's moral and spiritual growth.

The book *Facing Codependence*, by Pia Mellody, further notes: "Any serious abuse . . . is also spiritual abuse, because it taints the child's trust of a Higher Power." For example, a Christian woman named Ellen asks: "How can I think of Jehovah as a Father when I have this concept of a cruel, raging man for an earthly father?" Says another victim, named Terry: "I never related to Jehovah as a Father. As God, Lord, Sovereign, Creator, yes! But as Father, no!"

Such individuals are not necessarily spiritually weak or lacking in faith. On the contrary, their persistent efforts to follow Bible principles give evidence of spiritual strength! But imagine how some might feel when they read a Bible text such as Psalm 103:13, which says: "As a father shows mercy to his sons, Jehovah has shown mercy to those fearing him." Some may grasp this intellectually. Yet, without a healthy concept of what a father is, it may be hard for them to respond to this text emotionally!

Some may also find it difficult to be "like a young child" before God—vulnerable, humble, trusting. They may hold back their true feelings from God when praying. (Mark 10:15) They may hesitate to apply to themselves the words of David at Psalm 62:7, 8: "Upon God are my salvation and my glory. My strong rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people. Before him pour out your heart. God is a refuge for us." Feelings of guilt and unworthiness may even undermine their faith. One victim said: "I believe in Jehovah's Kingdom very much. However, I don't really feel I'm good enough to be there."

Of course, not all victims are affected the same way. Some have been drawn to Jehovah as a loving Father and feel no obstacle at all in relating to him. Whatever the case, if you are a victim of childhood sexual abuse, you may find it of great value to discern how it has affected your life. Some may be content to let matters rest. However, if it appears to you that the damage is significant, take heart. Your wounds can be healed.

### **[Footnotes]**

Our discussion focuses on what the Bible calls *por-nei'a*, or fornication. (1 Corinthians 6:9; compare Leviticus 18:6-22.) This includes all forms of immoral intercourse. Other abusive acts, such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, and exposure to pornography, while not *por-nei'a*, may also damage a child emotionally.

Since children tend to trust adults, abuse by a trusted family member, older sibling, family friend, or even by a stranger also constitutes a devastating betrayal of trust.

See Awake! of December 22, 1990.

**\*\*\* g91 10/8 7-11 "A Time to Heal" \*\*\*  
" A Time to Heal"**

Ann was everyone's shoulder to cry on; a rescuer of anyone with a problem. Poised and impeccable in appearance, she gave not even a hint of having secret emotional wounds, until one day she began to remember. "I was at work," recalls Ann, "and I started getting pains and intense feelings of shame. I could hardly stand up! For days I suffered. Then a memory came back of my stepfather molesting me—really, it was rape. And it was not the only time."

THERE is "a time to heal." (Ecclesiastes 3:3) And for many victims of childhood abuse—like Ann—the emergence of long-buried memories is an important part of the healing process.

How, though, could anyone forget something as traumatic as sexual assault? Consider how helpless a child is against the advances of a father or of some other powerful adult. She cannot run. She dare not scream. And she dare not tell—anyone! Yet, she may have to face her abuser every day and act as if nothing happened. Maintaining such a pretense would be difficult for an adult; it is nearly impossible for a child. So she uses the tremendous imagination with which children are endowed and escapes mentally! She pretends the abuse didn't happen, blanking it out or numbing her senses to it.

Actually, from time to time, all of us block out things we don't want to see or hear. (Compare Jeremiah 5:21.) But abuse victims use this ability as a tool of survival. Some victims report: "I pretended it was happening to someone else and I was just a spectator." "I pretended I was asleep." "I did my math problems in my head."—Strong at the Broken Places, by Linda T. Sanford.

Not surprisingly, then, the book *Surviving Child Sexual Abuse* claims: "It is estimated that up to 50 per cent of survivors of child sexual abuse are not aware of these experiences." Some, though, may recall the abuse itself but block out the feelings connected with it—the pain, the rage, the shame.

### **Repression—Tug-of-War in the Mind**

Is it not best, then, that these things stay buried—that victims simply forget about them? Some may well choose to do so. Others simply cannot. It is as Job 9:27, 28 says: "If I smile and try to forget my pain, all my suffering comes back to haunt me." (Today's English Version) The repression of frightening memories is an exhausting mental effort, a ferocious game of tug-of-war that may even have serious health consequences.

As a victim gets older, the pressures of life often weaken her ability to repress the past. A whiff of cologne, a familiar-looking face, a startling sound, or even an examination by a doctor or a dentist may trigger a frightening onslaught of memories and feelings. Should she not simply try harder to forget? At this point many victims find relief in trying to remember! Says a woman named Jill: 'Once the memories are brought out, they lose their power. To keep them in is more painful and dangerous than to dispose of them.'

### **The Value of Acknowledging**

Why so? For one thing, remembering allows a victim to grieve. Grief is a natural reaction to trauma; it helps us to put distressing events behind us. (Ecclesiastes 3:4; 7:1-3) An abuse victim, though, has been denied her grief, forced to deny her horrifying experience, made to bottle up her pain. Such repression may result in what doctors call posttraumatic stress disorder—a numbed state virtually devoid of emotion.—Compare Psalm 143:3, 4.

As memories begin to return, the victim may virtually relive the abuse. Some victims even temporarily regress to a childlike state. "When a flashback is in progress," recalls Jill, "I often have physical symptoms. Sometimes the memories are so oppressive, I feel I am being driven to madness." Long-suppressed childhood rage may now come tumbling forth. "Remembering plunges me into depression and anger," says Sheila. But under these unique circumstances, anger is appropriate. You are grieving, expressing pent-up righteous rage! You have a right to hate the wicked acts perpetrated against you.—Romans 12:9.

Says one abuse victim: "When I was able to really remember, I had a great sense of relief . . . At least now I knew what I was dealing with. As difficult as it was on me to remember, it did give me back a part of my life that had become scary because it was so unknown and mysterious."—The Right to Innocence.

Remembering may also help a victim to get to the root of some of her problems. "I always knew I had deep self-hatred and anger but didn't know why," says one victim of incest. Remembering helps many to realize that what happened was not their fault, that they were victimized.

Of course, not all remember their abuse as dramatically or as vividly as others. And most counselors agree that it is not necessary to recall every detail of one's abuse in order to heal from its effects. Simply acknowledging that abuse occurred can be a big step toward recovery.—See box on page 9.

### **Getting Support**

If you are a victim of childhood sexual abuse, do not ride out the storm of returning memories by yourself. It helps to talk out your feelings. (Compare Job 10:1; 32:20.) Some who are extremely distressed may decide to seek the help of a qualified physician, counselor, or mental-health professional. In any case, a trusted friend, a marriage mate, family members, or Christian overseers who will

listen with empathy and respect can also be valuable allies. "My biggest help has been my best friend, Julie," says Janet. "She's allowed me to talk over and over again about a memory. She allows me to feel the emotions that result. She listens and responds with understanding."

Trust is a risky business, and you may feel unworthy of receiving someone's help—or be too ashamed to talk about your abuse. But a true friend is "born for when there is distress" and may very well rise to the occasion if you give him or her a chance. (Proverbs 17:17) Be selective, though, about whom you confide in. Learn to reveal your concerns gradually. If a friend proves to be sympathetic and discreet, then you might try disclosing more.

It also helps to take good care of yourself physically. Get sufficient rest. Exercise moderately. Maintain a healthy diet. If possible, simplify your life. Feel free to weep. The pain may seem never ending, but in time it will subside. Remember: You lived through the abuse as a helpless child—and survived! As an adult, you have resources and strengths you didn't have back then. (Compare 1 Corinthians 13:11.) So face your painful memories and put them to rest. Rely on God for strength. Said the psalmist: "However great the anxiety of my heart, your consolations soothe me."—Psalm 94:19, The New Jerusalem Bible.

### **Getting Rid of the Guilt and Shame**

Ending self-blame is another important task of recovery. "Even now it's hard for me to think I was innocent," says a victim named Reba. "I wonder, why didn't I stop him?"

Bear in mind, though, that abusers employ the most diabolic means of coercion: authority ("I'm your father!"), threats ("I'll kill you if you tell!"), brute physical force and even guilt ("If you tell, Daddy will go to jail."). Conversely, some use gentle persuasion or gifts and favors. Some misrepresent sexual activities as a game or as parental affection. "He said that this is what people do when they love each other," recalls one victim. How could a little child resist such emotional blackmail and trickery? (Compare Ephesians 4:14.) Yes, the abuser coldly exploits the fact that children are helpless, vulnerable, "babes as to badness."—1 Corinthians 14:20.

Perhaps, then, you need to remind yourself just how vulnerable and helpless you were as a child. You might try spending time with some small children or looking at childhood pictures of yourself. Supportive friends can also help by constantly reminding you that the abuse was not your fault.

Still, one woman says: "I get sick when I remember the feelings my father aroused in me." Some victims (58 percent in one study) recall experiencing arousal during the molestation. Understandably, this causes them much shame. The book *Surviving Child Sexual Abuse* reminds us, however, that "physical arousal [is] simply the body's automatic [response] to being touched or stimulated in certain ways" and that a child has "no control over this arousal." The abuser alone thus bears full responsibility for what transpired. **IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT!**

Take comfort, too, in knowing that God views you as "blameless and innocent" in the matter. (Philippians 2:15) In time any urge to engage in self-destructive behavior may diminish, and you can learn to cherish your own flesh.—Compare Ephesians 5:29.

### **Coming to Terms With Your Parents**

This may prove to be one of the most difficult tasks of recovery. Some continue to be filled with anger, fantasies of revenge—or guilt. One abuse victim said: "I am depressed because I think Jehovah expects me to forgive my molester, and I can't." On the other hand, you may live in morbid fear of your abuser. Or you may have hostile feelings toward your mother if she closed her eyes to the abuse or reacted with denial or anger when abuse was revealed. "My mother told me that I'd have to make allowances for [my father]," recalls one woman bitterly.

It is only natural to feel angry when one has suffered abuse. Nevertheless, the ties that bind families can be strong, and you may not want to cut off all contact with your parents. You may even be willing to consider a reconciliation. Much, though, would depend on the circumstances. Victims are sometimes inclined to forgive their parents outright—not excusing the abuse, but refusing to be consumed with resentment or controlled by fear. Preferring to avoid an emotional confrontation, some are content to 'have their say in their heart' and let matters rest.—Psalm 4:4.

You may come to feel, however, that matters can be resolved only by confronting your parents with the abuse—in person, by phone, or by letter. (Compare Matthew 18:15.) If so, be sure you have recovered sufficiently—or at least have enough support—to withstand the emotional storm that might erupt. Since little will be accomplished by a shouting match, try to be firm but calm. (Proverbs 29:11) You might proceed by stating (1) what took place, (2) how it has affected you, and (3) what you expect from them now (such as apologies, payment for doctor bills, or changes in conduct). At the very least, bringing matters out in the open may help dispel any lingering feelings that you are powerless. And it just might pave the way for a new relationship with your parents.

For example, your father might acknowledge the abuse, expressing deep remorse. He may also have made sincere efforts to change, perhaps by getting treatment for alcohol addiction or by pursuing a study of the Bible. Your mother may likewise beg your forgiveness for her having failed to protect you. Sometimes a full reconciliation may result. However, do not be surprised if you still feel ambivalent about your parents and prefer not to rush into a close relationship with them. At the very least, though, you may be able to resume reasonable family dealings.

On the other hand, the confrontation may trigger a torrent of denial and verbal abuse from the molester and other family members. Worse, you may discover that he is still a threat to you. Forgiveness may then be inappropriate, a close relationship impossible.—Compare Psalm 139:21.

In any event, it may take considerable time before your hurt feelings subside. You may need to remind yourself repeatedly that final justice belongs to God. (Romans 12:19) Talking things over with a supportive listener or even expressing your feelings in writing may

likewise help you work out your anger. With God's help you can work through your anger. With the passage of time, hurtful feelings will no longer dominate your thinking.—Compare Psalm 119:133.

## **A Spiritual Recovery**

Space does not permit us to discuss all the emotional, behavioral, and spiritual issues involved. Suffice it to say that you can do much to facilitate your recovery by "making your mind over" with the help of God's Word. (Romans 12:2) 'Stretch forward to the things ahead,' filling your life with spiritual thoughts and activity.—Philippians 3:13; 4:8, 9.

For example, many abuse victims find much comfort simply by reading through the Psalms. Even greater benefits come, though, by diligently applying Bible principles. In time marital stress can ease. (Ephesians 5:21-33) Destructive behavior can cease. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) Unhealthy sexual feelings can heal. (Proverbs 5:15-20; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5) You can also learn balance in your personal relationships and build solid moral boundaries.—Philippians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:11.

Make no mistake: Recovery requires real determination and supreme effort! Psalm 126:5, though, assures us: "Those sowing seed with tears will reap even with a joyful cry." Remember, too, that the true God, Jehovah, is interested in your welfare. He is "near to those that are broken at heart; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves." (Psalm 34:18) Says one abuse victim: "When I finally realized that Jehovah was aware of every feeling I had and that he cared—really cared—then I finally felt peace inside."

Our loving God, Jehovah, offers even more than peace of mind. He promises a new world of righteousness, where he will wipe out every memory of childhood pain. (Revelation 21:3, 4; see also Isaiah 65:17.) This hope can sustain and strengthen you as you travel the road toward full recovery.

## **[Footnotes]**

Some memories begin their emergence in the form of psychosomatic pains; others are in the form of hallucinations that may be mistaken for demonic activity—intruder sounds, such as doors opening; shadowy figures that move by doorways and windows; the feeling of an invisible presence in bed. Such distress generally ceases when the memories fully emerge.

Valuable information on helping abuse victims is found on pages 27-31 in the October 1, 1983, issue of our companion journal, *The Watchtower*. We recommend that all congregation elders refer back to that issue and pay careful attention to any cases referred to them.

## **[Box on page 9]**

### **Ways to Recover**

- Remembering and acknowledging the abuse
- Grieving over the abuse
- Talking out one's feelings with a supportive listener
- Overcoming feelings of guilt and shame
- Coming to terms with one's parents
- Applying Bible principles to change destructive behavior
- Healing unhealthy sexual feelings
- Developing healthy personal and moral boundaries
- Developing a close relationship with God and fellow Christians

## **[Box on page 10]**

### **Releasing the Past**

Memories are usually released over a period of weeks, months, or years, each emerging memory bringing on a temporary crisis. The Right to Innocence says that at times "you may feel like you are backsliding. You aren't. You are getting better. In actuality, you have gained the strength necessary to face deeper, even more painful feelings and awarenesses." With good reason, though, recovering may temporarily become a person's all-consuming concern.—Proverbs 18:14.

Some victims find it beneficial to read or hear the expressions of other victims. Looking at family photos and childhood memorabilia, visiting childhood sites, and talking to supportive friends and family members may also stir up memories. Particularly effective are writing exercises. Some victims record all they remember of their trauma in a journal. Others pour out their feelings in a letter to their abuser—one that is not sent—which often triggers further memories. Prayer too is a powerful tool of recovery. Like the psalmist you can pray: "Examine me, and know my disquieting thoughts, and see whether there is in me any painful way, and lead me in the way of time indefinite."—Psalm 139:23, 24.

## **[Picture on page 8]**

Facing the past and putting it together again can be one step toward healing

