

# Sexual Abuse:

An introduction for lay counselors helping women

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# Sexual Abuse

## A Lay Counselor's Primer

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## Introduction

Sexual abuse is a plague that is ravaging America's children. One in three girls will be sexually abused by the time she is eighteen years old. The statistics will continue to get worse as violence against women is glamorized in rock and rap music and in increasingly violent movies and television that generation X'ers have been reared on. In a society where the focus is, "If it feels good, do it," our little girls may end up paying the highest price.

Survivors often endure a lifetime of fear, depression, and self-hate. They spend much of their energy trying to bury their toxic shame with food, drugs, work, sex, or anything else that distracts them from the wounds in their hearts. They are tormented by a world turned upside down. Some can't sleep; others sleep too much. Some can't stand to be touched; others mistake sex for love. Their need to protect themselves may turn into co-dependency or they may only be able to see themselves as victims. These ladies are missing out on the freedom and joy that God has for them.

If you are to help these wounded ladies you will need to know what problems to watch for. One seldom sees what he does not expect to find. You will need to recognize what causes the abused woman to think and respond in unhealthy ways, and how to help her view her struggles the way God sees them so she can heal.

There are an endless number of ways for an abused woman to escape from the reality of the pain in her life. The counselor could poke around trying to find each diversion, and the counselee can hide some of those diversions indefinitely if they choose. Instead, it is important for the counselor to identify what distracters God is concerned about. The counselor may want to have the victim pray a prayer like this one, "Lord Jesus, what am I doing to medicate my pain, that keeps me from learning to rely wholly on you?" When the Lord is speaking to the counselee about the problems, it eliminates a lot of work for the counselor.

This resource is designed to give you an overview of common issues in an abused woman's life. It will give you an idea of what to look for but it is only a brief introduction to each topic. To learn more about any of the issues presented in this resource you can visit [www.helpers.homestead.com](http://www.helpers.homestead.com)

God seldom heals two women in the same way. We like to have neat little formulas but the Lord likes to keep us dependant on Him. Some of the topics in this resource have basic generalized suggestions for helping the wounded woman but others don't. Once you have an understanding of a problem, ask the Lord what His solution is for the lady you are working with.

## Abuse Factors

If a caring adult helps the child understand and deal with the abuse, that child will probably not experience long-term damage. Most women who received comfort and support shortly after being abused do not even think of themselves

as victims. In this book we will focus on the implications for those who did not receive emotional support for the abuse they suffered.

There are many things that determine how the abuse will affect the victim; factors like how old she was when she was abused, who abused her, the types of abuse she experienced, and the length of time she was in danger. Every abuse situation is unique, and every child will react differently but we will look at some of the common tendencies.

## Age of the Child

The child's maturity at the onset of abuse is a good place to start looking for the effects of her trauma. Most counselors believe that an infant who is abused will probably not be able to remember the abuse later in life but may develop a fear of being touched that can result in developmental delays and failure to bond with her mother. However, some women do recover memories of abuse as infants. Dr. Karl Lehman in his paper *Basic Memory Phenomena, Explicit and Implicit Memory*, explains that this may occur because the brain is only the housing for the memory and that memory can still be intact even if the brain is not fully developed until later.<sup>1</sup>

Children between two and six years old are usually the most devastated by abuse and unfortunately that is the age when most sexual abuse begins. Four-year-olds experience the highest percentage of sexual abuse of any age group.<sup>2</sup> At that age most children are not able to tell someone what is going on and many adults are not alert to the signs that a child has been traumatized.

Over half of the children who are sexually abused before the age of six, dissociate from at least some of their memory of the abuse.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true if the abuse is repeated – and it usually is. Once an abused child develops the ability to dissociate from traumatic memories, it is likely that she will continue to use this coping behavior even as an adult.

While these children may not have conscious memory of the abuse, they will probably experience fears, regressive behavior, unexplained body memories and inappropriate sexual behaviors. A child may also get stuck at the maturity level where the abuse began. For example, a thirty-year-old woman may display the impetuosity of a five year old child. As these children grow up many will experience emotional distress in the form of panic, anxiety, and attachment disorders without knowing why.

Children who are seven to ten years old when the abuse first happens are more likely to remember it. They will usually know that the things that are happening to them are shameful. Threats not to tell will bear a lot of weight. A single incident of abuse at this age can be the impetus for Post Traumatic Stress

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<sup>1</sup> Lehman

<sup>2</sup> Snyder

<sup>3</sup> *Amnesia*

Disorder.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes abuse that began when the child was only three or four continues into the teenage years and even adulthood. By the time the child reaches adolescence, she generally has enough knowledge to get herself out of the abusive situation by telling a teacher or calling a help line. But if the abuse has continued for a long time, chances are that she will have accepted the abuse as inevitable. She will feel guilt and shame for allowing it to go on for so long. She may become conditioned to the abuse and feel powerless to stop it. While some teens run away, marriage is the most common escape. Many of these young women marry abusive men.

When abuse starts in the teen years it is usually not perpetrated by a family member. Often the girl will either be in a compromising situation, as in the case of date rape, or she will be abused by someone she thought was safe. Because she is older, she will better understand the implications and the stigmas that go along with the abuse.

## Relationship with the Abuser

While many parents are careful to warn their children about “stranger danger,” only about twelve percent of abusers are strangers to the child.<sup>5</sup> Being abused by a stranger, whether it is exhibitionism, molestation, or rape, is very traumatic to a child. Stranger abuse is sometimes more violent, because the stranger is not usually dependant on the silence of the child for protection.

The abused child will develop many new fears, and will probably become clingy as she tries to feel secure again. She is also likely to have nightmares, flashbacks, and a fear of strangers. Stranger abuse tends to have fewer long-term effects than abuse by someone the child knows, for three reasons: the abuse is not continued on a long term basis, the abuse was not committed by someone she knows and respects, and, usually, she will receive emotional support from her parents if they find out.

If the abuse was committed by an acquaintance, someone in the neighborhood, a teacher, a relative the child sees infrequently, or by another child, the abuse will be far more haunting than abuse by a stranger. It is less likely that the child will tell someone about the abuse and it is more likely that the abuse will be repeated. The more closely involved the child is with her abuser, the greater the impact the abuse will have on her life. People the victim frequently interacts with, especially those she loves and trusts, cause the most devastating abuse.

The term *pedophile* means lover of children. They are all around us, usually in positions of trust. They are pastors, coaches, daycare workers, camp counselors, school teachers, and babysitters. It is common for a pedophile to

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<sup>4</sup> A condition that results from experiencing or witnessing an unusually distressing event; symptoms range from repeatedly reliving the trauma, such as in dreams or flashbacks, to general emotional numbness.

<sup>5</sup> Perpetrator

abuse more than 250 children in a lifetime. That is two hundred and fifty children who's lives will be permanently altered. The majority of pedophiles prefer preying on boys but plenty of girls are also hurt. Typically a pedophile will try to develop a relationship with a child in need of love and attention and then seduce the child.

With so many blended families sibling abuse has become fairly common. It is degrading and creates a tremendous amount of insecurity on the part of the little girl. Parents are usually completely oblivious. The brother may be taunting his sister, and all the parents perceive is "normal sibling rivalry." It makes for a terrifying childhood; she never knows what is going to happen when mom and dad are out of sight. One woman recounts her suffering as she was growing up:

In order to stop me from telling my mother or anyone else of their nightly raids, my stepbrother and his friend would tell me they were coming in the night to cut off my head if I ever told. They took my dolls and decapitated them to show me they meant it. He locked me in the closet in the dark, or when I was walking down the hall, he would jump out at me and yell (I became very jumpy.) I do not remember all of how they scared me into silence, but the final scare was to kill my favorite bird. Actually it was the family's bird but I took a particular interest in the parakeet. He was well trained, and since I was always sick with asthma or the flu, he would keep me company. He would cuddle under my chin or peck me kisses. When I walked around the house, the little yellow bird would ride on my shoulder. I was extremely fond of him. My eldest stepbrother unbent a wire coat hanger and screwed the bird through the chest."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *An Angel's Kidnapping*