



Recognizing and identifying patterns caused by abuse.

by Sallie Culbreth

Abuse has a way of controlling your life. It does a lot of damage, even if you don't think it was "that big of a deal." All abuse (physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual) is worthy of being addressed.

There are many excellent resources to help you take the first steps toward freedom. You may feel anxious, as if you need to find something to help you right now. The best place to begin is at the beginning.

First, it is important for you to know that you are normal! Abuse is what is NOT normal. You have been intimately wounded. Everyone responds differently, but there seem to be certain feelings and experiences that are common among survivors:

Isolation or loneliness. That terrible sensation that no one understands you... no one "gets it." You may feel like an alien visitor from another planet, as if you've been dropped to earth with no preparation to live here. Many of us (abuse survivors) feel very alone, even in a crowded room or around people we live with and love. That sense of isolation exists because abuse taught you to be silent, to carry your secrets and experiences by yourself. The shame, fear, and guilt attached to the abuse energize the isolation. Because of the twisted nature of sexual abuse and the dysfunctional relationships that many of us grew up with, we have no sense of what "normal" is. You may socialize well and know what to do, but there is often a huge lonely ache inside that no one else can see. Intimacy is terrifying for an abuse survivor. It is one of the many broken places that remains long after the abuse ends.

Sexual confusion or dysfunction. Sexual abuse is not only abuse, it is also sexual. Your abusers became your sexual mentors. They taught you to perform, to lie, to devalue or degrade yourself, and to connect abnormal sexual experiences with normal longings for intimacy and touch. Many of us have a strong sense that our bodies betrayed us because we experienced pleasure or gained something because of the abuse. As a result, we, as sexual beings, approach our sexuality and sexual experiences with confusion. It feels as if everything in life is about sex. This is true on both ends of the sexual spectrum. If you are a sex addict and constantly crave risk-taking, degrading sexual experiences, it's all about sex. On the other end, if you are repulsed by sex, avoid sexual experiences and despise your own sexuality, it is still all about sex.

Sexual abuse survivors struggle to accept touch without associating it with sex. Sex is frequently used as a way to either avoid intimacy or express rage or power (either by withholding or giving). Sexual abuse survivors frequently have problems experiencing orgasm, even when they willingly participate in sex. Often, we do not know what to do with the "sexual ache" that drives us into sexual relationships or experiences. Once sex begins, it becomes very confusing as your mind, spirit and body cease to work together. Then pleasure, gratification, or fulfillment seem lost in the chaos. You and your partner frequently end up using, wounding, or abandoning each other because the lessons of abuse are so deeply rooted in you.

Anger management problems. Rage is a frequent problem for abuse survivors. It is generally expressed in one of three ways. Some people lash out at other people, using their anger to control circumstances. Others keep it inside and beat themselves up, instead. And some people do both - lash out at others and rage at themselves. This anger stems from deep hurt, extreme frustration, or fear. To control the anger (either internally or externally) can be exhausting. Frequently, survivors feel so overwhelmed that they give up even trying to manage it.

Body image and treatment. Most of us have concluded that our bodies are the enemy - something to be treated harshly or without respect. We don't necessarily do this at a conscious level, but we express it with our lifestyles. We either eat too much, too quickly, or we starve ourselves. Some of us abuse drugs or alcohol. Perhaps you hurt yourself with self-inflicted wounds or work so much that you are beyond exhaustion. Many of us feel completely disconnected from our bodies and never pay attention to our body language. We don't know if we're hungry or tired; in pain or pleasure; we are well-practiced at ignoring or silencing our physical needs. You may push and push and push yourself, or numb yourself with food, drugs or sex. As you journey toward freedom, you must understand that your body did not betray you; your abuser(s) betrayed you.

Ineffective expression of needs or longings. Abuse teaches you that your needs, longings and opinions do not matter (at least not to your abusers). Abuse changes the way you express yourself. Many of us struggle to express our true needs or longings. We cloak our desires because of the pain experienced when those longings were mishandled by others. At the same time, those needs and longings still exist and beg to be heard. Perhaps your need to be held as a child was frequently met at the expense of abuse, so you learned to hate what you needed. But the dilemma remains: You still have needs and longings. Because of this inner conflict, desires are often expressed in ineffective or destructive ways. We alienate people through unreasonable demands, silence, or abusive manipulation. Learning to balance the pressure of unmet needs with effective expression and respect are challenges that survivors must confront.

"Escape" mentality. When you were abused, you had to find a way to cope. Many of us learned to escape, mentally, by "checking out" of reality and entering a self-created fantasy world in order to avoid truth. This coping mechanism established patterns of living that are no longer serving you well. Rather than embracing life and doing the hard work of taking ownership of who you are, you use trusted escape routes that have alienated you from relationships, career, school, or God. You may wrap a cocoon of sleep, TV, work, drugs, books, video games, etc., around you to avoid life and people. This may feel safe to you, but you may place yourself in situations that are harmful or self-defeating because you are so unaware of what's going on. It is a challenge to remain focused on reality in order to make good decisions or take healthy actions.

Damaged spirit. Abuse rips apart the spiritual life of a survivor. The very thing that God placed in us to connect, spiritually, is detached or re-wired to create a sense of meaningless existence or hopelessness. Even if you have pursued a relationship with God, there may be an underlying struggle to feel spiritually alive. Repairing the spiritual damage caused by abuse is an integral part of the journey toward wholeness. It is full of difficult questions and an intimate sense of betrayal. At the same time, in the core of your heart, is a hunger for something better, for something bigger than the cruelty, perversion and evil you experienced through abuse. It is this hunger that propels many of us to re-establish the broken connection with God. In the face of all that is wrong, there is a tiny flicker of God's love that begs to be fanned into a flame of spiritual vitality. Ultimately, evil can motivate us to pursue something better - to pursue faith, hope and love.

Questions. Abuse burns tough questions into the souls of its victims. Why is there evil? Why do bad things happen to innocent children? Where was God, and why wasn't I protected? Where were my protectors - mother, father, family and friends? Do I really want out of my angst, or do I want to remain a victim where I know the rules of engagement? Why can't I remember big parts of my childhood? How do I move beyond what was done to me? When will the pain and chaos end?

These are only a few of the questions you will probably ask at some point in your journey toward wholeness. They are questions that are worthy of thoughtful exploration. Some questions will receive a satisfactory answer. Others will never be adequately answered: It is both the glory and the frustration of breaking free from the past. The ultimate question you must ask yourself is this: Am I a cynic or a seeker? Do I really want to find solutions or do I want to cross my arms in stubborn determination to remain unchanged?



The process of moving beyond your abuse involves an exchange.

You will need to exchange the lies that abuse taught you about yourself, the world and God, for truth.

Truth about your worth.

Truth that yes, there is evil, but there is also good in the world.

Truth that spiritual wholeness is not a fantasy, it is the reality of relationship with God.

This is a long, difficult process, but it is not an impossible one.

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