

Secrets Too Well Kept

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We live in a world where news moves in and out of our lives so fast that we miss half of it. However, sex abuse scandals are rarely missed. When related news of it seems scarce for a while, a new case hits the headlines and the media once again makes us aware of abuse's devastating effects. We must never be lulled into passivity. Our vigilance must remain strong because the wounds of sexual abuse stay with survivors for most of their lives. This article is about women survivors in their sixties and seventies who have a story to tell because in the past, people were not always vigilant.

As a therapist who works primarily with sexually abused teens, I was not surprised when older women eventually started coming to see me with stories about childhood sexual abuse. They had carried their well-kept secrets their entire lives. These women are professionals, businesswomen, parents, engineers, medical staff, aunts, teachers, CEOs, waitresses, cleaning ladies, and grandparents. They are from all ethnicities and economic levels, but they have one thing in common: the shame that they feel because they were abused. The subject of sex was taboo when they were young and, unless you were a victim, you probably did not know sexual abuse existed. Even then, victims probably could not name it. They didn't know the language to use to explain, nor did they think anyone would understand their situation because they themselves did not understand what was happening to them. One of my clients, who tried to tell her mother, was punished for saying "such things." Her father would take her on trips, and while away, he would abuse her. She begged her mother to let her stay home or to send her younger sister with her. Her mother refused. Today, as she relates her story, she wonders if her mother knew what was happening and if her younger sister was chosen to be "saved" from the abuse. These are questions she will never have answered.

Several of my clients say that intimacy with their husbands has been tainted by the forced intimacy they had with their abusers when they were teenagers. One abuser was the maintenance man at the local school. He was, as my client says, her first love. She has flash backs 50 years later. She occasionally dreams about her abuser. He is always reaching out to her asking her for help. "What does this mean," she asked, "How do I make it stop?" Some women who were abused report becoming promiscuous after the abuse. They all report that their self-esteem was wrecked and that there was confusion and distrust about sexuality and sexual relationships and questions about moral values.

There are other women that I talk with who have more than survived. These women have dealt with the abuse and moved on. I do not know if this is true for every case, but these women always had someone with whom they could share their story, even if it was many years after the abuse stopped and the abusers were gone from their lives. Most acknowledge that they never forget what happened, but they have not allowed one terrible event to control their entire lives. Several have sought reconciliation with the abuser, usually with guidelines that govern future interactions. Often, this is done with a mediator or a friend or family member who is deemed acceptable by both parties. Sometimes, women who were abused have talked to me after a VIRTUS® training session and asked how they could help with the work of healing others. One woman told me she finally found peace by praying for her abuser.

The cliché "different strokes for different folks" is certainly the case when healing from sexual abuse. No two people I have worked with have done it the same way, nor has it impacted

everyone in the same way. So many things enter into the mix of the experience; it is impossible to describe a very specific road to healing. One thing is for certain though. It takes years for some to heal, and forgiveness often takes decades. What most people need in the beginning is a friend who will listen and never judge.

So if someone tells you her well-kept secret about abuse, do not interrupt or immediately tell her to see a professional (although that might be a very good idea at some point). Do not ask for details. She will tell you what she wants you to know. She has chosen you for a reason. It is not important to know why, but do know you need to stand in the shadow of the Almighty as you hold a broken heart in your hands.

And if someone is reading this who has a story to tell, remember: About one-fourth of adult women have a story about sexual abuse, so you are not alone. I pray you soon find a friend who will listen.

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