

# WHEN A MAN YOU LOVE WAS ABUSED

*A Woman's Guide to Helping Him  
Overcome Childhood Sexual Molestation*

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Publications

*When a Man You Love Was Abused: A Woman's Guide to Helping Him Overcome Childhood Sexual Molestation*

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## A Word About the Names in This Book

When I write nonfiction books I like to provide the full name of the individuals involved. I believe it adds integrity to the material and shows they're not made-up accounts or composites. In this book, however, I can't do that. This material is much too sensitive and personal.

"If I gave my name," one man said, "my family might find out, and they wouldn't forgive me." His stepfather had been the perpetrator.

Others who talked to me gave no specific reason other than to say, "I'm not ready to tell this publicly" or "I'd rather you don't use my name."

Out of respect for these individuals, I've disguised their identity. If you read only a first name, it's for one of three reasons:

1. The person requested I not use his name.
2. Several of the groups in which I participated are like AA—and we use only our first names. I tell the story of a man named Red, for example, so called because that's the only name by which I knew him.
3. I no longer have contact with the person and couldn't get permission.

## How to Use This Book

I've designed this book in two parts, and it doesn't matter which you read first.

Part 1 focuses on male sexual assault and its effects. This part is basically informative, and its purpose is to help you understand the problems that male abuse victims face.

Part 2 is the practical section. The purpose is to show you—a woman in the life of a man who was molested as a child—what you can do to help him.

## IF YOU'RE AN IMPORTANT WOMAN IN HIS LIFE

He was molested—or at least you suspect he was. That means he was victimized by someone older and more powerful than he was. The man you care for might be your boyfriend, husband, brother, father, or son. He is someone you care about deeply, and because he hurts, you hurt.

He hurts because he was victimized in childhood. Many therapists don't like the word *victim* or *victimized* and prefer to speak of *survivors*. They also don't like the word *abused* and usually opt for *assaulted*. The media tends to use the word *molested*. In this book, I use the terms interchangeably.

Regardless of the word used, something happened to him—something terrible and frightening—that will affect him for the rest of his life. Something happened to him that affects *your* life as well.

### How Can You Help?

Because you care about him, you have also been victimized. Because of your love for him, you've been hurt, and you may have suffered for a long time. But the man you care for didn't hurt you intentionally. He was trying to cope with his problem.

Perhaps years passed before you knew about his childhood pain. During that time, you may have sensed something was wrong. Statistics indicate that men tend to reveal themselves more readily to a woman, usually a wife or girlfriend.

But even if you knew about his experience, how could you have grasped how it would impact your relationship? Because he battled the problem that he couldn't talk about, he did it privately and sometimes not too well. How could you not feel rejected or hurt when he shut you out?

Even if he faced his abuse, he may have excused the perpetrator. Although the man in your life was the victim, he may have felt guilty for the abuse. *His undeserved guilt is real. And he hurts.*

Because he hurts, you hurt too.

That's part of *your* victimization. His reactions, attitudes, and behavior caused you to assume blame and guilt, and you've asked yourself, "How did I fail?" You may not have voiced those words, but you felt you were the flawed person in the relationship.

If this describes you, you may already have gone through a lengthy period of wondering what was wrong with you. You tormented yourself with questions:

- ✦ Why does he shut me out?
- ✦ Why can't I help him?
- ✦ Why can't I take away his pain?
- ✦ Why won't he talk to me or allow me into his private world?
- ✦ How did I fail him?
- ✦ I love him and try to show him that, so why won't he trust me?

If you're reading this, it means you know, or seriously suspect, that an important male in your life was assaulted in childhood. You love him and want to relieve his pain, but you feel helpless. Or you're sure there must be something you can do to fix him. If you could just figure out the hidden weapon, the magic pill, or the right words, he'd be all right.

It isn't that simple. Besides, you can't fix him.

In this book, though, I provide suggestions in part 2 to help you understand and accept him. As you accept his situation and his resulting problems, I hope you'll feel better about yourself and accept that *his*

*problem is not your fault.* You may often need to remind yourself of this fact: it is *his battle*. You can't fight his inner demons, but you can stand with him when he fights them. He must work through it himself. You can assist him by being available to him, and I'll suggest ways to do that. *But it is his struggle and his journey into wholeness.*

You may feel more at peace with your inability to heal him if you can think of him as a once-innocent child who was victimized by a predator. This isn't to deny your pain, but you can help him and help yourself if you can start with understanding something from his past.

His experience and his response to it are complex. He has been wounded in several ways, the old wounds reopen in unpredictable ways, and you can't do anything to make him into a whole person. You can stand with him as he seeks and discovers his own healing. As you accept his situation and his resulting problems and behavior, I hope you'll feel better about yourself and accept the reality that his problem isn't your fault. He must work through his own emotional issues—with your assistance of love and encouragement.

I want to make an important distinction here. When an adult sexually abuses a boy, many people think of that as a sexual act. That's not correct. The perpetrator's actions weren't about sex, and they weren't about love for the child. Those who molest have deep-seated problems that go far deeper than sexual exploitation of a child. For the perpetrator, sexual gratification at the expense of a child is a *symptom* of deeper problems that go beyond the scope of this book.

When adults are attracted to children—compulsively attracted—we call them pedophiles. Although there are variations in the definition of pedophiles, here's a simple one: the term comes from two Greek words—*paídos*, children, and *philia*, a word for love. It refers to anyone—male or female—who is sexually attracted to prepubescent children. I'll say it even stronger; they are *compulsively* attracted. Generally, that means the objects of their desire are children younger than thirteen. Therapists have recorded that some pedophiles visualize themselves as being at the same age as the children they molest. Other



therapists would say that pedophiles are adults who are fixated at the prepubescent stage of life.

Just as all assaulted boys won't become homosexuals, the male perpetrator may not be gay. Most of those convicted of molesting boys vehemently deny that they are homosexual and insist they are heterosexual.

Regardless, when an adult molests an innocent child, that's sexual abuse. My intention is not that you try to understand the abuser, or that you feel sorry for that person. By the end of the journey, though, I hope you and the man in your life will be able to forgive and to feel sadness for such individuals.

The perpetrator—whether male or female—is a sexual abuser of children. That's the one fact to bear in mind. Sometimes it makes no difference to the perpetrator whether the victims are male or female. This is an important concept for you, the woman in the victim's life, to understand. The result of his abuse carries long-lasting effects, and he may not want to talk about the issues related to the abuse for fear of being labeled as homosexual. *Or he may feel he is gay because it was a man who molested him.* You may need to help him accept that child sexual abuse is not a heterosexual-homosexual issue. It's a crime and a sin that was perpetrated against him.

He probably doesn't understand all that. He may still feel conflicted about what happened to him—and about the theft of his innocence. For now, the once-abused child needs support and encouragement. He needs someone he can trust as he copes with his pain and his problems. He needs you.

## WHO ARE THE MOLESTED?

This book came about after I wrote an article for women readers whose husbands had been molested in childhood. More than one hundred copies of *Light and Life* magazine, in which the article appeared, lay on the free sample table at a conference where I taught in California. Many conferees picked up copies.

Although most of them didn't read the article at the conference, several did. Two men told me they appreciated my candor in speaking out. One said, "I think that's a picture of me." His eyes began to tear, and he chose not to talk further.

Three women privately discussed the article with me. "I'm sure my husband was abused," one woman confided. "He won't talk about it, but for years I've believed that he was." When she had asked her husband, he'd say only that he'd experienced such a terrible childhood he didn't want to discuss it. She planned to ask him to read the article and hoped it would be a catalyst for them to talk about his past. She didn't contact me again.

One mother wept as she told me that her older brother had abused her son. The boy admitted it, but the uncle denied the accusation. Whenever she brought up the subject, her eight-year-old son cried and couldn't talk about it. The woman refused to allow her brother to visit and cut off all contact from him. "My son has started counseling," she said, "but so far it hasn't helped."

After the conference, another woman e-mailed me with a similar story. "I talked to my brother, and he admits he was molested," she wrote,

“but he won’t get professional help. I know he still hurts. His seventh-grade Sunday school teacher was the abuser.” Because of the perpetrator, her brother refuses to go to church, “even though he believes in God and reads his Bible.”

“I thought I was the only one,” one man said when he phoned me and talked for almost half an hour. “I’d heard about girls being molested, but not boys. This is the first time I’ve ever talked to a man who also went through what I endured.” He added, “Intellectually, I know there are thousands of others, but emotionally, my isolation makes me feel as if no one else has been there.”

“Yes, I know what it’s like to feel as if you’re the only one,” I said.



From responses to my blog, <http://shatteringthesilence.wordpress.com>, I’ve learned that many males are afraid to admit they’ve been abused. It seems related to how they perceive themselves as males. They’re often afraid of how others will perceive their manhood.

I understand why they think that way because I experienced similar feelings when I began to cope with my own abusive childhood. In the late 1980s, I became emotionally aware of not being the only one who felt that way. I attended a conference called “Men and Masculinity” that summer at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. The conference offered seventeen small-group settings. With great hesitancy, I signed up for one called “Men Who Were Sexually Molested in Childhood.”

At the time, I’d been in the process for at least a year of healing from my own childhood abuse, but I hadn’t spoken with other males who’d been molested. In the small group of seven, each man briefly shared his own heartache over childhood sexual molestation.

I let the others go first. Tears filled my eyes as the first one related his story. His was the first I’d ever heard about a Catholic priest assaulting a boy. One by one the other six told their stories.

When my turn came, I tried to talk, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t hold

back the sobbing. The six men silently formed a circle around me and hugged me.

“We understand your pain,” one man whispered.

Fresh sobs came from an even deeper place inside me. My body shook for what seemed like minutes. Until I started to recover from my childhood abuse, I hadn’t cried for many years.

“Cry as much as you need to,” someone said.

When I finally could talk, I told them my story. For the first time, I felt I had found a safe environment and was able to speak openly about the abuse of my childhood. While I talked, I shifted my gaze from face to face. Each of the six said a kind word, touched my hand or shoulder, or nodded.

That day, all seven of us faced the pain of our childhoods. The others were further ahead in their healing, but we all traveled along the same path. By acknowledging the theft of our innocence, each of us took a few steps toward healing. Three of them were in therapy. Except for me, all of them had talked to at least one professional about being molested.

“It helps to know that I’m not the only one,” I said several times, because that was such a powerful revelation for me.

“I used to believe it was my fault,” one man in the group said. “I never figured out what I did to make my uncle do those things, so I blamed myself.”

“I guess I’d have to say that shame held me back the most,” a second man volunteered. “I was sure my friends would laugh at me if I told them what happened. They’d call me gay.” He later said that the physical stimulation felt good. “Yet I hated what he did, and I was scared and kept begging him not to do it. For many years afterward, I believed something was wrong with me.”

Of the nearly two hundred men who attended the conference, only seven of us attended that small group. *We are seven, but how many others are there?* I wondered. How many more of the conferees had been molested as children? As I learned later, a number of others could have joined us, and they might have gained from the experience.

After the conference one man told me, “I wasn’t ready to share with a group, but I need to talk to someone.”

We cried together and hugged each other.



What percentage of males experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of sixteen? No one knows the answer, and the proposed figure is highly controversial. For many reasons, researchers encounter more resistance in getting that information from males than from females. One of the difficulties the experts face is how to define abuse. Another involves the methodologies used in doing the investigation, such as the way the researchers phrase the questions. There is no clearly agreed-upon method.

Since the 1980s, a large number of organizations have conducted surveys and interviews and ended up with conflicting answers. Critics have often blamed the questionnaire for being either too specific or not clear enough. Others have faulted the lack of honest responses. The number of males abused in childhood are listed as low as 5 percent or as high as 33 percent.

Probably the most accepted figure is one in six boys—but even those who use that figure believe it’s conservative. Even if it were one in ten, or one in every thirty, that still means boys are victimized.

One Web site, <http://www.1in6.org>, states, “Researchers estimate that 1 in 6 males have experienced unwanted or abusive sexual experiences before age 16. This is likely a low estimate, since it doesn’t include noncontact experiences, which can also have lasting negative effects.”

Emerging evidence indicates as many as a third of incidents of child sexual molestation aren’t remembered by adults who experienced them, and that the younger the child was at the time of the molestation, and the closer the relationship to the abuser, the more likely he is not to remember or not to remember clearly.

In recent years, more men are coming forward and admitting that

they were assaulted as children by Roman Catholic priests. This development has encouraged others to speak out. And it's not just priests who abuse, and not all priests are guilty. Perpetrators come from all occupations and all faiths.

Despite the revelations of male sexual molestation, our culture still implies that men are supposed to be invulnerable—if a male was molested, something was wrong with the *victim*. That was a common attitude about females a generation ago. Too often, the assaulted male feels he won't be believed. We have that in common with females.

Males also have additional concerns: *Our strongest fear seems either that others will think of us as homosexuals or that something is wrong with us.* Many adult men who have survived sexual abuse as children have questions about their sexual orientation—that is, they question whether they might be gay. “After all,” they reason, “I should have resisted the molestation.”

Or they might believe they're weak or helpless. “After all, I should have *been able* to resist the molestation.” Another fear is that if they go public with their molestation other people will assume that one day the victims will become perpetrators, or that people will scrutinize their activities, fearing the pattern of molestation will repeat itself. Although many men who assault children were themselves victimized in childhood, nothing indicates that most abuse survivors will commit the offense.

Several researchers have posed a theory about which boys are selected for abuse by their perpetrators. Almost all authorities acknowledge that abusers have a special kind of antennae that pick up the frequency of possible victims. I tend to agree.

I've also read, and watched TV programs, about con artists and pick-pockets. Those who are successful at their “trade” are intuitive and have an almost-infallible beacon that spotlights the vulnerable. It might be the way potential victims walk or something about the way they dress. Con artists seem to be able to look into a person's eyes and spot the vulnerable and the impressionable.

That's probably just as true with perpetrators and the boys they abuse. One thing I've heard and read several times is that, generally, the

victims were characterized by an intense quest for affection. They perceived that one or both parents had rejected them. They were so needy they would have done anything to be loved.

When an adult prepares to molest a boy, then the perpetrator begins by showing interest. Perhaps he's kind and attentive. Because of that attentive kindness the boy is receptive; he needs affection. As the relationship grows, the boy accepts the abuse in silence because he feels loved, accepted, or attached to the other person. He may not like what the older person does to him, but he often is unable to protest or stop the molestation.

A man in his twenties, for example, spoke about being abused by three different men. "I used to wonder if I wore a sign on my forehead that said, 'I've already been abused. Come and use me like they did.'"

Such boys who don't fight back learned that if they are to receive affection, no matter how perverted, they must pay the price with their bodies. Be careful not to blame the boy for being needy. He yearned for affection because he didn't get the kind of attention, acceptance, and love that every child deserves. Because the real thing was denied him—the first and more important victimization—he became vulnerable to the second.

The desire to feel loved is a built-in requirement of every human. Some might not feel loved, so they cry out, "Who needs it? I don't need anybody or anything." That's a powerful act of self-deception. The reality is that every person in the world needs and deserves love. Every person was born to be loved and to be treated lovingly.

Some of those who cry out do so because they don't grasp the meaning of real love. For abused kids, too often the word *love* means sex. It's difficult for them to accept that love is the unselfish giving of themselves and not the giving of their bodies to satisfy the lusts of predators.

### Facing the Reality

I hold out hope for, and I encourage women to stand with, the male victims of rape. But I also want you to face reality. Some men won't

recover from the trauma of childhood. Even if they are able to talk about their abuse, they may continue to feel the pain every day of their lives. They can't release the anger, or they remain traumatized or refuse to forgive. That's reality—but I hope you'll do whatever you can to help the victims move beyond the pain of their past. Part 2 of this book will help you in doing that.

Every male who has been molested is an individual. What helps one survivor may not help another. Some may experience feelings of pain, fear, anger, and isolation. Some may go the other way and numb out, as I did, and feel nothing.

Despite negative indicators, there is hope. I am a victorious survivor. In this book you'll also read of other men who faced the demons of their childhood, have survived, and now consider themselves healed and healthy.

Because of the grace of God that permeates their horrific childhood, they are able to say,

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)

They are also the same men who believe,

We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. (Romans 8:28)