

***Healing from Abuse Through the Power of the Cross* – Dan Hitz**

Dan is the director of Reconciliation Ministries. He grew up with a paranoid schizophrenic mother in an emotionally, physically, and sexually unsafe home; and endured spiritual abuse as an adult. In addition to overcoming the effects of abuse in his own life, Dan has ministered to male and female abuse survivors for many years.



The boundaries of those who have endured abuse have been violated by those who were supposed to protect and empower them. In response, many victims build their own walls of self-protection. These walls may have helped for a season, but eventually outlive their effectiveness and keep survivors trapped in their pain. Sometimes their lives are in ruins. Through the power of the cross, Jesus Christ can heal the pain of abuse and rebuild lives. In the Old Testament, Nehemiah talked to the leaders of Jerusalem and acknowledged that the city lay in ruins. He then encouraged the people, “Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace” (2:17). He also told them of God’s graciousness and His ability to restore. In response the people said, “Let us start rebuilding” (2:18). Recovery from abuse requires that we acknowledge the pain of the abuse, and make a conscious decision to begin the healing process.

The *Living Waters* guidebook identifies four types of abuse – physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. Additionally, past Reconciliation Ministries’ newsletters have explored recovery from spiritual abuse. Whatever the type of abuse a person may suffer, the effects go deep down into his soul. This article will briefly review some of the main effects of abuse and common steps toward healing. Although this article focuses primarily on sexual abuse, it is helpful in the recovery of all types of abuse.

One of the primary factors influencing the effects of abuse is the frequency that the abuse occurred. The more frequent the abuse, the greater its effects. Unfortunately, those who have endured long term abuse may perceive it as less harmful than someone who endured a single episode of abuse because she may have grown used to the abuse and viewed it as a part of her everyday life. The stronger the emotional foundation of a person’s life prior to the abuse, the greater their ability will be to process and heal from the abuse. Children growing up in a positive family environment usually have a much stronger sense of who they are and their purpose in life. They are much more resilient than a child growing up in an abusive home. Unfortunately, perpetrators seem to have a built in radar system and prey upon those from more dysfunctional families who don’t have the emotional strength to prevent or overcome their advances. (See the article entitled “The Pre-Abuse Set Up” on the “Archives” section at www.recmin.org.) In addition to the critical role that parents play in strengthening the foundations of their child’s world, a child’s heart continues to grow in strength and understanding as his/her life progresses. When children are abused at a young age, they have not had the positive life experiences necessary to produce a healthy foundation to process the events of life. Those who are abused at a younger age suffer more emotional damage than those abused when older. The identity of the abuser is another factor that influences the power of the abuse. The impact to the survivor is directly proportional to the perceived closeness and authority of the abuser. When those who are supposed to be the safest and most empowering people in the child’s life become those who are the most dangerous, the effects are much greater than abuse from a random stranger. The final factor influencing the effects of abuse is the response of others – actual or perceived – that the survivor may tell



about the abuse. It is heartbreaking to hear survivors tell of being scolded by a parent for reporting the abuse from another parent or loved one. In such cases, the child feels like she has no where to go for safety and the consequences increase.

The actual effects of abuse can be devastating to the survivor personally, and to others in his life. The innocent victim bears the weight of another's sin and perversion. Innocent others in the life of the survivor bear the weight of the victim's emotional consequences, ranging from lost intimacy and isolation to becoming the target of his unpredictable emotional rage. The primary victim is the person who actually experienced the abuse firsthand. The secondary victims are the people in the primary victim's life who have suffered from the effects of the brokenness of the one who was victimized. This may be the siblings of the survivor who are mistreated by the survivor out of fear and self-protection, or the spouse of the survivor who is resented and sometimes persecuted when seeking appropriate emotional and sexual intimacy from their spouse. It is important for all of those affected by the survivor's abuse to seek their own healing and understanding.



Because their own boundaries have been shattered, abuse survivors often have poor interpersonal boundaries. They may have no boundaries at all, in which case anyone and everyone is entrusted with intimate details of the person's life, or rigid boundaries which keep everyone far away from any trace of vulnerability in the survivor's life. Both extremes keep the survivor trapped in emotional chaos and loneliness. Emotionally healthy others respect the broken boundaries of a survivor – other abusers or emotionally damaged people don't. This sets the survivor up for a vicious cycle of unhealthy relationships and heart ache.

Scripture gives us many examples of God expressing His emotions from wrath to compassion to joy. Unfortunately, many survivors have learned early on that expressing emotions is dangerous. They may have been further shamed and mistreated for resisting or becoming upset about the abuse, or they may have been overwhelmed by their own emotions and shut down their feelings altogether. Those who have responded to abuse by shutting down their emotions are often unable to understand the social cues of others, or to adequately verbalize their own needs even when in a safe environment. Abuse negatively affects the fight or flight center of the brain. Some abuse victims become hypersensitive and over reactive to even the slightest trace of perceived threats or offense. They may exhibit extreme ranges of emotions which far exceed the things they are responding to.

Fear, self-hatred, and inappropriate guilt are often incentives for self-sabotage in the life of the survivor. There are many factors contributing to these emotions. In the case of long-term abuse, the victim may teach himself to like the abuse in order to cope with the confusion and fear. Others suffer condemnation because their bodies have responded to the pleasurable feelings they felt during the abuse. Unfortunately, kids don't understand that their bodies are built to respond to touch regardless of if the touch is welcome and Biblical, or unwanted and harmful. Because of the inappropriate guilt, he may feel unworthy of being happy or having satisfying relationships. When things start going well, he may begin to feel threatened or condemned and may create an incident to plunge those around them into the world of chaos he feels inside his own heart. She may feel threatened with appropriate intimacy or fear

abandonment so she offends or rejects the other person before the other person can hurt her. Some survivors attempt to compensate for “feeling small” and vulnerable by “becoming bigger” emotionally and/or physically. A young girl who was told how pretty she was by her abuser may gain weight in an attempt to make herself less attractive to those who may abuse her in the future. A young boy who is told how sensitive and understanding he is by his abuser may become emotionally abrasive and offensive in a broken attempt to ward off potential abusers.

Understandably, the effects of abuse often cause wide ranging damage to the survivor’s relationships. Those who were neglected at home may perceive that the only intimacy they received was during the abuse and link sex, abuse, and intimacy together in unhealthy, eroticized intimacy. Others may refuse intimacy altogether out of fear of being betrayed and abused by those to whom they would become vulnerable. Others may turn to substance abuse or other addictions to numb the pain of abuse leaving them unable to interact properly with safe people. Secrecy, hiddenness, and a life of covering up the abuse may inhibit the survivor from living in honesty and proper emotional openness to those who really would be safe to have a relationship with.

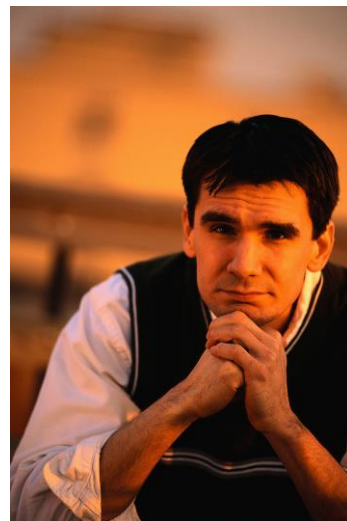


If you have been abused, you may have recognized some of the feelings and effects in this article. Perhaps you may even feel like you’ve finally received validation for the pain that is in your heart. Maybe you’ve tried

to describe this pain to others who seem to blow you off, and tell you to “get over it”. If that’s you, Reconciliation Ministries understands that your pain is very real and very deep. If you love someone who has been abused, maybe you’ve seen some similarities in her behavior with what is described in this article. It is our hope that you have begun to understand the hurt trapped in his heart a little easier.

Help for those who have been abused...

In spite of the severe consequences of your abuse, there is hope and healing in the presence of Jesus Christ. The first step in recovering from abuse is to acknowledge the abuse itself, and make a conscious decision to start the healing process. It is critical for you to reach out to a safe, trusted Christian minister and/or counselor who has experience in helping people overcome sexual abuse. This person will help you process through your experiences, thoughts, and emotions to better understand and overcome the effects of the abuse. As you acknowledge the pain and effects of abuse in your life, you will be better able to take that pain to the cross where you can receive comfort, healing, and truth from the Holy Spirit. He can restore your heart.



You will need to appropriately break several common rules of abusive homes including the following: 1) *The Don’t Talk Rule*. Whether you were threatened, experienced further abuse, or shamed into silence; it is common for survivors to suppress their experiences. You may have perceived that talking about the problem brings danger and more fear. In reality, talking about your abuse in the presence of safe others helps to validate your feelings and release years of pain. 2) *The Don’t Feel Rule*. Feelings of abuse are painful and overwhelming. Survivors often feel that if they would have continued to feel the emotional turmoil of the abuse they would have gone crazy. Beginning to feel years of suppressed emotions is often

frightening and painful. An experienced minister or counselor can help you learn to feel and resolve negative emotions in the presence of Jesus who has infinite capacity to carry your burdens and heal your pain. 3) *The Don't Need Rule*. Survivors often learn the message that needs will go unmet, or will be used against them and convince themselves not to need anything. The truth is that we as humans are created by God to have basic needs and desires. Learning to acknowledge these needs, and to step out and seek for those needs to be fulfilled in legitimate ways takes courage and support. 4) *The Don't Trust Rule*. Those who have been violated by people they have trusted frequently become self-sufficient and resistant to trusting others. You will need people you can trust to learn the how, when, and who's of trusting. This may be a fearful step for you, but learning to allow safe others into your life is critical to your healing and brings godly, rewarding friendships. This will take you some work, but an experienced counselor will help you to learn the relationship skills necessary to set healthy boundaries, understand who is safe and who isn't, and developing healthy relationships.



If you have learned to use anger as a shield, you will need to look at your anger and how you use it. Some anger may have helped you to survive back when the abuse was current, but it often begins to work against you later on down the road. You may even be angry at God for “allowing” the abuse to happen. These are important thoughts to look at with your counselor or minister. He can help you understand the motives behind your anger and learn healthier ways to cope with your pain. Releasing your anger doesn't mean that you are saying that what your abuser did was okay, and it doesn't mean that you now have to trust the one who abused you. Releasing anger frees you up to use your emotional energy in a more productive manner. We'll cover the dynamics of anger in a future edition of our newsletter.

Another important step will be to seek the Lord for a godly vision of the future. What does the Lord have for your life? Why were you created? Gaining a better understanding of your purpose and calling in life will help you understand the steps you'll need to take to reach that goal. The Lord doesn't see you as your abuser – or even you – see you. He sees you with eyes of compassion, protection, and restoration. He knows how valuable you really are.

If you or someone you love has suffered from abuse, reach out for help. Reconciliation Ministries offers individual counseling and prayer ministry, open support groups for men and women, and a 24-week discipleship program called Living Waters. The men and women on the Reconciliation Ministries team have overcome their own sexual and relational issues and understand the challenges of facing our brokenness and walking into wholeness. We are here to walk with you. For more information, call Reconciliation Ministries at 586.739.5114.



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