

Breaking the Wall of Silence No Longer a Victim Part 4

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Tatiana is an adult survivor of sexual assault and domestic violence. She writes *The Examiner*, free now to tell secrets she had before tried to share with her mother and grandmother years earlier but found in them not the comfort and protection that one might expect given the severity of her accusations. Instead, she describes her pleas for her mother and grandmother's rescue from the sexually tormentive and assaultive behavior of her step-father on her childhood innocence as ignored and unanswered.

“My sister's father molested me for years from about 3 until 6 or 7. He was nightmare after nightmare, I even told my mother and grandmother what was going on and nobody did nothing, I didn't know then but at the time, my grandmother was dating his uncle and my aunt was dating his brother who is the father of my two cousins (so who was going to tell)”.

Her mother was an abuser of drugs and dependent on her abuser to put food on the table, keep a roof over the families head and support her drug habit. Tatiana writes that her mother encouraged her to pray to God and ask him to take away the nightmares that plagued her nights. She was asked to repeat the prayer over and over every night, but often when she awoke, she found that her prayers too had gone unanswered.

“She used to tell me to repeat this prayer, “Please God please make these dreams go away. Please make me dream something good to dream.

IT NEVER WORKED. Sometimes I would wake up to find him on top of me already or already touching on me in my sleep...”

And growing into adulthood did not mean that she would be able to leave the nightmares behind. It did not mean that she could leave behind the pain, anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy, guilt, shame or even the anger. In fact, she explains, she experienced a roller coaster of these and other emotions for years until she was finally able to tell the secret of her abuse and break the hold that keeping the secret and protecting those who remained silent had on her life and her ability to embrace healing and recovery. But if you think that Tatiana's story is unique and you sigh a breath of relief because neither you nor anyone you know has been affected by such heinous an offense. You may want to think again.

According to the Survivors Healing Center the problem of child sexual abuse is a prevalent one as evidenced by statistics that show almost 50% of reported rapes are of juveniles who are under age 18 and a report by imprisoned rapists showed that 94% of child victims under age 12 years were family members (70%) or an acquaintance/friend

(24%). The remaining 6% were strangers. For child rape victims age 12 to 17 years, 36% were members of the rapist's family, 45% were an acquaintance/friend, and 19% were strangers (http://www.survivorshealingcenter.org/the_issue.html#home), making the chances of not knowing someone who has been touched by the experience slim to none. Why is it that you may not be aware of the survivors around you? One of the primary reasons is the stigma in our society which still accompanies the experience of rape, according to Mertie Alexander, Sexual Assault Counselor of Brighter Tomorrows in Dallas. Alexander says that they have the double burden of having to deal with the fact that their families may have been accomplices in maintaining the environment of abuse and they have to deal with a society which largely still blames the victim for the experience of rape/sexual assault.

And Lynn Parish, Media Relations Specialist for the Rape and Incest National Network or RAINN agreed citing the following statistics:

1. One out of six women and one out of thirty three men have experienced rape.
2. Survivors of sexual abuse/violence are 13 times more likely to abuse alcohol.
3. Survivors of sexual assault/abuse are twenty-six times more likely to abuse drugs.
4. They are four times more likely to consider suicide.

Parish said the effects sexual abuse/violence can be difficult and long lasting but there are things that can be done on behalf of the survivor and by the survivor to aid in the process of healing and recovery.

Professional Advocacy

Advocacy for survivors of sexual assault can take place in the community and across the health care spectrum. In an interview with Dr. Karl Benzio, director and founder of Lighthouse Network, he revealed that he believes that much more could be done to raise awareness in the medical community. Benzio said that when screening is done as a routine part of a visit to a physician's office it could indeed increase the opportunity for survivors to reveal themselves. He pointed out that physicians may meet with some barriers because they are spending less and less time with clients and feel that they just don't have the time to get it all done or they lack the appropriate training to be able to offer this service for their clients. But, said Benzio, this is a gap in service that must be addressed and suggested the following as ways physicians and the community can work together to begin to better address the needs of survivors:

1. Encouraging the Medical Community and Healthcare Providers across the Healthcare spectrum to encourage its memberships to take sexual assault CME training (online, individually or in a group).
2. Amending intake screening tools across the health care spectrum to take a sexual assault history.
3. Making available in health care offices brochures on the availability of counseling interventions (many survivors continue to struggle with physical, emotional,

- economical and societal concerns over the expanse of a life-time and may need assistance with coping years after their trauma), victim reporting and compensation and information on community support groups for survivors and other affected persons.
4. Making use of posters in facilities which depict survivors stories of help, hope and justice, utilize public service educational DVDs and tapes to educate people about sexual assault and its effects on individuals, families and our community.
 5. Partnering with sexual assault care centers and other support organizations by sponsoring events which seek to educate the public on sexual assault and ways they can help to diminish the stigma association with survivorship both for victims and other affected persons.

According to Dr. Benzio, many of the maladies that survivors present in the doctor's office for such as depression, anxiety, problems with sleep, sexual dysfunction, eating disorders etc., etc. are being treated with pills when what is often necessary is combination therapy (medication and counseling/therapy). Benzio also said that survivors, survivor advocates and other affected persons can let their physician know that screening for sexual assault is important to them and that they would like for their physician to start routine screening to help bring greater awareness to the issue and as an intervention tool to help put an end to sexual assault.

When asked how someone advocating for physician screening would address a doctor who is reluctant to screen, Benzio said that clients should share the following with their physician, "...screening shows that you care for me that you want to know about me in more depth and detail. It shows that it is an uncomfortable thing to do but that you are willing to be uncomfortable and out of your comfort zone for me. It also shows that you have some thoroughness and that you will be thorough in other areas of my care." Benzio said that when the questions aren't asked that it can really undermine the overall care of the client. He suggests also giving the physician an example of when you weren't able to open up about things in the physician's office and the consequences to your health because of the silence.

Healing and Recovery

Counselors Parish and Alexander say that if you have survived sexual assault it is possible to experience healing and recovery. They emphasize that the road to recovery can indeed be long but it doesn't all have to be accomplished at one time. They say it is a process and a journey and if this has been your experience and you are experiencing life disruptions because of this trauma there is both help and hope for you no matter how long ago your experience.

Those who have survived child sexual assault and sexual assault have been taught to care for their abusers needs often at the expense of their own. But, in order to begin the process of recovery survivors must begin to take care of themselves. Alexander suggests learning to take deep breaths, drinking plenty of water, healthy eating and exercise. She says during times of victimization, one's concentration is primarily on survival. "When

we are under extreme circumstances and in crisis our senses become heightened much like if a lion were chasing us. Our main objective is to survive. Sleep, rest, water and self care are often not things we've had control of..." Alexander says that when healing survivors often go through a re-regulation of the self. "Sometimes survivors will have depression, flashbacks, suffer with PTSD, nightmares, bad dreams or increased anxiety." For this reason, she said, self-care is pivotal in helping survivors to cope.

Alexander says that when depression is severe enough survivors can begin to display isolative behavior, lose their desire to take care of basic functions or have feelings or thoughts about harming themselves.

Tatiana reported to The Examiner that she was able to begin the process of healing because of; her faith in God, her work with a counselor and starting a medication regiment to help ease long time symptoms of anxiety and sleep disturbances associated with sexual abuse. She writes that it isn't a panacea, it doesn't just make the bad thoughts and dreams disappear. It still takes work.

"...even though I have to take medication every night its still a good thing because of it I can live through the nightmares and live and love my children, I tried suicide 3 times to get away from the memories, again, medication has made this possible, not to leave therapy. I plan to re marry in the next 2 years and I have shared my story with my fiancé, I think its important to speak out and let people know that this has happened to you and that you are a survivor. God has since also sent two young ladies in my life that I call my baby sisters, I dated their brother for a while and me and them stayed close once I ended the relationship, they too had been touched on by an uncle and couldn't believe I could relate----I'm very happy to say I have been that big sister they never had and because of my survival and accomplishments its given them a reason to strive on".

"Everyone's recovery is different but if these symptoms keep you from functioning to where you can't get out of bed, unable to bathe or take care of other basic functions and if this has gone on for some time you should consider consulting with a doctor to see if you might need medication. It doesn't always have to be a long term thing but sometimes the medications help survivors to increase function". She says it is also important to positively affirm yourself and as survivors are able, to begin to do things in which they may have before found pleasure and enjoyment. Easy does it the counselors emphasize, the recovery belongs to you and it is you who must set the pace.

The choice to speak out is a very personal one and one that not all survivors are able to make. Parish says that survivors often will not seek professional counseling and thus experience disruptions over the period of a life-time. But, said Parish if they just want to pick up the phone and talk to someone who will listen, who will believe and support them no matter how long it has been, that help is available through the twenty-four hour referral and hotline 1-800-656-HOPE. Its free and confidential. "We all know someone who has experienced sexually assaultive behavior/rape; it is just that many of us don't realize it."