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FORGIVING OUR PARENTS, FORGIVING OURSELVES: HOW CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN ABUSED BY THEIR PARENTS CAN FIND RELEASE FROM A LIFE OF TORMENT

Children who have experience the childhood trauma of sexual abuse are often victimized all over again by well-meaning individuals who try to convince them it was partially their fault and demand they forgive and be reconciled to their perpetrator, often their own parent. Continually living with the weight of an abusive past hinders them from truly enjoying all that life offers.

In this article we will explore the journey to healing from an abusive past, look at what forgiveness is, and understand how victims of childhood abuse may come to forgive their abusers and move from surviving to thriving.

Introduction

Lorie¹ Was confused and terrified every time her dad came into her room late at night. He just wanted to keep her company, he said. But if she was supposed to feel comfortable and safe with him, why was she afraid? It all started two years earlier. Her mom and dad seemed to be arguing a lot. Lori would run to her room and shut the door, climb in bed, and put her pillow over her head. She could still hear the shouting, but the muffled sounds put a little dis-

tance between her and her parents. Once the fighting subsided, the silence became even scarier.

Lori remembers the first time her dad crawled in bed with her. Her put his arms around her, drew her close to him, and whispered in her ears that he loved her and was there to take care of her. It was comforting, indeed, at first. But then his gentle touches made her uncomfortable. Her parents had told her to beware of other people who might try to touch her in the private places of her body, but this was no stranger...it was her own dad. She didn't know how to deal with her conflicting emotions or whether she should be angry, or pleased.

Lori's sexual abuse continued until she was a teenager. Now, in her thirties, Lori is married, has two daughters of her own, and often has flashbacks of those horrible nights when her dad molested her. She is terrified

1. All names have been changed to protect the victims)

that her husband might do the same thing to their daughters, although he has never caused them any harm and loves her, and their daughters, immensely. Her husband has asked her about her family of origin, but all Lori tells him is that she doesn't want to talk about them and does not want to ever see them again. And most definitely, she forbids her dad to see his granddaughters.

Lori has held a deep anger, even hatred, of her dad for many years. His abuse was the reason she left home at a very early age, fleeing for her safety. But all these years later, she still carries the burden from her past and fear for the future of her daughters.

Like Lori, countless victims of abused by their parents live with the weight of their abuse holding them back from being free and thriving in life. Some have become abusers themselves, while others experience deep psychological and spiritual struggles. At the same time, many victims of childhood abuse have learned the value of forgiveness and have lived happy, healthy, successful lives for their own benefit and for the benefit of every relationship they have, particularly their own family.

Stages of Abuse

In order to help victims of sexual abuse put their experiences into a logical framework, social scientists have described the journey from abuse to healing as stages a victim traverses on the way to becoming a survivor. While this article does not deal with adult rape, it is important to recognize that children who have suffered sexual abuse may also experience similar feelings as those of rape victims.

1. Shock/Disorganization. As in the case of Lori, Jack was shocked and scared the moment his elementary school teacher

touched his genitals. Jack could not figure out why such a kind, funny, and gentle man would touch him when his parents had warned him about strangers doing that. He was shaking, a combination of fear and disbelief. When the initial shock wore off, he tried to rationalize and even minimize what had taken place. Perhaps he just imagined it. Or maybe his teacher didn't mean to do it. Or perhaps, he thought, it was over my pants, he didn't put his hand under my pants. When he told his parents, and they called the police, he became disoriented with so many people asking him so many questions. The police took him to the hospital where he had even more people asking him more questions. And when the case came to trial, there were lawyers and judges, and others asking more and more questions. It was confusing, scary, and even embarrassing.

2. Denial. After the initial abuse, and the following investigation, Jack continued to second-guess himself. "It wasn't that bad." "Did he really touch me? Or did I just imagine that?" In many cases children are too afraid to say anything or may even be threatened to not tell anyone. Because they have been told so, they come to believe that "no one will believe me," or "no one will understand." Unless these children receive proper care and professional help, they may believe that "I can't live with myself," "I can't handle this," or have the mistaken idea that "It will go away if I don't think about it."

3. Guilt and Shame. Often, victims who talk about their sexual abuse are made to feel that what happened was their fault, not the abuser's. Some people, children and adults, may try to convince them that they "should," or "shouldn't" have done something to prevent the abuse from happening

or they should have defended themselves while the abuse was taking place. As a result, often survivors of sexual trauma internalize those messages and feel guilt and shame. They replay in their minds the things they could have or should have done to escape the trauma, even if as defenseless children there was nothing they could have done. As Camila Williams (2018) states, “They may feel guilty for having not stopped the abuse and ashamed for having been a victim of it.”

4. Anger and Depression. Jenny was angry at her father for abusing her, and at her mother for not believing her or protecting her. She was angry at not having control over the situation, but also angry at the system, and angry at God. But since she felt she should have done something to prevent the abuse or to stop it from happening, her anger turned to herself. Self-blame and anger are, in fact, very common among children victims of sexual abuse. Such was the case with Paquito. His mom worked the night shift as a nurse in the community hospital, so she left Paquito in the care of her sister. As Paquito tells, “My aunt was always very loving, playful, and funny. At first, I had a great time with her, she would let me have cake and ice cream, and watch tv, and then we would play games and wrestle. But then the wrestling became less play and more touch. She assured me it was normal for me to feel ‘funny,’ but that I should not tell anyone, especially my mom, about it. Then, one night, she put her hand inside my pajamas. I wanted to run away, but where? I should have screamed, but I was scared. What she did to me night after night still gives me nightmares. I am so weak and worthless.”

Victims of sexual assault have this overwhelming feeling of shame and blame

themselves for the trauma they experienced. They convince themselves that, “I asked for it somehow.” And because they didn’t do anything to prevent it or stop it, they come to accept for themselves the false narrative that “I’ll never feel better again,” and for many the only possible solution is, “I wish I were dead.”

5. Fear and Anxiety. The place where children should find safety and security has become their worst nightmare. If they can’t feel safe at home, with those who are supposed to protect them, where can they be safe? They think to themselves, “Will I ever have a healthy relationship again?” “Will I ever be able to trust again?” They feel vulnerable, and very often experience nightmares or night terrors, and flashbacks.

6. Grief and Mourning. While grieving can be painful, it can also be very therapeutic. As Williams (2018) explains, “There may be many things to grieve: loss of innocence; loss of childhood; loss of feeling safe; grief over mistrusting others and always feeling like something is ‘too good to be true’; grief over loss of time (for school, relationships, jobs, or time spent self-medicating and in depression); and grief over ‘what could have been.’” With the help of a competent professional, the child can grieve what they lost while looking for a better future and enjoying what can be.

7. Acceptance of Self and Forgiveness. When the child, or the person, understand that they were not at fault for what was done to them, that they are not responsible for not being able to prevent or stop the abuse, and that they are not “damaged goods,” they can turn their attention to dealing with the perpetrators of their abuse. Obviously, the abusing actions of the perpetrators may have been dealt with by the

authorities, but the victim himself/herself needs to come to terms with those who caused them so much harm. Here's where forgiveness comes into play.

First, the victim needs to accept that they are not responsible and are not to blame for the abuse perpetrated against them. A person in power took full advantage of the younger, smaller child and victimized them against their will. The adults bear all the responsibility, the child does not.

Second, the survivor of the abuse needs to forgive themselves. What should they forgive themselves for if they were not guilty of any offense or of causing the offense? That is precisely the point. They need to stop blaming themselves, which is in itself, an act of forgiveness.

Third, the abused victim needs to forgive their abuser. That does not excuse or exonerate the abuser but rather releases the victim from any negative feelings they may have toward the abuser. As long as the victim holds negative feelings toward the abuser, they will remain emotionally imprisoned and revictimized by the abuser. As Lewis Smedes (n.d.) declared, "The only way to heal the pain which will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurt you. Forgiveness heals the memory's vision. ... You set a prisoner free, but you discover the real prisoner was yourself."

Once the victim learns to accept what happened as not being their responsibility, and detach their negative emotions from the abuser, they can begin to trust themselves and their feelings and work on other aspects of their life. Forgiveness helps the victim to stop blaming themselves and seeing themselves as worthless, vulnerable, and helpless and instead, see themselves as survivors, stronger, and healthier. The abuse will never

change, it is part of their past. But the past does not need to hold them back. As someone said, instead of being an open wound, the abuse will become a scar. It is not a festering infection, but a sealed reminder that the disease is no longer there. Forgiveness keeps the abuse in the past so that it does not negatively impact the future.

One technique that has proved to be helpful for victims of abuse who wish to forgive their abuser is to write a letter to them expressing all the emotions they feel, making them understand that there is no excuse for what they did, and confronting them with the abuse they perpetrated. However, they are not to send the letter. The fact is that the letter is not for the benefit of the abuser, nor to try to change them or make them recognize or accept what they did, or even to get them to apologize for the abuse. The letter is to benefit the victim as it releases their pent-up emotions toward their abuser which keeps them attached to them. The letter is a sort of official declaration of freedom from their abuser. The abused may also write a letter to him/herself forgiving themselves for what they did or did not do to try and survive the abuse. Perhaps their life of abuse led them to abuse drugs or alcohol, or they became sexually involved with many people, or did other things to harm him/herself. Such actions did not help them feel better about themselves and perhaps actually caused the opposite reaction. Forgiving themselves for self-harm is also part of the healing process.

The bottom line is that forgiveness helps the abused to accept themselves and begin a new, better chapter of their life. It is the stage in life when they can tell themselves, "It wasn't my fault," "I didn't choose to be abused," "I didn't choose to have

parents/uncles/aunts/grandparents/siblings who abused me,” “It’s okay if there are moments when I feel angry, but I can channel my anger in positive ways to help me have a better life and perhaps to help others.” Acceptance and forgiveness also help the survivor turn toward the more positive aspects of their life. They can tell themselves, and others, “My own efforts kept me alive,” “I have more control of my own life,” “I am a survivor!”

Is Forgiveness Possible for an Abuse Victim?

There’s a section of Second Corinthians in which Paul intimates that someone in that church has caused Paul harm. This is how Paul writes it in his letter to the members of that church:

“Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ.” 2 Corinthians 2:5-10 (ESV)

What is relevant to our discussion from Paul’s words is that he found it helpful to him, and to the members of the church at Corinth, to forgive the man who had evidently caused

him, and them, harm. Obviously, we cannot compare whatever abuse Paul received as an adult by another adult to that which a defenseless child receives at the hands of an adult, particularly one that should have been their caretaker and defender. Nevertheless, the principle of forgiveness is still applicable. Paul did not excuse his abuser nor the harm he had caused him or the community, but rather he appealed to their Christian love (“I beg you to reaffirm your love for him”) and ethics (“that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything”), because ultimately, we do it for Christ (vs.10).

To be clear, again, forgiving the abuser does not mean ignoring or excusing what they have done to the victim. As McBride (2011) affirms:

“There is an inner letting go for your own well-being that provides emotional benefits to your mental health. Forgiveness in this way is positive and healing as long as you don’t deny the pain and hurt caused to you and you are able to set appropriate boundaries to stop it in the future. Adult children of narcissistic parents have been unloved, and many have been abused physically, sexually and emotionally. We cannot excuse bad parenting. We must not ignore the basic needs and rights of children. So, the forgiving is letting go of the past internally but only after you work the grief in your recovery.”

We could expand on the many reasons we should forgive, from the Judeo-Christian

perspective. Suffice it to say that God expects it from us in as much as He has forgiven us. We believe that God not only wants us to forgive as a demonstration of our own acceptance of His forgiveness, but also because He knows it is for our spiritual, emotional, and even physical benefit to do so. But apart from our spiritual convictions, as long as we hold negative feelings toward the perpetrator, we are the ones who will suffer the most. As Ann Grizzle (1988) wrote, "But think about who your anger is hurting most: it's *you*, as you wallow in your inner turmoil and bitterness. Forgiveness enables you to become fully freed from your anger so that you can develop as good a relationship as possible with your parents. Then, you will also be free to move forward positively in other relationships."

Even if reconciliation is not possible, the goal of forgiveness is for the victim to be able to let go of their injurious past so they can have the freedom to live a better, healthier future. Wright (1989) uses a well-known game to illustrate what happens when the victim extends forgiveness toward their abuser: "Forgiveness involves letting go. Remember playing tug-of-war as a child? As long as the parties on each end of the rope are tugging, you have a 'war.' But when someone lets go, the war is over. When you forgive your father, you are letting go of your end of the rope. No matter how hard he may tug on the other end, if you have released your end, the war is over for you."

So, to the question, is forgiveness possible for an abuse victim, the answer is that it is not only possible but the best course of action to take. The victim, by choosing to forgive their abuser, takes a step forward toward becoming a survivor and moves

more clearly in the direction of becoming, ultimately, a thriver. But forgiveness is not an event, something that happens in one moment, but rather a process that may take a long time, depending on the person and the type and length of the abuse perpetrated on them. As Stoop and Masteller (1991) explain, "Forgiveness then becomes a process that involves freeing *ourselves* from the emotional effects of what was done to us." (p.167)

We must emphasize that forgiveness is not simply a feeling. Worthington (2003, p.41) explains that there are two types of forgiveness.

1. Decisional Forgiveness. Regardless of whether we feel that we have forgiven or not, we make the decision to forgive the other person. We consciously release ourselves from what has kept us imprisoned to them and are releasing them to God and His justice.

2. Emotional Decision. This is the type of forgiveness that changes the heart.

For the victim of childhood sexual abuse, they may choose the first type of forgiveness- decisional forgiveness. In other words, understanding that it is for their own benefit to forgive, they make a decision to forgive their abuser regardless of the painful memories or feelings they may harbor toward them. But as time goes on, they may come to the place where they no longer have the paralyzing feelings they once did toward their abuser. They have reached the place where they have emotionally forgiven them and are now fully free to live their life without that anchor to their past holding them back.

Forgiveness Therapy

For some victims of childhood sexual abuse, the understating of what forgiveness is may be sufficient to get them started on that journey. For others, it may necessary, or at the very least recommended, that they seek forgiveness therapy. As Freedman and Enright (2017, p.3) explain, “Forgiveness Therapy allows women who have been abused to choose a moral response to injustice and deep hurt which is both empowering and effective in decreasing the negative psychological outcomes of emotional abuse as one is validated for their anger and other negative feelings and then helped to move beyond them.”

The point is that a victim of childhood trauma, particularly sexual abuse, does not have to make the journey toward healing alone. Friends, compassionate church members and leaders, and skilled, trained professional may assist them along the way.

The Process of Forgiveness

Anastasia Pollock makes an important point when she says that one must be careful not to push the victim of childhood sexual abuse to forgive their abuser. As she states, “it is equally important for others to refrain from pushing someone into forgiving a perpetrator. Even if the intention is coming from a good place, trying to get someone who has been violated to forgive can feel like being victimized all over again. Instead, it is more helpful to validate that the person is entitled to his or her feelings. Being a listening ear instead of trying to fix the issue is much more supportive and healing. The person needs to be able to have a voice and express what he or she is feeling and thinking without the fear of judgment.” Blogger Christina Enevoldsen (2015), a victim

herself, confirms, “I was told that forgiveness was for my benefit, not for my abusers, but it wasn’t for my benefit to be pushed. I needed time to sort through my feelings and then to decide for myself without guilt from outside sources.”

As is the case whenever there is a need to forgive, survivors of childhood trauma or abuse begin the process of forgiveness by making the decision, by choosing to forgive their abuser. Stoop and Masteller (1991) provide a six-step process for forgiveness:

1. Recognize the injury. Others, perhaps their own mother, have tried to convince a child that what her father did to her did not really happen. Some have made the victim feel somewhat, if not totally, responsible for the abuse. The victim may have even come to the place where they doubt themselves and feel responsible for what took place. But with the help of a compassionate, skilled therapist they may finally come to the place where they accept that the abuse did take place, that they were the victims, and that they were not responsible for causing it or stopping it. This is a critical step. As long as there is denial there is little hope of healing taking place.

Dr. Dick Tibbits (2006) suggests, “Acknowledging the existence of your painful past and the fact that you can’t change it is a key step toward forgiveness. Forgiveness then goes on to insist that you can most definitely change your memory of the painful event. And, by insisting that you adjust your inaccurate memories, forgiveness gives you the power to get unstuck from your past.”

2. Identify the emotions involved. Earlier we stated some of the emotions that abuse victims may experience. It is important that they give each of them a label, that

they become aware of the emotions they are experiencing and learn how to manage them appropriately. At one time or another, or perhaps all at once, they may experience anger, fear, guilt, shame, sadness, or deep grief. Understanding these emotions, and why they are experiencing them, also helps them to own them and to heal from them.

3. Express your hurt and anger. Inasmuch as it is safe to do so, the victim can confront their abuser. They can let them know that what they did was wrong and inexcusable, and that they hurt them physically, emotionally, and perhaps even spiritually. But they can also let them know that they are not helpless victims anymore and that despite their abuse they have survived and have a better life now. The victim is not obligated to confront their abuser and instead they may wish to write a letter, as we explained earlier, expressing their feelings as if they were facing their abuser. Stoop and Masteller (1991) offer a simple explanation as to why it is important to express their emotions: “If you discovered that there was poison in your belly, it would not be enough just to know it was there, or even to know exactly what kind of poison it was. You would want to get rid of it. That is what the word ‘express’ actually means. It means to ‘press something out,’ like squeezing the juice from a lemon. ‘Expressing’ our destructive emotions is important because it gets them ‘out of the system’ so that they cannot poison us any longer.” (p.173)

For those who want to help victims of childhood abuse, it is important that you stop to listen patiently to their story. As Darlene Ouimet (2012) states, “Victims of child abuse (or any type of abuse) need to be heard before they are instructed to move on or find a way to forgive the perpetrator

of the damage caused to them. People need to be validated and assured that what happened to them was WRONG and that they didn’t deserve it. They need to be told that it was not their fault and that the perpetrator of that abuse is the guilty party and that person is the one who is accountable.”

4. Set boundaries to protect yourself. Virginia was in her late twenties or early thirties, married, and with two beautiful little red-haired girls. We met Virginia and her family during a visit to the church where they were attending at the time. Later that year, during the annual camp meeting gatherings for the conference, we met Roy and his wife. They, too, were a delightful couple in their late fifties or perhaps early sixties. Sometime later we learned that Roy was Virginia’s father and that he had sexually abused her as a little girl. It was very difficult for us to comprehend how such a nice, pleasant, grandfatherly-like man could have perpetrated such a heinous violation on his daughter, but it was true. We learned that, while Virginia has contact with her dad, she would not let him see her daughters. It was her way of protecting them from possible abuse by her father. While she had forgiven her dad, and could have a relationship, though distant, from him, she did not want to risk her daughter’s being abused by him. As Lewis Smedes (n.d.) said, “You can forgive someone almost anything. But you cannot tolerate everything...We don’t have to tolerate what people do just because we forgive them for doing it. Forgiving heals us personally. To tolerate everything only hurts us all in the long run.”

This is a very important point to remember because some well-meaning people, particularly Christians, may suggest to the victim that they need to forgive and

reconcile with their abuser. But, as John Shore (2013) explains, “Forgiving your abuser does not necessitate letting them back into your life. Forgiving your abuser does not, in any way whatsoever, oblige you to have, or continue having, a relationship with them. Period. Forgiving a snake for biting me doesn’t mean I have to again pick up that snake.”

5. Cancel the debt. This is the point at which you chose to extend forgiveness to your perpetrator. It may be done in person, via a phone call, or via a letter. As we have said before, so people may choose to write a letter and then bury or burn it as a symbolic representation of being free from their past. In fact, in cases where the abuser has died, this may be the only way to forgive.

6. Consider the possibility of reconciliation. This is not a requirement for forgiveness. Reconciliation should take place

only when the victim is safe to make sure no further abuse will be perpetrated on themselves or their loved ones.

From Victim to Survivor to Thriver

But victims of abuse don’t have to simply be survivors. The image of surviving emotes the image of someone who fell in the ocean, swan to the shore, and collapsed on the beach. A survivor, yes, but barely. Survivors of abuse can have, and many have had, a very good life, marriage, and family despite what was done to them during their childhood. The goal for the survivor, then, is not to simply make it out alive, but to get to the point where their life is better every day, to be thrivers. The website HAVOCA (Help for Adult Victims of Child Abuse) (n.d.) shows the difference in being a victim to surviving the abuse and to eventually make it as a thriver.

VICTIM	SURVIVOR	THRIVER
Doesn't deserve nice things or trying for the "good life."	Struggling for reasons & chance to heal	Gratitude for everything in life.
Low self- esteem/ shame/unworthy	Sees self as wounded & healing	Sees self as an overflowing miracle
Hyper vigilant	Using tools to learn to relax	Gratitude for new life
Alone	Seeking help	Oneness
Feels Selfish	Deserves to seek help	Proud of Healthy Self caring
Damaged	Naming what happened	Was wounded & now healing
Confusion & numbness	Learning to grieve, grieving past aggrieved trauma	Grieving at current losses
Overwhelmed by the past	Naming & grieving what happened	Living in the present
Hopeless	Hopeful	Faith in self & life

Uses outer world to hide from self	Stays with emotional pain	Understands that emotional pain will pass & brings new insights
Hides their story	Not afraid to tell their story to safe people	Beyond telling their story, but always aware they have created their own healing with HP
Believes everyone else is better, stronger, less damaged	Comes out of hiding to hear others & have compassion for them & eventually self	Lives with an open heart for self & others
Often wounded by unsafe others	Learning how to protect self by share, check, share	Protects self from unsafe others
Places own needs last	Learning healthy needs (See Healing the Child Within & Gift to Myself)	Places self first realizing that is the only way to function & eventually help others
Creates one drama after another	See patterns	Creates peace
Believes suffering is the human condition	Feeling some relief, knows they need to continue in recovery	Finds joy in peace
Serious all the time	Beginning to laugh	Seeing the humor in life
Uses inappropriate humor, including teasing	Feels associated painful feelings instead	Uses healthy humor
Uncomfortable, numb, or angry around toxic people	Increasing awareness of pain & dynamics	Healthy boundaries around toxic people, incl. relatives
Lives in the past	Aware of patterns	Lives in the Now
Angry at religion	Understanding the difference between religion & personal spirituality	Enjoys personal relationship with the God of their understanding
Suspicious of therapists— projects	Sees therapist as a guide during projections	Sees reality as their projection & owns it
Needs people & chemicals to believe they are all right	Glimpses of self-acceptance & fun without others	Feels authentic & connected, Whole
“Depression”	Movement of feelings	Aliveness

Victims of childhood trauma, particularly sexual abuse, have a lifetime of pain unlike those who may experience abuse as adults. But their abuse does not have to mark them or limit them for life. Those who have accepted the past, without excusing it, denying it, or turning a blind eye to

it, but who have rather confronted it and taken steps to prevent it from happening again and to release themselves from the emotional attachment to their abuse have managed to thrive and gone on to have fruitful, successful, happy lives.

Additional Resources

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