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Why Victims Keep Their Abuse a Secret

By: Dr. Kaye Smith

There are several reasons why victims do not report sexual abuse. The main reason being that the victims were taught, trained or threatened to be silent, most often by their sexual abuser or by other members in the family. Secondly, more than likely the person they looked up to for help, for example a mother, may be the one who failed them the most. If the mother is not there to defend her child, her child begins to feel totally helpless. If the mother did not make it clear to her daughter (or son) that it was not her fault, the victim begins to feel guilty and even worthless. Lastly, sexual abuse goes unreported because no one notices a change in the child's behavior; no one takes the time to find out why she/he is acting out, angry, sad, or depressed.

Many children are willing to tell on the perpetrator, even if the perpetrator has threatened them. Children desperately want encouragement to make them report what someone has done to them. They feel like they are exploding on the inside with secrets, but they do not know where it is safe to tell. Children always send emotional signals that they are being abused. They will send an outward message, a begging almost, for someone to rescue them. Unfortunately, when the cry is not heard inside the family, or the family does not want the silent crime to be exposed – this produces silent children.

In ReClaim, I have discovered that when some victims take a chance by telling someone outside the family and asking them for help – the consequences inside the family can be horrific. Comments like, "Why would you bring shame on this family," gives the victim a feeling of deeper helplessness, and cause her/him to start believing the sexual abuse is actually her/his fault. Sometimes she will also experience physical abuse for exposing the family secrets. Her/His punishment reminds her/him daily that s/he'd better not ever tell again. Each time her/his sexual abuse is minimized or she/he is shut down when she/he wants to bring it up, the pain from the abuse is drilled deeper into her/his soul. If this pain goes unchecked, it will always find a way to leak out of her/him, especially in her/his adult years such as her/his self worth and intimate relationships. Because the child victim was made to feel guilty and helpless in so many ways, when she/he is an adult she/he is not able to connect the many negative emotional behaviors directly to the childhood abuse.

Even if the victim came from an ideal home, loyalty to the family tends to be stronger than protecting her/his own well-being. She/He feels torn between breaking up her/his model family and exposing the twisted and sick details of what her/his abuser continues to do to her/him every night. The silence continues.

Children do not know how to explain what they have experienced. They need an adult to help them express their story and how it made them feel. I have witnessed adults who were great orators except when it came to talking about their sexual abuse. The abuse had become a big complex pile of mush.

The following are examples of how the memories of sexual abuse can get shoved deep inside its victim. Furthermore, these examples explain why sexual abuse goes largely reported. **Here are two stories about why these women never told anyone about their abuse.** These are the voices of the little girls who still live inside the adult women. These little girls remember in great details why they never reported what really happened to them.

Susanna speaks of the 10 year old that lives inside of her.

"Seems like when you have an old man stick his fingers down your little pink shorts and inside your panties and then go inside your pee pee with his big thick fingers at a movie theatre and you're only four years old, uh maybe you're five, that your older brother sitting next to you would have noticed but he didn't. I didn't know what to do; I just froze. I didn't tell anyone--I didn't know what, how, or who to tell. The words just didn't come to me and when I became quiet, no one asked me this question, "Why are you so quiet, Susie?" No one asked, "Did you like the movie, Susie?" At forty-one-years old, I finally decided to tell a friend about that time at the movies, and I also stepped out on a limb and shared about my nasty brother-in-law, my sister's husband, who also molested me for three years beginning when I was ten, I was amazed at my friend's question, "Did you ever tell anybody?" Why didn't she understand that when I did tell on my brother-in-law no one helped me anyway! My dad indicated that it was my fault. I still cannot comprehend how a ten year old is capable of flirting with a 25 year old man. Then I realized that there is another reason why I did not tell. It is because no one heard me anyway, or asked if I liked the movies, or why I left the room when my brother-in-law came over, or why I was mad all the time."

"Today, it is amazing to me that even though I went to college, I still do not have the words to tell anyone about what happened to me, or even how to speak about it. I can still see it happening to me inside my mind even though I know I never lied, and I certainly never flirted with that ugly man. But, I did do this – I did keep it stuffed down and demanded it to be quiet on the inside of me for a long time, hoping no one on the outside would suspect anything bad about me. That's why I didn't tell."

Mary tells of the 7 year old child that lives inside her.

"I would think that when my stepfather came into the TV room, somebody would have wondered why I left so quickly, right in the middle of our favorite show. Yes, that was me who was running hard footed and fast to my room to get the door locked before he...but, no too late, he grabbed my hand and pulled me into his room with his hand over my mouth. He had his big boy (as he called it) ready and I knew I'd better move my mouth right or my nipples would really get squeezed hard and they would hurt for a few days. Unfortunately as always, I did it wrong and I would feel his calloused fist in my back. But I was only seven and my mouth was so tiny. I could barely put the whole thing in my mouth. And don't I dare gag, because he would squeeze my throat and it hurt when he said, "Swallow it, swallow it, swallow it, you better swallow it bitch!" Swallow what? This sour milk coming out of your big boy? But it's nasty and I don't like it! Why are you making me do this to you?"

"My mom knocked on the door one time and almost caught him, but he threw a blanket over me. I was too scared to move. What the hell mom! Didn't you wonder why that big lump of blanket was there? But she didn't care, and she didn't ask, she didn't look for me, she was just so in love with him. So I went to bed not looking for her either."

“When I was 17, I refused to come home on time and he had the audacity to call me stupid and an idiot. You nasty bastard, you’re the idiot! I thought constantly about yelling it aloud, real loud, in fact screaming it very loud, “You’re the f***ing idiot. You’re the stupid child molester, of me and my sisters!” I could never say it though because I agreed with him that I might really be a stupid idiot. I was the stupid idiot for letting him get away with it for ten years. But I knew if I said anything my little sister might have to pay, so I said nothing, because I learned about the repercussions early on.”

“I imagined my marriage to be different than what it is now. When my husband began to do some things like my step-dad, it bothered me a lot but I can’t really explain why. Although he demands that I get over it - I just can’t get over it, or really kiss him the way a wife should. Sex, well there’s that issue too, but, it seems like he’s never going to understand me in that area either. Oftentimes, I just let him get on top of me and do what he wants. He doesn’t see or hear me crying while he’s doing it though. Afterwards, I go to the bathroom, fall to my knees and weep on the floor.”

“I make plenty of excuses not to have sex such as, “I’m tired, I’ve had the kids all day and I work too”. I desperately yearn to be normal! Why can’t I just be normal? What’s wrong with me? I really want to tell my husband what this pervert did to me but I know he just won’t understand. He would probably tell me that I have to forgive and move on. So why would I bother to talk to my husband in the first place?”

“For some reason it just seems like I don’t have the confidence to do certain tasks or even finish a project. I can’t really put my finger on why I just can’t do these things. I wish I could get through some days without panicking, or forgetting something. I have days of depression but no one knows why I feel that way. I’m a good pretender. I keep on smiling and doing well at work, and doing good by helping others, by making cookies, and bringing in extra coffee— and no one asks how I am inside. It seems like no one cares about the time deeply hidden time bomb ticking on the inside of me. I ask myself why do people treat me this way, like I’m a nobody, and it seems like I have no one who cares. So I’m alone with my thoughts of despair, defeat and confusion.”

We must stop this from happening. We must help victims get their voice. If you are an adult victim of sexual abuse, we encourage you to reclaim your life now! Go to www.reclaimglobal.org to find out how you can start your journey to healing.