

The False Guilt of Abuse – Dan Hitz

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One of the deepest and most painful effects of abuse is the profound sense of guilt that often afflicts survivors. Those who have never suffered the pain of abuse would loudly declare that the survivor was the innocent victim who did not cause the abuse and should not feel the least bit guilty. They are correct. Unfortunately, even though abuse survivors would loudly proclaim the freedom of guilt to others who have suffered abuse, they seldom apply this truth to themselves. This article will look at some of the root

issues fueling the false guilt of abuse, and help those who are recovering from abuse learn how to overcome false guilt and walk in peace. The list is far from conclusive, but it covers some of the main causes of guilt I've seen through the years as I've counseled abuse survivors.

As a child, we want the world to make sense. We grow up hearing that the big people are in charge and we need to obey them. Everyone is born with a deep need to be loved and feel secure. We instinctively look to our parents and caregivers to fulfill those needs. Abuse from those who were supposed to protect us does not make sense. There is no way it can. As a child, our need to feel loved and secured is shattered as we are abused by those who were supposed to keep us safe and provide for our needs. After all, we were taught that Mom and Dad were in charge and we assumed that they were always right. In innocence, and in desperation to make sense of the world, children who are abused often assume that they must be the ones who were wrong, and therefore they deserve the harsh treatment they are receiving. This does not make logical sense when we step back from our emotions and evaluate the thoughts. No matter how badly a child behaves, no child deserves to be beaten physically or abused sexually. However, in the mind of an abused person, it seems to make all the puzzle pieces fall into place. "I am so bad that my daddy has no choice but to treat me like this." Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

Believing that the abuse was "my fault" also instills a false sense of hope and control. Admitting that the abuse is not my fault, and recognizing that there is nothing that I can do to prevent the abuse, brings the terrifying realization that there is absolutely nothing that I can do to stop the abuse or predict when it is going to happen. This realization is accompanied by terror and helplessness. If I unconsciously believe that the abuse is "my fault" and that "my horrible behavior" caused the abuse, I can hold onto a false hope that I can prevent the abuse by becoming "invisible" or by being a good boy or good girl. After all, we are taught that bad things don't happen to good boys or girls. Our abusers may even tell us so. Healing comes at a deeper level as we acknowledge that the abuse was not our fault, confront our terror and helplessness, and seek healing from safe people.

"My body responded to the abuse. That 'proves' that I must have wanted the abuse to happen." Our bodies are amoral. Our sexual organs were created with many nerve endings that respond to touch. Our bodies don't know if that touch was wanted or unwanted. They don't know if the touch was from the loving hands of our spouse, or from the tormenting hands of an abuser. Our bodies just know that the nerve endings are being stimulated and that the stimulation feels

good. Males commonly experience an erection during unwanted sexual touch which adds to the false guilt. Both males and females experience orgasm during unwanted sexual abuse. This does not mean that the abuse survivor wanted the abuse. It simply means that the body's nerve endings did what they were designed to do in a situation that was not supposed to happen. Recognizing this truth has helped many abuse survivors overcome years of false guilt.

“There were times when I initiated the abuse. Surely this ‘proves beyond a shadow of a doubt’ that I wanted the abuse to happen.” There are many reasons why an abuse survivor may begin to initiate sexual activity with the abuser. The human heart is very complex and the wounds and voids of life can leave us starved for affection. Abusers know this and are expert manipulators. They seem to have a built in radar sensor to figure out which kids have emotional voids and are open to abuse. They can also figure out which kids are less likely to tell an adult that the abuse happened, and which kids are more likely to be shy and silent. They prey upon these vulnerabilities during the *grooming process*. The abuser grooms – or prepares – the potential victim by showering him with attention and making him feel like he has a special relationship with the abuser. The abuser may even buy special gifts for the child and/or let him do special things that others in his family are not allowed to do. Abusers often introduce abuse through non-sexual touch like hugging or massages. If the child is responsive to this touch, he then begins to make the touch more sensual. The child's boundaries are eroded and he often suffers emotional confusion as this trusted friend begins to make unusual requests. Sometimes the victim complies because the abuser tapped into a vulnerable part of the child's heart that craves attention. Sometimes the victim complies because he feels obligated to the abuser due to their special relationship. Manipulative abusers can make the victims feel like the abuse was their idea, and some even threaten the child or his family if he tells. This sets the victims up for further abuse.



Abuse fragments the victim's heart. Sometimes abuse victims learn to “enjoy” the abuse out of desperation to avoid the emotional torment and terror of the abuse. Victims are usually conditioned to submit to their abusers and may not see any other options but to comply with the abuse. If children who are being abused were forced to live in the ongoing terror of the abuse, they would probably suffer a severe emotional breakdown. Often the child's mind “splits” or *dissociates*. This means that a part of their mind stays to endure the abuse, and a part of their mind “goes away”. Think of the last time you had to perform a prolonged, mundane task. Your mind probably got so bored with the task that part of your mind began to daydream that you were off doing something exciting, while another part of your mind and body continued to perform the task. This is a very simple example of dissociation, and most of us experience this from time to time. Dissociation during abuse occurs on a far more severe level. The part of the mind that stays to endure the abuse is forced to “like” the abuse to avoid “going crazy”. Sometimes that part even learns to initiate the abuse to gain the favor of the abuser, or to protect younger siblings from the abuser. The victim initiating the abuse in no way justifies the actions of the abuser. No matter the situation, if a child makes sexual advances towards an adult, an older child, or a person in a perceived position of authority; it is the spiritual, moral, and ethical responsibility of that person to protect the child and to get help for that child as quickly as possible.

Sometimes abuse survivors feel a special bond with their abusers. Tracy, Tracy, and Garrison explain this in their book *Mending the Soul Student Edition* (Zondervan, 2011). Compounding the manipulation experienced during the grooming process, our bodies secrete special hormones during and after a sexual experience that bond our hearts to the object of our stimulation. God's intent was that the bonds to our spouse continue to grow as we thrive in marital and sexual intimacy. Remember, our bodies are amoral and can't tell if our sexual experience is within the boundaries of a godly marriage, or within the broken boundaries of abuse. Unfortunately, this works against abuse victims to deepen the strange emotional connection between the victim and the abuser. This also intensifies the confusion the victims face when they find themselves bonded to the one who causes so much pain. Fortunately, these strange connections can be broken through prayer and counseling to free the survivor from the emotional bondage that was forced upon him during the abuse.

“But I didn’t stop the abuse from happening, and I didn’t tell anybody about the abuse when I had the chance. Doesn’t this ‘prove’ I wanted the abuse to continue?” There can be multiple reasons why victims don't stop the abuse or report it to others. Remember that abusers are expert manipulators. They often trick the victims into thinking that the abuse was their idea. They may also threaten the victims that they or a member of their family will be harmed if they tell. Other times, the abusers exploit the bond that has been built with the victim. Abusers pressure the victim not to tell anyone or their “special relationship” will end and the abuser, himself, will be in trouble. Not wanting the “special relationship” to end may not make sense to one who hasn't been abused. It helps to remember the issues of dissociation, whereby the victim's mind – heart – is split into pieces. The piece of the heart that carries the terror of the abuse is separate from the piece of the heart that engages in a special relationship to avoid going crazy. As healing begins and the fragments of the heart are reunited, the survivor often feels relieved to recognize that a large part of their heart truly hated the abuse.

The process of “learned helplessness” keeps the victims silent. If the abuser uses aggression to force the victim to comply, the fear of being harmed can propel the victim to remain silent even after the abuser is gone. Small children may be fully dependent upon an abusive caregiver. They may fear abandonment and being helplessly left alone if they turn their abuser in. Children don't have adult reasoning capabilities to figure out how to get help. They “learn” the message that they are helpless to stop the abuse. Even after they grow older and/or their abuser is gone, they continue to perceive that they are helpless. “Learned helplessness” explains why a child who is aggressively abused at home fails to tell a teacher or other caregiver about the abuse. During the healing process, survivors begin to learn their current coping abilities as they heal and grow stronger.

Abusers often refuse to acknowledge their guilt and push it off on their victims. The authors of *Mending the Soul Student Edition* explain that abusers should feel immense guilt for what they've done. This guilt should cause them to feel extreme conviction, leading to repentance and a full acceptance of responsibility for the harm they have caused. Instead of repenting, abusers commonly refuse to accept responsibility and harshly blame the victims. This manipulates the victims into carrying false guilt for what the abuser has done. One of the first steps to overcoming false guilt is to hand the guilt back to its rightful owner – the abuser.

Abuse survivors can take positive steps to overcome false guilt and the negative effects of abuse. The first important step that they must take is to come to Jesus. This step may sound obvious to anyone who hasn't been abused, but victims struggling with false guilt often feel too dirty and disgusting to come to Jesus. Satan is right there screaming lies in the

struggler's ear. We can remind survivors that Jesus came for broken people. He forgave the repentant thief on the cross who was mocking Him just moments earlier (Matthew 27:44, Luke 23:39-43), and He forgave the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11). No matter how dirty we feel or how sinful we have been, Jesus came to heal people just like us. He loves us in a safe way and He can help us navigate through the healing process.

Abuse survivors will need the help of safe, godly people as they overcome false guilt.

Yes, God touches our hearts individually through the Holy Spirit, but He also works through His people to heal our hearts. This can be a scary step for those who were abused by someone who was supposed to keep them safe. It can be especially frightening if that person was in the church. However, a principle in God seems to be to use healthy people to help us heal from the wounds inflicted by unhealthy people. A great first step in finding a safe person would be to talk to someone in the pastoral care department of your local church. You can also talk to a counselor who has experience in helping people overcome sexual abuse. As you heal, you can pray for God to send you one or two other safe people that you can share your story with. You don't have



to tell everyone about your abuse. God will show you who He wants you to tell. You will also need other safe friends just to enjoy life with. It will take some time to learn trust, but it is worth the effort.

Facing the pain of your past with safe others is essential in your healing process.

You might feel like you just want to forget your abuse and move on, but it is important to acknowledge your wounds, take them to the cross, and find healing. One of the worst things about getting a

physical wound that requires stitches is that the doctor has to wash out the wound before he stitches it up. That hurts. Sure, he could stitch it up without washing it out, but that would leave contaminants in the wound that would cause much worse problems down the road. It is better to endure the short-term pain of cleaning out the wound thoroughly so that a deeper healing can take place. Your heart is just like this. It will be painful to talk about the abuse, but in doing so the Lord can bring a deeper and more thorough healing. As your healing progresses, you will find good parts of your heart coming back to life and you will have much more peace. The short-term pain of the healing process is worth it for the long-term peace the process brings.

Give yourself much patience during the healing journey. Healing is a process that usually takes much longer than we wish it did. Give yourself a lot of grace during this process, and take as much time as you need. I hope that your favorite part of the journey will be to learn about God's safe heart of love for you. He is a safe caretaker that heals our hearts, strengthens us, and teaches us how to do life. You will learn some beautiful things about God along the way. You will learn some beautiful things about yourself too.

If you would like more information about Reconciliation Ministries, or any of the ministries we offer, visit us on the Web at www.recmin.org, or call (586) 739-5114. You may also e-mail us at info@recmin.org. **All correspondence will be kept strictly confidential.** Reconciliation Ministries is an affiliate ministry of **Restored Hope Network**.

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