

## **Recovery from Sexual Abuse – A Life Transformed – Craig Beickelman**

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Growing up in my family of origin I experienced neglect, emotional incest with my mother, and years of sexual molestation from an older boy. As one having to come to grips with these issues and overcome them, I share the following insights.

As with many issues, one of the first steps is to admit that these kinds of things have happened in my life and get some help. While I always remembered below the surface that things had happened between the older boy and me, I worked very hard to forget it. It was the only way I knew how to cope with the confusion and on-going interactions with him. After I had rebuffed his advances and ended the sexual relationship, he hated me intensely; down deep I always knew why. I didn't understand the extent of the emotional incest with my Mom until I started my healing journey.

I was in college when the realization of what went on with the older boy really came to the surface and hit me with stark reality. I was in freshman sociology class and they were spouting off statistics of different types of sexual abuse and I just thought, "I am a statistic". I guess I never had the words to express what had gone on before. Unfortunately, it would take a number of years before I started looking for help. Most victims don't realize that abuse is so damaging and that it affects every area of their life. I was a survivor and had built a whole world of helping others to insulate myself from ever being needy or weak again. Abuse survivors often tend to minimize what has happened to them in order to cope and move on with life. I was like a tree that had suffered from damage and had developed my own way of survival around that damage, but my whole life was altered by the damage and my own survival tactics.

Not only had I focused my life on helping others, but I had so much generalized pain that I became addicted to anything that numbed the pain such as applause, work, food, porn, and fantasy. It took the addictions to push me to seek help. I had spent my life surviving and trying to avoid pain. The last thing I wanted to do was face that pain and acknowledge all of the confusion in my life. When things finally became unmanageable, I decided to start down the road of seeking help.

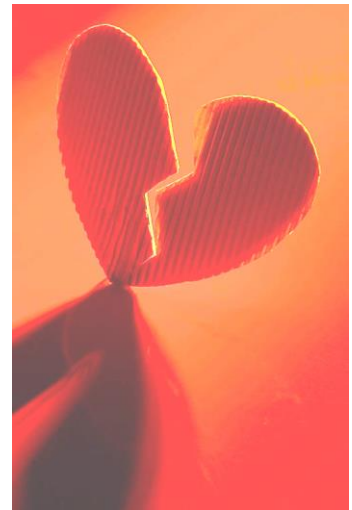
This was a very scary thing for me and there aren't a lot of good options out there. I started by reading books on sexual abuse, but most were written for women and didn't address a lot of the dynamics specific to men. One of the biggest things for me to deal with was the feelings. I could rattle off facts and explain things that had happened, but I didn't feel anything. My numbness was a coping mechanism. I was so afraid of the pain and all of the corresponding confusion that I believed that if I allowed myself to feel

and experience it, the dam would break and I would go on an endless rampage of addiction. In reality, dealing with the feelings was the key to opening up the doors for healing. I had to learn to embrace the pain as the Lord slowly allowed it to come to the surface, and then bring it to Jesus for healing. It helped to see His pain and suffering on the cross and know that He understood. I learned that the pain wouldn't kill me and that Jesus would help me navigate through it, bring healing and lift the pain. It was a slow process, but He helped me to let go of my unhealthy defenses and brought healing.

I had put huge walls around myself for protection my whole life. When I went through years of abuse I had to make sense of what was going on in my world. My normal boundaries and internal components that we are created with for protection were all shattered. Everything inside of me told me that my Mom was destroying me and that something was wrong with what the older boy was doing to me – but to make sense of this I decided that I must be wrong because this is my mother and a boy that was trusted by my family and they are supposed to be safe. I gave up all of my natural boundaries and built in indicators and was left feeling naked and vulnerable. I tried to feel secure by building my own artificial boundaries to make up for what was lost. The walls were huge and thick and I had to let Jesus begin to take them down brick by brick.

Throughout the process memories continued to come back. For me it was important to lay out memories in a timeline and get some indication of what went on and how things developed. I was able to tie abuse memories to other memories of events that were going on at the same time to get some feel for what had happened and when. Abuse brings so much confusion into a person's world that having a way to categorize it can be helpful. Memories come in layers and sometimes don't clarify until you have processed some of the layers. I still have memories and feelings that come back from time to time, but I have learned not to run from them or sweep them under the carpet. Dealing with the memories and corresponding feelings in the right way empowers me to not be controlled by them. You can't change your history, but your history doesn't have to control you.

As my healing process continued, I began to see my unhealthy relationships with others. Because I was accustomed to abuse, I ended up in relationships with abusive people. While I didn't like these relationships, they were comfortable in an unhealthy way. I had to see my destructive and sinful ways of relating to others and repent for a lot of things. I had to take responsibility for my responses and actions. The false identity I had built to cover up what I believed was destroyed had to be surrendered to Jesus. There was a season in the healing process when I didn't know who I was anymore, but over time Jesus and the support of others helped me to recognize my true identity. Moving out of the unhealthy relationships and allowing healthy people into your life can be scary because it is new and unfamiliar, but it is crucial for anyone to move forward in their healing.



Forgiveness is also a key element of healing. Unforgiveness continues to tie us to the people who have hurt us and keeps the doors open to destructive patterns in our lives. Some areas of healing did not come until I forgave and released those who had abused and hurt me. It doesn't mean we are saying that what they did is okay, but we are releasing them to our Heavenly Father who is the one true Judge.

During all of the years of abuse, I wanted to die and learned to embrace death. Now, I had to learn to embrace life. Learning to live also meant that I had to learn how to have fun and enjoy things. Enjoying things was something that had gotten me into trouble before. Needing had also gotten me into trouble. Neither seemed safe. Realizing that it was a new day and that I am not that vulnerable little child who will be destroyed anymore took time. I was victimized as a child and helpless to do much about it, but that isn't the truth anymore. I am an adult now and no longer a victim. The victim mentality and learned helplessness goes deep in the hearts of survivors and may spring up at different times; this is common because it has been a way of life for many years. The key is to allow Jesus to point this out and continue to surrender our broken ways of doing things and receive support and encouragement to move on. It is important to have people in your life who won't minimize what you are walking through, but who will also give you honest perspective and challenge you to move forward. Irrational fears and anxiety are common parts of life for abuse survivors. We have learned that we aren't safe and that people can't be trusted. I have had to face these beliefs, get help to see the fears and anxiety broken, and move on.

Those of us with a sexual abuse background have to learn that sex doesn't equal intimacy. During the abuse, the only intimacy in my life had been sexual, so I linked the two ideas together in my mind. To me, the desire to be touched and be close with others meant the desire for sex. This is a common misconception, but must be identified as false and healed. Many times normal touch and closeness will feel dirty or sexual, but learning the truth about what is good and healthy will pave the way for wholeness.

Many of the effects of abuse are learned behaviors in an attempt to make sense of a crazy, mixed up world. Behavior that has been learned, can be unlearned. It takes time, patience and the support of others. Remember that healing is a process. The key is not to panic when challenges arise, but to allow the Lord to continue your healing and stay in your supportive relationships.

It has been a long hard road, but the Lord has helped me to let go of my broken walls and see Him as my wall of protection. I am learning to connect with people and grow in relationships. I am a member of a great church and am learning to function as a valuable part of the body. Life is no longer an endurance course. I am learning to live in the moment and live life to the fullest each day. I no longer live with a black cloud of abuse over my head. I can't change the past and what has happened, but with the Lord's help it doesn't have to control my future. I can now look forward with hope of what the Lord has ahead for me.

