



Ghosts in the Bedroom: A Guide for the Partners of Incest Survivors

By Ken Graber

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Do you feel isolated or rejected, and think that no one else will understand your problems?

Although the impact of incest or sexual abuse can destroy relationships and test long-standing commitments, the information in this book may be the key to holding your relationship together through the journey to recovery. *Ghosts in the Bedroom* provides comfort and guidance for partners in the process of recovery. Graber draws from personal experience to show how partners can accept responsibility for their own issues, support the recovery of the incest or sexual abuse survivor and work toward solving relationship problems together.

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Editorial Review About the Author

Ken Graber, M.A., is an experienced social worker and supervisor. He is also a certified Values Realization Trainer who facilitates self-esteem raising seminars. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 1

Am I The Partner of A Survivor?

If you are the partner of a sexual abuse survivor, you are not alone. Recent studies show that by the age of 18 one woman in three and one man in four has been sexually molested. It has been estimated that these statistics are low due to underreporting, especially for male victims. It is also known that these statistics are based on a definition of sexual molestation including only the most flagrant kinds of overt childhood sexual abuse. Self-declared sexual abuse survivors also include those who were forced to hear or see others abused, exposed to pornography, involved in voyeurism or exhibitionism, verbally abused and raped or abused as adults. When the definition of sexual abuse is broadened to include these additional kinds of overt and covert sexual abuse, both child and adult, the number of survivors and the number of partners of survivors are significantly increased. There has recently been a large increase in the literature available for sexual abuse survivors and the resources needed to assist their recovery. Survivor support groups are also springing up in many communities. Although there are nearly as many partners as there are survivors, and although partners are significantly affected by the survivor's recovery process, there is almost no literature and little support for partners. It is a confusing time for both partner and survivor when the survivor's memories begin to return. It is appropriate for the survivor who experienced the primary trauma to be in treatment, but the partner often has nowhere to turn. Partners cannot turn to survivors for support because the survivors are too busy with their own issues and it would be inappropriate for them to divert energy away from their recovery. Some of the feelings that are natural for partners would be hurtful if expressed to the survivor. But suppressing their feelings is not healthy for partners either. Partners need their own support network so they can get healthy or stay healthy and be supportive of the survivor's recovery. Although friends may be willing to listen or offer support, they may not be helpful unless they also have knowledge of the issues for survivors and partners of survivors. The best solution is for partners to have their own program and their own group. The largest group of survivors are females who are in relationships with male partners and who were abused by males. However sexual abuse survivors can be of either sex and any sexual orientation. So can their partners. Male partners may be in heterosexual relationships with female survivors or gay relationships with male survivors. Female partners may be in heterosexual relationships with male survivors or lesbian relationships with female survivors. Regardless of these apparent differences, the commonality of experience and feelings for partners in all circumstances predominates. The commonality for partners also spans the type of sexual abuse. All partners can find comfort and understanding whether the abuse was heterosexual or homosexual, whether there was incest, sexual abuse or rape, and no matter what age the abuse occurred or the current age of the survivor.

What Is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse is the term used to refer to any incident that causes an individual to feel sex related shame. It includes sexual molestation or abuse, incest and rape. These terms are used in an expansive sense that includes subtle and isolated incidents as well as flagrant and continuing experiences. They apply to victims of either sex. Incest is between family members and the victim is usually a child under the age of 18. Sexual molestation or abuse also involves a child victim but is not between members of the same family. Rape involves force or violence and may be directed against a victim of any age. Sometimes the definition of incest is extended to include sexual abuse by any person in a position of authority or responsibility. This definition is compatible with the sense of betrayal and violation of trust experienced by incest survivors. It makes little

difference whether a survivor's abusive experience meets some particular definition — the recovery process is the same. Partners of sexual abuse survivors are even further removed from the experience and need only understand its damaging effects whatever the duration or type of abuse. Physical molestation includes flagrant and easily recognized acts of sexual abuse. Some of the most common are oral sex performed by either party, vaginal or anal intercourse and vaginal or anal penetration with fingers or objects. Physical acts of sexual molestation also include manual sexual contact or stimulation and masturbation by either individual. In some cases children are induced to have sexual contact with animals. A little less obvious is fondling or sexualized touching of other areas of the body and inappropriate sexual kissing and hugging. Children need to be touched, cuddled, kissed and hugged in nurturing and appropriate ways. In healthy families there is a clear distinction between appropriate and inappropriate touching. Dysfunctional families with confused, unclear boundaries allow touching to be inappropriately sexualized, which children experience as sexual molestation. Other physical acts that can become sexual molestation are excessive and stimulating tickling, erotic or bare bottom spanking, intrusive or unnecessary enemas and excessive personal involvement in toilet training. In addition to physical acts, there are kinds of sexual abuse that do not involve contact. Voyeurism and exhibitionism are examples. Peering through windows or displaying explicit pornography are clearly voyeuristic, but less obvious is looking through open doors and refusing to respect a family member's privacy in dressing, bathing or using the toilet. Exhibitionism is the counterpart to voyeurism and occurs in many of the same situations. Healthy adults take care to model privacy and protect children from the sight of adult nudity and sounds of adult sexual activity. Verbal sexual abuse is a final type that can also have shaming and damaging impact on the child. Obscene telephone calls can be frightening and shaming, particularly when found in conjunction with an excessively prudish family that refuses to allow age-appropriate sex education or discussion about anything sexual. The opposite extreme of a family that allows young children to be exposed to crude sexual jokes, inaccurate sexual information or too much sexual knowledge too soon can be equally damaging. Sexual abuse also includes sexual threats, graphic descriptions and other inappropriate sex talk. The key elements characteristic of sexual abuse are lowered self-esteem and imposed shame. Sexual abuse does not occur where there is respect for the individual's identity, boundaries and self-esteem. When these are violated the victim — who had less power in the first place — feels responsible for the violation, loses self-esteem and takes on the shame.

What Does "Survivor" Mean?

Survivors are persons who were victims of sexual abuse. In some ways "victim" and "survivor" are interchangeable, but there is a difference in focus. The term "victim" is most frequently used in the courts and legal settings where the focus is on the incident or crime. The term "survivor" is used in counseling and self-help programs where the focus is on the individual's treatment and long-term recovery. In the early stages of recovery the survivor feels like a victim. Using the term "victim" may inhibit further recovery. Consciously holding up the image of "survivor" assists those stuck in the victim role to see recovery as a possibility. It is also helpful for partners of sexual abuse survivors to use the term "survivor" since recovery is a process that affects both the survivor and the partner. Using the term "survivor" keeps the focus on the person who has been abused and their responsibility to actively seek and take part in their recovery. The term "survivor" gives credit to the effort the person put forth in order to survive the ordeal, recognizing that some victims did not survive. Identifying oneself or one's partner as a survivor is a hopeful designation that reinforces belief in the possibility of growth, change, recovery and regaining full functionality and health.

How Do Survivors Recover?

Recovery for survivors of sexual abuse is usually a process that takes from three to five years of therapy and participation in a support group for survivors. The period of time required for healing and recovery depends on how deeply damaging the sexual abuse experiences were, but the three- to five-year guideline fits in almost all cases. Sometimes the healing period appears to take longer because the survivor takes time out to deal with other issues, and sometimes it appears to be shorter because the survivor has previously dealt with

part of the abuse issues. Some survivors spend a few months working on the sexual abuse issues and gain some measure of recovery but leave some deeper issues unresolved. These may be dealt with at a later time. There is no set schedule for recovery. Each individual proceeds through the various stages at their own pace. In their book *The Courage To Heal*, Ellen Bass and Laura Davis have described the stages of survivor recovery they have observed:

The Stages

Although most of these stages are necessary for every survivor, a few of them — the emergency stage, remembering the abuse, confronting your family, and forgiveness are not applicable for every woman. **The Decision to Heal**

Once you recognize the effects of sexual abuse in your life, you need to make an active commitment to heal. Deep healing happens only when you choose it and are willing to change yourself. **The Emergency Stage** Beginning to deal with memories and suppressed feelings can throw your life into utter turmoil. Remember, this is only a stage. It won't last forever. **Remembering**

Many survivors suppress all memories of what happened to them as children. Those who do not forget the actual incidents often forget how it felt at the time. Remembering is the process of getting back both memory and feeling. **Beliving It Happened**

Survivors often doubt their own perceptions. Coming to believe that the abuse really happened, and that it really hurt you, is a vital part of the healing process. **Breaking Silence**

Most adult survivors kept the abuse a secret in childhood. Telling another human being about what happened to you is a powerful healing force that can dispel the shame of being a victim. **Understanding That It Wasn't Your Fault**

Children usually believe the abuse is their fault. Adult survivors must place the blame where it belongs — directly on the shoulders of the abusers. **Making Contact With The Child Within**

Many survivors have lost touch with their own vulnerability. Getting in touch with the child within can help you feel compassion for yourself, more anger at your abuser, and greater intimacy with others. **Trusting Yourself**

The best guide for healing is your own inner voice. Learning to trust your own perceptions, feelings and intuition forms a new basis for action in the world. **Grieving And Mourning**

As children being abused, and later as adults struggling to survive, most survivors haven't felt their losses. Grieving is a way to honor your pain, let go and move into the present. **Anger — The Backbone Of Healing** Anger is a powerful and liberating force. Whether you need to get in touch with it or have always had plenty to spare, directing your rage directly at your abuser, and at those who didn't protect you, is pivotal to healing. **Disclosures And Confrontations**

Directly confronting your abuser and/or your family is not for every survivor, but it can be a dramatic, cleansing tool. **Forgiveness?**

Forgiveness of the abuser is not an essential part of the healing process, although it tends to be the one most recommended. The only essential forgiveness is for yourself. **Spirituality**

Having a sense of power greater than yourself can be a real asset in the healing process. Spirituality is a uniquely personal experience. You might find it through traditional religion, meditation, nature, or your support group. **Resolution And Moving On**

As you move through these stages again and again, you will reach a point of integration. Your feelings and perspectives will stabilize. You will come to terms with your abuser and other family members. While you won't erase your history, you will make deep and lasting changes in your life. Having gained awareness, compassion, and power through healing, you will have the opportunity to work toward a better world. Partners of survivors are involved in every stage of recovery and can be a strong source of support if they understand the survivor's recovery process. A common pattern is for the survivor's memories to begin returning sometime after the age of 30. By then the survivor is trying to establish a mature sense of identity

and feels safely removed from the influence of the abuser. Some survivors may begin recovery earlier, while some may not feel safe enough to deal with the issues until after the death of their abuser.

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