



lost childhood

BY FRITZ ESKER

There are often stories on the news or in the newspapers about abused children. If the story has been made public, chances are it is because the abuser was caught and punished for his/her crimes. In this case, it is undoubtedly a good thing for the child that the abuse has ended. But sadly, the effects of being abused as a child last a lifetime and coping with these effects are a constant challenge the victims face, even into adulthood.

The problems abuse victims can face are numerous. While all abuse victims do not fall neatly into one category or another, common problems for survivors of childhood abuse include low self-esteem, anxiety, insomnia,

substance abuse, fibromyalgia, stomach pains, and eating disorders. In addition to this, if a person has a genetic tendency towards a serious mental disorder (such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia), then the abuse might trigger that disorder. “The effects of childhood abuse last a lifetime,” said Helen Stavros, a licensed clinical social worker with the Ochsner Health System.

Even those people who avoid the more serious side effects still have trouble forming healthy adult relationships. “A lot of people who have been abused as children have trust and intimacy issues,” Stavros said. Because of the trust and intimacy issues, abuse victims often enter into difficult relationships as an

adult. “They tend to choose abusive partners, as their father or mother may have been,” Stavros said.

Brenda Aranda, a licensed clinical social worker with East Jefferson General Hospital, agrees. “You learn your relationship patterns from your family.” Coming from a dysfunctional, abusive family will make an individual more likely to gravitate towards a similar environment as an adult.

In addition to these factors, abuse victims must battle a number of misconceptions. The first is the common belief that people who are abused as children will almost certainly go on to abuse children when they become adults. While some child abusers were themselves

abused as children, being abused as a child is not by any means a guarantee that the victim will then abuse children as an adult. Many abuse victims grow up to have loving families.

Secondly, there is a misconception that people who were abused as children can just simply “get over it” as they reach adulthood and put the whole incident behind them. “Your mind doesn’t forget,” Stavros said. “They (the memories and feelings of abuse) will resurface if you don’t deal with them... You need to acknowledge it, recognize it, and seek some sort of help.”

So how can abuse victims counteract this? The first step is seeking the help of a professional counselor or therapist. And the sooner the abuse victim seeks this help, the better. Part of the reason abuse is so mentally destructive for children is that they don’t know how to process what has happened to them. “Children internalize abuse...(in their minds), it must have been because they are intrinsically bad or unworthy,” Aranda said. Among other things, therapy can help children realize that they were not to blame for their abuse.

An important thing to remember with therapy is that it requires patience and persistence. “Lots of people come to therapy, but they don’t stick with it,” Stavros said. “They feel a little better, then quit it.... Therapy generally doesn’t work in just two or three sessions.”

In addition to traditional psychotherapy, a new technique called eye movement desensitization therapy is being used for abuse victims. The therapy involves reprocessing traumatic memories through eye movements. By processing the events more fully, the technique reduces distress.

New research indicates that genetics may also play a role in how well a person is able to cope with being abused as a child. Certain people have more sensitive dispositions than others. “Some people have very abusive childhoods and are just fine, others have minor adversity and are a mess,” Stavros said. “Some people are born sensitive.”

Another mitigating factor is the support system the abuse victim is able to cultivate. If a person is able to enter a healthy marriage with a supportive spouse and have a strong network of loyal friends, then he/she will likely be able to cope with the past better than an abuse victim who feels alone and isolated.

But the most important thing for abuse victims to remember is that being abused as a child does not have to mean that they are doomed to a life of misery, anger, and regrets. However, to overcome the abuse, the victim has to summon the courage to reach out for help. “If you have any of these issues, seek help,” Stavros said. “You can get over them, you can get better.”

what to do if a child in your life is being abused

While a responsible adult should obviously report any incidences of suspected child abuse, it is often not as simple as turning the bad guys in. If you are a parent or a trusted authority figure in the child’s life, how you act on your suspicions can greatly affect the child. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children discusses some guidelines on its website (www.missingkids.com).

Often a child will not admit to being abused out of fear, guilt, or shame. There are some warning signs you can look for if you suspect a child in your life is being abused. Look for extreme mood swings or changes in behavior, withdrawal, excessive crying, and bed-wetting, as well as nightmares and a fear of going to bed. Some children may suddenly show an inappropriate interest in sexual matters. Others may suddenly become aggressive

HOTLINES TO CALL FOR HELP

CHILD HELP USA NATIONAL CHILD ABUSE
HOTLINE: 1-800-422-4453

CHILD ABUSE NATIONAL HOTLINE:
1-800-252-2873

NATIONAL YOUTH CRISIS HOTLINE:
1-800-448-4663

LOCAL HOTLINE: (504)925-4571

and some fall back to clinging, infantile behavior. Finally, there are also the physical signs like unexplained injuries, especially those in private areas.

If a child you care about discloses such information, it’s hard to know how to properly react. On the one hand, it is advisable to stay as calm as possible and just listen to the child at first. However, while you should not fly off the handle, it is also important not to under-react or minimize the child’s concerns. Understand that the child is likely very frightened about how people will react. Be supportive of the child and reassure the child that he/she has done nothing wrong and is not to blame.

After listening to the initial story, law enforcement authorities and (if needed) medical personnel should be contacted. Once this has been done, the child should be directed into counseling or therapy.

Above all else, do not just dismiss a child’s concerns or think he/she is overreacting. Always err on the side of caution if abuse is a possibility.

A SURVIVOR’S STORY

For most people, childhood abuse is an abstraction. The majority of people grow up in loving households with supportive parents. It's almost impossible for most people to imagine what it must be like to be a child betrayed by someone who is supposed to love and protect you. For Mike Hess, childhood abuse was a tragic reality that he has spent his life overcoming.

The abuse started for Hess at age 5. His adopted father, an alcoholic, began sexually abusing him and continued to do so for 10 years. His father said that he was teaching Hess things he'd need to know as an adult. When the abuse started, Hess was too young to fully grasp what was happening. However, even as a young child he sensed something was wrong. "When someone tells you, 'Don't tell anyone,' you know there's something not quite right about it," Hess said. But, like all children, Hess' instinct was to obey authority figures and his father was such a figure.

As Hess got older and the realization that things were horribly wrong grew, he then became horrified that anyone would find out. He was afraid that if people found out, they might blame him for it. He eventually started to resist, but each time he did so, his father would say that he would kill himself and then Hess would back down. Finally, at age 15, Hess refused and did not back down.

Hess' father once again resorted to guilt trips. He said that he would kill himself, but Hess stood his ground. But it wasn't easy. Hess turned around and went to bed, but he did not sleep much that night. Instead, he lay awake waiting to hear a gunshot indicating that his father had made good on his threats to commit suicide. His father did not kill himself.

Despite his stand, Hess did not report his father to the authorities. He only told one person, his sister. The abuse did not become public until Hess was a 19-year-old college student. His sister, in therapy while battling an eating disorder, disclosed the incident to her therapist, who then contacted Hess. "I was really afraid of what this meant," Hess said. "But it was a good thing because it

drove me into therapy."

As a result of the disclosure, Hess' mother divorced his father and his father sank deeper into alcoholism. Unfortunately, his mother's family was unsympathetic, demanding to know what Hess was trying to gain by doing this to his father, which caused Hess a lot of deep pain and anger.

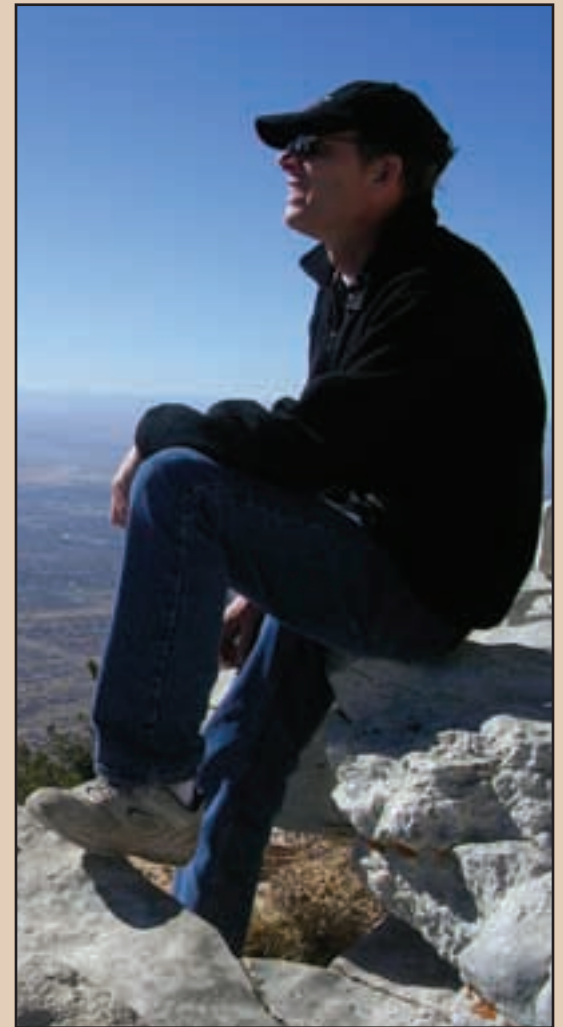
The best Hess' father could muster was only a backhanded semi-apology. He claimed to never remember abusing Hess, but said that if he did, then he was sorry. Hess never received the full apology he wanted and deserved. One night, his father was drunk and smoking in bed. He fell asleep and the cigarette caused the bed to ignite. The cabin burned down around him, killing him.

The incident illustrates an important piece of advice Hess imparts to fellow abuse victims. "Do not expect that at some point you're going to hear what you want to hear from your abuser. Put it aside and move on – don't wait for the grand apology," Hess said.

Hess also stresses that being able to talk about the abuse is an important first step to recovery. "Tell your story to a caring person in a safe environment," Hess said. That person can be a therapist, social worker, or any other trusted authority figure in the child's life. An equally important tip for abuse victims to remember is to be kind to yourself. "You didn't do this to yourself," Hess said. "All children should trust their parents. In your case, your parent wasn't trustworthy."

Even if an abuse victim follows Hess' advice and seeks professional help, that does not mean it will be easy. Hess said that he had a hard time forming relationships in his 20s, had difficulty asserting himself, and would often be very unforgiving of mistakes he made. In addition to this, abuse victims often have to cope with misconceptions people have about them. According to Hess, the biggest is that if you were abused as a child, then that means you will go on to abuse children when you become an adult.

However, even though it has been a difficult road for Hess, he has succeeded



in building a life for himself. He has been happily married since 1995 and he has also earned a Ph.D in political science from the University of New Orleans. He now works as a college professor. Aside from these accomplishments, Hess feels his experiences have helped him to be more solicitous of other people's feelings. And when he meets someone who has suffered a trauma of any sort, he can easily relate to and empathize with them. But all of these accomplishments took a great deal of work.

"I've had a long, long journey with this," Hess said.