Incest and Sexuality

Anxieties about Relationships

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Anxieties about Relationships

Survivors of sexual abuse are keenly aware of how unpredictable and hurtful other human beings can be. Having been victimized by people whom they had formerly trusted, incest survivors may feel particularly vulnerable or fearful of further abuse. Since trust was broken by other family members who failed to protect the survivors, these experiences may have left survivors wary of any type of relationship with either sex. Survivors may not feel they have the ability to select good friends and partners. Relationship skills such as developing mutual trust, communicating honestly and assertively, and experiencing playful physical affection may be undeveloped and may even seem foreign.

Young victims frequently react to the incest by generalizing individual characteristics of the offender to other people. One girl, after being abused by a grandfather who had a beard, developed a special fear and distrust of older men with beards. Teens in the survivors' groups were very suspicious about being touched by anyone who reminded them of the offender—even when the only similarity was in being male. They expressed a general fear of men (all their

offenders had been males). Teens reported having difficulty differentiating between touching that was friendly and caring and touching that might have been intended as a pass. Some survivors expressed feelings of disgust and repulsion at the sight of male bodies. Chest hair, body smell, and mannerisms similar to those of the offender were taken as warning signs, bringing up fear of sexual abuse. Survivors' concerns went beyond the typical anxiety and embarrassment most teen girls feel around men. Their expectations of male behavior and their awareness of their own sexuality in relation to men were different too.

These teens' remarks illustrate their confusion about men:

> If I was standing alone in an elevator and a thirty-three-year-old man walked in, I'd be scared that he was just going to rape me or something. I'm scared to death to be in a room alone with a man.
>
> There's a man who was a good friend of our family's. He used to take us to church all the time. I haven't seen him for a long time, but I saw him recently and he gave me a big hug and it just gave me the creeps. He also gave me a kiss on the cheek and I couldn't stand it. It really freaked me.
>
> I know what you mean. A few weeks ago, a guy from church, his wife, and baby came over. My foster parents, my foster sisters, and these people were all in the bedroom talking. This guy and I were the last ones to go in, and as we were going in, he put his arm around my waist and I felt like he was making a pass at me. Then he started asking me if I was ticklish, and I told him no and to get away from me. I didn't really know what to do.
>
> Every time an older man touches you, you think it's some kind of pass, but sometimes it's not. My grandfather always hugs me, but I just couldn't stand it. I did finally get used to it. I thought he molested my mom, but then I found out that he didn't, and I felt safer.

Fear of males generalizes into teens' relationships with their male peers. Here a survivor shares her concerns about boys:

> I needed to have a meaningful relationship with anyone. Because of my experiences with sexuality as a child, I was afraid of boys. I was also afraid of my own sexual desires. I was scared to confide in people. So when I had the urge to think sexual thoughts or masturbate, I felt horribly guilty. I thought there was something wrong with me. I tried to repress any sexual feelings I felt. Not being able to trust was also one of my problems in making friends. I didn't like talking about boys, and always clammed up when discussing sex.

In general the fear of boys is not as strong as the fear of men. Many teens expressed confidence in their ability to defend themselves verbally or physically against the unwanted physical attention of their male peers. However, they did consistently report anxiety about whether boys went out with them primarily to get sex from them or because the boys really liked them.

A concern expressed by teen and adult incest survivors is that they might marry someone who would sexually abuse their children. Some women become extremely suspicious of their partners when there is no cause. Others fear involvement with men who fall into high-risk groups, such as partners who will stepparent existing children or men who themselves were victims of early child abuse.[8] While it is important to be aware that these groups are high-risk, this is not reason enough to avoid a particular relationship. Survivors would benefit more from evaluating the personality characteristics and interpersonal skills of a prospective partner. To illustrate, many stepfathers genuinely care for and respect

their new children. And many men who were abused as children grow up to be nurturing, supportive adults highly motivated to give their children what they themselves did not receive. Often the fear of repeating abusive family patterns in itself prevents adult survivors of child abuse from ever being abusive. Female survivors reduce the risk of their children being abused when they are assertive in their marriages, feel relaxed and comfortable with sexual matters, and encourage open communication. In addition, survivors can develop their ability to recognize signs of abuse and stop the abuse if it begins to occur.

Anxieties about future and current relationships can be reduced when survivors learn better how to distinguish abusers from nonabusers. Generalizing about men or women and feeling helpless need to be minimized. Taking a closer look at the characteristics of offenders can help survivors gain skills in partner selection and evaluation. Here is a list of characteristics that may be found in offenders. Survivors may want to use the list as an aid in selecting potentially nonabusing partners.

Sexual offenders are more likely to:

1. Need to feel powerful and controlling in relationships. They may see males as dominant over females in sexual relationships.

2. Have been physically or sexually abused as children and have never dealt with the feelings that resulted.

3. Have difficulty in expressing feelings and maintaining emotional relationships with adults.

4. See sex as the primary means to satisfy their general emotional needs.

5. Attribute sexual characteristics to children and see children as sexual objects. Some may enjoy child pornography or make comments about children being sexually enticing.

6. Have poor self-concepts.

7. Display behavior that may reduce inhibitions, such as alcoholism, psychological disturbance, and drug addiction.

8. Exhibit patterns of distorted thinking to avoid responsibility for their behaviors, such as blaming others, rationalizing, minimizing, shifting conversations, and so on.

A survivor can evaluate her choice of current and future partners using this list. The items listed can be seen as red flags, that is, areas that may signal trouble. There are two ways to use the list. One is to look at how many items on the list characterize a specific partner. A person who exhibits seven or eight of the characteristics is clearly a larger risk than someone who has none of them. However, the other way to use the list is to look at how frequent or intense a behavior is. For example, many people have a tendency to blame others. It is important to note whether this is an occasional behavior or is done several times a day by a person who shows no ability to take responsibility for him/herself.

Looking at both how many characteristics are present and how often or intensely they are occurring can give one a good idea about the risk of choosing an abuser.

Survivors can help themselves stop abusive relationship patterns when they learn to select partners for whom sexual relating is only one of several ways to make intimate contact. This will give survivors the chance to experience relationships in a positive new light. Commenting on what helped her move beyond the problems that resulted from the incest, a survivor wrote: "I learned to choose my partner. In the past I used to jump into sexual relationships quickly with only the hope of getting what I wanted. That never worked."

Some survivors have difficulty determining whether they are allowing themselves to be abused in a current relationship. The following list can help survivors to determine if they are consistently allowing themselves to sacrifice their own sense of self in order to remain in a relationship.[9] In this relationship, am I:

disregarding my own intentions?

overlooking behavior that hurts me deeply?

covering up behaviors that I despise?

appearing cheerful when I am hurt?

keeping up appearances to avoid conflicts?

being disrespected repeatedly?

allowing my standards to be compromised?

faulting myself for the relationship's problems?

believing I have no options?

Each yes answer can be interpreted as an indicator that there is a problem in the relationship. Survivors can learn how to be in relationships without falling into these traps, which perpetuate the victim role. If the items on the list characterize a survivor's responses in a current relationship, then the relationship is not one that fosters honest and open communication. It cannot be satisfying until the abusive and self- defeating behaviors stop.

Survivors may approach new relationships with unrealistic ideas and expectations because their early experiences in relationships were built on manipulation and disappointment rather than trust and honesty. From the start survivors may view new relationships in black- and-white terms. One incest therapist described this as an "I want everything, I deserve nothing" approach. A survivor might have high expectations that a partner will rescue her, love her, and take care of her forever. Later, once the excitement from the romance dies down and the realities of hammering out a mutually satisfying relationship set in, a survivor might take the pessimistic stance that the relationship can't possibly work for her at all. Her partner's withdrawing during a disagreement might be

immediately interpreted as a rejection of love. She may become upset and angry, then severely depressed. This flip- flop approach sets up the survivor for relationship failure. It can frustrate partners and discourage their interest. A more realistic view would contain a balance between extreme optimism and pessimism, and a more matter-of-fact, less personalized approach to relationship ups and downs.

The most significant step incest survivors can take to protect themselves from further abuse and to create satisfying relationships for themselves is to approach relationships from a position of strong self-esteem. Good self-esteem means feeling important, worthwhile, valuable, and deserving of respect from others. Without good self-esteem, survivors may attract those people for whom exploitation, deception, and manipulation are a way of life. Low self-esteem impairs one's ability to be assertive, to get out of potentially harmful situations, and to balance needs in relationships. If survivors feel unskilled in communicating effectively and resolving relationship disputes, they can learn these skills as adults through classes, books, or counseling. Feeling confident that one has the tools for maintaining healthy relationships promotes high-level self-esteem.

Survivors often doubt their desirability. They worry that partners will judge them for having been sexual before, as if they are "used property." They may feel permanently marked as bad or worthless by the experience of incest. Some mentally torture themselves with such thoughts as "It didn't really happen"; "It

was my fault"; "It degraded me and made me different"; "I could have prevented it"; "My only value is sexual"; and "Nobody will ever love me."

Once in positive relationships it may be hard for survivors to believe that they are being loved for themselves. As one woman said, "Sometimes I think I am too needy and too insecure to be really loved— I keep doubting the relationship." Commenting on how she might have been different if she hadn't been an incest victim, another survivor wrote: "I think I would be negotiating relationships instead of avoiding them as I do now. I find myself in a double bind—alone without an intimate relationship and alone in one."

Many survivors worry about how partners will react to them when they disclose they were incest victims. They may fear their partner will reject them, think that they are different, believe they could have prevented it, or wonder if they enjoyed it. Though many survivors worry unnecessarily and their partners respond with understanding and care, the reactions of some partners are similar to survivors' fears. While there is a risk involved in telling a partner about the incest, the negative outcome of the alternative—not telling—must also be considered. In giving advice to other survivors, one woman wrote, "If your partner won't be supportive and learn about incest, get out of the relationship!"

Every incest survivor deserves support from her partner, and she can increase her chances of getting it by presenting herself as a whole, worthwhile

person rather than as a permanently damaged woman. A negative response from a partner is best viewed as the partner's problem rather than the survivor's problem. Many partners lack knowledge about incest. Some partners will not know how to respond, and some will respond poorly. Some will learn to adjust and will respond more positively later. Some will not be willing to work through their own issues and responses.

Survivors who feel clear with themselves about the incest can effectively handle the reactions of partners as they come up. For instance, if a partner begins to imply that perhaps a survivor could have prevented the incest from occurring, then the survivor can respond by educating her partner about the offender's manipulations and the feelings she had during the abuse, and about other dynamics of incest. One woman, when she received a reaction of pity from her partner, told him she was hurt by his response and wanted him to know that she really was fine in spite of the early abuse.

Women who have female sexual partners generally reported that their partners reacted to the incest disclosure with support, anger toward the offender, fear, sadness, and love. These reactions were usually well received by the survivors. Problems arose when the partners' responses made them emotionally unavailable to the survivors.

Many male partners responded with similar emotions of support. However,

about half of the male partners in our study reportedly expressed disbelief, blame, a lack of understanding, or other unhelpful responses. One woman wrote, “A relationship that does not encourage talking about feelings and letting out secrets triggers my insecurities.” This remark reflects a common desire among survivors for relationships in which both partners value sharing feelings.

Many adult female survivors may have trouble establishing close relationships with women. A mother who knew about the incest but did not protect her daughter broke her trust as surely as a father who molested her. This issue may be even stronger for lesbian women who have been incest victims; some have said that they felt recognition of their lesbianism would have come much earlier in life had they not felt such a lack of trust in women as a result of their relationships with their mothers.

Lesbian survivor relationships may have an added problem. Keeping their lesbian lifestyle a secret can remind them of keeping the secret of the incest. Thus even a positive adult relationship may be strained by anxiety and fear of discovery. As one survivor explained:

> A gay lesbian sort of issue is that because we have to live kind of closeted, I have another secret that I have to carry. Sometimes when we’re in a social situation and I have to keep the sexual relationship unknown to other people, I can feel stuff. It’s like a trigger. There are certain things that can be real difficult for me, where I just want to go out and scream about it. Now it’s a real positive thing. Then it was a real negative. But keeping the secret—having that feeling inside that there’s this thing that you would like to have out, that’s something I think is different. If you’re in a

> heterosexual relationship and things happen that are good as you're recovering from incest, you can go around and tell people in the office and your friends and your family.
>
> You can say I'm really loving George and it's so wonderful. You can go to your family—I mean maybe not everyone, but a lot of people— and say the sexual relationship is good and complete and whole, and you get encouragement and validation for that and for the relationship. And for us, all that has to be kept quiet. When there are extra tensions in the relationship because of the incest, we don't have the validation coming from family and the world out there to keep it together. And that hasn't been a problem for us but I've seen that in other lesbian couples. The strain of having to hold the relationship together alone makes you just so much more isolated that to add the incest into it makes it more difficult for those relationships to survive.

Incest survivors can greatly help themselves by choosing to relate to people who are understanding of what they have been through, accepting of who they are now, and responsive to what they need. To accomplish this, survivors must give themselves permission to relate to sensitive, accepting people. This may not feel comfortable at first, as survivors have been used to unequal relationships in which their needs are not met. However, the level of comfort increases with time and will pay enormous benefits in the long run as survivors discover how truly nurturing relationships can be.

8 D. Finkelhor (1979), *Sexually Victimized Children* (New York: Free Press), 25, 47.

9 Adapted from P. Carnes (1983), *The Sexual Addiction* (Minneapolis, Minn.: CompCare Publications), 97.

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Suggested Resources

Outgrowing the Pain, by Eliana Gil, 1983 (San Francisco: Launch Press).

A short, readable book for adult survivors of child abuse which clearly explains how early abuse affects self-esteem and relationships. Especially good for people who wonder whether they were actually abused.

Betrayal of Innocence, by Susan Forward and Craig Buck, 1978 (New York: Penguin Books).

Basic information on the history and dynamics of incest, including many

case examples. Sections on variations of incest, including mother-daughter, mother-son, father-son, and sibling.

Father-Daughter Incest, by Judith Herman, 1981 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

A comprehensive book on how incest affects daughters, including a historical overview, research findings, and treatment concerns.

For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality, by Lonnie Barbach, 1976 (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books).

A good overview of sexual socialization and sexual pleasuring. Especially helpful for women resolving orgasmic difficulties.

For Each Other: Sharing Sexual Intimacy, by Lonnie Barbach, 1982 (New York, New York: New American Library).

Female perspective on healthy couples sexuality. Lots of exercises and suggestions for improving physical relationships. Contains basic sex therapy techniques.

Male Sexuality: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment, by Bernie Zilbergeld, 1978 (Boston: Little Brown and Company).

Excellent section on male sexual socialization, harmful myths, and reasons for male sexual problems. Includes sex therapy techniques for treating common male dysfunctions.

Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction, by Patrick Carnes, 1983 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Comp-Care Publications).

Overview of common types of sexual addictions, including incest. Can help survivors understand why some perpetrators sexually molest.

Learning About Sex: The Contemporary Guide for Young Adults, by Gary F. Kelly, 1977 (Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 113 Crossways Park Drive, Woodbury, New York 11797).

A good book for teens over fifteen years old and their parents, in paperback. Straightforward sex education for older adolescents. Includes section on love, responsible sex, and decision making in relationships.

"Identifying and Treating the Sexual Repercussions of Incest: A Couples Therapy Approach," by Wendy Maltz, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 142-170.

Primarily written for clinicians. Presents a model for assessing and treating the sexual effects of incest in couple relationships. Includes intervention strategies, techniques, and therapeutic considerations.

Partners in Healing: Couples Overcoming the Sexual Repercussions of Incest (VIDEO) produced by Wendy Maltz, Steve Christiansen and Gerald Joffe, 1988. (For information and to order, contact: Independent Video Services, 401 E. 10th St. Dept. L, Eugene, Oregon 97401, telephone 503-345-3455).

Hosted by Wendy Maltz, this video program helps couples identify sexual problems caused by incest histories, and journey toward sexual healing and emotional intimacy. Symptoms of sexual concerns and specific steps in the healing process are discussed. Features three heterosexual couples (one with a male survivor). Helpful to incest survivors as well as a resource for therapy, education and training.

Two major self-help organizations for adult incest survivors are *VOICES* (Victims of Incest Can Emerge Survivors) in Action, Inc., P.O. Box 148309, Chicago, Illinois 60614, and *ISA* (Incest Survivors Anonymous), P.O. Box 5613, Long Beach, California 90805-0613.

About the Authors

Wendy Maltz LCSW, DST, is an internationally recognized sex therapist, author, and speaker, with more than thirty-five years of experience treating sex and intimacy concerns. She authored a number of highly acclaimed sexuality resources, including the recovery classic, *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, as well as *Private Thoughts: Exploring the Power of Women's Sexual Fantasies*, and *The Porn Trap: The Essential Guide to Overcoming Problems Caused by Pornography*. Wendy compiled and edited two best-selling poetry collections that celebrate healthy sexual intimacy, *Passionate Hearts: The Poetry of Sexual Love* and *Intimate Kisses: The Poetry of Sexual Pleasure*. Her popular educational website, www.HealthySex.com, provides free articles, podcast interviews, posters, couples sexual healing videos, and more to help people recover from sexual abuse, overcome sexual problems, and develop skills for love-based sexual intimacy.

Beverly Holman holds an M.S. in counseling psychology from the University of Oregon, where her master's thesis was entitled "The Sexual Impact of Incest on Adult Women." She also holds an M.A. in human development from the University of Kansas. Beverly is currently in private practice in counseling and mediation,

specializing in incest and couples counseling. She is also a family therapist at a local agency, where she works with children and adolescents and their families. Previously she counseled in a family-oriented agency, where she led incest groups for adult survivors and worked with abused children and their parents. She is a member of the Oregon Counseling Association, the American Association for Counseling and Development, the Academy of Family Mediators, and the Executive Board of the Family Mediation Association of Lane County, Oregon.