

Incest and Sexuality

**Effects of
Incest on
Self-Concept**

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Effects of Incest on Self-Concept

During childhood, incest experiences hinder the development of high self-esteem and good self-image. The immediate effects of the trauma of incest are often fear and immobilization. The impact is even more significant because the incest often lasts a long time and may not be addressed for years. It can lead to chronic depression, guilt, a sense of powerlessness, and poor self-esteem. These feelings may be manifested in many self-destructive activities, such as alcohol and drug abuse, suicide attempts, and sexual relationships in which the woman continues to be victimized.

Understanding how the incest has such a strong impact on the development of self-concept can help survivors begin to feel better about themselves and reclaim their sexuality. A child's self-concept is built by taking in messages from the important adults in her life. When she is praised, supported, and encouraged, she will come to believe she is worth praising, supporting, and encouraging. She will probably like herself and feel she is worthwhile. In contrast, a child who gets the message that what she feels and wants doesn't count will come to feel that she is not lovable. She may feel discouraged and believe she does not deserve to be cared for by others. Her basic sense of self-worth can easily become associated

with her ability to second-guess the needs of other people in her family. Being sensitive to others' needs brings her praise from the family and helps her avoid family upset, which is distressing to her. In the process of becoming adept at sensing how others are thinking and feeling, she may learn to discount and invalidate her own needs. The unsupported child may strive to be perfect in the eyes of her family. She may incorrectly come to believe that any misery she experiences is her own fault. As one survivor recounted:

I believed in perfection and strove to obtain it. But it was a hard life—trying so hard and always coming up short of the mark. I was disappointed in myself because I kept letting myself get in the way of perfection. I was limiting myself. I was frustrated by not knowing how to overcome my weaknesses and by making the same mistakes time after time. I felt guilty for each imperfection I had, and that guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders, dragging me down to where my eyes were directed to the ground instead of being able to look up, out, and around. I wasn't able to see that overall, I was really okay, and so was my world.

An unsupported child is not a different kind of person from a child who receives support. They have just received different messages on a daily basis for many years. They have both learned to believe what they heard.

An incest survivor learns not to expect reciprocity in relationships. Because she is expected to meet the needs of the family and the perpetrator at the expense of her own, she learns that others don't really care to respond to her inner concerns. Her sense of importance is perceived as equivalent to her actions as a giver. She gives to everyone but herself. Her physical needs for caring touching

and for affection may remain unmet. She may not give herself permission to ask for the kind of nurturance she really wants. Her participation in physical touching may be limited to times when she feels sexually exploited.

Incest is particularly damaging to self-concept in another way as well: victims are systematically forced to doubt their own perceptions of reality. Adults guide children by validating children's perceptions. For example, a parent may agree with a child that the water is hot or the dog is dangerous, as the child suspected. Children gain self-esteem by trusting their own feelings and experiences and by being believed by others. This makes it possible for them to act on their beliefs. In incest, the offender is so involved in his own experience that the victim's perceptions get discredited and denied. Sandy Solomon, an incest therapist, explains: "There is lying and deception by the parent ...and if the child believes the parent's lie to be the truth, then she will have to believe her experiential truth to be a lie."

It is very painful and difficult for a child to perceive her parent as a liar. To seriously doubt a parent's honesty shakes up the trust system the child has for understanding the world. Even though the thinking of the offender is distorted by his addiction, the child generally doesn't realize this at the time. It's not uncommon for an abuser to tell the victim that she is to blame for the incest. When a victim protests that she doesn't like what's going on, the abuser may respond by insisting that she does like it. One teen's father, after she told him she did not like

what he was doing to her, replied, “Yes, you do. You know you do, you little tease!” Interactions like these leave the child with a sense of self-doubt and with a limited ability to trust herself. The offender benefits from the child’s confusion, because children who doubt themselves are more vulnerable and more easily tricked into further sexual interaction and secrecy.

The following excerpt from a teen survivors’ group illustrates the influence of the offender’s thinking on the child’s developing self- concept.

LEADER: What things did your fathers or stepfathers tell you about sex or tell you about your body?

GIRL 1: Well, what he told me was that I would never have a boyfriend if I didn’t make out with him. He said guys wouldn’t like me and, for example, if a guy took me out to dinner I would have to pay him back somehow. That’s just like being a hooker or something; you’ve got to give a little and take a little. That’s exactly what it is. I’d like to go into modeling as soon as I get my teeth straightened, but my dad would always show me pictures of naked girls in *Playboy* magazines. He’d ask me if I knew who the girls were, and I’d tell him I didn’t, and he’d tell me that she was so-and-so’s girlfriend, and another was so-and-so’s wife. My dad said that he would be my manager if when I got older I would try to get into *Playboy*. He said I’d be a big model and make movies and everything. When I was younger, I didn’t know what a prostitute was, and my dad would tell me that they were girls who would stand on street corners and sell their bodies and there were guys who managed them and they would get to live in fancy apartments and wear fancy clothes and buy fancy cars. He said all I would have to do was what I was doing to him, and he was showing me how to do it so I would be able to get ahead in life.

LEADER: Most fathers don’t want their daughters to be prostitutes.

GIRL 1: He would probably have been my pimp if I’d let him. He just lies so much that it really makes me mad.

GIRL 2: My dad used to ask me if it felt good. I'd tell him that it felt terrible, but he'd say that it felt good to him and he'd tell me that when I got older and started developing that it would feel really good and that I'd want him to do it to me. And I was saying that I didn't like it and didn't want him to do it to me.

LEADER: And so, again, the message was that you were there to meet his sexual needs; it didn't matter that you didn't like it or that it hurt you—it was pleasing to him, and that was all that mattered.

GIRL 2: Yeah. I would ask him why he was doing it to me, and he would tell me he did it because it made him feel good. I told him that it didn't make me feel good and that it wasn't really fair, and he'd remind me of all the presents he gave me. If we were shopping and I'd see a dress or a pair of shoes that I liked, he'd ask me if I wanted them. When I'd say yes, he'd tell me that if I did this and this and this with him he'd get me the things. Or he'd tell me if I did something with him, he'd give me such-and-such an amount of money, and if I did another thing, he'd give me another amount of money, and if he could take pictures of me I'd get money also.

GIRL 1: And that really makes you feel like a hooker because you're giving something and you're getting paid for it just like they do. Maybe not quite as much, but it really makes your self-image a lot lower.

This is an example of how the offender tries to bend the perceptions of the victim. The father of Girl 1 twisted her desire to become a model into a willingness to become a prostitute under his management and made incest seem necessary for learning basic skills to attain her goals. In the case of Girl 2, the offender discounted her experience of the sexual abuse and tried to plant ideas of how she would feel about it in the future in an effort to justify his actions. She had been consistently taught by the offender to take bribes for activities that she didn't want to engage in, and thus she learned to devalue her own perceptions and weaken her personal sense of integrity.

Another way in which an offender may have influenced the child's developing image of herself is through the use of such labels as "sexy whore," "bitch," "baby doll," or "evil one." These can leave bitter scars on the victim's self-concept. They sink into the child's mind below the conscious level and change the child's feeling about herself. Survivors need to realize that these terms served to sexually arouse the offender or to allow the offender to convince himself that he was not responsible for what he was doing. The terms are *not* reflective of who the victim really was or who the survivor really is now.

Even when the offender made complimentary comments about the victim during the abuse, the comments created confusion concerning the victim's perception of herself. Positive comments were usually viewed with suspicion and disbelief. Here are a few examples from the teen survivors' group:

He always told me I was really beautiful, but I never could quite believe him, because whenever you look in the mirror at yourself you always see this ugly image of yourself. I thought he was just saying that to make me feel better about myself so that I would do what he wanted me to.

What I got was a comparison between my mom and me. He'd say my breasts were so much fuller and firmer than my mom's, or my body was so much more supple, and all this, which didn't really say anything about me as a person; it was just in comparison to my mom. I really don't know what he could expect, because during most of it, my mom was pregnant.

In some cases, victims enjoyed hearing complimentary comments. They may have liked hearing that they were more attractive and nicer than other women.

Given their loneliness, they may have enjoyed receiving special attention, praise, and displays of affection. For these women, feelings of guilt and anger can surface later and erase any positive influence the earlier compliments may have had on self-concept formation. The source of the compliments was not trustworthy.

Many survivors report having strong negative feelings toward their bodies; “ugly,” “repulsive,” and “disgusting” are words victims frequently use to describe themselves. These feelings serve to fuel their self-hatred and guilt. Survivors may respond to having negative feelings about their bodies in a variety of ways. They may hide their bodies with excessive weight, clothes, and hairstyles; may neglect their grooming and/or hygiene; may flaunt their bodies with seductive dress; may harm their bodies by taking extreme physical risks or by abusing drugs and alcohol; or may fail to nourish and generally care for themselves in a healthy way. These actions serve to illustrate to themselves and to others the diminished value they see in themselves.

Objectifying their bodies can become so routine to some survivors that they will jeopardize their health or discount their natural beauty in ways that would cause most women to cringe. One client bleached her hair blonde and had breast implants inserted because her husband liked women who looked that way. She was in her fifth pregnancy, although she had been advised by her doctor that having another baby could kill her. She wanted this child so her husband could finally have a girl.

Years of self-doubt and poor self-image take their toll on survivors by fostering emotional and social isolation. Many survivors did poorly in school, as they were unable to concentrate and were often depressed and discouraged. In speaking about how the incest and subsequent courtroom ordeal affected her sense of self-esteem, one survivor said:

I hated myself and couldn't get along with others. I was always getting into trouble at school for fighting. My life was miserable. I got poor grades and spent most of my time alone. I retreated from life. When I was at home I spent most of my time in my bedroom, usually crying. I wanted to belong. I wanted to have friends, but I had established a reputation for being a poor sport and a fighter. I was a loner. During recess I sat by myself. I knew the other kids didn't want to play with me. I was a social reject, a complete outcast.

In the sixth grade I was a total reject. I was always late for school. I rarely had homework done on time. I was irresponsible. I was always forgetting everything. I wore hand-me-down clothes that were outdated. My hair was unkempt and I didn't care for myself. I had tried to change over the years, but something always held me back.

Some survivors become super-achievers who put their energy into trying to gain a positive sense of themselves through work accomplishments. But old beliefs often make satisfaction with their achievements difficult. A survivor remarked:

Even though I have had academic success, there are times when I feel like my I.Q. is below average. I wonder if really I'm a dumb person trying to be smart. However, at other times, I remind myself that I have gotten good grades in school, so I must have some brains.

Learned self-doubt may extend into a survivor's adult life, making her prey to abusive partners and to the feeling that she is unable to trust her own perceptions. All along the way, each failure or perceived failure provides further evidence for her belief that she is different from and not as good as other people.

For survivors riddled with unresolved concerns about trust, early relationships in childhood and adolescent years can be rocky or nonexistent. The mother of a survivor explained that her daughter seemed to have intense, close relationships that lasted for only a few months. Her daughter would lie to her friends and try to manipulate them, and sooner or later the friends would decide they had had enough. Group therapy helped the daughter to change this pattern.

As teens, some survivors established very healthy relationships with teachers, relatives, or friends that helped them through the rough times and gave them a sense of self-worth and lovableness. The importance of these relationships cannot be overemphasized. Here a survivor describes her first major friendship:

At the end of my sixth-grade year I met a girl named Jane Smith. I was sitting by myself at recess, as usual, when she came and sat down beside me. She started talking with me, and I found it easy to talk to her. Before I knew it, she had invited me over to her house. From that day forth, we were best of friends, and still are to this day. We spent all of that summer together. I was then eleven years old. Jane believed in me, and I loved her. We needed each other. We spent many days at her house singing while she played the guitar. That fall, Jane and I started junior high school together. We were excited about going to a new school. For me it was a new beginning. I made lots of friends and found that people liked me. Without trying, I averaged B grades in my classes. One of the high points in my life

was when I received an A grade in my seventh-grade health class. I felt really good about myself. For the first time I felt like I could succeed. This is when I decided I wanted to be an A student, and I have been ever since. I know now that if I try hard enough at something, I can obtain my goal. I feel good when I learn new things, and I like school. My twelfth year was when I was the happiest. I had friends, and I liked myself.

How girls feel about being female and going through puberty may also be affected by the incest. Some girls reported blaming their bodies for “causing” the incest. One teen incest survivor said, “I wished I was a man; then I wouldn’t have cramps anymore, my boobs wouldn’t be in the way, and he wouldn’t have touched me.” Indeed, reaching puberty can be a fearful experience for a victim. Menstruation may have brought with it the fear or reality of pregnancy. Developing secondary sexual characteristics may have signaled the onset or acceleration of the abuse. This rejection of female identity because of the incest disrupts the process of self-acceptance so important to the development of positive self-esteem.

The development of an eating disorder that results in extreme thinness or in an overweight condition may be an unconscious reaction to the incest and a way of avoiding the acceptance of sexual maturity in young adulthood. Extreme thinness can cause menstruation to cease and can give the female a boyish appearance, with undeveloped breasts and practically no hips. Overeating can also produce a body that is less attractive and thus less vulnerable to the sexual interests of others. While serving as a protective function for survivors, these

extreme conditions seriously jeopardize health and reinforce feelings of social isolation, rejection, and inadequacy. A large number of people suffering from eating disorders were victims of incest.

Some survivors have an internal image of their body that became fixed at the age when the incest occurred. Looking in a mirror at themselves in the present, they may be surprised to find fully developed bodies along with obvious signs of aging, such as wrinkles. One survivor explained:

I experience something I call the Alice in Wonderland phenomenon, where I experience my body in different sizes...thinking for one moment I am too young to drive, too young to go out on a date, etc., or coming out with a five-year-old's voice when I speak.

In our study, women had many ideas about how they might be different if they had not been incest victims. They felt that they would have:

been more trusting

known their personal power better

had better self-images

been more successful

been more relaxed

known their own boundaries

done better in school

emotionally bonded better

been healthier

said no more easily

had less fear and dependency

had fewer pregnancies

avoided relationships less

While incest may have substantially influenced a survivor's life, she has the power to improve and change her self-concept. In the following comment, one respondent shares her hope:

In the nine months since I started counseling, I've had more hope than ever before in my life that the pain I've felt somewhere inside all the time, and the frustration I've felt at being socially inadequate, could go away. I didn't know why I hurt so much or handled life in general so poorly, why I seemed so weak, but I thought I was made that way—a big mistake on God's part. Now I see the cause/effect, and I see myself feeling less depressed all the time, and I'm beginning to feel like an adult in an adult's world instead of like a weak child overcome by most situations. I've never been happier and I expect it to continue and to learn to cope with hard times (emotionally) in less drastic impulsive ways.

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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.