



Incest and Sexuality

Family Influences

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Family Influences

Incest survivors grow up in families that often appear to be like any other family. However, a closer look reveals primary relationships that are riddled with secrets and psychological stress. Like a team of rock climbers connected by ropes that scale the side of a mountain, all family members are integrally connected in a journey through time. A family “team” operates in a state of interdependence, with younger members extremely dependent on the older members for guidance and support. The inappropriate behavior of any one member has consequences for all the other members and seriously jeopardizes the integrity of the family team as a whole. An undetected abusive relationship between two members of the family creates layers of dishonesty that extract a personal toll on those maintaining the secret and that weaken the whole team’s ability to function. Trust is betrayed when forced secretiveness prevails.

Understanding family influences can benefit survivors. They can learn how each member of their family contributed to or was affected by the incest. Survivors learn that psychological problems suffered by older family members may have set the stage for incest to occur and to remain hidden. Self-blame is alleviated when survivors realize that what happened to them would have

happened to any child of their sex entering the family when they did. This understanding helps free survivors from feelings of guilt and responsibility and thereby allows them to strengthen their identity apart from their family of origin.

Many survivors request clear information about family influences in order to learn how their upbringing differed from that of children in families where incest did not occur. They use this knowledge to help themselves create a different kind of life, free of destructive relationships. By reviewing their upbringing in detail, many survivors learn how to supportively “parent” themselves. This involves learning to identify and meet their physical and emotional needs themselves. As they become secure in their ability to care for themselves, survivors can then become more trusting of the caring and assistance that other people can provide. Survivors who have children can increase their ability to be good parents.

In the following sections, some common psychological stresses and relationship patterns that have been identified in incest families are presented. Much of the information comes from observation of families in which father-daughter incest occurred. Survivors who were molested by people other than their fathers will be able to identify some familiar characteristics and to adapt this information to their particular situation. (This chapter provides an overview of common traits. No family will look exactly like this and some will be quite different.)

Readers who suspect they were abused but are unable to remember any specific events may find the following information helpful in establishing whether incest did occur. While incest cannot be confirmed solely by the presence of these characteristics, it is realistic to assume that some type of inappropriate relationship may have existed if many of the characteristics are present. In some cases, the elements for abuse were present but nothing concrete ever happened, owing to lack of opportunity, the existence of minimal impulse control, or some other intervening factor. Reading this chapter may thus help some people understand why they “never felt comfortable getting a kiss from Uncle Fred,” “refused to share a bed with cousin Sue,” or “ran away from home at an early age.”

Fathers—the Offenders

Fathers who sexually abuse their children lead double lives. On the outside they may appear no different from other fathers. They are members of every race, religion, profession, and socioeconomic group, and are of varying ages. They are often members of churches and are relatively intelligent. Many of them impress others as dedicated family men who are good providers.

Inwardly, sexually abusive fathers suffer from psychological distress, emotional isolation, and emotional immaturity. Their thinking concerning sexuality is distorted, and they lack adequate skills in impulse control. They may never have experienced a psychologically healthy life as a child. Many grew up in

families where they were physically and emotionally abused by punitive, distant parents. Frequently, they themselves were victims of sexual abuse.

Sexually abusive men usually feel very inadequate and powerless. They have low self-esteem. Most do not lead self-fulfilling lives. Many feel chronically resentful toward others. They may unconsciously seek rejection and hostile responses from others as a form of self-punishment. Some seek to attain a feeling of power by exerting themselves as head of the household in a forceful and authoritarian way, resorting to violence in some cases. Other family members may feel intimidated by them. Offending fathers may become self-appointed experts on all family matters, involving themselves in the minute details of each family member's life. They are frequently successful in isolating members of the family from people outside the family. Methods for accomplishing this range from the deliberate embarrassment of guests who are visiting to directly forbidding family members to interact with others. When public disclosure of the incest occurs, outsiders may be shocked to learn that a man behaved so forcefully in private while maintaining a public persona that was very different. Other offenders acquire power by acting helpless and needy. They look as if they need to be taken care of and their victims feel sorry for them.

Sexually abusive fathers lack the ability to identify what is really bothering them, to share it with another adult, and thus to break through feelings of emotional isolation. They are weak or lacking in attributes that reflect emotional

maturity, such as the ability to delay gratification, to exercise impulse control, and to empathize with another person's experience. Frequently, sexual offenders will turn to alcohol, drugs, or other forms of escape to sidestep the pain they feel inside. These behaviors further impair their functioning by lowering inhibitions and frequently go hand in hand with sexually abusive activity. Sexually abusive men turn to incest in a vain attempt to meet their emotional as well as their sexual needs.

Abusers eroticize the child by projecting sexual fantasies onto the child's body and behavior. They often masturbate while thinking of the child and thus strengthen their attraction to the child. The risky nature of the abuse, coupled with the repetition of fantasies and masturbation, serves to create heightened sexual experiences for the offender. Adrenalin that is produced by the fear of being discovered adds an intoxicating excitement. Many offenders feel powerless over their desire for this "high." They lose control of their impulses and experience their own needs as so overpowering that they ignore or deny any pain they are causing to their victims.

Distorted thinking encourages an offender to victimize the most vulnerable person available—a child who depends on him. Distorted thinking also prevents him from recognizing the harmful impact his actions are having on the child. One offender exemplified this distorted thinking by saying, "If a young child stares at my genitals, it means the child likes what he or she sees and is enjoying watching

my genitals.” This statement ignores the fact that young children stare at virtually everything out of the ordinary, and it implies a sexual interest of which a young child is not capable.

Sexual abusers rationalize their abusive behavior with unrealistic thoughts. These rationalizations include the idea that the offender (1) is being seduced by the child, (2) wants the child to learn about sex “properly,” (3) wants the child to feel good, (4) is giving the child special attention, and (5) is not going outside the family to meet his sexual needs and is therefore keeping the family together. While none of these explanations is credible, such distorted thinking, along with the imposition of inappropriate arousal patterns on the child, allows the incest to begin. Once begun, the behavior is frequently addictive. Despite any ambivalence or desire to stop, cessation of incest is rarely attributable to the offender.

After disclosure, offenders will almost uniformly deny that the sexual abuse occurred. When the facts about the incest are presented to the offenders in such a way that they cannot deny its having occurred, they will nevertheless frequently deny responsibility for the abuse. They attempt to absolve themselves either by reiterating their unrealistic rationalizations or by blaming their spouse. However, some sexual offenders are relieved to finally be caught. The dishonesty and hidden anguish of years’ duration become exposed, and they may welcome an opportunity to get control over their problems. An offender’s willingness to admit his responsibility for the abuse can in itself be a big help to the victim in her

recovery. It can also aid the offender in reestablishing trust with other family members, especially his spouse.

Mothers—the Nonoffending Adults

The typical mother in the incestuous family somehow conveys to her children a sense of weakened capacity. She may be overworked, chronically ill, depressed, economically dependent, and/or socially isolated. She is often a survivor of sexual abuse herself and may never have disclosed the abuse. Her ability to be responsive to her children's needs may be impaired on account of the stresses and responsibilities she feels burdened with in the family. She may be frequently absent from the house because of a demanding work schedule, or she may be busy with housework and the care of young children. Often her marriage is unsatisfying in that it may be limited in communication and emotional closeness. She may currently be in a destructive relationship with the father and may be physically abused by him. Often the mother feels intimidated by the father and may convey to her children her belief that she is not capable of asserting herself equally in that relationship.

Mothers in incestuous families may sometimes encourage their older children to assume numerous adult responsibilities that strain these children's coping abilities and reduce the amount of care and nurturance they receive. For instance, the older children may be given responsibility for care of the younger

children and for household tasks. The mother may also depend heavily on her children to provide her with emotional support. The love she feels for her children may be expressed only when she is showing appreciation for what they have done for her. Mothers of incest victims may lack the ability and skills to demonstrate unconditional love. They may be unable to set aside their own neediness in order to respond with empathy to their child's daily experiences.

Disclosure of incest is a most shocking and upsetting experience for the mother. She may have had no idea that sexual abuse was going on. She may have sensed that something wasn't quite right without having allowed herself to think that it could be incest. Sometimes the mother may have doubted her own perceptions of abuse and thus may have convinced herself that she was either crazy or reading too much into an innocent situation. Often daughters do not tell their mothers about the incest because they sense the mother's weakness and want to protect her from any further pain and hardship. Daughters may also fear the loss of the family and take literally such threats as "It would kill your mother if she found out about this."

Mothers often feel immobilized at the time of disclosure. A woman may fear the disclosure means she must make a choice between her child and her husband, two people toward whom she feels love and loyalty. One woman explained her dilemma by asking, "Should I cut off my right arm or my left?"

While some mothers do respond to their daughter's disclosure in a supportive way, many frequently have a difficult time believing that incest has occurred. Some mothers totally disregard the disclosure and "forget" it was even mentioned. This amnesia-like response leaves the victim feeling ignored and invalidated. The choices a mother has to make once she accepts the incest are difficult.

Believing that her husband or partner has abused her child or other children forces a woman to make choices and take actions. The woman who has already decided to end her relationship (either by divorce or separation) or who is on the brink of the decision is usually more likely to believe her child because she has less to lose. Sometimes learning of the abuse can precipitate a long overdue decision to end a bad relationship. The woman who wants to remain in the relationship or who at least has mixed feelings—which is most common —has the hardest time.³

Fully accepting that the incest occurred and learning to cope with the changes that result from it are processes that take time. Following disclosure of Father-daughter incest, a mother usually goes through some of all of the following reactions:

1. She is *angry* at her daughter for not revealing the incest sooner and at her husband for doing this to her child and to her.
2. She feels *guilty* that she has failed to protect her child and that she has failed to satisfy her husband. She thinks it may be her fault that the incest has occurred.
3. She feels *betrayed* by her husband because he has been living a lie and a

little by her daughter for having kept the relationship a secret.

4. She *hates* her husband for the consequences of what he has done—the damage to the child, to *her* relationship with her own child, to the relationship between herself and her husband. He is the cause of all the difficulty everyone is now experiencing.
5. She is *repulsed* by him, keeps thinking about him touching her child and trying to get the thoughts out of her mind. How could he do it?
6. Sometimes she even feels a little *jealousy* toward her daughter for the extra attention and special relationship which she seemed to have with her husband.
7. She is *confused*, because on the one hand she wants to support and help her child, but on the other hand you don't just change your feelings for someone even when you learn about sexual abuse. New feelings are competing with the old ones. She feels caught between the two sets of feelings, not sure what is best.
8. Most of all she feels that not only has she *failed* as a wife and mother but she is now *expected to take charge* of resolving all the problems that have resulted from the incest, even though she was not directly involved with the abuse or perhaps didn't even know about it at all.⁴

Mothers of incest victims find the help they need to resolve issues brought up by the disclosure when they learn to use the network of social services in their area. Parent support groups, treatment groups for mothers and victims, and

educational classes on incest are effective in countering the experience of social stigma, guilt, and family disruption. With help, mothers in incestuous families can learn to be supportive of their daughters and begin to rebuild their families.

The following letter, written by a mother to her daughter, reveals the pain and growth that can come from weathering the disclosure of incest in a family.

Dearest Julie,

I am writing you this letter to help clarify my feelings and possibly open some doors of communication that have been closed to us for some time. I hope this letter can be a start for a new, open and honest relationship between us.

Julie, I want you to know that I do not blame you for any of the sexual abuse that you have gone through for the past seven years. It was Jim's fantasies that were not normal, and nothing you said or did caused Jim to sexually abuse you.

Jim's fantasies started before he ever touched you. He was so subtle you weren't even aware of it when it really started.

I know the sexual touch began when you were about seven and lasted for at least seven years, starting with Jim fondling your vagina, then making you touch his penis. It got to the point where Jim would put his penis in your mouth. When you were in about the sixth grade he started getting into bed with you at night, fulfilling his fantasies by fondling you, ejaculating on you, saying sexual things to you, and attempting intercourse with you.

Some girls feel guilty because at some point they might have even enjoyed some of the sexual contact; maybe even felt like they-might have wanted the attention (especially if the man is gentle). I want you to know that all of

us, no matter how young, have parts of the body that are made to react to touch. And being an adult man, with sexual experience, the man knows where those spots are and how to touch them to get the reactions he wants. There is absolutely no wrongdoing on the child's part because his or her body reacts naturally, the way God intended. The problem is with the man who uses his knowledge and experience with an innocent child. Julie, I'm not even sure you have guilty feelings, but if you have any at all, please know that Jim is the adult who is completely responsible for the inappropriate sexual contact, whether it was his touching you or through any conditioning he started with you at a very early age.

Your sexuality is something very precious. I'm angry that Jim tampered with it and may have caused you to feel bad about yourself as a sexual person. If so, I hope that you can learn to feel good about yourself sexually and learn to enjoy sex under healthy circumstances in years to come.

Jim used your need for fatherly affection and attention wrongly. Instead of responding with fatherly nurturing, he sexually abused you. He would ignore you for weeks at a time, until you were starving for his attention and wondered what you had done wrong. At that point he could get you to do anything he wanted. Jim would side with you in conflicts with me. It would make me the "bad ass" and make you owe him; also it put us at odds, closed our communication and kept you silent. Jim always let you know he felt special towards you by buying and doing special things for you (watchband, necklaces, bookshelves, etc.). He kept John [older son] at such arm's length that the attention he showed you must have made you feel very good. All of your reaction to his manipulation was normal. It was his manipulation to abuse you that was unacceptable fatherly behavior.

I know that I must take some responsibility for what has gone on in our lives, not for the sexual abuse, but for not being there when you needed me. I know at one point, after a TV program on child abuse, you asked me what I would do if I knew Jim had touched you. My reaction was, "I'd kill him!" Right then I closed the door for you to tell me anything. I know my violent answer was not the help you were looking for. That answer would have scared me if the situation were reversed. I also feel that you love me very much and did not want to hurt me or break up the family. Maybe you

might have felt like I might blame you by thinking you were having an affair with my husband. Julie, how could you not have felt that way, I always acted so in love with Jim and always put him first. He said and did horrible things to me and I always stayed with him and just tried harder. If I did leave him, he'd talk me into coming back in a few weeks with his promises and acts of love. Julie, if Jim could manipulate me, an adult, with his actions and words, how could anyone blame you, a child, for being conned by this authority-figure adult.

I always demanded respect from you and John for him, even when you saw the emotional abuse we received from him. By doing this I reinforced his power over you and John.

I guess my biggest frustration was that not only was I not there for you, but no one was. Jim manipulated the whole family to abuse you. We all fell for his cons. He kept John at arm's length and on guard all the time. Jim was the authority over John. John could never do anything good enough to please Jim. John was always wrong-always in the way-so when Jim said jump, John jumped.

Jim used Doug and Jason [father's children from previous marriage] as an excuse to molest you. He could always tell himself that he was not going to let you or John take their place in his heart. When the boys were at our house he made sure they knew that you and John were not special and that they were still first. I guess the worse he treated you the more he felt it showed the boys they were #1.

I was always busy with Gary and Sally [youngest children, from this marriage] when they were young, so you felt neglected. Jim used your neglected feelings to molest you. He made sure I knew I never lived up to his expectations of a mother to Gary and Sally. So I was always busy trying to meet his expectations, which left you to him with more emotional needs and hurts that he could manipulate and prey on.

I know things have not worked out exactly as you've wanted since you disclosed to me about Jim's sexual abuse to you. All I can say is, I am so grateful you were brave enough to tell me so it could be stopped. I want

you to know that everything that has happened to our family after disclosure is completely Jim's doing. He was the one who put our family on the line. It's because of his actions that the family is separated. It's because of his actions that he was sent to jail. It was because of his actions we may not be together as a family for Christmas. The result of his actions are what caused all the confusion in our lives. I know this and I want you to know it too.

I could write a book on the ways Jim has used our family. There are so many instances I recall, now that I know Jim was manipulating all of us to sexually abuse you. I did not recognize the characteristics or the manipulation for what it was until I received group counseling. I knew there was something wrong but just couldn't put my finger on what it was. Through the teaching and counseling with the mothers' group, I'm finally understanding. Neither you nor I was to blame for Jim's actions. He was; and it's up to him to change them. But we can change our relationship with each other to an open and honest one so neither Jim nor anyone else can ever hurt us in this way again. Let's talk about all the instances that Jim manipulated and used power over us. Let's open ourselves up to each other so you will know you can trust me to protect you always. Let's learn how to stop this in this generation so none of our babies to come will go through what you have.

I love you so,
Mama

Children—the Victims

Child victims in incestuous families live in an ongoing state of psychological stress. They are generally unhappy children. They are troubled by memories of past abuse, fears of future abuse, and the pressure to keep the sexual experiences secret. The psychological stress of the abuse is seen most often by a change in the child's behavior, which may occur at the onset of the sexual abuse or which may

develop as the child grows older.

The following behaviors may be present in children who are victims of sexual abuse.

Common signs in young children include: nightmares and other sleeping disturbances; bedwetting, fecal soiling; excessive masturbation; clinging/whining; regression to more infantile behavior; explicit sexual knowledge, behavior, or language unusual for their age; withdrawal; frequent genital infections; unexplained gagging; agitation/ hyperactivity/ irritability/ aggressiveness; loss of appetite.

Common signs in older children include: depression; withdrawal; poor self-image; chemical abuse; running away or aversion to going home; recurrent physical complaints, such as infections, cramping or abdominal pains, muscle aches, dizziness, gagging and severe headaches; self-mutilations such as cutting, burning, tattooing, suicide attempts; truancy; change in school performance; overtly seductive behavior/promiscuity/prostitution; eating disorders such as anorexia, sudden weight gain or loss; limited social life; attention-getting or delinquent behavior.⁵

It is not uncommon for these signs to be completely ignored by other family members. If there is a response, it often consists of blaming or punishing the child for the behavior. One woman shared that she pulled all her eyelashes out beginning at the time her father started molesting her. Her mother called it a bad habit and scolded her to stop; she lacked the education and sensitivity to know that these behaviors can be symptoms of sexual abuse. Thus it is not surprising that the actual abuse may go undetected for a long time.

Victims of abuse grow up without a sense of protection and security. All children need the security of feeling protected from danger in the world in order to build inner strength and to venture into new experiences. Victims of abuse do not trust that the adults in their lives can place a child's welfare before their own. As victims mature, they may be handicapped in their ability to establish trusting relationships with others. Sexual abuse conveys the message to the child that the offender's needs come first, so it destroys the basis for child-adult trust. The abuser teaches the child that it is not safe to trust. It is a harsh lesson to discover that the same person who is supposed to protect you in life is the person who is harming you the most. Trust may be further impaired by a lack of responsiveness on the part of the nonoffending parent, who does not protect the child from the abuse. Like all children, victims of sexual abuse are vulnerable and dependent on others. They accept the attitudes and beliefs of the older people in the family as truth. Quite understandably, they are not able to perceive a larger view of their experience, one which would indicate that something in the family as a whole is very wrong.

The abused child may assume that the abuse is something she caused or deserved. All young children view themselves as the center of all their experiences. It is difficult for the child to realize that the abuse has very little to do with her, that it is a symptom of a sickness no one can see in the offender.

Lacking perspective, the child may believe that all families are like hers and

that children are commonly sexually abused by older family members. One woman remarked, "I thought it [the sex] was just another part of growing up. I imagined my friends had to do it too." In contrast, many victims may feel strongly that something is wrong but, because of their immaturity, are unable to verbalize the experience or act to stop the abuse.

Methods used by the offender to coerce the child into sexual behavior and keep that behavior secret impact negatively on the child's sense of well-being. The inherent imbalance of power in the adult- child relationship establishes a basis for coercion. It doesn't take much more than action on the part of the offender to obtain the child's cooperation. Some children are forced into incest through various forms of physical abuse, such as being slapped, hit, drugged, and held down. When physical force is used, fear and pain may increase to extreme levels. Sexual energy may become infused with associations to violent energy. Once this association is learned, the victim has a hard time separating the two types of energy.

Many child victims are coerced into secretive sexual activity by nonphysical pressure tactics. These may include subtle nonverbal approaches such as silent, occasional fondling during bedtime play and touching the child's breasts or genitals when the child is thought to be asleep. One woman described how all her father had to do was look at her with his "sad puppy-dog eyes." Another woman said her grandfather would silently, expressionlessly walk over to her when they

were alone. Nothing was said; these women knew what “the look” meant and knew they had no choice. Nonphysical methods of pressure also include a wide variety of verbal means, including commanding, threatening, bribing, and pleading with the child. Some offenders explain to the children that the activity is a form of sex education, that it’s a punishment, or that it is acceptable, common behavior.

Some offenders are well aware of the emotional neediness of the child. They may use their awareness for the purpose of manipulating the child into sex. They may give and withhold privileges, love, and acceptance in order to obtain the child’s cooperation.

Child victims in incestuous families often long for adult love and attention. Quite frequently, adult survivors report that they were neglected by all the adults in their lives except the offender. When this type of relationship occurs (where the offender was the primary, only nurturing, caring adult in their lives) an intense protective loyalty may be apparent. Even after the abuse becomes public, the child may defend and continue to idealize the offender. Their emotional dependency on the offender may blind them to the harm caused by the abuse.

Child victims in incestuous families are likely to have assumed a role as a parentlike figure to other family members. This process, known in psychological terms as parentification, involves the child feeling responsibility for the family’s welfare. A survivor described the role reversal in her family in this way: “I aligned

with my mother, but my mother never really aligned with me. I was there to protect her, and she was very childlike and I was very parental toward her.” Since the victim is frequently the oldest daughter in the family, those girls who have become the “little mother” of the house may submit to sexual abuse in order to keep the offender from abusing a younger sibling or physically hurting their mother. Other victims, keenly aware of the family’s financial dependency on the offender, may assume that the sexual contact is necessary to obtain basic survival needs such as food, shelter, and clothing.

Offenders understand the implications of parental behavior in children and may emphasize how the child will be responsible if the offender goes to jail, if the family breaks up, if the mother has a nervous breakdown, or if the younger child gets taken away. The offender may also appeal to the victim’s sense of responsibility and power by asking how she can deny her lonely father his only source of pleasure. These comments serve as powerful silencers and discourage disclosure.

Feelings of low self-esteem, fear, hopelessness, depression, and responsibility hold the child victim back from disclosing the incest. Sometimes the child suppresses the incest from her conscious memory. Often the child just hopes the sexual abuse will stop on its own or tries to avoid situations in which it may come up. Victims may fear that no change will occur after disclosure and that their family’s lack of caring for them will be confirmed. Others fear that too much

change will occur. One woman, abused from age three to seventeen by her father, stepfather, brother, and uncle, explained:

I thought I'd be blamed and shamed—I had a crush on my stepfather, so I thought I caused it at age five. When I was older, a teen, I thought my mother would have a nervous breakdown or else kill someone, or some unknown and horribly shameful catastrophe would happen. We were not emotionally close. I lived in a fantasy world for survival. ... I was under *extreme* stress. I felt suicidal, homicidal, and schizophrenic. Barely on the edge of sanity, *constantly*.

When a child victim is able to disclose immediately following the first incident, it's a sign that she feels positive about herself and that she generally feels supported in the family.

Too frequently the child's worst fears are borne out and disclosure is met with shrugged shoulders, blame, punishment, and continued incest. When family members react in these ways, it leads to deeper feelings of depression and hopelessness for the victim. One survivor related that her disclosure precipitated her parents' divorce but the incest did not stop. The actual experience of disclosure can be very upsetting to a child, owing to confrontations with police, social workers, and juvenile authorities. Personal emotional support from at least one relative is extremely important for minimizing feelings of guilt and confusion.

Disclosure can be a very helpful experience if it stops further abuse, frees the child from the necessity of having to maintain a self-defeating secret, and provides public recognition and validation of the injustice done to the child. Whether or not

disclosure occurs, the child is often left with mixed feelings toward the offender. She may feel both love and disgust for him at the same time. As adults some women continue some of the incest dynamics by feeling a need to please their fathers. Feelings of intense rage may be covered up when the adult survivor continues to play the role of the responsible, loving daughter.

Family Patterns

Families in which incest occurs tend to be closed, inward families lacking in real emotional connection to people outside the family. The couple is usually not working together well as spouses or parents. They may have an active sex life but usually lack emotional intimacy.

These families often have a history of problems for several generations which increase the potential for incest. Frequently, the mothers of abuse victims were themselves sexually molested as children. The majority of offenders have a history of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or emotional abandonment in their families of origin. Alcoholism, a documented hereditary disease, often seems to travel from one generation to the next, along with incestuous behavior. Family patterns that allow alcoholism to continue untreated for many years similarly foster undetected sexual abuse.

Family members learn roles of victim and perpetrator which become accepted and commonplace. Children pick up on the intimidation, fear, and

helplessness the nonoffending adult feels toward the perpetrator. This limits the options children perceive for getting out of the abusive relationship. Many victims assume that being dominated and treated poorly by the offender is just a fact of life, not something to be challenged. Perpetrators of abuse desperately attempt to avoid their own feelings of helplessness by doing what as children they associated with being powerful—dominating and manipulating others in the family. But because they still view themselves as victims, they fail to assume responsibility for their own abusive behaviors. It is impossible for them to consider relinquishing their position of dominance, as this is their only fragile hold on power. Giving it up would force them to face the flood of fear, anger, and vulnerability which they have repressed from childhood.

How is incest passed down in families? While the following scenario is just one of many possibilities, it does provide insight into the influence that family patterns can have on incest.

A typical pattern might include a father who is needy and dependent and has unusually high expectations of being taken care of by his family. The mother is also needy and exhausted. There is little emotional intimacy between the parents. The father was abused by his own family as a child and finds close contact with his oldest daughter sexually arousing. She has taken on more and more responsibility for household tasks and child care to relieve her mother, who is overwhelmed. The daughter has often been told by her parents to do as she is told and not

question her parents. The father tells her she is special and may give her more attention than the other children. She feels close to him and appreciates his affection. The affectionate touch gradually changes from tickling to massage to sexual fondling to oral sex. The father tells her it is her duty to take care of him. The mother consciously ignores signs of abuse, unable to face its consequences. The daughter grows up feeling dirty and different from other girls. She does not “tell” because it has been going on for so long that she is afraid of being blamed and does not think anyone will believe her. Her self-esteem is poor, and escape from home becomes a goal. She chooses a partner who looks strong, expecting that he will take care of her. His neediness attracts her; she is familiar with needy men and wants to be loved. Her partner’s “strength” is often a cover-up for his own insecurity. They marry, slowly become alienated and depressed, and have children who once again fall prey to incest.

There are many variations in family incest patterns and, like the example just given, they often involve families being socially isolated, being run in an authoritarian manner, and adhering to limiting male and female roles. Severe family stress can make families more susceptible to abuse. Stress hampers people’s ability to make good decisions and to exert impulse control over inappropriate tendencies. Family influences may contribute to incest, but the offender’s behavior *is* the abuse. The offender is the sole person responsible for the abuse.

As adults, survivors have two major tasks to accomplish in relation to family influences: the resolution of intense feelings and the establishment of new boundaries with old family members. Resolving the intense, leftover feelings from the abuse allows survivors to close the incest chapter in their lives and move on to create better relationships and better times. Feelings such as anger, fear, betrayal, and sadness need to come to the surface and be expressed in safe, supportive ways. Sometimes this can occur directly, when family members are willing to be involved. Many times it is more appropriate for it to occur indirectly through therapy, either because of the lack of availability and supportiveness of other family members or in order to avoid negative consequences for the survivor. This letting go of old feelings frees the survivor from the victim role she may have played in the family. Understanding and resolving feelings allows her to live a life unencumbered by continual bitterness and hatred.

How a survivor chooses to establish adult relationships with the offender and other family members is an individual decision based on a variety of circumstances. The key is that the survivor needs to give herself permission to limit contact, and possibly to change the whole nature of the contact if that's what she requires to affirm her separateness and strength. Distancing emotionally, physically, and even geographically may be very appropriate. Many survivors only feel comfortable reestablishing contact after they have gained assertiveness and self-protection skills, have learned to reduce their expectations of how much closeness is possible, and have lessened their need for love and support from their

family of origin.

Survivors often wonder whether they should feel forgiveness toward the offender and other members of the family. Forgiveness in the sense of releasing others from responsibility for their harmful actions and believing that the actions were justified is not healthy. But if forgiveness can be defined in a way that emphasizes understanding a person's humanness, limitations, and history, then it may be very beneficial. This second style of forgiveness is self-affirming. It can allow and encourage the survivor to accept her own humanness, develop compassion toward herself, remove remaining self-blame, and release herself from constantly experiencing negative feelings toward old family members. The issue of forgiveness is something each survivor must resolve for herself.

³ Sexual Assault Center, Harborview Medical Center (n.d.), *Sexual Abuse: The Mother's Experience*, 2-3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Behavior signs and indicators that a child has been sexually abused (October 1983), *Sexuality Today* 6, no. 52: 2. Used with permission of Atcom, Inc., 2315 Broadway, New York 10024.

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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,

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