



Incest and Sexuality

**How Survivors
Can Help
Themselves**

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How Survivors Can Help Themselves

I know the devastation of incest can be overcome. Hundreds of my patients have done it. I did it. So can others.

— Susan Forward
Betrayal of Innocence

Many survivors have serious reservations about their ability to successfully overcome the sexual repercussions of incest. They doubt that they can resolve sexual problems, lose their fear of sex, stop feeling guilty about sex, and learn to control the negative feelings they have about sex. While this attitude of discouragement may reflect the learned hopelessness that resulted from early victimization, it also stems from an awareness of how significantly survivors feel their sexuality was affected. Influences from incest tend to be deeply ingrained and are often unconscious. They are multidimensional and affect sexual attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, associations, and self-concept. Thus, trying to overcome the sexual repercussions of incest can feel much like wrestling with an octopus. Unless you have a sense of what you are doing, and know how to reduce the octopus to the size of a crab, it's easy to get exhausted and give up hope.

Sexual problems that resulted from incest do not go away by themselves.

Treating them successfully requires an effective, well-focused effort that addresses the ingrained results of the abuse. This is why seeking outside professional help in the form of psychotherapy is recommended (see chapter 11). Yet many survivors either do not feel ready for or currently have no access to incest and sex therapy. They want to be given basic ideas that they can start using right away to help themselves.

Whether or not they are currently involved in an intimate relationship, survivors can help themselves make positive changes in the sexual area of their lives. So many times survivors become stuck in old, self-defeating patterns that reinforce unsatisfying sexual experiences. By following the suggestions in this chapter, survivors will be using a well-directed approach to begin resolving sexual concerns.

Survivors can learn on their own to feel better about their bodies and better about the expression of their sexual energy. Since survivors experienced their bodies as objects manipulated for another's benefit, they were denied a comfortable opportunity to develop ownership and control over their bodies and the expression of their sexual energy.

As adults, survivors can provide themselves with new experiences to learn some of what they missed. General body acceptance can be facilitated when survivors take the time to privately look at themselves nude in a full-length

mirror, massage their skin, or slowly rub lotion on themselves. Looking at their genital area with a mirror, naming all the sexual parts, and touching the sexual parts to explore the different sensations are all good ways to extend the sense of ownership to more sexual areas. Self-stimulation of sexual parts, which may or may not lead to orgasm, can enable survivors to feel that their sexuality exists primarily for themselves. They can also learn more about what they find sexually satisfying—information critical to further sexual satisfaction with a partner. Women who are comfortable with their bodies and with self-stimulation tend to be more easily orgasmic and generally more satisfied in sexual relationships. These exercises should be done when a woman is alone, and she should move through them at her own pace. This will allow her to fully experience being in control of the experience, which is very important. Body image does not change quickly, but it can change. The exercises become more comfortable with practice, and they are most effective when repeated over time.

Survivors can create a foundation for positive future sexual relationships by learning how to distinguish caring touch from exploitive touch. Caring touch respects the receiver's feelings and gives the receiver room to say no at any time. Exploitive touch is primarily for the benefit of the toucher and tends to deny or discredit the withdrawal of the receiver. Nonsexual relationships that involve an exchange of touch through hand-holding, hugs, friendly kisses, and physical closeness can be very healing to incest survivors and can help them establish trust and a sense of physical control. In a teen group, one survivor shared how

important her foster father has been in teaching her about caring touch from a man.

I'm finding that in my foster home I'm getting the love that I never got from my father. I had thought that affection from fathers was them lusting after my body. Since I was four years old, which is when my mom married my stepdad, what I remember is him going after my body and just wanting my body. Now my foster father kisses me good night or kisses me goodbye, and he's showing me love in a secure way and the way in which a father should show love. He's really good about it. He told me that if he ever did anything that made me uncomfortable, like hugging me or something, I should just say so and he would find it really understandable. I'm tempted to call him Dad because I never had a dad who was nice like that. He was the one who said I couldn't kiss my boyfriend, but he did that to protect me. He said he knew I could just go out and do whatever I felt like, but he told me that it was because he loved me, and loved me as much as any of his daughters, that he didn't want me to do certain things. He shows me the same kinds of things that he shows any of the other kids in his home.

Single survivors may want to develop social and assertiveness skills before pursuing an intimate relationship. They may find it helpful first to establish friendships with people they are sexually attracted to before acting on those sexual feelings. Having several months in which to get to know and trust a partner, express feelings, and learn to touch in a slow, safe, pleasant way, can give survivors the time they need to relax about sex and view it as one possible choice on a continuum of options for loving physical expression.

Based on information and advice provided by survivors themselves, the following "bill of rights" can serve as a reference for survivors in developing

assertive attitudes and behaviors regarding sex.

Bill of Sexual Rights

1. I have a right to own my own body.
2. I have a right to my own feelings, beliefs, opinions, and perceptions.
3. I have a right to trust my own values about sexual contact.
4. I have a right to set my own sexual limits.
5. I have a right to say no.
6. I have a right to say yes.
7. I have a right to experience sexual pleasure.
8. I have a right to be sexually assertive.
9. I have a right to be the initiator in a sexual relationship.
10. I have a right to be in control of my sexual experience.
11. I have a right to have a loving partner.
12. I have a right to my sexual preferences.
13. I have a right to have a partner who respects me, understands me, and is willing to communicate with me.

14. I have a right to talk to my partner about the incest.

15. I have a right to ask questions.

16. I have a right to receive accurate sexual information.

A good exercise for a survivor to do on her own is to read through the above bill of rights and make a note by each right that she feels she has not incorporated in her life. Next, she can explore changing her thoughts to include the rights that she would like to accept. Thoughts are like cassette tapes playing on the metaphorical tape deck of one's mind. An old thought can be challenged and erased and a new thought can be played repeatedly until it becomes a new belief. For instance, a survivor may be having trouble with the seventh item on the Bill of Sexual Rights: "I have a right to experience sexual pleasure." She can challenge her belief by asking, "Why don't I feel I have that right? What am I afraid of if I assume that right?" She can visualize herself having the right and imagine how much better she might feel.

By asserting their rights, survivors of incest can begin to see sex in a new way, that is, not as something forced but as something healthy that is freely chosen. Survivors frequently commented about the importance of saying no when they either knew they didn't want sex or when they were unsure. An important point is that a person cannot really say yes to sex unless she/he can also fully say no to it *at any time*, even after sexual activity has begun. Claiming the right to say

no is a step toward leaving the victim role behind and developing stronger self-esteem.

Women in our study shared those things they have done that have helped to resolve sexual issues. These included reading and learning about incest; learning how to relax, how to acquire self-confidence, and how to be assertive; reading about sex, relationships, and self-esteem; talking with their partner and sharing what was uncomfortable about sex; learning to be vulnerable; learning how to choose a partner; stopping abusive sexual patterns; taking a “vacation from sex” by becoming celibate for a while; becoming monogamous; learning to relate emotionally with a partner; learning to be patient and to take time; developing a clear sense of sexual boundaries and limits (what they would and wouldn’t do, what was needed from a partner); and learning to recognize and allow anger.

Asked what advice they would give to other incest survivors, women made the following insightful comments:

Don’t ever feel guilty about the acting out behavior in your past—such as promiscuity, pregnancies, or abortions.

Say no until you really want to say yes. Share the feelings that come up with your partner when they come up or as soon as you can. Explore your own body. Learn to please yourself and teach your partner. Allow yourself to be pleased, to receive, to be vulnerable.

Talk about sex, read about it, write about it—if it’s your time. Don’t force the river. It’s all waiting for you whenever you’re ready.

Talk openly about sex and incest, and remember they're different.

Concentrate on body touch and safety—not sexual pleasure. Say no especially when you are feeling maybe.

Sometimes a heterosexual survivor is anxious about entering a relationship with a male because men frighten or intimidate her. There is a simple exercise she can do to help overcome this. It's called "putting on blinders." Blinders are the black covers that horses wear to prevent them from seeing sideways. The survivor imagines she is wearing blinders that prevent her from seeing that she is a female. She thus relates as a genderless person, neither female nor male. The man is also imagined as a genderless person. The survivor relates to his eyes, to what he is saying, to his personality, and so forth, not to his maleness and what maleness has previously meant to her. This technique can allow the survivor to overcome initial anxiety and assert her strength in developing a relationship.

Once they have become involved in a relationship and are sexually active, survivors may experience flashbacks to the abuse while they are having sex. Here are some suggestions for survivors for how to cope with flashbacks. First, survivors can identify the triggers that tend to remind them of the abuser and the abusive sexual activity. Once these triggers have been identified, exposure to them can be minimized. For example, cigarette smoke and alcohol may trigger flashbacks for one survivor. She might then establish as a condition for being sexual that she and her partner not consume alcohol or smoke cigarettes before sex. If one or both of them have done either of these, steps can be taken before sex

to minimize the effects, such as brushing teeth or using a mouth freshener. Survivors may choose to let their partners know about their triggers so that the two of them can work as a team to find solutions.

Some triggers, such as moaning, sweat, sexual smells, and heavy breathing, present a different challenge, since they cannot realistically be avoided during sex. A request to breathe lightly and to stop sweating will just not be well received by even the most understanding partner! In these situations, some preventive measures may be taken, such as bathing before sex or using an enjoyable perfume that establishes a new smell. Other options for reducing triggers include making love someplace other than a bedroom, changing the time of day for sexual activity, or changing the position for making love to one in which the survivor is more dominant.

In the following excerpts, a survivor describes how she was able to minimize disturbing feelings that would arise around sexual activity by changing the place where intimate contact took place, and how she used cleansing to help her break the old associations with sex as “dirty.”

We couldn't start making love in the bed. When we started the sexual contact, it was in the living room, a safer place for me. And I found the first time we went to bed together we went to the ocean, so we weren't really at home, and that was okay. But then when we came back, the next time we went to bed was in my apartment. I had a flashback. Then I found it very threatening when I was in bed. That was real difficult for me, to be in a bed. So that was something else. Though I don't know if we thought about it consciously, it made it easier for me to move into the sexual relationship

by being careful about where we were in the house. Definitely not the kitchen. Definitely not the bedroom. Those were the two places for me that were very threatening. The bathroom, for me, was a really safe place. And we kind of played around a lot in the bathroom. We took showers. That was a safe place for me as a child —I could go lock the door. Most of the abuse for me took place in the kitchen and the bedroom. So we'd take a shower together and scrub each other, wash each other's hair, things like that. But if anything sexual was initiated, it was always in the living room.... Showering and cleansing bring up good feelings for me. When I have a flashback, or when I've got lots of stuff going on and I'm feeling kind of dirty, I do that. I just allow myself to go in and take a bath every now and then, when I don't need one. Just to feel clean. And it's a physical act that symbolizes a psychological one. Saying, no, I'm now clean. I wash that away.

In the process of reclaiming sexuality as something positive and healthy, women need to remind themselves that the current situation is different from the past. Before they were children, and now they are adults. Their present partners are different from the abusers of the past. Survivors can now trust their own feelings. If sex is uncomfortable or undesired they can speak up and take action. Survivors can develop ways of reminding themselves that now is not the past. Talking during sex to hear their own adult voice and that of their present partner, and reminding themselves where they are and whom they're with can help. Some survivors find they can relax and center themselves by looking around at favorite objects and saying to themselves such statements as "I am big now. I am in control. I am an adult."

The feeling that she can control whether or not sexual interaction takes place as well as the pace of the interaction is a key element in a survivor's sexual

healing. Being able to say no to sex at any time includes being able to say no even after sex has begun or is about to be over. The ability to say no with sensitivity to the partner's experience is an important relationship skill. Thus, pushing the partner away abruptly is less desirable than calmly informing him or her and remaining present to hug, calm down, and rest together. Stopping the sexual activity is a way for the survivor to remind herself that she is in control and can say no at any time. Her partner's acceptance of her decision to stop ensures her that she is cared for and respected.

Stopping also provides the survivor with the time needed to refocus on sex from a relaxed perspective, should she and her partner wish to resume overt sexual contact. When possible, it is a good idea for a survivor to indicate to her partner how touching could then be resumed. Perhaps resuming by touching another part of the body or merely slowing down would be a good way to proceed. The process of shifting to a different kind of touching is a way for a survivor to gain control while reinforcing to herself that touching can be a positive experience. One survivor explained:

In my present state and partnership, we each have varying sexual feelings, communicate about them, and act appropriately on them each time. Sometimes old memories and feelings come back and I take time, often with the help of my partner, to separate the present from the past. Often at those times he'll just hold and rock me. That helps.

Once assured that they have the ability to say no and to control the contact

comfortably, survivors can slowly explore the option of saying yes willingly and of creating a relaxed setting in which to enjoy sexual expression. Survivors can learn to take an active role in pursuing sexual fulfillment. They can learn to ask comfortably for what they want in lovemaking.

One survivor shared a different approach for overcoming negative feelings that came up during sex. She would challenge herself to be as actively involved as her partner in the sexual activity. She noticed that by bringing herself up to his energy level she could overcome any vulnerable feelings that had begun to surface. She was not just responding to him but was actively matching her activity level with his. As this survivor said, "If you can deaden yourself sexually, then you are powerful enough to drum up your sexual energy at will!"

The ability to laugh about her situation and about sex in general is a good sign that a survivor is on the road to healthy recovery. Developing a sense of humor about sex can reduce anxiety and foster personal change. When sex can be viewed as playful fun among equals, then significant healing has occurred.

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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.