



*Incest and Sexuality*

**Preface and  
Introduction**

**Wendy Maltz  
Beverly Holman**

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**Incest and Sexuality: A Guide to Understanding and Healing**

**Wendy Maltz  
Beverly Holman**

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## Preface

For the past year and a half we have worked jointly to produce this book. Initially we planned to do a research study and from that write a pamphlet for incest survivors and their partners about dealing with the sexual aftereffects of incest. But as time went on, we expanded our existing materials and realized that we had the ingredients for a book. We each put in many long, hard hours of research, writing, editing, and general production. Before we began, our lives were already filled with family and work commitments. It was often very difficult to keep focusing our energies on the book. Constant exposure to the painful details of sexual abuse left us feeling emotionally sensitive at times.

However, the effort was not without its rewards. We were inspired by the strengths and abilities of survivors to overcome their childhood traumas. We were provided with opportunities to expand our existing knowledge and expertise in treating incest survivors. We gained new appreciation for the art and discipline of expressing thoughts on paper.

Our contributions to the book were different and yet complementary. The original idea for writing on the subject of incest and sexuality came from Wendy.

Five years ago, she and another Eugene, Oregon, incest therapist, Sandy Solomon, met with teen survivors to gather more information for a statewide counselor training workshop on incest and teen sexuality. Some of the ideas and theoretical models in our book had their beginnings in materials developed for that workshop. The teen incest survivor interviews contained in the book are from transcripts of those early group sessions.

Wendy proposed the research and writing project to Beverly in the summer of 1984. At that time Beverly was facilitating adult incest survivor therapy groups at a mental health clinic and was attending graduate school at the University of Oregon in Counseling Psychology. She conducted an extensive review of existing literature on the interface of incest and sexuality. She administered a questionnaire to thirty-five survivors who were in incest treatment groups. Beverly analyzed the results and wrote a thesis entitled “The Sexual Impact of Incest on Adult Women.” Much of our book is based on materials gathered from the literature review, research, and questionnaire responses.

In January 1985, we began writing the book. Wendy wrote the bulk of the initial draft; together we rewrote and edited subsequent drafts. While she was working on the book, Beverly graduated and continued to counsel incest survivors in her private practice and at local mental health clinics. Her background in incest resolution therapy and family therapy has contributed an important clinical perspective to the book. Simultaneously, Wendy’s private practice grew in the

number of incest survivors and partners who wanted help in overcoming the sexual difficulties they were experiencing. From this clinical work and from workshops she had presented on sexuality, Wendy developed models and strategies specifically for sex therapy with incest survivors. She interviewed survivors and partners to obtain their stories for the book. The names in these accounts have been changed to ensure confidentiality. Many of the guidelines, interventions, and analogies in the book are Wendy's original contributions. Beverly assumed the administrative task of preparing the final manuscript.

Acknowledgments are due to many people. Steve Schweitzer, Ph.D., provided academic consultation for the research at the University of Oregon. Thoughtful assistance in editing and content was provided by Sandy Solomon, M.S.W.; Nancy Evergreen, M.A.; Judith Engle, Ph.D.; Mary Ann Huysler, M.A.; Marty Acker, Ph.D.; and Bee Sholes, M.A. Members of the Lane County, Oregon, Incest Clinicians's Group assisted in administering the questionnaire for our study and provided enthusiastic support. In particular, we thank Carolyn Rexius; Gail Wiemann; Mary Hinman, M.S.; Jill Wolf, M.S.; Norma Sue Webster; Margie Templeton, M.A.; Dorothy Abelson, M.S.W.; and Diane Maria. We appreciate the information, materials, and consultation provided by Doug Ricks, Peter Elliot-Wotton, and John Preble, M.S.W., on sexuality concerns of male incest survivors. We thank Dianne Watson, M.A., our colleague and friend, for helping us stay focused and for helping to keep the ball rolling to the finish line. Thanks are also due to Barbara Land for her careful work in typing the manuscript.

A special thanks goes to our husbands, Larry Maltz and Sabin Lamson, whose support made it possible for us to carve out the time and energy for this project. We are grateful for their love and affection, which keep us mindful of how nurturing intimate relationships can be. We also thank our children, Jules and Cara Maltz, Jesse Kocher, and Emilie Lamson, for patiently allowing our endless absences.

Most of all, we want to thank the incest survivors whom we have come to know and care about in our work as therapists and researchers. Their openness in exploring and sharing the intimate aspects of their lives made this book possible. We dedicate this book to them and to all survivors of child sexual abuse. We hope they will find it helpful in their journey.

## Introduction

This book has been written for survivors of incest who want to explore both how the sexual abuse may have affected their sexuality and what they can do about it. Intimate partners of survivors and therapists who have clients who are survivors may also find this book useful in developing a supportive and understanding approach to sexual concerns. Special sections have been written with partners and therapists in mind. We have chosen to use the term “survivor” instead of “victim” because it better communicates the ability people have to recover from abuse.

This book has been written from the perspective of female incest survivors because most incest survivors are female, current research has focused almost exclusively on females, and our contact has primarily been with female survivors. However, a male perspective is important and we have consequently devoted an appendix to addressing sexuality concerns of male survivors [See Appendix A]. We believe that male survivors as well as female survivors of types of sexual abuse other than those we have discussed will find useful information in this book. We hope they will be able to adapt the content and treatment approaches to their own situations.



Sexuality is a very sensitive and emotionally charged subject for incest survivors. Confronting the graphic details of sexual abuse can be a shocking experience. Therefore, we recommend that people reading this book have a support system, such as a friend or counselor, with whom they can discuss any feelings that may arise. We also suggest that readers give themselves permission to skip over any graphic descriptions contained in the book and to stop and take a break from the reading when needed. We suggest that readers use the parts of the book they find helpful and not put expectations on themselves to address the topic in any particular way or move through the subject matter faster than is comfortable. Our goal has been to create a framework for understanding so that sexual concerns can be addressed in a relaxed and positive manner.

Survivors of sexual abuse are definitely not alone. Estimates vary, and because of the high number of unreported cases, solid data is not available. However, studies show that a range of 9 to 52 percent of adult women and 3 to 9 percent of adult men report having been sexually abused as children by either family members or strangers.<sup>1</sup> The figures are much higher when the definition of sexual abuse is broadened to include experiences such as being forced or encouraged to watch sexual activity or being forced to stimulate oneself in front of another person.

When we permit the inclusion of more common experiences that contain elements of sexual abuse, such as receiving obscene phone calls, being called

sexually derogatory names, and being treated as a sexual object, it becomes evident that almost all females and many males have experienced some form of sexual abuse.

In many ways, our American culture fosters the existence of abusive elements in sexual relationships. During the developmental years, males and females are taught stereotyped sex roles that set the stage for how sexual activity should take place. Males are often taught that being unfeeling, uncommunicative, and sexually demanding is part of being masculine. Teen boys express this attitude in such statements as “If I don’t press for sex with her, she might be angry or think I’m gay,” and “Even if she says no, maybe she still wants it and expects it from me.” Sexual activities become an opportunity to gain peer status and show conquering abilities rather than to relate meaningfully to another person.

Teen females are culturally socialized to seek approval from others by being passive, adaptive, and physically attractive. They are taught to downplay their intelligence and assertiveness for fear of being seen as unfeminine. The message is that females should be responsive to males’ sexual needs. Paradoxically, females are also inaccurately viewed as having ultimate responsibility for whatever sexual activity takes place. Sex is often engaged in as a means of maintaining the status of having a boyfriend or with the hope of securing future commitments. Thus girls learn to exploit themselves sexually toward a nonsexual goal. Little cultural recognition is given to the healthy expression of female sexual feelings. Instead,

sexual directness in young women is considered socially out of place.

The American media portray sex as a casual activity, unplanned, with no mention of birth control, the prevention of sexually transmitted disease, or emotional responsibility to a partner. Many times sex is portrayed as a way to exert control and power over another person. Television, movies, and books teach Americans to use sex for secondary gain. Blatant examples are the teen slash films, in which sex is associated with violence. These films often show rape scenes that have no apparent connection to the plot, and women who respond positively to aggressive acts against them. Much adult pornography continues the sex stereotyping by portraying women as content to be sex toys for men's pleasure.

It appears that our society has been training boys to be sexually exploitive, and girls to be sexually victimized, without full awareness of how this has been happening or of the unpleasant repercussions it implies for both sexes. As adults, many men feel ashamed when they recall the times they pressured a girl into sex. What they most desperately wanted was to be really loved and accepted. They thought sex was a means to that end and lacked other skills to develop intimacy.

The high rate of sexual abuse in our culture dramatically underlines the strong need for sex to be taught and portrayed in a different way. Whether it is engaged in alone or with a partner, sex is a physical activity that is based on a natural biological drive. The circumstances surrounding sexual activity determine

whether it is positive or negative. It would be very beneficial to our culture if we were to begin teaching sexual relating as a serious activity that can be approached with personal integrity, a willingness to assume responsibility, and an ability to delay gratification. Were sexual activity to be undertaken responsibly, with accurate information and healthy sex role models, the negative repercussions could be reduced.

Sexual abuse has finally been recognized as a major problem in our society. Public awareness and education about childhood sexual abuse has mushroomed in the past five years. The public reaction to incest has changed from one of disbelief to one of active concern. Current and former victims of abuse have been coming out of their hidden worlds of pain to get help. Hotlines, treatment programs, and reading materials are now available and in demand.

Incest is the most common form of child sexual abuse. We define incest as any sexual contact between a child or adolescent and a person who is closely related or perceived to be related, including stepparents and live-in partners of parents. Most victims are female; most perpetrators are male. In the majority of cases it is a father or stepfather who abuses a child. Incest also includes sexual activity initiated by siblings, cousins, mothers, uncles, aunts, or grandparents. Incest involves sexual activity that occurs only once as well as activity that takes place over an extended period of time, often several years. The types of sexual activity include fondling, oral sex, anal sex, and intercourse. The breakdown of

trust within the family heightens the psychological damage caused by the sexual abuse.

Many women (estimates run as high as 50 percent) do not remember their incestuous experiences until something triggers the memory in adulthood. Those women who do remember may be disappointed to find that the important steps of remembering the incest and disclosing it to others do not bring automatic relief from the legacy of pain and problems the incest has left behind. Understanding why one has always felt shy undressing in front of others does not make the shyness go away. Likewise, addressing other issues such as anger and grief, while crucial to the work of incest, does not necessarily result in resolution of sexual concerns.

Based on our clinical work and research, we believe that a person's sexuality is significantly affected by the experience of childhood sexual abuse. Sexuality involves attitudes, feelings, and behavior concerning sexual activity. It reflects one's gender identity (male or female), the types of sexual expression pursued, and sexual preference (heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual). Societal messages and sexual interactions early in life strongly influence the development of adult sexual attitudes, behaviors, and identity.

Most incest survivors have some sexual issues. Some women have extensive concerns about sexual relating and others have minor ones. Experiencing incest is

only one source of sexual concerns. Many women who are not incest survivors also have sexual problems. Sources of sexual problems for both survivors and those who have not experienced incest can be medical conditions, inadequate knowledge, lack of experience, sexually repressive childhoods and poor relationship dynamics.

Many benefits can be derived from addressing the relationship between incest and sexuality. As a society, we can become more informed about the real damage that occurs. Our motivation to combat sexual abuse can be strengthened. Parents can recognize signs of abuse earlier and take a more active, outspoken role in protecting their children. Sexual offenders can be directly challenged when they deny or try to excuse the effects of sexual abuse with statements like “She was too young to know what was happening”; “She was asleep and probably forgot it”; and “I did it for her benefit.” These remarks are absurd when contrasted with the enormous pain survivors experience and the difficult process recovery requires. And for adult survivors of incest, studying the relationship between incest and sexuality can answer questions they may have about what they are feeling and how they are behaving sexually. Survivors can gain knowledge and skills that will enable them to resolve their sexual issues.

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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](http://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.