

*Incest and Sexuality*

**The  
Survivor's  
Choice**

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## The Survivor's Choice

Incest survivors are victims of trauma. A profoundly negative experience occurred in their lives—an experience over which they had no control and no escape. Nothing can erase the pain from the past; memories do not dissolve. However, incest survivors do have a choice. They can let the pain from the past continue to control and victimize them or they can make a conscious choice to leave the victim role behind. It's not easy. It's not possible to leave the victim's experience behind by willing it to be that way. It takes facing the incest and its repercussions head on. It takes hard work and a long time. It can be the most worthwhile and important choice a survivor will make in her entire life. A survivor's discovery of herself can be a magnificent experience full of wonderful surprises. As one survivor advised, "Remember that other women share the same feelings as you and that they do get better. The experience of incest won't go away, but you can reveal to yourself many hidden strengths."

Overcoming the effects of past abuse can be a very rewarding,

empowering experience. Initially, it can be scary to turn and face past abuse directly, with one's eyes open. It can be hard to realize how families let people down and even exploited them. Admitting the need for and seeking outside help may be a difficult step. But frequently, in time, survivors find tremendous relief in knowing they are not alone and that there are effective ways out of their current psychological and sexual dilemmas. Survivors learn to validate their self-protection and survival skills. They come to acknowledge their lost innocence and begin responding in assertive, nurturing ways in order to meet their own needs. Such feelings as guilt, anger, and sadness can be expressed and resolved, permitting survivors to deepen intimacy and trust in relationships with other people. By understanding what happened, why it happened, and how it happened, survivors can emerge from confusion and fear, able to face new experiences with confidence.

Survivors are often surprised at how well they are able to overcome the sexual repercussions of incest once they have committed the time and energy it takes to effectively address these issues. One partner of a survivor expressed delight in the success they had been experiencing sexually after working patiently on sexual inhibition for a year.

Early in the relationship I became aware that Fran did not feel anything when I touched her. It has been wonderful watching different parts of Fran's body literally coming alive. When I think back when she was like a steel rod, I remember asking her if she would mind if I would kiss her and she would look at me and say, "What? You mean on the mouth?" Fran thought she might throw up if I kissed her. Now I contrast that with three days ago when Fran turned to me and joked, "Well, when are we going to make love?" In a year's time, this is phenomenal!

Survivors can reclaim their sexuality *for themselves*. They can experience feeling comfortable with their bodies and with giving and receiving physical pleasure. Touching can become a positive, nurturing experience. Survivors can gain more control over their bodies and can experience sexual fulfillment. Sexual problems and inhibitions can be overcome in ways that strengthen survivors' feelings of personal respect and self-esteem. Healing the sexual trauma of incest can have a positive effect on the survivor's current family. A survivor shared in therapy her happiness at discovering that her eldest daughter was warming up to her husband's friendly affection for her. The daughter had been mimicking the mother's old behavior, recoiling from the touches of an adult male. As the mother worked through her sexual inhibitions and enjoyed snuggling with her husband on the couch in the evenings, all the children became more

open and relaxed about physical displays of affection.

Sexual healing is a beautiful gift a survivor can give herself. The sexual repercussions of the incest can be understood, challenged, and worked through. When a survivor makes the choice to face the incest directly, her burden of pain and hurt can be lifted. The incest will always be part of her past, but she can choose to remove its hold on her life. A survivor *can* claim her identity as a healthy, sexual person. The choice is hers.

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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.