



OVERCOMING a Painful Childhood

Hope and Healing for Adult
Survivors of Abuse and Neglect

by *Melanie Wilson, Ph.D.*

Sue woke up feeling the pain of another one of her boyfriend's rages. She rubbed her arm and wondered if it was broken or just sprained. A woman with a bruised face stared back at her from the bathroom mirror. Sue wasn't surprised. She had been waking up like this for as long as she could remember. Her boyfriend, Rick, liked his beer as much as her father had, and they both had hot tempers. Sue never knew when Rick would lose it and start hitting, but there was something about her that made him do it. It must be the same thing that had made her father beat her. "I wish things could be different," she thought, "but I don't know how I'll ever be happy."

This booklet is for the millions of men and women like Sue whose lives are affected by abuse or neglect they suffered as a child. Adult survivors of physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual abuse often wonder

- How does my history of child abuse continue to affect me today?
- What can I do to start feeling better emotionally and physically?
- How can I ensure a better future for myself and the people I love?

The good news is that with help from God and people who care, you can overcome a painful childhood.

Long-Term Effects of Abuse

You are a special person and your childhood experiences were unique. However, many adult survivors of child abuse deal with similar problems, misconceptions or anxieties. You may not have made the connection between your experience of abuse or neglect and the problems you are having in your life today, but everyone's adult life is heavily influenced by their childhood experiences. Understanding how child abuse has affected you will show you that you are not alone and help you let go of unnecessary guilt and self-blame.

In 2003, child protective services documented almost 2.9 million reported cases of child abuse or neglect in the United States. They estimate that there are millions of adult survivors just like you. While some of those people do not have continuing difficulties in adulthood, many do. Usually, the more severe the abuse or neglect was, the more severe the problems are in adulthood. These problems range from basic misconceptions about yourself and the world around you, to emotional problems and difficulty controlling behavior.

Misconceptions about yourself, others, the world

Sue could still hear her father saying she would never amount to anything. He said she was ugly and no man would want her. She supposed he was right. She was 30 years old, still single, and only making minimum wage. Rick never held a job longer than a month. He only stuck around because the rent was free and because Sue didn't say anything when money disappeared from her purse. But she figured Rick wasn't any worse than any other guy she'd met. They were all looking out for "number one."

Like Sue, many adult survivors have believed lies about themselves, other people and the world in which they live. Maybe your abuser lied to you over and over again, so you don't know what's true and what's false. In his book, *From Victim to Victory*, child abuse survivor Phil Quinn explains that many adult survivors believe lies about themselves, such as

- I'm bad, ugly, no good, worthless, stupid, unlovable or helpless;
- it was all my fault that I was beaten, ignored or molested;
- it is not okay for me to feel angry or sad or to tell the truth about how I feel.

Many adult survivors believe lies about others, such as

- people cannot be trusted;
- other people are cruel and out to get me;
- other people only care about themselves.

Many adult survivors view the world as

- frightening and unpredictable;
- overwhelming;
- doomed.

As you learn the truth, your beliefs about yourself, other people and the world will change.

Emotional problems

Sue found it more difficult to get out of bed in the morning. She didn't feel like going to work anymore. She used to enjoy getting together with her friends, but she hadn't called anyone in months. She also thought about death a lot; it seemed like the world would be better off if she weren't around.

People who have been abused are more likely to suffer from emotional problems such as depression and anxiety. Many survivors struggle every day with

- poor self-esteem;
- lack of interest in fun activities;
- loss of appetite (or weight gain);
- trouble sleeping (or sleeping too much);
- fatigue;
- hopelessness;
- suicidal thoughts.

Other survivors suffer from anxiety disorders. The nervousness may seem unrelated to their abuse, or the fear may be brought on by situations that trigger memories of abuse. If you suffer from anxiety disorders you may experience

- sudden attacks of fear;
- frequent worry;
- restlessness;
- fatigue;
- muscle tension and pain;
- nightmares or other sleep difficulties;
- trouble concentrating;
- being easily startled.

Difficulty relating to others

Like Sue, most victims of abuse and neglect are hurt by the people they want to love and trust the most—their parents. The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect reports that in 2003, 83.9 percent of abusers were the child's parents, and another 15 percent were relatives of the child. Young children learn the most about themselves and how to relate to others from their parents. Children who are abused by their parents may have no idea what a healthy marriage or parent-child relationship is like, and often continue to have unstable, unhappy and sometimes violent relationships as adults. Judith Herman writes in *Trauma and Recovery* that the risk of rape, sexual harassment or battering is almost doubled for survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

As an adult survivor, you may

- be always searching for someone to love and care for you the way your parents never did;
- not know how to choose a trustworthy partner or friend;
- give in to people who seem to have more authority than you do;
- abuse others;
- be the victim of other abusive relationships.

Difficulty controlling behavior

Adult survivors are more likely than other people to abuse drugs and alcohol. Drinking and taking drugs can dull the painful memories of abuse and help you escape the pain of your current life situation. Because you can drink and use drugs to feel good whenever you choose, they can give you the illusion of being powerful. But addictive substances can quickly control you and cause even more pain than you had before.

Although most adult survivors do not abuse their own children, they are more likely than other people to do so and more likely to commit other violent acts. Adult survivors often were taught by example to solve problems with violence and have deep-seated anger about their abuse.

Victims of child abuse are also more likely to hurt themselves. Some adult survivors say physical pain helps to block out the emotional pain, while others say they feel relief after punishing themselves for being “bad.”

Misconceptions of God and life in general

Sue wondered if she would really end up burning in hell like her father said. Of course, she wasn't sure she cared one way or the other. Her life seemed like hell on earth anyway. If there was a God, Sue was pretty sure He'd never liked her. She remembered praying a couple of times when she was a kid, "Please help daddy be happy. Please help me be good so he won't get mad." But nothing changed.

Child abuse or neglect can interfere with every aspect of a person's life, including the spiritual. Although some survivors learn to depend on God because of the abuse, others are angry at God or are unable to believe in Him at all. Some survivors were spiritually abused; the church was involved in their abuse, or their abuser lied about God or they were prevented from knowing God. Some survivors, like Sue, wonder how there could be a God who would allow an innocent child to endure such pain and suffering, and others see no meaning or purpose in life.

Hopefully, this brief review of the ways that child abuse and neglect may continue to affect you today has helped you to understand yourself better. Remember that some adult survivors do not experience these kinds of problems. If you do, however, it may be helpful to read more on the subject. Additional resources are listed at the end of this booklet.

Dealing with Childhood Trauma

At work one day, Sue's coworker, Karen, said she'd noticed that Sue seemed down lately. She asked if Sue wanted to talk during their lunch break. Sue didn't feel much like talking, but she said yes anyway. During lunch, she didn't feel comfortable telling Karen about Rick, but she admitted that she had been feeling pretty hopeless lately. Karen was a good listener and soon Sue was explaining that she'd never really been happy—even as a child. She talked about how hard it was having a father who drank and lost his temper a lot. Karen put her arm around Sue and promised that she would help Sue feel better soon.

The fact that you are reading this booklet suggests that you are ready to begin the process of recovery. This journey requires tremendous courage. It is usually a slow (perhaps lifelong) process, and you should not try to do it alone. The first step is to feel safe, then to tell and retell the story of your abuse, and finally, to forgive your abuser.

Establish a support network

Karen told Sue she knew of a Christian counselor who did therapy at a reduced rate. Sue wasn't too sure she wanted to talk to anybody about her life, let alone a Christian, but Karen said she could quit if she didn't like it. Karen even offered to drive her.

The therapist was friendly and seemed genuine. Sue was surprised that she ended up talking to her and even crying a little bit. The therapist said she wanted to help Sue connect with people who could help. Sue decided that she didn't have anything to lose by trying.

The first step in feeling safe is to build a support network of people who can help you, which may mean reaching out and asking for help. A good start would be to find a licensed counselor or psychologist who has training and experience working with adult survivors of childhood abuse. If finances are a concern, look for a therapist whose fees are based on your income. It's important to develop a close working relationship with a counselor, so choose someone you are comfortable with. If necessary, ask a friend to take you to your appointments.

A counselor can help you find a support group for adult survivors if you want one. There are support groups for adult children of alcoholics, victims of sexual abuse, victims of incest and other particular situations. Although your experiences are unique, you can benefit from the support of others. The group members' stories may help you tell and understand your own story, and they will probably have useful suggestions on how to cope.

Your support network may also include trusted friends and family members. Tell these people that you are beginning the recovery process, so they will understand changes in your emotions and behavior. Your therapist may also encourage you to involve them in the counseling process.

You may have a lot of questions about God—Where was He when you were being abused as a child? Does He care about you? If you question the existence of God or wonder about the meaning and purpose of your life, a Christian counselor or caring pastor can help. Ask people you trust to recommend a pastor or Christian counselor who understands the particular needs of adult survivors of child abuse.

Get treatment for physical and emotional symptoms

Once you have established a support network, your next step will probably be to control any troubling emotional or physical symptoms. A thorough medical exam is a good idea. Your therapist can help you find a psychiatrist who can prescribe medication to control depression, anxiety or sleep difficulties. Your therapist can also help manage symptoms by teaching you new ways to relax and control your thoughts.

Create a safe place to live and work

Sue's therapist helped her find a support group for adult survivors and a pastor with whom she could talk. She still didn't feel completely comfortable talking with the pastor. She worried that he could see how bad she was, but he was nice and tried to make her feel welcome.

The therapist also talked with her about ending her abusive relationship with Rick. Sue was scared about what Rick might do if she tried to kick him out, but she agreed to talk with someone at a domestic violence shelter about her options.

You must feel safe where you live and work. Continuing to live in a crime-ridden area, being repeatedly hit by your partner or working for someone who harasses you is likely to interfere with your recovery. Your support network can help you find the resources you need to move, temporarily live in a domestic violence shelter or change jobs.

Build self-confidence

Sue couldn't believe the changes that had taken place in her life during the past several months. She was feeling less depressed, had made new friends in her support group, and with the help of the counselors at the women's shelter, had moved and ended her relationship with Rick. She was actually starting to feel good about herself. The therapist started teaching Sue how to stand up for herself, and she had just started taking a self-defense class at the YMCA.

Some adult survivors find that participating in confidence-building programs helps them feel safe. Learning how to assert yourself—how to ask for what you need and want without being aggressive—is one way to build your confidence. Taking a self-defense course, practicing Tae-Bo or doing other exercises can help you feel able to protect yourself. A challenging outdoor program such as Outward Bound can also help you believe you can care for yourself. Your support network can help you find the right program for you.

Tell your story of abuse

Sue was afraid to write a letter to her dad. Her therapist said it would help, but Sue didn't see how. She'd never been very good at writing, but she tried. She started with "Dear Dad," and then was stuck for a long time. After a while she started writing about the time her dad broke her nose because she hadn't put her bicycle away. She wrote about the time he'd made her walk miles to school when she'd missed the bus. When she read to her therapist what she'd written, the therapist said she had done well and encouraged Sue to write more about her feelings in the next letter.

When Sue read the second letter aloud, she was surprised by her angry words and tears. She never knew that she had so much hurt and anger inside.

Once you have established a sense of personal safety, the truly difficult work of recovery begins. With the help of your support network, you must tell your story of childhood abuse and neglect. This can be very emotionally draining, and it is helpful to eliminate as many other activities as possible so you can focus on this task.

The thought of remembering painful events from your childhood can be very frightening. You may fear that once you

begin to express your feelings, you will never stop feeling angry or depressed. It is also normal to fear hurting yourself or someone else once the feelings come to the surface. However, the emotions you feel at this point in recovery will not always be so intense. Your support network can also reassure you that they will not let you hurt yourself or others.

In light of how difficult discussing your abuse will be, you may wonder if the past isn't better left in the past. But feelings that are not expressed can disable you. Unexpressed anger can lead to depression and anxiety. When you decide to feel your feelings, you take away their power to control your life.

Writing letters and keeping a journal are usually the first and best means of helping you recall painful memories. Your therapist may ask you to write a letter to your abuser or to any adults who did not protect you from the abuse. These are for your healing; they will not be sent or shared with anyone who is not part of your recovery.

Storytelling often begins with a brief, unemotional description of events. As you gain courage, though, your storytelling will become detailed and filled with emotion. You may write several letters and read them aloud to your therapist or support group. After a particularly emotional letter writing or reading session, you may feel relief, as though a huge weight has been lifted from you. But the painful feelings may return temporarily during other emotional experiences, such as the death of a loved one, losing a job, the death of your abuser or having a child reach the age at which you were abused.

Keeping a journal of your thoughts, feelings and dreams as you go through recovery is an excellent way to let go of negative feelings and understand yourself better. It will also help you see how much progress you are making.

Find safe ways to express feelings

Sue also read her letter to her support group. Afterward, the support group leader encouraged her to beat on a pillow with a plastic bat to express her anger. Sue felt silly at first, but soon the anger and hurt came pouring out as she yelled at her father for what he'd done. When she stopped, everyone hugged her. She was exhausted, but she felt better than she had in years.

Your counselor may give you other suggestions for managing your feelings. Punch a punching bag, pound on clay, scream by yourself in the car or shower, run, walk briskly—do whatever you can to express anger safely. It may also help to talk to a friend, practice deep breathing and relaxation or just do something you enjoy. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.

Grieve losses

At first, you may be overwhelmed by feelings of anger toward your abuser and any other adults who didn't protect you. You may also feel sad because

- your parents didn't love you unconditionally;
- other people you cared about—your mother, brothers, sisters—were also victims of the abuser;
- you lost your innocence at an early age;
- you wasted years of your life feeling guilty or bitter about what happened to you;
- you didn't get help sooner;
- you have hurt or disappointed others, too.

Don't be afraid to cry. Grieving your losses is an important part of the healing process. If, however, you feel hopeless or consider hurting yourself, tell someone you trust immediately. It's okay to feel sad sometimes, but life is *not* hopeless.

Make New Choices

As a child you did not have the power to stop your abuse. But today you have the power to choose whether you will live as a victim or will make new choices and live victoriously.

New choices about yourself

In therapy, Sue learned that her father had lied when he said she would never amount to anything. Her therapist, pastor and support group had helped her to see that she was a bright, attractive and lovable woman. Sue had always wanted to be a nurse, but never thought she was smart enough. Now she is enrolling in nursing school.

One of the most destructive things about child abuse is that it can make you believe lies about yourself. You are not responsible for what happened to you. No matter what you did or didn't do, you did not deserve to be abused or neglected. God created you. You are His child—a special person with unique talents and gifts. What happened to you cannot change that. It will take time to silence the voice in your head that says you're dirty, no good, worthless. But it can be done. Try writing positive reminders to yourself such as "God loves me" or "I am a good friend." Put these reminders on the bathroom mirror or over the kitchen sink, anywhere that you can see them each day. Before you go to bed each night, make a list of the good things that you did during the day.

Start caring for yourself the way you would care for a good friend. Begin by getting help to stop smoking, drinking too much, using drugs, injuring yourself or abusing others. Care for your body by eating delicious and nutritious food. Exercise regularly in a way you enjoy. Do something that makes you feel attractive. Listen to uplifting music. Make time to relax. Take baths, read, work in a garden. Do something you really enjoy. Loving yourself is good defense against self-doubts.

The pain and disappointment of an abusive childhood can rob you of hope. But God says that He has a plan for you. He has plans for you to have a fruitful life full of hope. God has a plan for your job, your relationships and your life. But the only way you can experience His plan is to trust Him and begin setting new goals. Your abuser may have told you that you couldn't do the things you wanted to. Now is the time for you to discover that with God, you can. Don't let fear stop you. You have already overcome so much! Set small, specific goals in all areas of your life. For example, Sue's first goal in becoming a nurse was to go to the library and find out what education and experience is required. Begin acting as if you've already achieved your goals. Before you know it, those long-forgotten dreams will become reality.

New choices about relationships

Sue decided not to visit her mom and dad for the time being. She was sad about not seeing her mom, but felt she needed time before she could stand up to her dad. Sue had already ended friendships with people who thought nothing good would ever happen to her, and she was making new friends from the support group who encouraged her.

As you begin to make new choices about yourself, you will realize how important it is to make new choices about your relationships as well. It is difficult to cope with fear of making major life changes if you are surrounded by negative people. Spend time with people who believe that you can achieve your goals. Let them get to know you, and seek to love and encourage them as well.

You may have to make some difficult decisions, including whether to confront your abuser. If you do, it will require lots of encouragement from your support network and preparation to know exactly what you want to say. Most importantly, you should know why you are choosing to confront. You could be very disappointed if your primary motivation is to cause your abuser to change. The goal of confrontation should be to help you feel stronger and more peaceful.

If the abuser currently has contact with children who may also be victimized, you must report your abuse to authorities in order to protect those children.

If your abuser is still a part of your life and continues to abuse, you may have to limit or end contact. This can be very difficult if your abuser is a parent or other close relative. You may decide, like Sue, that you only know you don't want see that person right now. You can always change your mind later, but only you can make that decision.

New choices about God

Sue couldn't believe that just a year ago she was considering suicide. At the time, she didn't think she could ever be happy. But now most days she actually felt peaceful. She knew God's peace and joy in her heart. With help from her therapist and pastor, she had decided to forgive her father and Rick for hurting her. She also made the most important decision of her life—she decided to set aside the negative messages she had been told about God and to seek comfort in Him. There were still difficult days, but now Sue knew that she never had to face them alone.

You may feel angry at God and that's okay. Tell Him about how you feel; He can handle it. You may also have some questions to ask Him—Does He care about you? Where was He during your abuse? Why didn't He protect you?

The answer to that first question is absolutely yes! God created you. He knew you before you were born and He cares about your thoughts and feelings. He has a purpose for your life and wants you to have the joy that comes from knowing Him.

Where was God during your abuse? He was with you, grieving each hurt you experienced. He wants to comfort you and promises to be with you always. God does not cause evil to happen, but it is hard for us not to hold Him responsible because He didn't step in and stop the evil from happening. It only makes it worse when we see or hear of situations where it does seem that a miraculous intervention took place to break the cycle and end the abuse. Why are some spared and others not? You may never know the answer to that question. But what you do have is His continuing promise of love.

The final step in the recovery process is to forgive your abuser and others who have hurt you. Forgiving your abuser may seem impossible—you probably feel anger, hatred and even a desire for revenge. These feelings are reasonable and justified, but they can interfere with your ability to love yourself, others and God. God asks you to forgive others because He forgives you.

“What is forgiveness? It's not just a response to an apology. It's not just a feeling. Forgiveness is a choice, an action. Forgiveness is a gift from God in which He removes our sins and does not remember them anymore. It is a freeing gift. Forgiveness is the gift of peace with God through His Son, Jesus Christ” (from *Forgiveness Is for Giving*).

When you choose to forgive, you are not excusing the evil that was done to you. You are releasing the rage that can destroy you. You are deciding not to dwell on the abuse and not to mention it in anger. When memories of abuse come to mind, you can distract yourself, talk to a friend and let go of the memory, or pray for others who are right now suffering the same kind of abuse. Eventually, God will give you the spirit of forgiveness.

God will give you the power to live victoriously with your past, to forgive, to make new choices. Pray this prayer, or one like it:

God, thank You for being my Comforter. Forgive me for making choices that were not the best for me and that were not pleasing to You. Live in my heart and make me a new person. Help me make new choices for my life that are pleasing to You, and give me the power to forgive the people who have hurt me, just as You have forgiven me. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

New choices for life

One of God's most reassuring promises about suffering is that, in all things, He works for the good of those who love Him.

Helping other people who have suffered abuse is one way to see good come out of your experience. Phil Quinn, a survivor of severe physical abuse, was motivated by his anger to help other abuse victims. Oprah Winfrey has also devoted herself to protecting children as a way of healing the pain of her own abuse. You, too, can find healing for yourself in helping others.

- Volunteer in or financially support an agency that helps victims of child abuse and works for helpful new laws.
- Teach and provide support for parents to prevent abuse.
- Pray for peace for others who have suffered abuse.

You can make a difference in other people's lives. Share the comfort God has given you with others who are suffering.

Additional Resources

From Victim to Victory by Phil E. Quinn, Abingdon Press, 1994, 163 pages,
ISBN: 0687136555

The Healing Path by Dan B. Allender, Waterbrook Press, 1999, 259 pages,
ISBN: 1578561094

Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman,
Basic Books, 1997, 290 pages,
ISBN: 0465087302

Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-SAFE (799-7233)

Outward Bound
1-888-88-BOUND (882-6863)

OVoiceDC@AOL.COM
One Voice - The National Alliance
for Abuse Awareness

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child_abuse_and_recovery](http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/child_abuse_and_recovery)

<http://abuse.mentalhelp.net>

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