

**SILENT VICTIMS:
THE FAMILIES OF SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILDREN**

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Introduction

Literature on sexual abuse mainly focuses on the pain of the victim. Whereas this is highly recommended and necessary, it appears that little attention has been given to the pain experienced by the family of the child who has been abused. It is proposed that the family becomes a secondary victim and that, in many ways, such grief and pain that the family members may experience, is unacknowledged thus making it more difficult to resolve. This paper is an attempt to draw attention to this lack of acknowledgement.

Initially it was proposed to follow a 4 x 4 design where the perpetrator is (a) a relative (b) trusted friend (c) trusted authority figure (d) a stranger; and, upon disclosure, the perpetrator (a) suicides (b) is jailed (c) is acquitted or (d) charges are not laid. Although many of these areas will be discussed, lack of time and resources have proved too difficult to cover such a wide range of possibilities.

No cases of biological parent/child or full sibling sexual abuse have been included in this paper. This is also largely ignored by research although one wonders how much of this type of abuse goes unreported owing to the powerful restraints to protect one's family of origin.

Many of the clinical observations discussed have been made from working with victims and their families in private practice in Queensland. Individuals with whom I have worked were approached and invited to contribute any personal feelings and observations they may have.

In all cases, the initial response was one of great support:

“your message was one where I felt so passionate and excited about the prospect of having a voice that I almost rushed into an immediate and confused tirade of emotions”.

Subsequently though there has been little follow through compared with the numbers invited and the initial enthusiasm. It would appear that, even though there is great support for the concept, when it comes to putting words on paper or revisiting old wounds the effort is too painful.

Since beginning this paper I have come to realize how similar this work is to working with members of stepfamilies. Twenty years ago I wrote a paper called “Counselling with the Invisible” which was an attempt to address some of the pain experienced by second and subsequent relationships which involved children. For many living in a stepfamily situation, the feelings are too complex, painful and raw. Members of such families often struggle with the belief that their family is deficient in some way and so secrecy is the wisest choice. It would appear the same applies to families of abuse victims

Acknowledging Grief

An excellent paper by Dwyer and Miller (1996) discusses the experience of victims/daughters, mothers/wives and disenfranchised grief. Doka (1989 cited in Dwyer and Miller) defines disenfranchised grief as

‘...the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. The concept ... recognizes that societies have sets of norms - in effect “grieving rules” - that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve’.

Prior to 2001, the poor publicity given to sexual abuse cases and the likelihood of the victims being further abused by the legal system mitigated against abuse victims or their families being included in any set of 'norms of those who are entitled to grieve'. While the same risks still apply, the landmark case against Toowoomba Prep School with the wide publicity the girl received when she won the case has opened up the possibility of abuse of victims and their families being viewed for what it is. Trauma. All trauma causes grief.

Secrets Lead To Shame

The keeping of secrets within a family often leads to distortion and confusion for all family members. This in turn causes the individuals to lose faith in themselves and to develop shame prone personalities. Shame is an emotional response to a negative evaluation of one's self or of one's child or of one's relative. (Harper & Hoopes) Shame is often an outcome of an individual being forced by family members or by their own fear of criticism to keep secrets. When the secret being encouraged or insisted upon involves the sexual activity of a member of one's family or the sexuality of one's child then the imperatives become even greater.

There are no simple solutions to the dilemma of whether to be open or secretive.

Mary Pipher (1996) exhorts us to tell the truth about our family suicides, criminals, abuse, addictions, unplanned pregnancies etc. "We are diminished by living with problems we try not to see. Secrets keep families from dealing with reality ... they keep things from changing and make people feel ashamed ... almost all the craziness in the world comes from running away from pain.'

On the other hand Anita Kelly (1996) wrote that self-disclosure of personal secrets has its dangers. We are often better off not telling secrets regarding our sexual behaviour, mental health problems or bitter failures. "If you give people information about yourself, you give them power over you" (p450). Additionally people often make misjudgments about secrets and the ways in which they ought to respond. Sometimes you get negative feedback. For instance a woman who has been raped may be seen as a victim by other women or as damaged goods by men. More paralyzing for parents is the fear that their child will be viewed in the same negative way or worse held responsible for the abuse as having been at best a flirt or at worse out rightly seductive. She further states that there is a need to choose someone who will give you insight into your problem. Unfortunately she claims such people are hard to find. Kelly continues "So if you cannot find anyone appropriate, consider this: that keeping secrets is a safer alternative because it is a way of managing your identity, and indicates you are secure and have self control. But it takes energy, because you have to be on constant guard not to accidentally reveal something that is potentially damaging".

It must be pointed out that Kelly is discussing the keeping of secrets. She is not advocating keeping secrets, rather cautioning people as to whom they disclose. Kelly also cautions that keeping secrets is a draining process and of the need to always be on guard. Additionally and importantly she is not suggesting the telling of lies. Lies to avoid the truth or total absence of any explanation can lead to flights of the imagination which can be more horrifying than the actual truth. Discovery later that deception has been involved will further erode the confidence and self esteem of the one deceived. One ten year old whose father was a pedophile who suicided upon disclosure, was heard to comment "Mum, I hate knowing what my Dad did but if you had told me lies and then someone else had told me the truth I would have been so **angry** with you".

Restraints to Keep Silent

As stated previously, the family of an abuse victim usually receives little recognition of the impact on its members. Powerful restraints operate within the family to keep individuals silent about the abuse. For instance, a parent of the abuse victim can encourage secrecy as a stated means of protecting the child from any more exposure. Or it could be wanting to protect his or her elderly parents from an unpleasant truth "It would kill Mum if she knew". This is particularly so if the abuser also happens to be a relative of the elderly mother (ie. Older cousin or uncle of the abused child). This understandable need to protect both the victim and other members of the family limits the ability to discuss events and eventually arrive at some type of resolution. In such a situation with one parent of the abused child related to the abuser and the other not, there exists a case of critical conflict between the couple. The parent related to the abuser has a need to protect the family name and the non-related parent is often calling for blood. The ensuing struggle between the parents as 'what to do after the disclosure' causes an additional problem for the child who is seeking help in coming to terms with the abuse. It is not uncommon for the child to wonder if it had been a good idea to disclose. Now with parents in obvious conflict it would appear to have been less trouble to say nothing in the first place. In this way the child is left with the secret information and the consequent shaming experience of feeling that he or she was in some way to blame for it happening

Following disclosure, the ability to return to some sort of normality will largely depend upon the response the child receives at the time. Failure to believe the child mitigates against good recovery prospects. Doubt on behalf of the parents or those in authority cause the child to further doubt their own perceptions of themselves. In most cases the abuser has manipulated the child into believing that it is he or she who is the blame and if they tell anyone no-one would believe them. When finally disclosure becomes an imperative for the child it is devastating for them to hear the very prediction of the abuser coming to fruition.

In such a situation where the parent or parents have doubted or acted in any way other than totally supportive, subsequent events prove even more difficult for the parents as they try to grapple with the extra guilt they feel having even temporarily disbelieved their child.

Stepfather abuse is frequently reported. In these cases, the likelihood of the marriage surviving is minimal. Recriminations from the mother and extended family of the abused child can be met with denials and counter recrimination from the abuser's parents that it was an unsuitable marriage that caused the problem and that their son had done nothing wrong. In one case where the abuser suicided upon disclosure the accusations towards his surviving widow reached critical proportions when her parents-in-law put pressure on her to withhold the truth from all family members and to claim that the death was a result of a car accident. When the stunned widow refused to agree the abuser's family not only cut her off but their biological grandchild as well.

From clinical observations I can state that it is far more difficult to come to terms with abuse by a relative particularly in intact families. Always the abuser will be related to either the mother or the father. This critical situation causes divided loyalties which are often misinterpreted by the non relative parent. As one woman stated "He is the man I loved as a father and yet I am absolutely furious and repulsed by his actions of abuse on my daughter. I never want to see him again but in the long run he is my father and I cannot walk away from that no matter how much I would like to" On the other hand her husband is able to revile and dismiss his father-in-law in ways his wife finds impossible. When I suggested to this man that his family had been bleeding for years he responded "No, we've been hemorrhaging".

In all my years of clinical practice I have never witnessed such pain as I did from that mother the day she bought her daughter in following disclosure. Years of difficult behaviour from her daughter which was diagnosed variously as Obsessive Compulsive disorder or Temporal Lobe epilepsy and many attempts of suicide on the part of the girl were now explained and it was **her father** who was the cause of the trauma. The couple continue to have difficulty in accepting that other family members still keep in contact with the old man even though he has been found guilty in court and received a suspended sentence (only because of his advanced years). The whole unhappy business has altered everyone's life in the family, the girl's brothers as well. The Court Case was a further trauma with the old man maintaining his innocence until the last minute when he admitted all charges. As his daughter said, "the Court Case didn't prove to make it better or the end for us or for our daughter. Rather it has become the beginning of a new chapter. Friends ask about why I don't see my father any more. I used to cover up for him but now I don't, I am more able to be open about it". This same woman has recently received a State-wide award for excellence as a pediatric nurse. Initially she refused to accept it as she said she felt so bad accepting an award for looking after other people's children when she couldn't even care for her own daughter.

Anomie

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim, used the term 'anomie' to describe the condition in societies in which norms and rules governing people's aspirations, expectations and moral conduct breaks down. Anomie is what happens in families where a child has experienced the sexually abusive behaviour of either a relative, friend, authority figure or stranger. In every case of abuse of children it is the behaviour of the adult which is inappropriate. All children are naturally affectionate. If an adult responds to a child's enthusiasm in a sexual way it is the adult who is responsible and must be held accountable.

In everyday circumstances, a single action with one member of the family can cause ripples of disruption to all other members. In a case of sexual abuse it is more similar to having a hand grenade thrown into the center of the family.

Adults who have less than satisfactory sexual relationships speak of the 'ghosts in their bedroom' as they struggle with the aftermath of sexual abuse in childhood. The dysfunction is not confined to the original victim.

From the parents of the girl who was awarded the case against the Toowoomba Prep School come the following comments.

"At first we thought that because the offending teacher had suicided then that was the end of it. How wrong we were. Between us we had no other topic of conversation. If only he had not died! We continually thought of the most depraved things to do to him but nothing we could think of was bad enough. We still haven't thought of a torture that would satisfy us." She went on to say that their marriage has suffered in the extreme and it is a miracle they are still together. Friends stopped asking them out because they were fighting all the time. They told no-one of the trauma they and their daughter were going through. The girl wouldn't allow it. The school had refused to acknowledge the abuse had occurred thus signaling to the girl they didn't believe her. There was no way she was going to give anyone else the opportunity of calling her a liar. The girl's siblings initially were both kept in the dark but when they were subsequently told their reaction was extreme with the girl's sister becoming physically ill and her brother going off by himself for days. The mother went on to say "I guess the worst of it was that we were so shocked and couldn't organize ourselves to try and help our daughter. We had no idea of where to go and no support was forthcoming from the school. We just blundered on for months and years with our daughter's behaviour becoming more and more dysfunctional and our family coping less and less".

The above account is Anomie. There are no norms to guide parents with this particular dilemma. It is to be hoped that an outcome of this conference is the beginning of a competent road map emerging for parents to follow should they be in a similar situation.

Sexual Abuse – Legal System Abuse

The above condition of anomie continues to dog parents if they or their child chooses the option of pursuing the perpetrator through the legal system. Little is understood by the general public of the processes of a court hearing and such lack of understanding causes alarm for parents as they witness their already damaged child being taken through proceedings often far beyond their comprehension. One mother claims that her loss of innocence as a single parent family began when her ten year old daughter went away for a weekend with a close friend and her godmother. Her friend's husband molested her child during the night. "My daughter told me what had happened and I immediately told her older sister who insisted we visit the local doctor. He was a close family friend as well and, possibly ill equipped to give advice. Never-the-less he encouraged me to take the matter up through the legal system." The mother states that her guilt for encouraging her daughter to take this step remains a constant even though she thought she was taking the best option. "Then started the disclosure at Juvenile Aid Bureau and the going over and over the story, friendship disturbances, school disturbances, work disturbances and all the time her daughter was facing a personal crisis in that her credibility was seriously challenged. The real damage came later as the court process dragged on over almost two years through a committal hearing and then through the actual trial." Another mother worried by her daughter's withdrawn behaviour sought counselling for the girl. Years later, when the abuse had been disclosed and the girl was joined by others from her gym class in prosecuting her coach, the Court misconstrued the mother's actions of taking her daughter to a counsellor. The barrister implied that the girl was a 'nut' case and therefore not to be trusted. He later suggested that the mother herself was a failure for allowing her child to be left in a vulnerable situation. She claims "It was nothing to do with us or what was right or wrong. It was to do with who had the best barrister. More simply who had the most money. We didn't stand a chance". Support from the community was very short lived for this woman and her daughter. She said "at first people are mortified and shocked but then they soon get sick of hearing about it. People are more comfortable with saying someone has cancer than they are in knowing you have a child who has been sexually abused".

Consistently parents talked of the trauma of having to allow their child into a Court room unattended by them and of the difficult time the child had giving evidence or worse being aggressively cross examined. "It went against my every sense to sit outside while my child was in such a hostile vulnerable situation. Parents are meant to protect children not throw them to the wolves. I was screaming with pain inside and there was no way I could let my child know ... I had to be strong for her. She came out of Court with the face of a ghost years older than when she'd gone in two hours before. I was powerless to be able to take her pain away. Later I was beset with thoughts of how much hope we had the day she was born. Nothing like this was even remotely in our plan".

The Evidence Act in Queensland (1977) suggests that a child can be deemed a 'special witness.' Special witnesses can give evidence on video but still must be cross examined, however, the granting of such status is still up to the discretion of the Judge or Magistrate. In one reported case a Magistrate asked a young boy to demonstrate the position used when he was raped by an older man. The boy hesitated but the magistrate insisted. Immediately after the demonstration the boy rushed from the courtroom. While the verdict was favorable to the boy one wonders what extra damage was done to the lad by the aggressive insistence that he re-live the experience in a physical way.

Suggestions for Future Research

Within the very limited confines of this paper it has become evident that there is a considerable amount of unacknowledged pain experienced by family members of sexual abuse victims. Future research should be aware of discrete categories such as those mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Additionally, at the time of research, categories need to include:

- Whether the child is still a child
- The child is now an adult or
- Whether the abused child is male or female
- And whether the abuser is male or female
- No mention has been made in this paper of a female abuser but it would be wrong not to include such an occurrence in in-depth research.

The information gained from this study suggests also that the delicate nature of the enquiries necessitates time being allocated to each subject interviewed. It is the opinion of this researcher that the topic is entirely unsuitable for questionnaire gathering of information. The subjects need the protection of having plenty of time to talk to the researcher and also to have the confidence that the researcher will attend to any difficulty or pain that may arise from the interview. For this reason it is suggested that any research in the future be of a case study nature.

Conclusion

This paper is an early attempt to draw attention to the lack of consideration given to these families. Much attention should be given to the time of disclosure of the abuse. Failure to satisfactorily attend to both the child and the parents at this time will mitigate against any future resolution of the situation. Unfortunately by the time lawyers are involved much harm has been done to both the child and family members.

I take the liberty of including a seven point plan which I believe would promote a speedier and healthier outcome for all concerned.

1. Any child making a complaint should be taken seriously.
2. The person accused should not be told of the allegation before the official enquiry by police. I realize that in a case of within family abuse this would be difficult to monitor but it is especially important should the abuser be an authority figure such as church official or school teacher.
3. The child should be seen as soon as possible by a recognized psychologist or counselor.
4. Immediately after charges have been made against the alleged abuser he should be removed from the child's immediate world until all investigations are complete. It is not appropriate to remove the child from familiar surroundings thus increasing the risk that the child feel punished or guilty for having disclosed.
5. Counselling for the child should take place immediately.
6. Counselling should be available for the parents separately from the child
7. NO attempt to cover up or hide the accusations should be entertained. Any such attempt will abort any positive effect of the counselling for the child or for the parents.

Other points would be specific in the situation where the abuser is a member of a church or school authority. However, the purpose of this paper is to alert the general population to all forms of inappropriate behaviour towards children. It is to be hoped more recent media attention alerting the general population to the proliferation of abuse will encourage other victims to come forward. Failure to disclose will serve to help the activities of sexual deviants to continue wreaking havoc among our child population. Without disclosure and some positive outcome the families of these victims will be left to struggle with the damages inflicted which clearly have been demonstrated by this study. The restraints to keep victims and their families silent have been touched on in this paper. There is an urgent need to have more in-depth research on the ramifications of the unchecked behaviour of sexual deviants.

References

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