

Coming Forward as a Survivor of Sexual Abuse

By Beth Birch of The Abuse Network, Inc. of Huntington, Juniata, and Mifflin Counties

Sharing one's experience of sexual abuse is about more than simply reporting a crime. There's often a stigma of shame, guilt, and humiliation that may lead one to remain silent. Negative public perception and the fear of being blamed or not believed by law enforcement also may make someone who has been victimized think twice before coming forward.

Offenders often capitalize on these feelings by the things they say and do to victims. They use shame and fear to isolate them from others who might help them. The victim is left feeling alone; isolated from everyone around them.

Victims often describe this as a surreal feeling—to see others leading normal lives all around them, but to feel so detached due to the abuse they have endured. This shame and silence can last for decades.

Moreover, it is estimated that 90 - 93 percent of all incidences of sexual abuse are committed by someone known to the victim.

This can add an additional layer of confusion and fear to the situation. In many respects, it can be difficult to think about making a report of sexual assault or abuse against someone you know and, perhaps, even someone you have trusted.

Most instances of sexual abuse—approximately 70 percent—are never reported. You or someone you know and love may be among those holding this trauma inside. They are certainly not alone.

It is common for survivors of childhood sexual abuse to attempt to put the experience behind them without making a report or seeking assistance of any kind.

However, victims may recognize along their journey that sharing their story can be helpful in their healing process. Some may make formal reports to law enforcement while others will share their experience with friends, family members, or in the context of their spiritual affiliations. The victimization often feels very fresh for the victim when they share their experience. The reactions of those victimized by sexual abuse or assault may mirror those reactions experienced at the onset of the victimization. These reactions are very unique and there is no right or wrong way for a victim to respond. Belief, acceptance, and respect for the victim and for their reaction can be crucial to long-term healing.

If someone shares their experience of sexual abuse with you, let them know that it was not their fault and that you believe them. Avoid making any judgement or offering advice. The response of the listener is critical to the victim, no matter when they elect to make their victimization known to others. Victims need to be believed and supported as they will often cite their fear of not being believed as a reason they hesitated to come forward immediately after the event. Delays in reporting can be attributed to a number of factors but they are not an indication of the authenticity of the report. False reports of sexual abuse and assault are extraordinarily rare.

The survivor may wish to seek resources for assistance. Reassure them that it is never too late to reach out for support. This may be a good time to involve your county's local sexual assault and rape crisis center in the discussion.

PCAR-supported rape crisis centers provide services to each of the 67 counties in the Commonwealth to meet the needs of survivors and their family members and friends. Services offered at these centers include crisis and options counseling, information about the available resources, and criminal and civil justice education, advocacy, and accompaniment.

All services from your local center are free and confidential and many of these services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. A full list of rape crisis centers in Pennsylvania can be found at www.pcar.org or you can access them by calling the agency's toll-free hotline, 1-888-772-PCAR.