

## **The past Incest Survivor**

Judith Herman in her book *Father-Daughter Incest* describes the long term effects of incest on an adult woman's life:

“The memory of the incest persisted, shaping their relations with others and their image of themselves. All without exception felt somehow branded or marked by their experience.”

The past incest victim is a victim of society's silence. The taboo against incest has often left the woman carrying a burden of secrecy for many years. These women not only face the “usual” forms of female discrimination (poverty, poor child care, sexual harassment, the threat of rape and battering), but do so with the debilitating knowledge that even their own families provided no refuge from , and often constituted a greater danger than the outside world.

There are two definitions for the word incest. The first is the legal definition which describes incest as sexual intercourse with a person who is by blood relationship his/her child, brother, sister, parent, or grandparent. Our definition stretches to include an adult in a parental role (i.e. foster, common-law, step-father) using a position of power and trust to sexually exploit a child. The abuse can take the form of grandparent/child, older sibling/child, and many others, but the most prevalent form is father/daughter incest. We recognize incest as any form of sexual behavior towards a child, not just sexual intercourse. It also does not have to depend on a blood-link, (as in the case of a step-father). The major factor in an incest situation is that, within the power structure of the family, the child's needs for security, acceptance, and love are exploited in a sexual manner. It may be difficult to imagine our fathers sexually abusing us at night, and then getting up the next morning and attempting to resume sense of “normalcy”. It is important, however, to imagine ourselves in that situation to fully comprehend the implications of incest.

### **1) Feelings**

There are a lot of emotional scars left over from incest for the adult women to deal with. Having grown up feeling that the core of her identity was the incest, it can be a hard process working through these feelings, and finding her true identity.

Many incest victims feel that they were denied a childhood, that it was “stolen” from them. The child is forced into performing sexual acts beyond her developmental needs. Often her role in the family becomes blurred. A child used by a family member for his adult sexual gratification has to act part child, part “little adult”. There may be feelings of responsibility in holding the family together through keeping her secret quiet. She may be the oldest child, and may be pushed into performing more adult, nurturing duties, such as looking after the younger children.

The feeling of being betrayed is common among past incest victims. This betrayal is felt on three levels: betrayal by the family member who abused her, by the other family members (especially mother) who didn't protect her from it, and betrayal by various helping institutions. Being sexually abused by your father is the deepest form of betrayal. The child's trust and needs for love and attention from her father are used as a payoff for sexual access. The balance of power in the relationship is maintained by the father who may convince the child that he is just teaching her what she needs to know, or that all fathers do this. The adult women will often experience an ambivalence of feelings towards her father; she may love him and at the same time hate him for the manipulation and the abuse that went on. Since incest is usually a long term situation and could have extended over years, this victimization may be internalized, and the woman may feel herself and her sexuality to be shameful, unworthy, and somehow responsible for the abuse.

There is usually a lot of anger and unresolved feelings towards her mother who did not protect her or did not sense what was happening and stop it. In many cases the abuse occurred in periods where the mother was sick and absent from the home. Or other circumstances where the mother was physically or emotionally "removed" from the child. In most of the families the other played a passive role, with the father the economically and psychologically dependent on her husband as the child. It is often easier for a grown woman to express her feelings of betrayal by her mother than those feelings directed at her father; the anger towards her father may be too big and too frightening to face.

Many past incest victims have felt betrayed by the helping institutions they have gone to for support. Too often, women have turned to mental health professionals who were unprepared to help them. Many have encountered disbelief, hostility, and an unwillingness of the therapist to look at the incest, and validate the women's experience. Because past incest can be the basis of many varied emotional problems, often only these surface symptoms are dealt with.

Another feeling is the sense of being set apart, abnormal, an outsider from the rest of the world. The recognition that other fathers don't do this to their daughters, and the gained sexual knowledge years beyond that of the other children only serves to distance the child from her peers, and to make her feel different.

## **2) Survival Skills**

Incestuous abuse has been linked to many social problems. Studies have shown that a high percentage of runaways and prostitutes have suffered some form of incestuous abuse as children. Prostitution may be seen as the only alternative to staying at home and being abused. Incest victims may feel that their only worth lies in their sexuality, and if it is going to be used they might as well profit from it. It may be seen as a way of gaining control over what happens to their bodies. For once, they can decide when to be sexual and with whom.

Drug and alcohol abuse may also be ways for a survivor to cope with the emotions brought on by sexual abuse. They can effectively block the pain and anger, or offer an “acceptable” outlet for them.

Self-mutilation, whether it involves cutting, burning, scratching, or punching, may be the only method a victim can gain recognition for the unacknowledged pain she is feeling. Suppressed feelings of anger, frustration, and confusion may lead to a desire to create physical signs of this emotional distress. This may be combined with a sense of low self-esteem, and a feeling of being deserving of punishment.

Self abuse may also take the form of abnormal eating patterns. Obesity and anorexia nervosa can be ways to mask your obvious female characteristics. There may be a desire to create an unattractive appearance in order to stop the abuse, or it may be a denial of their sex and sexuality.

Victims of incest learn early in their lives to detach themselves from their experiences. Some do this by pretending the abuse is a dream, imagining that it is normal and happening to all daughters, by disconnecting their minds from their bodies. It may be difficult to “unlearn” this behavior, as it has probably worked for them, and enabled them to survive. However, it may create problems at a later stage in their lives. Many survivors are not believed because of their detachment from the experience, either emotionally or verbally.

Suicide is often the final cry for help. What the victim is saying is that they can no longer live with the pain, and see death as the only solution. They may feel caught between whether it is more difficult to kill themselves or live the way they have been. There is often a part of them that wants to die, and a part that wants others to see their pain and offer to help.

It is extremely important to acknowledge that the techniques used by an incest survivor to reach this point in her life were necessary. However, although we recognize their necessity, it is important to discuss the destructiveness of some of these survival skills, and to explore new ways of effectively dealing with the past.

### **3) Social Implications**

It has only been in recent years that the topic of incest has emerged from the domain of scandal, and has been recognized as an immensely important problem. The existence of a taboo against incest, universal and touching all human cultures has been thought to be enough to prevent its occurrence. In actual fact, this taboo does not prevent incest; it just prevents talking about it. It keeps the issue silent and in the dark, thus encouraging the very behavior it is supposed to prevent. The taboo also serves to secure the continuance of the nuclear family, and its patriarchal structure. This system, based on the institutions of male supremacy, secures to fathers immense power over very difficult for women to fight back against this structure. Judith Herman states:

“The woman who reveals her secret implicitly challenges a gradational and cherished social value, the right of a man to do as he pleases in his own home.”

While incest is the most prevalent form of child sexual abuse, assaults outside the family make up approximately 10% of the total figure. While the emotional aftermath of these experiences can also linger into adulthood, they are very rarely as wounding as incestuous abuse. A sexual assault by a baby-sitter, friend of the family, or stranger can be a one time occurrence, while incest can span a whole childhood. Often an assault that occurs outside the home is sooner believed by adults than something inside the family, and there is a higher probability that the child will receive emotional support and treatment. The abuse in these cases is usually not as deeply internalized by women as incest seems to be. There is also a higher rate of incestuously abused children becoming abusive parents themselves, or marrying abusive spouses. But abuser/victim behavior is learned behavior, and can be unlearned. Through awareness of the complexities of the problem, an adult woman dealing with past incest can put an end to this cycle, and see beyond her victimization to her power and strength as a survivor.

#### **4) Counselling Alternatives**

Many times women who come to the Sexual Assault Center to talk about past incest are opening up for the first time. This may be the first place she can specifically deal with the incest, not just the symptoms. Some women have completely blocked out all memories of the incest, and are in the process of having their memories return to them, usually in fragments. The fear that they are going “crazy” is often heard.

We can offer them counseling on a one-to-one basis, and later our Incest Survivor’s Groups. Outside professional referrals are given if necessary. Sometimes simply having the opportunity to talk about the incest, in the company of a counselor who believes the story and reacts in a calm, supportive manner is sufficient for the woman.

Judith Herman, in her book Father-Daughter Incest relates a woman’s personal story of her counseling experience:

“To those of you who are incest victims I would like to say this: Digging into my family experience has been (still is) one of the most depressing and painful periods of my life and I didn’t start to do it until I was ready and really wanted to do it., feeling I had to understand myself. Through therapy I have come to see pain and fear as teachers, not as something to push down and run away from. I want to have relationships that are good for me, be able to love myself, be able to enjoy working and being creative, to see and feel the beautiful things of life more fully and be stronger and more able to fight against oppression....Through giving in to my pain and fear enough or clearly fell and see what’s there, I’m getting to the root of why I feel and behave the way I do. I know my pain and fears will never disappear entirely, but at least they won’t control me any more... only through a clear understanding of myself and also of my environment will I be able to make positive choices for my self, minimizing future suffering and maximizing satisfaction.