



A BRIDGE TO Hope AND Healing

With appropriate help, victims of sexual abuse can find the healing they so deeply desire.

By Nanon Talley

LDS Family Services, Texas, USA

Imagine you are standing at the edge of a cliff and want to get to the other side of a deep canyon, where you have been told that great happiness awaits you. As you search for a way to cross, you find a pile of supplies that, if put together correctly, will build a bridge to cross the canyon.

If you don't know how to build the bridge, the supplies will be useless and you will feel frustrated and hopeless. But if you get help from someone who has experience in building bridges, your knowledge and understanding can increase and together the task can be accomplished.

Over the past 18 years, my job has been to provide tools and guidance to help people cross the gulf of emotional or mental suffering. Of all the people I have counseled, no other clients seem to come so wounded as those who have been victims of sexual abuse. I have seen the impact that this challenge has on the individual's ability to endure well to the end.

However, I have also come to know that lasting relief from our struggles and suffering is possible through our Savior. His love lifts people out of darkness into light.

Why Does Sexual Abuse Cause Such Harm?

Victims of abuse tell me of a life full of depression, self-doubt, and other deep emotional pains. President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) helped us understand why sexual abuse causes such deep hurt:

“There is the terrible, vicious practice of sexual abuse. It is beyond understanding. It is an affront to the decency that ought to exist in every man and woman. It is *a violation of that which is sacred and divine*. It is destructive in the lives of children. It is reprehensible and *worthy of the most severe condemnation*.”

“Shame on any man or woman who would sexually abuse a child. In doing so, the abuser not only *does the most serious kind of injury*. He or she also stands condemned before the Lord.”¹

The power of procreation is a sacred and divine power our Father in Heaven has given to His children. Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught: “The power of procreation is spiritually significant. . . . Our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son are

creators and have entrusted each of us with a portion of Their creative power.”² It’s no wonder, then, that violation of this sacred power is “worthy of the most severe condemnation” and causes the “most serious kind of injury.”

Understanding the Hurt

Sexual abuse is any nonconsensual interaction that involves touching or non-touching behaviors in which a person is used for the sexual gratification of another person. Far too often, victims of sexual abuse are left with confused thinking as well as feelings of unworthiness and shame that can be almost too heavy to bear. The pain and suffering victims experience is often intensified by others’ comments rooted in a misunderstanding of sexual abuse and its effects. Some victims are accused of lying or are told that the abuse was somehow their fault. Others are mistakenly led to believe that they must repent, as if they had somehow sinned by being victimized.

Many clients I have worked with who experienced sexual abuse in their childhood or youth are told to “get over it,” “leave it in the past,” or “just forgive and forget.” These types of statements—especially when coming from close friends, family members, or Church leaders—can lead the victim to increased secrecy and shame rather than healing and peace. Similar to a serious physical wound or infection, these emotional wounds do not just go away if ignored. Rather, the confusion that begins during the abuse grows, and together with the resulting painful emotions, one’s thinking may become altered, ultimately leading to the development of unhealthy behaviors. It is not uncommon for victims of abuse not to recognize that what occurred to them was abusive, yet they may still develop unhealthy behaviors and painful emotions.

Hannah (name has been changed) experienced sexual abuse early in her childhood. Like other victims, she grew up feeling like she was a terrible person who had no worth. She spent most of her life trying to serve others enough to make up for her feelings of not being “good



enough” for Heavenly Father or anyone else to love. In her relationships, she feared that if anyone truly knew her, they would think she was as awful as she believed she was. She experienced an intense fear of rejection that led to being afraid of trying new things in life or doing simple tasks like calling someone on the phone. She was blessed with a talent for artwork but gave up on it for fear of not being able to handle criticism.

For over 50 years her feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, fear, anger, confusion, shame, loneliness, and isolation guided her daily decisions.

Replacing Pain with Peace

The Savior suffered “pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind.” He did this so that He would “know according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:11–12). His suffering was not just for our sins but also for our healing when someone else’s sins cause us suffering.

If He were here today, I imagine that the Savior would weep with and bless those who have been sexually abused, as He wept with and blessed the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 17). While He is not here physically, His Spirit can be with us, and He has provided a way for us to be healed, to feel peace, and to forgive.

For many who have been hurt, the



idea that the pain they carry could be replaced with peace is almost impossible to believe. Often the wounds of the abused go unnoticed and unrecognized by others for years. The hurt is masked by smiling faces, a willingness to help others, and living life as if nothing was wrong, yet the pain is constantly there.

Let’s compare the emotional healing process with that of caring for and treating a physical injury. Suppose that when you were young, you broke your leg. Rather than going to the doctor to get it set, you hobbled along until the deep pain was gone, but there is always a slight pain with each step you take. Years later you want the pain to go away, so you go to a doctor. The doctor must reset the bone, clean away any buildup that has grown, cast it, and send you to physical therapy to strengthen your leg.

The process of healing from abuse is similar in that the victim must first recognize that the pain is real and that something can be done about it. The process includes acknowledging

COMMON BEHAVIORS OF VICTIMS

Victims often struggle with relationships and may constantly seek approval from others, become passive, put up barriers to keep people at a distance to avoid getting hurt, become promiscuous to seek nurturing through sexual activity (including pornography and self-stimulation), or do the exact opposite and avoid anything related to sex. The shame associated with these behaviors often inhibits individuals from seeking help from parents, priesthood leaders, or professionals because they do not understand the connection between what happened to them and their behaviors.

In living the gospel, victims tend to go to one extreme or the other: Some become overly religious. In an attempt to cover what they think is their unworthiness, they try to do everything right. Others feel that they are never going to be worthy of eternal life and at times give up trying.

LESSONS FROM DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 123

While the Prophet Joseph Smith was imprisoned in the jail at Liberty, Missouri, he wrote an epistle to the Church, comprising sections 121–124 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which include the “duty of the Saints in relation to their persecutors” (D&C 123, section heading). He did not tell the Saints who had suffered persecution and physical injuries to keep their hurt to themselves and pretend like nothing happened. Consider how the counsel given in section 123 can apply to the problem of abuse.



what happened and allowing the feelings of being hurt, scared, and sad to be felt, acknowledged, and validated. Often it is helpful to work with a professional experienced in this healing process. (Check with your priesthood leader to learn if LDS Family Services is available in your area.)

Whether or not the victim has access to professional help, it is best to pray, study the life of the Savior and His Atonement, and visit regularly with a priesthood leader. He can help ease the burdens and receive inspiration to help the victim understand their divine worth and relationship with Father in Heaven and the Savior. As Sister Carole M. Stephens, First Counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, recently taught: “Healing may be a long process. It will require that you prayerfully seek guidance and appropriate help, including counseling with properly ordained priesthood holders. As you learn to communicate openly, set appropriate boundaries and perhaps seek professional counseling. Maintaining spiritual health throughout the process is vital!”³

For Hannah, her life had become so uncomfortable that she sought help. She knew from her testimony that she could feel peace and contentment in life but did not feel them on a consistent basis. Through prayer and talking with her bishop, she was guided to counseling, where she was able to gain the tools she needed to bring the truth out of darkness and share the awful burden she had been carrying alone. In doing so, she was able to release the pain and find the peace promised by the Savior (see John 14:27). Along with this peace and comfort came the desire and ability to forgive.

The Need to Forgive

The idea of forgiving is often difficult for victims of abuse to hear and is often misunderstood. If they think of forgiveness as letting the abuser off the hook or saying that what they did doesn’t matter anymore, the victim won’t feel validated. While we are commanded to forgive (see D&C 64:10), in situations where the harm is deep, healing typically must begin

before the victim can fully forgive the abuser.

Those who are suffering the pains caused by abuse may find comfort in this counsel from the Book of Mormon: “I, Jacob, would speak unto you that are pure in heart. Look unto God with firmness of mind, and pray unto him with exceeding faith, and he will console you in your afflictions, and he will plead your cause, and send down justice upon those who seek your destruction” (Jacob 3:1). The need for justice and the right to restitution can be turned over to the Lord so He can replace our hurt with peace.

Hannah eventually found that she could turn the need for justice over to the Savior and in return find a feeling of peace in her life as she had never before experienced. Previously, she had feared attending family gatherings where the abuser would be present. Now, due to her willingness to face difficult emotional wounds on her way to healing, she no longer fears being in his presence and can even have compassion for him in his old age.

Free of Needless Burdens

Elder Richard G. Scott (1928–2015) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated that “complete healing will come through your faith in Jesus Christ and His power and capacity, through His Atonement, to heal the

scars of that which is unjust and undeserved. . . .

“He loves you. He gave His life that you may be free of needless burdens. He will help you do it. I know that He has the power to heal you.”⁴

The adversary wants to keep people bound by pain and suffering because he is miserable (see 2 Nephi 2:27). With the help of our Savior, Jesus Christ, pain can truly be replaced with peace, only as the Savior is able to give, and we can live with joy. “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25). Living with joy will allow times of trial to be more bearable and enable us to learn and grow and become more like our Father in Heaven.

I am humbled by the blessing I have had in my life to sit with those who have been harmed by abuse and see the miracle of healing that truly comes only through the Savior. If you are suffering, please prayerfully turn for help. You do not have to carry the heavy burden alone. I know He heals, for I have witnessed it countless times. ■

NOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Save the Children,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 54; emphasis added.
2. David A. Bednar, “We Believe in Being Chaste,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2013, 42.
3. Carole M. Stephens, “The Master Healer,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2016, 11.
4. Richard G. Scott, “To Be Free of Heavy Burdens,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2002, 88.

COUNSEL FOR LEADERS, FAMILY, AND FRIENDS

When a victim trusts you enough to share with you their sufferings and abuses, conversations with them should begin with love and empathy for them. Far too often victims have shared with me that when they approached their bishop for help, the first focus was on needing to forgive the offender. This can leave the victim feeling as if all that matters is the offender. When this happens, individuals rarely return to their bishops for help and miss out on the spiritual healing that is possible with ecclesiastical love and support.

Forgiving is a vital piece in the healing process and is a commandment—but please trust that allowing someone to first acknowledge their suffering, feel their feelings, and talk about them with a trusted person will in time lead to the healing that comes from being able to forgive the abuser.

Church leaders can refer to [ministering.lds.org](https://www.ministering.lds.org) to find “Abuse: Help for the Victim” for more information.