

How I Found Healing *from Sexual Abuse*

Name withheld

My nightmare began when I was only seven and my mom remarried. We really liked my new stepfather. He was kind and fit in well with our family. I felt really safe around him. Everything was great until one day, when everyone else was busy, he sexually abused me.

I didn't understand what he had done to me. I felt scared, confused, and so ashamed. But I was too afraid to tell anyone. I thought it would ruin my family's newfound happiness and that no one would believe me anyway. So I decided to stay silent.

He had only hurt me that one time, but the memory of the abuse always weighed on my mind. I eventually became so paranoid that someone would see through my pain and uncover my secret that I tried to hide the truth by becoming good friends with my stepfather. He was especially kind to me, and I actually started liking him again.

But then things got worse. When Mom started working at nighttime, my stepfather began regularly abusing me. I felt so helpless. I wanted to speak up, but my stepfather was well liked, and I thought everyone would side with him. So at night when I was alone, I begged God to help me keep my secret.

SPEAKING UP

One day the abuse finally stopped. I had no idea why. Though he was no longer hurting me, I always felt dirty and ashamed. I hated myself. Sometimes I even debated whether death would be easier than my reality. I still wanted to speak up, but I was afraid of what the truth would do.

Then one Sunday at church when I was 14, I listened to a lesson about making big decisions. My teacher encouraged us to fast and pray and promised that God would strengthen us to do the right thing. After church, I kept thinking about what she had said. I wondered if I asked, would God really help me speak up?

The next day I fasted for courage to tell Mom about the abuse. I couldn't focus during school because all I could think about was how she would react. By the time I got home, I felt extremely sick. I again prayed for strength, but I didn't feel prepared to tell her.

That evening, I approached Mom when she was cooking dinner. I didn't know what to say, but when I looked into her eyes, I found the courage to just start speaking. Once I began, everything I had been hiding for years spilled out.

Mom and I just sat on the couch and cried together. Afterward, we contacted our branch president and called the police. My stepfather was held accountable for what he had done to me, and I was given the protection I needed—I would never have to see him again.

THE PATH TO HEALING

During that time, it was difficult retelling my experience to the authorities and having friends ask where my stepfather was, but with my family's support, I was no longer alone. Together, we rallied around a new family theme: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13). Our extended family also offered their love and support and, over time, we began healing together.

Mom and I both attended professional counseling, which was a big help! My counselor was exactly what I needed. She helped me understand all the emotions I was feeling and helped me cope with my bad memories. I never realized how much I was hurting until I started feeling whole again.



I didn't think the pain would disappear just because I spoke up, but I also didn't realize how much time (and patience) it would take to heal. For so long, I had felt worthless. I had to relearn to love myself.

I found the most peace as I turned to my Savior and my Heavenly Father. Recognizing that They knew *exactly* how I felt gave me strength and hope. I relied on Them during the darkest moments. Over time the memories began to fade, and I really felt peace through the Savior's love.

One of the most rewarding parts of the healing process was recognizing that I *did* have a bright future. When I was being abused, I couldn't even imagine having a normal life. I felt permanently broken. But through help and healing, I found things to look forward to. I began telling my story to other girls who were hurting, and I even decided to serve a mission. Sharing my testimony with others strengthened me.

I'm not defined by what my stepfather did to me. He forever changed my life, but I'm choosing to use my experience to help others. Some days are still hard, but through everything, the Lord has strengthened me, and I know He will continue to help me. I've transformed from a victim into a survivor. ■