

5 Signs of Abuse

I'm grateful for April's designation as National Sexual Assault Awareness month, as well as National Child Abuse Prevention month. Sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, spans all ages, genders, races, ethnicities and economic backgrounds. Tens of thousands are added to the list of those who silently suffer from abuse each year. While our mission to bring healing to each of the individuals involved should never end, awareness months such as this one serve as an opportunity for many to break the silence that has enslaved them oftentimes for years, if not a lifetime.

Sexual abuse brings an enormous amount of guilt and shame to the victim which leads most of them to bear their pain and suffering alone. On top of that, most victims know their attackers, further encasing them behind walls of silence out of fear of the potential repercussions that can result from exposing the perpetrators. Staying silent, however, never leads to healing. I know. I am an abuse survivor.

I was only 3 years old when I began to be abused by a family member and if that weren't enough, I was raped as a teenager on two separate occasions by two different men. From firsthand experience, I have learned that if we are going to bring people from "victim" to "survivor," they need a chance to speak up and speak out. It is a crucial step towards healing. Without it, the shame, despair and inability to cope with the painful events can lead to depression as well as dangerous behavior, as victims tend to seek other ways to block out the memories and dull the pain.

It is important for all of us to always pay attention to our surroundings and those we come in contact with. Someone may be crying out for help, and if we know what to look for, we can be instrumental in moving them from victim to survivor. Some things to look for are:

- Behavioral changes
- Behavior that is sexual in nature or more mature for their age
- Depression (Abuse victims are three times more likely to suffer depression.)
- Acting out inappropriately
- Alcohol or drug abuse. Those who have been abused are 13 times more likely to become addicted to alcohol and 26 times more likely to become addicted to drugs.

If you find yourself in the situation of suspecting sexual abuse, you need to know that the individuals need a safe place to talk about what has happened to them. They need to be able to release the shame, fear and feelings of unworthiness. Since the healing process for an abuse survivor is similar to that of someone suffering grief, they need to feel safe, experiencing the sadness of the loss of their childhood innocence, their virginity or security, whatever it was that the abuse took from them. They need to have the freedom to experience righteous anger and eventually be led down the path to forgiveness of both the perpetrator and themselves. Counseling is key to the healing process.

Don't be afraid to hear a survivor's story. Survivors want to know they are heard and will be safe and protected. They do not need to be "shut up," because their situation is too hard to hear. They need people who are willing to listen and willing to stand up for them if the choice is made to go public.

Survivors Can Live a Normal Life.

It is important to know that abuse does not have to define a survivor. You *can* overcome its debilitating effects. If you

have been abused, find that “safe place,” that “someone” you can share your pain with. The more you talk about what has been done to you, the more you will heal. Although it will never “disappear” from your past, it will be a chapter of your life that can be closed. The more you keep the shame, guilt and fear locked away, the more power you continue to give the perpetrator and the more likely you will continue to remain their victim.

If you want to remain anonymous, write your story in a journal, but get it out. Each time you release the abuse from the depths of your memory you are giving yourself a VOICE and the power to fight back. **Specific details do not need to be remembered or recalled. There is no healing in putting yourself through the details, however, admitting that it happened is freedom.**

Those of us who have survived abuse are not fragile individuals. We are strong, worthy individuals who have overcome a great amount of suffering whether it was physical, sexual or verbal. Every form of abuse affects us emotionally, lowering self-esteem and our sense of worth. We often hide or bury the facts and the deep effects of the abuse out of fear, shame, and lack of support. The best way for us to heal is to have a voice to what has been done or said to us, to be heard and to know we are supported and loved.

Shannon Deitz started the “I Have a Voice” abuse awareness project where survivors share their personal stories of abuse (domestic, sexual, incest, rape, neglect, emotional and verbal) through intensely personal and honest YouTube videos. The videos show the power of giving a VOICE to survivors that was once kept hidden, and not only aides in their personal healing, but shows others they are not alone and there is reason for hope.

She is founder of Hopeful Hearts Ministry and was honored with the Family Time Women of Achievement Award for Women’s

Advocate in 2014. Her monthly column, "Shannon Deitz: On Hope," is particularly geared towards parents of teens. Shannon has also contributed articles to , Lifestyle & Charity magazine and Catholic Women magazine. She and her husband, Neal, live in Kingwood, Texas, where they are active in their local church and community. Together, they present a refreshingly honest (and sometimes humorous) marriage seminar entitled "The 3 C's of Marriage: Covenant, Commitment and Compromise." The couple has two sons, Ryan and Seth, who provide them with endless joy and reason to continually count their blessings.

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