

# **Sexual Abuse, the Reporting Dilemma**

Reconnecting with an old friend recently, she shared with me the fact that she believes she was a victim of sexual abuse. This happened over the span of several years, long ago when she was a pre-teen. The memories are vague, but still haunting. She believes the extent of the abuse involved inappropriate touching as well as exhibitionism but is not sure whether anything more happened.

Her dilemma was and still is, the fact that she never reported or addressed the abuse. In retrospect, she regrets not doing either. Her life has been adversely affected for years, especially her romantic relationships.

Why did she not report it at the time or over the years? There were many reasons. At least in her mind.

## **She Said, He Said**

At the time, she didn't think anyone would believe her, especially her parents. The abuser is a family member, an older sibling who could do no wrong in their parents' eyes.

## **She Loves her Brother, Didn't Want to get him in Trouble**

As they both grew up, the chances to report the abuse just seemed to slip away. There was never a good time. When she was old enough to recognize the abuse for what it was and how it was affecting her life, she didn't know how to proceed. First off, she didn't want to upset her aging parents with the shocking allegations. Then she didn't want to ruin the abuser's marriage, then his children's lives. The list goes on

and on.

## **She Felt Guilty**

As a preteen at the time of the sexual abuse, she really didn't know any better. Although his actions made her uncomfortable, was this normal behaviour? If it was wrong, why did she permit it to happen over and over again without speaking up? Who could or should she tell? These were the days well before Google and the internet.

## **She Thought She Could Live With It**

She figured if she didn't talk about the abuse, eventually, she would forget about it. Unfortunately for her, the suppressed feelings never quite went away, remaining bottled up for years. She never confided in anyone. All of her memories from those years remain quite vague, a fact that makes her wonder what really happened. Is her lack of memory a defense mechanism where her brain has blocked out the details?

## **Fast Forward to Today**

These days, sexual abuse cases are prevalent in the courts. The Me Too movement has arrived. Many are legitimate, albeit ancient cases. Others are not so believable, unprovable, sometimes merely vengeful cases. The latter are reported (created) for attention or defamation. It is great that legitimate victims have come forward and their abusers punished. However, we are living in a messed up world when the [person accused of abuse turns out to be the victim.](#)

We now know though that sexual abuse does not necessarily include intercourse. It is more about the power the abuser has over the victim. Is this surge in reported sexual abuse cases because women are braver today? Or because society has realized and accepted that abuse of any kind is unacceptable?

So, what should my friend do? Continue to keep quiet? Confront her abuser? Report the abuse even though fifty years have gone by? What would that accomplish after so many years, other than rip her very extended family apart? What is the statute of limitations on sexual abuse? Is there one? She had lots of questions that I could not answer.

I could only listen as she vented, realizing I don't know how I would deal with such a traumatic dilemma. I suggested therapy with an expert on such cases to help her weigh her options.



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