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JULY/AUG 2018



THE EXPERIENCE
PEACE BE UNTO YOU

What It Takes to Heal

If you survived sexual abuse, chances are you know these. Time to share the light. **Seven Transformational Tips for Abuse Survivors**

BY SAMANTHA NELSON

abuse is devastating. It destroys your concept of who you are and the value you have as a person. Sexual abuse steals part of you that was intended for a loving, committed relationship. Clergy sexual abuse adds a spiritual component that makes you question the very heart and existence of God.

I grew up in an abusive home—emotional, physical and sexual abuse. I believed I was worthless, and good for nothing, as I had been told so often. At the young and naïve age of 16, I was gang-raped by a group of high school football players. When I left home a few months later, I was introduced to a man who became my boyfriend. He was 22, and I was 16. He was addicted to drugs and alcohol, and he physically abused me. At times, I was afraid for my life. I didn't stop to think that this was domestic violence, yet it was. Although I was not raised in a Christian home, I believed in God and cried out to Him for help. Within a couple weeks, I was free! God saved me from that life of abuse.

SAFE, BUT NOT SOUND

I had a long way to go before I would be able to say God had healed me. When I met and married

my now husband Steve, I knew he was the one because he didn't smoke, drink, curse, hit me or watch sports on TV all day. Sounds like my expectations were very low, doesn't it? The truth is, God sent Steve to me to help me overcome, and to stay by my side. Years later another disaster struck.



We were about to celebrate our five-year wedding anniversary when an incident occurred at a family gathering that brought up memories of my childhood abuse. I went to my pastor to see if he could help me. That's when Steve thought we "made a deal with the devil." Unknown to me, the pastor had been grooming me to become his next victim, and it was only a short time later that he raped me in his office. That story is too long to tell in this brief article. Suffice it to say, it turned my world upside down and nearly cost me my life, and my

marriage.

Thankfully, I didn't end my life, though I had multiple suicide attempts. My husband stood by my side to help me, and God was right there to strengthen and heal me. How, you ask? Let me outline the steps He took with me.

1. Acknowledge the wrongs committed against you.

I had to be willing to let myself think about the events that shaped my life—for good or for bad. I had to accept the fact that I had been repeatedly abused in multiple ways my entire life. I needed to acknowledge that I may have developed patterns

of behavior that were not healthy and needed to change. For me, this was self-injury. For others, it could also be drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, or any number of things you might choose to try to drown the past.

One critical component for me was confessing my sins to God so that He would forgive me of my own wrong actions. Then, there would be nothing to hinder Him from hearing my prayers and helping me when I cried out for help.

2. Educate yourself.

I educated myself on the issue of abuse and healing through self-help books about various types of

abuse. I took a Christian counseling certification course so I could learn what the Bible had to say about abuse (this was the reason I had gone to my pastor after all). I also immersed myself in the Bible so God could speak His truth to my heart. This helped me create a new identity—as a daughter of the King of the Universe! Even if you don't believe in God, this educational step is a much-needed step in your healing process.

3. Seek counseling.

You need to find a trustworthy counselor or peer support person to help you sort through your thoughts and emotions. Many times, as studies have shown, having a trusted friend who will listen and support you is equally helpful. The important thing is to talk about your situation. Abuse can only take place in secrecy, so it is important to shed a light on it by exposing it.

4. Remind yourself of the truth.

We all tend to believe many lies about ourselves, either because of what others have said about us or because we lack a healthy (not narcissistic) self-esteem. The truth is, you are not responsible for the abuse you have suffered. The truth is, it is not your fault. The truth is, you have a right to be free from abuse in every environment, whether home, work, church, or elsewhere. Reminding yourself of these truths will help you reshape your thoughts about yourself and your negative self-talk.

5. Work through the triggers to overcome.

Triggers—unrelated events that remind you of the abuse—happen unexpectedly, and can thrust you into a difficult emotional tailspin if

you do not learn how to overcome them. Let me share an example of one in my life. After the clergy sexual abuse, we moved to another state. At church one day, I looked over and noticed a man that looked just like my abusive pastor. It caught me off guard and distressed me.

At that moment, I had a choice to make. Healing is about the choices you make in the process. I could run out of church because I couldn't stand to look at someone that so eerily resembled my abuser, or I could choose to let my rationale kick in. I could remind myself that this man was not to blame for looking like my abuser, and he had done nothing to me. I chose to overcome this trigger by walking up to the man after church and introducing myself to him and his wife. Knowing him by his name, and as his own person, helped me overcome the distress I initially felt when I first saw him.

6. Allow yourself to forgive those who hurt you.

Forgiving the very people who caused you such tremendous harm is not easy. Compounding that difficulty is the fact that most abusers are never held accountable for what they have done. However, they must live in a prison of their own making due to their choices and actions. If you allow anger, and unforgiveness to consume your thoughts and life, then in a sense, you are still allowing the abuser to control you.

Forgiveness does not mean what the abuser did was ok. It does not mean that there will be any type of reconciliation. In fact, many times reconciliation would be quite harmful. Forgiveness does not mean the abuser is even sorry or will repent in any way. Forgiveness is for you! It allows you to let go, to release the pain, anger and bitterness so that you can move forward with your


life. Forgiveness is a choice, so you may have to choose to forgive multiple times, and that's OK.

7. Embrace your new freedom from abuse.

Once you are free from ongoing abuse, embrace that freedom and enjoy the new life you have been given. Don't waste time by living in the past. If you worked through the healing you needed by following the steps above, then you will be able to acknowledge the past, accept the truth about the abuse, overcome the triggers, release the pain, anger and resentment, and use what was intended for evil against you as a tool for helping others.

There is no set time limit for healing. We all are different, and heal at different speeds. For me, intense, deep healing took about two years after the clergy sexual abuse ended. For you, it may take more or less time. The important thing is to be thorough in the process, and not try to rush through it quickly. After I experienced healing I felt compelled to share helpful tips with others. I wrote a book entitled, *Reaching the Hurting*.

I was young, naïve and felt I mattered to no one, just like you may be feeling right now. I believed there was no way out of the abuse I was suffering. You may be feeling the same way right now. I want you to know there is help. There is hope.

Your life matters. Your healing matters. You matter. 

SAMANTHA NELSON is a pastor's wife and co-founder/CEO of The Hope of Survivors, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting victims of clergy sexual abuse.

She is also the author of *Reaching the Hurting—A Biblical Guide for Helping Abuse Victims*. In her limited free time, she enjoys traveling with her husband, the beauty of God's creation, and spending time with her furry children—two horses, two dogs, and two cats.

