

## **Women Healing in the Aftermath of Childhood Molestation** by Stacey B. Thacker, LMFT

As a psychotherapist specializing in the aftermath of childhood molestation, I have been a witness to the pain, suffering, and healing of many women and men who have been traumatized as children. It is with their voices and their expertise that I respond to Evergreen's request for this article. My wish in writing about this deeply sensitive and tender issue is that it might bring some peace, understanding, and hope to those who have been so wronged; provide clarity and increased empathy to their loved ones; and serve as a useful tool to therapists, bishops, and other church leaders who can provide some degree of relief and compassion.

When women have been molested as children, the aftereffects can be far-reaching. Current relationships may be adversely affected. The giving and receiving of emotional or physical intimacy is often compromised. A distrust of males, including church leaders, may make church inclusion uncomfortable. Those who struggle with same-gender attraction may experience an increased intensity of those feelings when confronted with memories or when familiar feelings of trauma resurface. A woman's fears may be projected onto her children as she worries for their safety. Some find it difficult to pray and receive answers to prayer from a male Heavenly Father, even though a strong desire for this connection may be present.

At times, loved ones and others may wonder why these affects are present years after the trauma was experienced. In many ways, it is similar to what is seen with war veterans who, several decades later, still jump at the sound of a car backfiring. The event is long past, but the brain has retained a blue print of the trauma and is set off again by triggers. As one woman put it, "*It may be the innocent touch of a spouse or a spoken phrase that brings an involuntary and terrifying reaction.*" Many women who have been traumatized as a child have been diagnosed with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) (Cameron, 1994). I think that many therapists would agree with me- PTSD is a normal reaction to a very abnormal situation- and there is nothing normal about being molested.

**Following are some of the more frequent comments/questions which I have heard from women in their healing process that bear addressing at this time:**

*I find it very uncomfortable to sit in my bishop's office for a temple recommend interview or when I am called to a position.*

Some women express feeling unsettled before and after an interview with a Priesthood holder. "*In my mind, I can tell myself I am safe with him, but I still get scared.*" It is not uncommon for women to experience sleeplessness, nightmares, flashbacks, gastrointestinal symptoms, and headaches before meeting with him, and for days afterward. Talking to a friend or a therapist may help prepare for these visits.

Letting a bishop know of her discomfort and background has been helpful for many women. Getting ready to discuss your personal history with your bishop, however, may bring up very painful emotions. Perhaps you want your bishop to "just know" what happened to you and what you need through inspiration. While some of this can take place, some of that inspiration will

come through you yourself as you teach him what you need to feel more comfortable in his presence. Some women find it helpful to take in an article such as Elder Scott's "Healing the Tragic Scars of Abuse" from the May 2008 Ensign, and hand it to the bishop at the beginning of the interview. Other women have found it helpful to take a friend to the appointment with her or to ask the bishop if she can sit nearer the door.

### ***Why didn't Heavenly Father protect me?***

This one is difficult for women of all faiths and is not specific to LDS women. It is a difficult and multi-layered question for which there is no single, satisfying answer. One woman may come to believe that there was a plan from the pre-existence that this was to be part of her mortal probation, while another woman finds the idea of a Heavenly Father subjecting his daughter to such treatment as incomprehensible. A woman may recognize the concept of free agency, feeling that this principle prohibits even God from intervening at times. To this, another woman cries out in despair, "*But what about my free agency? I didn't choose this to happen to me!*" To try to give an answer to such a complex question may only cause more pain. Rather than attempting to respond to a question for which there is no sure answer, I have found it more healing to sit with her and acknowledge her painful feelings behind the question. This gives her a place of comfort, acceptance, and respect for her healing process.

When thus supported over time, some women come to the understanding of just how painful her trauma and resulting aftermath have been for her Heavenly Father and her Savior as she begins to more fully understand the atonement. "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...and with his stripes we are healed." Isaiah 53:4-5.

### ***The scriptures and my church leaders speak of forgiving others. I don't know if I can...***

Women with a history of trauma often live with an unwarranted sense of shame and unworthiness. She may know cognitively that she did not cause her abuse, but there is still a "little girl" inside of her who often feels that if she was "good enough" this would not have happened to her, or that she wouldn't still be carrying such hurt. This "little girl" has a difficult time sitting in classes, in sacrament meeting, or in the temple when she erroneously feels unworthy. When the topic turns to forgiveness, she may want to run out of the room. She may feel it is already hard enough to measure up, and this seemingly impossible request can be quite overwhelming.

Your struggle to forgive your abuser may be compounded by your knowledge that your perpetrator(s) may be without remorse for the damage done. He or she may not have a willingness to understand the impact his or her actions have had on you. You may question, "*How can I forgive someone who isn't even sorry for what he did to me?*" Over time, you may come to experience that the healing aspects of the atonement bring a greater peace, not necessarily to your abuser, but for yourself as the weight of your trauma begins to lift. Elder Richard G. Scott states that "forgiveness heals terrible tragic wounds, for it allows the love of God to purge your heart and mind of the poison of hate. It cleanses your consciousness of the desire for revenge. It makes place for the purifying, healing, restoring love of the Lord" (Scott, 1992).

Even those who have found that they have come to a place of forgiveness for their abuser often find that they still suffer some of the aftereffects of the abuse mentioned in this article. Understanding forgiveness as a process can help you to be patient with yourself. It takes time.

***I know others who have been molested but they seem to be just fine. What's wrong with me that I am still hurting so much?***

Healing is an individual process. Some seem to move through the process more quickly than others. Some become “good” at hiding their pain while others may wear it on their sleeve. Do not judge yourself because someone else seems to be further along the path of healing than you.

I have recognized several factors which come into play, causing the aftermath to be more difficult, yet not impossible, from which to heal. When the abuse was caused by a family member, particularly a mother or father, the developmental process of trust is compromised and may make trust in oneself, others, or God more difficult. When there have been multiple abusers in the child's life, a pervasive sense of the world as an unsafe place may abound. The degree to which the child felt her parents protected her will undoubtedly have an impact. The length of time the abuse occurred may effect the outcome. Whether she was coerced, threatened, or if violence was used affects the way the child internalizes her experience. If the perpetrator was a Priesthood holder, the child's view of a loving Heavenly Father may have become confused and distorted. This can make it difficult for her as an adult to come to the very One who holds her healing or to His chosen representatives on the earth who are called to care for her.

Several scenarios may lessen the impact for a child. When a child found a safe place, such as a grandparent or kindly Primary teacher, some degree of inner safety may have been able to take root. When/if the child's experience came to light, the parent's response of empathy and comfort, the ability to handle their own emotions in front of the child, and a belief in the child's story coupled with protection from further harm can all directly lessen the severity of the impact and long-term emotional difficulty.

## **Your Healing Process**

Remember that healing CAN and DOES come. Healing is a process, however, and not an event. It takes patience, time, and a willingness to risk letting others help you. It is understandable that you would want a quick fix, but healing takes time if it is to take root and re-define your life. Be patient, and remember that you are not alone.

Elder Richard G. Scott (2008) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gives the following council.

”Healing may begin with a thoughtful bishop or stake president or a wise professional counselor. If you had a broken leg, you wouldn't decide to fix it yourself. Serious abuse can also benefit from professional help. There are many ways to begin healing, but remember that a full cure comes through the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Master and Redeemer. Have faith that with effort His

perfect, eternal, infinite Atonement can heal your suffering from the consequences of abuse” (Scott, 2008).

Finding a competent therapist is a prayerful task. Ask Heavenly Father to guide you in your important task of seeking help. Ask others for referrals. Interview several therapists to find one that feels like a good fit for you. Be wary of those who believe that they have all the answers or who think this can be done in just a few months. Look for a therapist who exemplifies empathy and compassion. Find someone who is willing to learn from you what you need.

Become a team with Heavenly Father in your healing process. It may be difficult for you to pray or follow through on promptings at times. Give yourself permission to have some setbacks. You can ask Heavenly Father to help you to want to pray, to want to read His word, and to want to follow his commandments.

The atonement of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is a living principle that you can hold and embrace and allow to grow a life of its own- within you. Your earlier traumas need not define who you are becoming today. God loves you. He knows you individually. Your healing is important to Him. We live in a day of miracles. Be prepared for them, expect them in your life, pray to recognize them, and embrace them when they come to you- for surely they will!

*Stacey B. Thacker is a licensed marriage and family therapist in private practice at Roubicek and Thacker Counseling in Fresno, California. She specializes in the aftereffects of childhood molestation, SGA, addiction, and families who have children with disabilities. Stacey is a convert to the church, a returned missionary from the Spain Barcelona Mission, and a former Seminary teacher. She and her husband John have been married for 29 years and have raised 6 children.*

#### References

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