

## **Adult Survivors Continuing Relationships With Abusive Family**

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By: Louise

A lurid and rather sensationalistic book about murderers that I recently read featured the case of Mary Bell, who committed two murders as a child of ten. In the years since, Mary has disclosed horrific child sexual abuse committed and/or facilitated by her mother, Betty. The author, Paul Roland, finishes with the following observation: "However, one has to wonder, if all Mary has claimed is true, why she invited Betty to live with her and her daughter in the latter years of her mother's life (2008 p. 165)."

Perhaps, in a book of this nature, sensitivity and knowledge about the many effects of child sexual abuse were hardly to be expected, but what concerned me was the using of Mary's ongoing relationship with her mother as a reason to doubt her disclosures of abuse. One thing survivors don't need is people acting out of ignorance discounting them and fuelling myths about the unreliability of people who say they were sexually abused.

And yet, the question, "Why would a person who experienced sexual abuse want to be close to the very people who did it?" is genuinely puzzling to people who may never have experienced incest or other parental abuse. Partners of survivors may feel disgust and confusion or a natural protectiveness towards their partners – and it is very concerning when children are exposed to danger from an abusive grandparent. Some survivors themselves are baffled as to why they feel drawn to keep going back to their abusive parents.

Why does this happen? Why would a woman raped by her father let him give her away at her wedding? Why does the son subjected to sexual abuse by his mother continue to submit to demands for his money? Why would incest survivors eat Christmas dinner with people who continue to degrade them? This article will look at some of the reasons.

**Damaged Self:** Many of us will have encountered children that cling tenaciously to parents who have hurt them terribly, and sadly some of us *were* those children. Judith Herman (1992 p. 103) writes that child abuse causes children to form a core image of themselves as

“bad.” This is essential for their emotional survival. At the expense of their very selves, children rationalise that they caused the abuse in order to preserve an image of mother and father – those people on whom they must depend for care and protection - as “good.”

This is not hard to understand until the survivor becomes an adult. What then? Aren't they grown-up now? Don't they have the choice to get away, and shouldn't they know better? No, that core of inner badness remains as it is until healing begins. Those who listen to adult survivors try to reassure them that abuse is never a child's fault, only to hear assurances that if their own parents could be so cruel there must be something fundamentally wrong with the survivor. A survivor carrying that sense of their own badness, with mother and father as “good” cannot separate until the self-blame stops, and responsibility is more realistically directed towards the abusers. Most survivors know that this is far more easily said than done.

**Inability for Self-Protection:** Survivors abused by one or both parents, or who were harmed and not supported, may believe that they in fact have no rights, or that they don't deserve to be protected from further abuse. Again, we hear from Judith Herman (1992, p. 112):

Many survivors have such profound deficiencies in self-protection that they can barely imagine themselves in a position of agency or choice. The idea of saying no to the emotional demands of a parent, spouse, lover or authority figure may be practically inconceivable. Thus, it is not uncommon to find adult survivors who continue to minister to the needs of those who once abused them and who continue to permit major intrusions without boundaries or limits. Adult survivors may nurse their abusers in illness, defend them in adversity, and even, in extreme cases, continue to submit to their sexual demands.

Survivors may feel truly helpless to stand up to an abusive parent, and to not be at their beck-and-call. Healing and change is about much more than what other people might see as “common-sense.” A person chronically abused by their parents does not necessarily perceive that they have different options now that they're grown up. They require – and deserve - help, compassion and patience.

**Grief:** Many of us have experienced the terrible grief of letting go of the image of the “good” parent, and we know that the act of separation from even the most abusive parent

can feel like an amputation without anaesthesia. Even as we know that separation is for our psychological benefit, this primal wound reverberates through every part of us, and the children we were.

The losses are huge. Survivors who separate from abusive parents often find that their whole families turn on them too, branding them crazy or even cruel: "How could you do this to poor mother?" Their children are ostracized; the survivor may be frankly persecuted by his or her family. It's no wonder that some survivors prefer not to "rock the boat."

**Guilt:** I'll share my experience: As the victim of abuse by a narcissistic and very violent mother, I grew up believing that I was responsible for mummy; responsible for making her sick, responsible for making her better; responsible for nurturing her. Unable to manage the ambivalence of my feelings, I felt terrible for being angry with her. I felt that if I abandoned her, she might die, and this was played by her for all it was worth; she threatened suicide many times. My guilt was exacerbated by memories of when she'd tried to be a good mother. Consequently, she continued a pattern of devaluing and manipulating me until I began to put a stop to it when I was twenty-six. One morning, my mother rang me and told me a bogus story – one among many – that she was at a Melbourne cancer hospital having treatment. It felt like leaping into a precipice for me, but I hung up in her ear. That was to be the first of many attempts at setting boundaries around her abusive behaviour, and it took much practice. I didn't know how to stop feeling the long-entrenched guilt and responsibility for her until I had been in therapy for a few years. I had to learn different lessons from those when I was a little girl; it had always been mummy first. I had learned that not forgiving poor mummy who had a lot of problems was selfish and cruel; I didn't see that I had rights too. Relearning was hard but empowering work.

**Concern for other family members:** Some survivors maintain links with abusive parents so that they can keep a protective eye on younger siblings or other children who may be exposed to abuse. This is not a bad thing in itself, but the survivor needs to practice self-care too.

**Disassociation and Denial:** Sexual abuse by a parent can be so terrifying and such a wrenching betrayal that a survivor may prefer to pretend it didn't happen. The nature of the trauma may mean that the survivor is in a state of numbing. Disassociation is something that many survivors of child abuse come to effortlessly do (Herman 1992 p. 102) By

disassociating from the memories, or from the feelings, a survivor is able to preserve a relationship with an abusive parent – usually on the abuser's terms. As a young survivor, I didn't understand the process of trauma, and thus believed that if I had no feelings, I must be okay. The lack of feeling made me think that the abuse didn't matter, which left the way open to continue a relationship with my mother. Denial can contribute to survivors putting their own children at risk from abusive grandparents.

**Ambivalence:** In writing about survivors who maintain contact with abusive parents, Laura Davis says "Survivors rarely feel one way toward their perpetrators, particularly when the abuser is a family member. Most feel some combination of love, anguish, hatred, rage, confusion, fear, loyalty and longing (1991, p. 212)." The same father who abused the survivor may also have bought them ice-cream when they were sick. It is very hard to let go of the "good" parent. Because there were good times, a survivor may wonder if he or she is "overreacting" about the abuse. Or, perhaps the sexual abuse was the only time when any affection was displayed. Even though survivors don't like the abuse, it's extremely painful to lose the source of an affection that may have been the only sustenance that the survivor received. A person starved of water will drink from a poisoned well if that's all there is.

I mentioned above that I was not able to cope with my own ambivalence. Rage and hatred for my mother was "bad.", and of course many children learn that they must love mother and father no matter how bad the abuse is. I have learned that it's okay to allow my compassion and my rage to exist side by side; it has become easier to just be wherever I'm at – but even if I am feeling compassionate about my mother, I still owe it to myself to have strict boundaries with her.

**Hope for change:** Laura Davis writes, "Even when they are treated terribly, children hold onto the hope that they can change things by altering their own behaviour (1992, p. 212)." One of the hardest things for many adult survivors is to come to terms with the fact that, regardless of what they do or don't do, the parent will not change and give the survivor the love they always needed. As long as there is the remotest chance that the abusive parent might change, the survivor clings. Linda Martinez-Lewi writes about the lifelong extremely abusive behaviour of Pablo Picasso toward his son, Paulo, and yet: "...Paulo remained tied to his father like an infant sucking on a cold mother's milkless teat (2008, p.17)." Letting go of the hope for change is a huge step towards freedom, but is still a massive healing task for a

survivor. The other side of that can be immense grief.

**Dependency:** A survivor may carry into adulthood the very natural childhood sense that he or she needs mother and father. Some survivors believe that an abuser is the only person they can really depend on, and this is something that an abusive parent fosters in order to keep control. They may have deliberately isolated their child from other avenues of sustenance. Abusers may pop up at the right moments with offers of help – with the understanding, of course, that the survivor must maintain respectful silence about abuse, and agree that the abuser is wonderful. Wealthy abusers may tie their adult children to them with financial dependency, and threats of disinheriting. Young or newly divorced survivors may have little option than to live with abusive parents. If a survivor is ill – mentally or physically - this can be a prime occasion for an abuser to take charge. And some survivors are deliberately *made* ill by abusive parents; Susan Forward (1990, p.63) tells us that some parents would rather their children were mad than knew the truth. I have seen the most solicitous-seeming parents, whom I knew were abusers, visit their poor, sick daughter in a psychiatric ward and make a great show of consulting with her psychiatrists to try and get her “well.” But the charade actually fosters the illness.

**Conforming to the silence:** A rule of many abusive families is silence. Children watch their mothers being beaten; they are sexually abused and beaten, yet the parents are pillars of the local church. The image and the silence must be maintained at all costs. Adult survivors grow up schooled in the rule of silence, and they keep it, hiding their shame and internal damage. When they begin to break that rule, it can be terrifying. Some survivors may see their siblings getting on with mother and father, and feel that they are deficient for their feelings. It can be particularly horrifying when the survivor knows that other family members know about the abuse, but continue to support the perpetrator anyway.

**Fear:** Some survivors have been threatened about consequences for upsetting the family applecart. Mother might commit suicide; families will be ruined, father will get into trouble, or even that they will be killed. One task for many survivors is to gently encourage their abused inner children to stop believing the abuser’s threats, perhaps realizing that if there is trouble in the family, that is a consequence of the abuser’s behaviour. But initially, this can be a very tall order. For some survivors, too, their fears are not groundless; they must move interstate to stop stalking, harassment and other terrorism from abusive families. In Australia some 15 years ago, a young woman walked into a police station and told of

repeated rape by her stepfather. He pulled up next to her at a set of traffic lights and shot her dead. Her mother married him while he was awaiting trial. Outcomes such as this are not usual, but it isn't hard to understand a survivor's fear.

**Religion:** When I was seventeen, my mother beat me badly and strangled me. I fought her off and fled in the night to a refuge. The next morning I went around to see my pastor, who reminded me to "honour thy mother and father." He said that since I was seventeen and still under my mother's jurisdiction, I should go home and behave myself.

Some communities of faith promote the idea of forgiveness as something one must do as if there was no wound committed. So, because they believe it is pleasing to God, survivors appear to "forgive" an abusive parent and continue to suffer further abuse, while their rage is called "sinful" and dangerously suppressed.

**Genuine reconciliation:** On occasion, an abusive parent may make a full and frank admission and apology, seeking to make amends for the pain they've caused. When a healing survivor knows that this is genuine, it can be an affirming choice to have some sort of a relationship.

**Acceptance:** Many survivors get to a stage where they accept that there will be no change. They put strong boundaries in place around what they will and won't tolerate, they have learned to protect themselves and they choose to maintain some contact with abusive parents – but this time on the survivor's terms. In my years of knowing many other survivors – particularly through Pandora's Aquarium, I have come to see what I can only describe as a beautiful and extraordinary grace. These survivors accept the flaws of abusive parents, and are able to show kindness – but no longer at their own expense. Of course for some survivors, continued interaction with an abusive parent is extremely dangerous physically or psychologically, and it is necessary to cut off completely. But some survivors are able not to do this, for good reasons.

**Traumatic Bonding:** Traumatic bonding occurs in abused children, battered women, prisoners of war and other situations in which people find themselves in a state of captivity. An abuser may also be the source of intermittent rewards and comfort – and torturers recognize this as a powerful means of asserting control. The abused feel love, gratitude, empathy and loyalty towards the abuser (Herman, 1992 p. 72). If hostages who had no prior favourable bond with their captors, bond traumatically, how much easier is it for a

child to do so with a parent, who is seen as the source of their very lives? An unhealed survivor carries this into adulthood too.

So, as we see there can be many factors – and some beyond the above, why adult survivors may interact with abusive parents. It is never a good enough reason to believe that the survivor is lying about or exaggerating the abuse.

If you are a supporting partner worried about the survivor you love maintaining contact with abusive parents, I strongly recommend that you read *Allies in Healing* by Laura Davis. This book gives excellent advice on caring for the survivor, keeping children safe, and validating your own very natural feelings of anger. It will also help if you are in a position where you've been drawn in to liking the abuser yourself.

If you are a survivor who feels stuck with abusive parents, or helpless to protect yourself from ongoing abuse from them in any form, it's important that you seek help. You deserve it. It's possible that the contact is continuing to trigger or otherwise hurt you.

I learned that life after mother contains powerful gains as well as losses. The gains are being free to know who I am outside of the way she defined me, my little inner child knowing she is worth standing up for, and having cut mother's pernicious games off at the knees. I wouldn't want to create the impression that it's easy; I would admit that the hurt has been ongoing; I watch other women with mothers who love, protect and support them and I am glad they have this. But whoever said you don't miss what you never had was talking utter crap. I do; sometimes I fiercely crave a mother. I can nurse myself through the recycled grief and ask for support if I need it; it's normal and it's okay.

It's sad for those of us whose parents either did not or could not love us or who sometimes did love us but then became terrifying and abusive. We have been abused and frightened by the very people we looked to for protection, and it's natural to want to keep believing in them. If you wish to continue some kind of relationship, you deserve to make sure it isn't because you feel the same entrapment and powerlessness you felt as a child.

Always feel free to post about this on Pandora's Aquarium; we have many survivors in various stages of relationships with, or separation from, abusive parents.

Remember that YOU have a place in the scheme of fairness and love, and that you deserve to be safe.

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