

THE INCEST VICTIM'S SHAME AND MISTRUST

Ninety percent of all incest victims," writes Dr. Susan Forward, an expert in child sexual abuse, "never told anyone what has happened, or what is happening to them. They remain silent not only because they are afraid of getting hurt themselves, but to a great extent because they are afraid of breaking up the family... Incest may be frightening, but the thought of being responsible for the destruction of the family is even worse. Family loyalty is an incredibly powerful source in most children's lives...'

Children who have been abused are very reluctant to talk about it. And those who were sexually abused by a family member find it even harder to face their terrible reality. They prefer to live with the pain, the humiliation, the shame and the guilt until the day they die rather than speak about it. They find it a lot easier to reveal the physical and emotional abuse and neglect than they do anything sexual.

Somehow, sexual matters carry a stigma that is very tough to deal with. Instead, they keep their wounds to themselves and suffer quietly. Their pain is very deep and never goes away with time. Their abuse carries over into many aspects of their lives. They usually suffer from low self-esteem. They may find it difficult to commit to a relationship. Some female victims decide never to marry. Some might run off to a convent. (I was once told by a superior that more than half of a group of 14 nuns were victims of sexual abuse.)

Incest victims feel dirty. They are laden with a heavy burden of guilt. Their shame eats them up inside and they often are driven to suicidal thoughts. They tend to believe that they are responsible for the abuse even if they are clearly victims, and they hate themselves for it. This self-loathing leads them to self-destructive behaviors. Drugs, alcohol and mindless sex are just some of the more common escapes that victims who cannot cope resort to in times of crisis.

It is difficult for outsiders to understand why a child who has been victimized, sometimes for years, would feel guilty. The answer lies in the child's unwillingness to see a trusted and "loving" parent or significant other as bad. Somebody has to take the blame and so the child does so in order to avoid destroying his/her relationship with the abuser. After all, imagine how the child would feel believing that mom, or dad, or uncle is an abuser. It would explode the nature of the relationship.

The feelings of being dirty, bad and responsible create a painful sense of isolation for incest victims. They feel they are the worst of the worst. More than that, they feel alone. they are convinced nobody will believe their story. They fear others will learn their secret and therefore find it difficult to trust others and make friends.