

Facing Abuse in the Family

Many of us are aware of families in the world and even those close to us that have struggled with issues of abuse. We know of many types of abuse that occur: physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, spousal, and others. Many of these situations and behaviors may occur for years before they are recognized and action is taken to correct them. Often this realization occurs because of others observing these problems and identifying them to the family. Sometimes child protection or law enforcement is notified of a circumstance and intervenes.

Patterns have been observed where abuse is seen in successive generations of a family, although this is not the issue in every situation. One possibility of how a generational pattern occurs is that a child observes abuse or is abused, and regards this as acceptable behavior. For example, in cases of physical abuse; when an abused child is later a parent, he or she may be more apt to apply severe punishment. It may take many years and professional counseling before the faulty patterns of behavior change. In the example of physical abuse, an abusive parent or spouse may work on managing anger by using strategies to safely vent that anger and by learning different approaches to conflict resolution.

Our society is increasingly sexualized. Media of all kinds emphasizes sexual relationships, especially those outside of marriage. Often health or family science education in schools is based on the suggestion that premarital and alternative sexual relationships will occur. Nevertheless, God's Word instructs that any sexual interaction outside of marriage is sin. Sexual abuse is an additional offense against the rights, mental health, and physical health of the victim, and is a crime.

There is a range of behavior that could be questioned as sexual. A parent bathing their toddler is expected and should not be an uncomfortable experience. There are incidents where young children are curious about one another's bodies or mimicking some experience such as going to the doctor. As parents, we understand the need to give guidance and instruction so that behavior remains appropriate. On the other hand, reports of sexual interactions or touching between children, or adults and children must not be ignored, despite our uneasiness with addressing them. It is possible that there is an explanation for confusing information from a child, such as, a babysitter helping a toddler to clean up after a toilet-training accident. Those involved want a basic understanding of what has happened before taking further action.

False accusations can have damaging effects, even if the official investigation determines no wrongdoing. Harm can include negative public opinion or suspicion after the fact, or even suspension of a professional license resulting in the inability to work during an investigation. As friends or family, we are not required to investigate a situation. That is left to law enforcement and appropriate government agencies. Laws vary from state to state; it is important to comply with local reporting requirements.

In the example of sexual abuse, the law often dictates that the offender cannot associate with children. We understand the reasons for this and support these individuals by not placing them in the position of temptation, "that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Rom. 14:13). We must be emboldened to remind them if they are not observing these boundaries. "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11). It may also mean that we would report the questionable actions of the individual to their probation officer or legal authority if they are under this kind of obligation. Legal consequences can be part of the deterrent for further offenses.

One may lack insight or empathy into how their actions have affected others. Specialized therapy and treatment

programs are part of the intervention. The abuser's excuse for his or her behavior is often part of their difficulty with insight that the professionals try to address. This can be true in all forms of abuse. At the same time, it is possible that they would desire to believe their sins forgiven and remain in faith. "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him" (Luke 17:3). "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32).

Abuse can have many consequences for the abused. These may include difficulty with trusting others, struggles with relationships, and more intense responses to stress or conflict with others than would be expected. There are also mental health issues that can correlate with being abused or be worsened by the effects of abuse.

The abused may develop patterns of thinking to internally protect themselves from the experience, attempt to rationalize what has happened, deal with anger, etc. The abused may struggle with questions of feeling responsible for the abuse, especially if the adult abuser of a child or an abusive spouse tells them this. Of course, this is not true. One who has not been abused may have difficulty understanding these thoughts, and how difficult they are to overcome. Professional support such as therapy or other mental health treatment is encouraged and often beneficial. Each person has different ways of coping with experiences and may have differing needs for intervention as well. The abused may have other events in his or her life that will cause these feelings and thoughts to resurface; it would be good to also seek help at those times.

Most of the support that the abused will experience will not be from professionals. Family and friends in faith are an essential part of healing. One does not need special training to offer reassurance of the gospel, a listening ear in times of trial, time spent together in fellowship, or acts of kindness. Family and friends are also often the individuals who encourage the abused to seek professional help. Friendship, compassion, and spiritual support are the work of each believer: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

Some hardships can feel insurmountable. Struggling with abuse can be particularly difficult. God does not forget any one of us. The Bible speaks in many places about God's love. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3,4). We await heaven, where all pain and struggles cease. "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Rev. 7:16,17).

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Discussion Topics:

1. Discuss ways that we can support individuals who have experienced these types of difficulties.
2. When discussing circumstances in the lives of God's children, we want to consider the effect and intent of our

conversations. Discuss Philippians 4:8 and James 3:5.

January 2014 *Voice of Zion*