

Overcoming Childhood Sexual Abuse: The Ripple Effect

Everyone must contend with the “baggage” we all bring into our relationships. Baggage might consist of the aftermath of a divorce, destructive habits, poor self esteem, or prior negative experiences etc. For those who must also deal with the affects of childhood sexual abuse, the challenge can seem almost overwhelming. But accepting this difficult challenge can have transforming effects that are incredibly far-reaching. Chuck and Laraine Chamberlain, certified CJEA practitioners and marriage mentors, have created a new website for those who have suffered abuse and are asking for your dialogue, stories, articles and resources. Check out www.GivingItaVoice.com

Bob and Carrie had been married more than twenty years. When people would ask how long he'd been married, Bob would often joke, “Carrie and I have been married ten wonderful years.” Like most jokes, this one had an element of truth. You see, the first ten years of their marriage were really wonderful. Then for seemingly no reason, things changed dramatically. This is their story of desperation and eventual healing.

It started the day after their daughter, Sarah, celebrated her sixth birthday. Carrie first thought she was having a heart attack. Her heart felt like it was operating its own little jackhammer and she couldn't calm herself down. She had difficulty just sitting in one spot for very long; walking from room to room trying to find some comfort. Strangely, every room felt wrong and a horrible truth started to dawn on her – the discomfort and agitation was coming from inside, not from her environment. In some odd way she was in terrible pain, but it was a type of pain she would have difficulty describing. She just knew something was terribly wrong. It was the most miserable feeling she had ever experienced.

The emergency room staff gave her all the tests, followed by some diagnostic work by cardiac specialists. They found nothing wrong with her heart, which was a big relief. But a few months later, after having repeated this scenario several times, she almost wished they would find something wrong with her heart. She was tired of being at the mercy of these attacks.

Over time, as these episodes continued, she started to realize she could never plan ahead, as she would never know how she would be feeling at the time. Other couples wanted Bob and Carrie to join them for Friday night dinners but Carrie could never commit. Eventually they stopped asking. She couldn't tell if she had pulled away from them, or if they had dropped her – but she realized she no longer had the friendships she once had. Bob tried to be supportive – at first. But eventually he found her excuses to be inadequate and he just couldn't understand her anymore. In his view, Carrie was finding excuses to distance herself from him.

To make matters worse, she was really beginning to struggle with her two boys and little Sarah. Their squabbles were becoming unbearable and she had lost patience with them too many times, resulting in her either screaming at them or holing up in her bedroom

with the door locked. One day, Sarah, now seven years old, looked sadly at her and asked, “Mommy, do you love me anymore?” This question, and the need to ask it, broke Carrie’s heart.

A few more months went by and Carrie was getting worse. One night there was a school art show and Jason, her nine-year-old, had several paintings on display. As she sat staring numbly at Jason’s rather odd-shaped rendition of a bowl of fruit, she had trouble focusing. Instead, she could only keep glancing around the room; watching enviously as all the mothers interacted so easily and lovingly with their children. It was then that a sick, dark feeling seemed to enter her and a cruel voice that sounded like her own said, “You are a terrible mother.” The next day, the dark feeling greeted her when she woke up and she had trouble starting her day. She barely got the kids off to school before she crashed in a big heap on her bed for the day. She was completely exhausted.

These dark feelings combined with the anxiety attacks to make Carrie feel her life was spinning out of control. Bob insisted she see a therapist and she was planning to do it, but then the stomach pains started. She had Bob call the therapist to cancel her appointment when she found herself doubled over in pain and once again in the emergency room. Expecting an ill-timed case of appendicitis, she was shocked when all the tests came back negative. They could find nothing wrong with her.

With more urgency now, Carrie made a new appointment with the therapist. In her first session, the therapist had her talk about her life. Carrie recounted the “slight trouble” she had when she was six. She had stayed the night at a cousin’s house when, shortly after going to bed, her uncle had come to her room and molested her. A few weeks later she told her mother about the experience. Her mother was shocked and asked her to keep it to herself so that it wouldn’t upset the family.

Carrie was very intelligent and knowledgeable. She had read of adults who had to heal from childhood sexual abuse. She had felt sorry for those who had suffered so much pain and felt lucky that her experience had not damaged her like that. At various times in her life, she would recall the abuse in a calm, logical way and take quick stock of herself. She would ask herself if she were doing ok, and of course, she always was. So it seemed to her that she had somehow managed to avoid any serious consequences.

Fortunately, Carrie’s therapist was one who believed as much in the need to deal with underlying issues as she believed in the power of drugs. The therapist was knowledgeable about new developments in her field, including the latest research dealing with the connection between the mind and the body. From her, Carrie learned about a new and accepted field of medicine called PNI or psychoneuroimmunology. Carrie was able to see a connection between an unconscious emotional state and the physical symptoms she was experiencing. Most importantly, she found some hope that her life could change.

After only a few sessions with this incredible therapist, Carrie learned something about her own power. She learned that, as a human being, she was blessed with the incredible

power of imagination; that whatever she imagined became an actual experience as far as her body was concerned. Part of her brain does not distinguish between an imagined experience and a real one. If she imagined a stressful situation, for instance, her body would produce the same substances; just as if the situation were happening for real. If she imagined being in a serene, peaceful setting, her body would produce the biochemistry to match. In other words, whatever is imagined becomes an actual experience to the body.

Amazingly, Carrie learned how to both “re-cast” her previous experiences, including the abuse she suffered, and to “fore-cast” experiences that had not happened yet. She realized that she could use the incredible power of her mind to re-shape the way she experienced life; even things in the past.

One exercise she did was to “re-cast” the conversation she had with her mother following the abuse she suffered. She drew a crude picture of her and her mother having this conversation, and then drew another picture of how she would like it to have happened. In her second drawing, she put “conversation captions” above the stick figure representing her mother. These captions contained loving words that her mother could have said but did not. They included statements that a much stronger, indignant mother would have said, such as, “Sweetie, this is not your fault. Your uncle was completely responsible for what he did. And I WILL hold him accountable for it. You won’t ever have to see him again unless you want to. That will be up to you.” Other parts of the exercise involved some journaling that Carrie found helped her to find some inner strength.

One day, the therapist had her create a collage with pictures representing her new life as a healed person. She went through magazines and found pictures that seemed to speak to her. Again, she did some journal writing about this collage and then kept the collage in her bedroom where she could see it often. Every day, she would look at the pictures until she could feel what it felt like to actually be this new person she would become. She learned that by doing this, she was actually creating a “memory” of the future experience of being healed. And having already “experienced” the healing, it became much easier to create her “real” world to match that experience.

There were a few setbacks, but eventually Carrie realized she was becoming a different person. But she wasn’t done yet. Carrie had always struggled with something that others seemed to take for granted - feeling God’s love. While she was able to believe it in her head, she never could feel it in her heart. When people at church spoke of this love, Carrie had always felt like such an outsider; as if she had been born blind. With all the healing that had come to Carrie, one of the best results was a growing understanding that she could actually feel love for herself. After one breakthrough session with her journal, Carrie finally had an appreciation for who she was. “I am a beautiful daughter of God,” she wrote.

Then, with this newfound ability to love herself, she was able to feel God’s love for the first time. It was a miraculous and emotional experience, and there became a whole new

dimension to her prayers. As a result, she developed profound empathy and forgiveness for her mother, for several others, and even for the uncle who had abused her.

Carrie was free. She felt lighter and more joyful. It amazed her that for so many years she had no idea all of this was happening inside her. Years earlier, she had thought she was healed from abuse; or more accurately, she felt she never really needed to heal. But life itself taught her differently.

Needless to say, her relationships changed dramatically. Carrie stopped having her attacks. She had plenty of energy to deal with her children and an ability to forgive herself for the struggles she had experienced as a mother. She was even able to recover romantic feelings for Bob that she had thought were lost forever.

Bob started to see Carrie again as the woman he had married. With this new but familiar feeling about his relationship, Bob found that he actually enjoyed coming home from work. He discovered more energy to fulfill his role as a father, and gladly took away some of Carrie's burden with the kids.

Bob's and Carrie's relationship changed dramatically as a result of a caring professional who used gentle tools to help Carrie overcome a traumatic childhood experience. The ripple affects of this change are difficult to assess, but could easily span more than one generation. Imagine that Carrie had not received the help she needed. Think of how their children's lives would have been different; whether or not Bob's and Carrie's marriage had remained intact.

Overcoming past trauma is not only possible and desirable, it is a responsibility; a sacred duty we owe to ourselves, our families and future generations.