Keeping Our Families Safe

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As a Christian counselor, I've worked with thousands of people—men, women, and children—who have experienced sexual trauma. Because not everyone wants counseling, I also teach workshops to help people heal. My workbook, *Core Healing from Trauma,* can help people experience freedom and healing as they discover how to move from posttraumatic stress to posttraumatic growth. Corroborated by God's Word and current research in neuroscience, transformation is possible!

I'm concerned when people avoid this topic and naively hope the problem of sexual abuse will go away if ignored. But **one in three women and one in five men** experience sexual trauma by age 18. During recent months, with the world focusing on a viral pandemic known as Covid-19, the pandemic of sexual trauma continues, largely unchecked, its horrific ramifications impacting every continent throughout the world.

Internalizing undeserved shame, survivors often numb their pain with alcohol, drugs, activities, or a relentless quest for success. Even when they ignore it, the pain is still there, impacting the core of survivors' beings, including five core areas: **Competence – Safety – Identity – Purpose – Belonging**.

To allow survivors a safe space to heal, it's vital to help them learn how to manage trauma stored in their brains and bodies. It feels like an ambush when, in as little as 1/12 of a second, any of their five senses trigger trauma memories stored in the brain's amygdala. "Hijacking" logical thought, that process can instantaneously move a person from his or her prefrontal cortex (PFC) to the five Fs of Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fornicate, or Feed. The good news is that survivors can learn to move back into the brain's PFC as rapidly as they left it through practicing grounding exercises. The Bible says to: *Take every thought captive and make it obedient…* and grounding exercises help us do exactly that. Taught in depth in *Core Healing from Trauma,* grounding includes:

1. **Physical Grounding**: such as diaphragmatic breathing, or simple movements like pressing your feet into the floor, focusing on a movement like wiggling your toes. Any conscious motion can help you live in the present.
2. **Mental Grounding**: to move into your PFC, describe shapes or colors in the room or place where you are; solve a basic math problem; write down a list of things you like to do; etc.
3. **Soothing Grounding**: Instead of allowing intrusive traumatic memories to govern your life, think calmly, consciously talking to yourself with kindness and dignity, focusing on God's promises instead of your fears. For example, consider this: *The Lord is gracious, merciful, and full of loving compassion* (Psalm 111:4, Amplified).

How can you tell if your child is being or has been sexually traumatized? This is difficult, especially since over 80% of perpetrators are known to the child (not strangers, as is generally assumed). Indications that sexual trauma could have happened include the simultaneous presence of numerous behavioral and attitude changes, such as:

- Persistent insomnia, nightmares (intrusive dreams)
- Overeating or undereating, binge eating or purging
- Physical symptoms, from muscle tension to GI problems such as diarrhea, constipation, etc. (see your physician regarding physical concerns)
- Self-stimulation; other sexual behaviors; knowing sexual terminology
- Consistently being anxious; easily startled; depression
- "Numbing out"/freezing emotions
- Addictive behaviors; self-harming behaviors such as cutting, head bashing, etc.
- Anger, rage, or bitterness; being easily irritated
- Afraid of or avoiding activities they used to enjoy
- Being in a continual state of reactivity

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Perpetrators are experts at manipulating not only their victims but their families, infiltrating churches, schools, Bible studies, and teams, finding places where people will trust them to be alone with their children. Once alone, they might say, "This is our special game. Only the cool kids get to do this." They know how to make children keep their activities secret. A child's confusion becomes incredible, since some touches feel good, but inwardly they feel horribly ashamed, knowing instinctively this isn't good (even though the perpetrator tells them it is). Luke 17:2 describes God's opinion of hurting a child. Jesus said, *It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.* The person who hurts children (or anyone else, for that matter) is the one sinning, yet the victim of sexual trauma blames himself or herself.

Parents and grandparents can be proactive:

1. **Spend time with your children**, learning their habits, observing them at play. Use books, such as *My Body Is Special and Belongs to Me! by Berenzweig and Benjoseph,* to help them understand safe touch and safe people.
2. Keep **computers and other technology**, such as phones and iPads, in an open place where you can see where your child is going online (child pornographers know how to infiltrate the sites children frequent).
3. **If you see behavioral changes** in a child such as stuttering, self-stimulation, isolation, or fear, observe them even more closely than before. If a child or adolescent is self-harming, read *Inside a Cutter's Mind* by Clark and Henslin.
4. Don't ask directly if someone is abusing them (if abuse at has happened, it will be difficult for your child to talk, since perpetrators know how to offload shame onto victims). If they've been alone with someone and you feel uncomfortable, calmly invite your child to draw pictures about their time, helping them **feel safe enough to talk.**
5. **Love** your children, demonstrating healthy touch and creatively, repetitively showing them how precious they are.
6. **Teach children** about their private parts, using correct anatomical terms, and discuss with them that those parts are special, designed by God for marriage. Explain that we don't let anyone touch our private parts—anything covered by our swimsuits— except parents changing diapers or doctors helping with our health.
7. **Do not allow sleepovers.** Even if you think you know the family where your children are staying, you can't possibly know all others—cousins, friends, neighbors—who might visit during an overnight stay.

If you are involved in ministry, teaching, coaching, or working with children or adolescents in Florida, you are a **mandated reporter**. What that means is this: if you suspect any form of abuse, you are required to contact the abuse hotline at **800.96ABUSE** (800.962.2873).

If this topic raises significant concerns for you or a family member, perhaps it's time to consider meeting with a Christian counselor. Many are listed at https://sfacc.net/.

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Please join me Saturday, June 26th, from 6-9 PM, at 901 S. Flagler Drive (at Palm Beach Atlantic University), where I'll be conducting training sponsored by the "Tree of Life, Network" with my workbook, *Core Healing from Trauma*. The workshop is relevant for all forms of trauma, from covid to war to abuse and divorce. The cost for the workshop is $25 and includes dinner. You can register online at https://cutt.ly/wnYpeAk.

For additional ideas, you can work *through Core Healing from Trauma,* a biblical counseling workbook for individuals or groups, available on Amazon (https://cutt.ly/occdejH). You can also watch "Strengthening Your Core," a 12 - video series on YouTube at https://cutt.ly/Or6EiiW or subscribe to my blog at https://corehealingfromtrauma.com/.

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