

RESOURCES FOR TRAUMA

by John Drescher Lehman



MOSAIC

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Editor's Note

Mosaic Conference received requests to provide resources for pastors and youth leaders to understand and lovingly respond as congregational members shared stories of trauma and abuse from their own lives. This is the first in a series of four articles by John Drescher-Lehman, LCSW designed to provide information on abuse-related trauma and guidance for pastors and congregations who desire to foster openness and healing.

Part One:

This Can't be Happening

As the car slid sideways on the gravel road, I braced myself for the impact of the embankment. Time moved in slow motion as the car flipped upside down and traveled backward down the ditch. As glass shattered and roof metal shrilled across gravel, I had one thought, “This can’t be happening.” I crawled out of a broken window, looked at the bottom of my car facing the night sky, and ran the last mile home.

When a traumatic event happens to us or someone close to us, our first reaction is one of disbelief and shock. Often our initial response is, “This can’t be happening!”

A traumatic event is something we were not expecting, are not prepared for, and doubt our ability

to survive it, emotionally, and sometimes physically. We want to look the other way, think about something else, pretend it isn't true, and go back to our "normal life."

Peter Levine, a leader in the field of trauma healing says, "Trauma is the most avoided, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering." We all attempt to avoid, deny, and leave trauma untreated, because our brains are wired to survive it and then get as far away from the event as possible — physically, mentally, and emotionally. This is one of the reasons why traumatic experiences can be buried in a person's memory for years; we simply don't want to be reminded of it, because when it happened, we thought we might not survive. Levine says people can be traumatized by any event they perceive (consciously or unconsciously) to be life-threatening and their ability to respond to the perceived threat is in some way overwhelmed.

When trauma happens to someone we know, we often have the same response as when it happens to us. We can feel caught in the conflict between the perpetrator and the victim, forced to take sides. Many of us have felt this conflict in response to Daniel Kabakjian's recent accusation that his principal, Martin Weins, made inappropriate physical contact with him and

other male students at Dock Mennonite Academy.

For years, we have lived in a culture that wants to believe persons with power and dismiss those who are harmed. Those with power can use their influence and authority as a shield to protect themselves, while harming others. We don't want to believe that good people such as parents, teachers, pastors, therapists, and other helpers, can also cause harm.

In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Dr. Judith Lewis Herman says it is tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. "All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering." Levine continues, "In short, trauma is about loss of connection – to ourselves, to our bodies, to our families, to others, and the world around us."

May we be willing to see. May we be willing to believe those who tell us they have been harmed. May we be willing to carry our share of the burden of pain. For we know, when we are able to see the harm, all of us are born with the capacity to heal. May we offer this gift of healing to all.

Part Two:

Sexual Abuse is More than Sexual

In 2018 Larry Nassar, a 54-year-old osteopathic doctor, was sentenced to prison for sexually assaulting at least 265 girls and young women, with complaints as early as the 1990s. All but one of the reported sexual assaults were perpetrated during a “medical exam.” He held prestigious positions at Michigan State University and with the USA Gymnastic team and was a doctor for Olympic athletes. His trial was national news for weeks.

It is important to remember that sexual assault is much more than rape. “Sexual abuse does not have to involve penetration, force, pain, or even touching,” according to Stop It Now. “If an adult engages in any sexual behavior (looking, showing, touching) with a child to meet the adult’s interest or sexual needs, it is

sexual abuse. Most often sexual abuse is a gradual process and not a single event.”

Sexual abuse will happen to one in four girls and one in six boys before the age of 18. Most of these situations will not make the news. These victims will sit beside us on the bus, or in the pew at church during worship. Most often they have been abused by someone they trusted.



In 93% of child sexual abuse cases, the child knows the person that commits the abuse, and in 47% of the cases the perpetrator is a close or extended family member. Sexual abuse is more than sexual. It is the abuse of power, trust, innocence, and relationships. Sexual abuse not only can harm the child’s sexual development and future sexual relationships, it can also harm their ability to trust others, especially others who are close to them.

In his book *Abused Boys*, Dr. Mic Hunter says there are two broad categories of abuse. One is overt sexual abuse where there is no attempt to hide that it is sexual, but often an attempt to deny that what is being done is abusive.

The second category is covert abuse. This is, according to Hunter, “more insidious, and therefore harder to identify, because the sexual nature of the action is disguised. The person acts as if he or she is doing something nonsexual (like the Nassar case), when in reality he or she is actually being sexual.”

Hunter continues to explain, “The betrayal is twofold: the child is abused and then deceived about it. It is this dishonesty that can make covert abuse difficult to identify and therefore difficult to recover from. The victim is led to believe that the event was not sexual, that he has not been abused, and that he should not trust his emotions or perceptions of those around him.”

Sexual abuse is more than sexual. It is the abuse of trusted relationships and power. It happens in secrecy and silence. It is estimated that 62% of children who are sexually abused never speak up and tell their stories. Why?

Part Three:

Disclosing Abuse Takes (Y)ears

Why do an estimated sixty-two percent of children who are sexually abused never tell their story of harm and betrayal?

Shame.

Shame is a natural reaction to being violated and abused. In fact, abuse by its very nature is humiliating and dehumanizing. The victim feels invaded and defiled, while being helpless and at the mercy of another more powerful person. Shame, as an emotion, protects the victim by encouraging them to keep quiet. Often, they believe if they keep quiet the abuse will not happen again.

Fear of Consequences.

Fear of consequences. Victims have a lot to lose by speaking up, and usually their abusers know this and use this to facilitate their abuse. They may fear they won't make the team, will be given a bad grade, or will lose the gifts the abuser also gives them. If the abuser is a family member, they fear this person will be punished or taken away. These potential losses create conflict for the child, and therefore, they don't speak up.

They don't believe they will be believed.

They don't believe they will be believed. The victim has less power than the abuser, and abuse happens in secret. Judith Lewis Herman in *Father-Daughter Incest* says, "Any touch or other behavior between the child and adult that must be kept secret will be considered abuse." So, it is the child's word against the adult's word, and the one with the most authority, position, and power is almost always believed.



Denial and Minimizing

It is a common psychological defense for all of us to deny or minimize the seriousness of abuse, as a way of helping us survive and move on. “He’s just a really friendly guy.” “It was only a kiss, it’s not like I was raped.” Denial, minimizing, and not remembering are important ways victims survive and move on, until it is safe enough to disclose. Disclosing abuse often takes y(ears).



Sex is Private

Sex is typically very private and personal. In our personal relationships, in our church, school, and youth organizations, we seldom talk about sex, especially good sex. So, what child or adolescent wants to bring up the topic of sex, especially when it was harmful? It’s also important to remember that young children don’t even have a concept of sex, so how can they talk about it?

Those of us with ears don't want to hear it.

Those of us with ears don't want to hear it. We have all been trained by our culture and media to believe that sexual abuse is caused by evil perpetrators. We have a hard time believing that good, loving helpers and parents can use their goodness as a cover for the harm they cause. We want to believe that our schools and churches and children's clubs are safe places, staffed by adults who will protect our children. So, when a child or youth speaks out about abuse, we must use our ears and listen, and believe, and respond. They need us.

Yes, it often takes (y)ears for a victim to feel safe enough to disclose abuse. We can sometimes reduce the years they must hold the abuse in secret, by offering our ears as a safe harbor for their story.



Part Four:

Recovery for All

Sexual abuse not only harms the victim, it also harms those families, friends, and communities that are close to the victim. It also harms the perpetrator. As Peter Levine says in *Healing Trauma*, “trauma is about loss of connection – to ourselves, to our bodies, to our families, to others, and to the world around us.” This loss of connection clearly happens for the victim. It also happens for families and communities, as we often allow ourselves to be divided by who we choose to believe or blame. The perpetrator is also losing connections, as they seek to use their power and authority to meet their individual needs, not the needs of the relationship. Recovery is needed for all.

In 2005, after more than three decades of working with those with trauma, Levine said this: “I have come

to the conclusion that human beings are born with an innate capacity to triumph over trauma. I believe not only that trauma is curable, but that the healing process can be a catalyst for profound awakening – a portal opening to emotional and genuine spiritual transformation. I have little doubt that as individuals, families, communities, and even nations, we have the capacity to learn how to heal and prevent much damage done by trauma.”

For all to recover, we must offer the following forms of connection.

listen and believe those who trust us with their stories of abuse

First, listen and believe those who trust us with their stories of abuse. We initially connect by acknowledging the trust they have placed in us, and the reality that they have survived the abuse. When we offer our heart and open ears to their story, they begin the journey from victim to survivor. This is an essential re-connection, both to themselves and to us.

ask the survivor what they need

Second, ask the survivor what they need. Each survivor’s journey in recovery is unique, dependent on their personality, the age the abuse happened, and

the current support or lack of support available to them. What next steps they take must be their choice, not ours. A significant harm caused by abuse is that what happened wasn't the survivor's choice. An important requirement for the survivor's recovery, then, is that each step must be their choice. Choosing to tell their story to friends, to a therapist, to a pastor, or to a support group can be a very powerful step toward recovery, when it is their choice.

know the resources that are available in your community and church

Third, know the resources that are available in your community and church that support and facilitate the recovery for survivors and for those who support them. Make these resources visible and accessible, even when no one is asking for them. Remember, most victims will spend years not asking for help. Many of them will find it helpful that, when they are ready, they know where to go for recovery.

hold the perpetrator accountable and offer resources for him or her

Finally, hold the perpetrator accountable and offer resources for him or her. As victims often take years to enter recovery, those who cause harm often take years to see and admit the harm they caused. By the

abuse of their power and authority, they took away the choice of the victim. They did not maintain the boundaries that were entrusted to them with their position, and this caused harm. Therefore, these boundaries now need to be held by the community (including churches, schools, and governing boards), until the perpetrator shows clear evidence of entering and maintaining his or her recovery.

Recovery for all requires all of us to be connected “to ourselves, to our bodies, to our families, to others, and to the world around us.”





About the Author

As a therapist and spiritual director, John Drescher-Lehman works with individuals, groups, and organizations, as they work to heal from trauma and abuse. John and his wife Sandy, a pastor in Mosaic Conference, run a small retreat center in the woods of Green Lane, PA. For restoration and self care, John gardens, photographs birds, reads, and rides a tandem bicycle with Sandy. John attends Methacton Mennonite Church in Norristown, PA.