

Sexual abuse is any sexual activity (verbal, visual, emotional, physical) engaged in without consent* (agreement), which uses one person in order to meet another person's sexual or emotional needs. This activity may be accomplished through force, intimidation, coercion, deception or influence of authority.

*Note: A person does not "consent" if he or she cannot reasonably accept or refuse sexual advances. A victim's age, circumstances, understanding and dependency/relationship to the offender may limit ability to consent.

A person who has suffered abuse has experienced a profound breach of trust. Intimate parts of his or her life has been taken (not surrendered) by another through control, manipulation, or power—sometimes, by a loved one, a confidant, or a person of authority. This violation can create emotional turmoil, distort a person's understanding of love and relationships, and generate significant questions about God. The abused person may wonder if he or she is lovable at all. Thankfully, God loves people who have suffered due to the sins of others—Christ understands suffering and abuse. God offers true love (sacrificial, unconditional love), and hope for healing to those wounded deeply by sin.

"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18)

Common Characteristics

- **Abuse can be ongoing or a single event, and can happen to anyone.** It can come at the hands of a stranger, authority figure, friend, or a trusted family member.
- **Sometimes memories of abuse are detailed and intact, but other times they can be vague and distant.** It is common for victims to minimize or dismiss memories of abuse. Sufferers of abuse can even convince themselves that the abuse didn't really affect them.
- **Abuse can lead to isolation and secrecy.** Sharing about abuse can be frightening and feel impossible. Sometimes victims lie to themselves to protect the secret. Lies such as: "It was a long time ago and it wasn't that bad;" "It doesn't really affect me now." Disregarding or minimizing abuse, however, makes it hard to see connections between the abuse and your own struggles.
- **People who have suffered abuse often carry feelings of false guilt and shame.** Abusers often try to convince victims, that they were willing participants or that the abuse is their fault. No matter what your abuser said and no matter how you may have responded, ***the abuse was not your fault.***
- **Sometimes people fault God for their abuse and blame God for not preventing the harm.** After abuse, people wonder if God really exists or cares. Some doubt that God could still love them because they feel so damaged. God did not cause your abuse. Abuse is the result of your abuser's choice to exercise his or her free will. God hates abuse and grieves the pain and loss it has caused.
- **Coping with the pain of abuse can lead to many harmful lifestyle choices and sinful patterns over time.** Abuse damages a person's body, mind, and spirit. Its effects can show up in any area of life. Physical, emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual problems are often rooted in the pain of abuse.

Biblical Insights

God is real. He knows about the evil done to you and He hates it. Abuse may have left you feeling deserted by God. But God did not abandon you. He was always present and pursuing; he saw it all. He knows your suffering. Though you may not understand why God allowed your abuse, you can know that he hates and grieves over your pain. He will bring justice for what was done to you.

- *"You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?"* (Psalm 56:8)
- *"I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit; you heard my plea, 'Do not close your ear to my cry for help!' You came near when I called on you; you said, 'Do not fear!' "You have taken up my cause, O Lord; you have redeemed my life. You have seen the wrong done to me, O Lord; judge my cause."* (Lamentations 3:55-59)

God can heal your shame and restore your life and true identity. It is easy to accept the lies of “dirty,” “broken,” “worthless,” and “unlovable” when you’ve been abused. But you matter to God. Jesus came to rescue you from sin’s lies and destruction. Through Christ’s blood, God offers you a new identity as His Child—clean, righteous, valuable, pure, and loved. Regardless of what you have suffered and any sinful choices you have made, God has a wonderful plan for your life that is not defined by sin.

- *“If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)*
- *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” (Ephesians 1:3-4)*
- *“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)*

Isolation and secrecy are traps that lock us into a cycle of unhealthy beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors.

But, honesty about harms to us and harms by us moves us out of hiding into the “light” where we can experience healing and true fellowship with God and others—we can be fully known and loved.

- *“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)*
- *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:17)*

You are not responsible for abuse against you. You are responsible for the unhealthy ways that you coped with the pain of abuse. Distinguishing between your abuser’s sin against you and your own sinful responses to the abuse will clarify your steps of healing. Thankfully, Christ left us an example to follow.

- *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” (1 Peter 2:21-23)*

Forgiveness frees you to work through your own pain and sin honestly. Forgiveness is not forgetting, excusing, denying, or freeing abuser(s) from consequences of sin. Forgiveness is entrusting justice for the abuse to Christ. It may feel impossible, but forgiveness ultimately frees you to experience God’s peace.

- *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24)*

Next Steps

- The task before you may be hard to face. But God will be with you on this journey of healing, guiding you along the way. With each step, you will come to realize that God is trustworthy, that He created you for a purpose, and that he can make all things new. God loves you. There is hope and healing in Christ. If you have not yet experienced God’s salvation, learn more at regenrecovery.org/freedom.
- If you have not yet done so, take the courageous step to admit to yourself that you were abused, and that the abuse was not your fault.
- Start building a support system. Take a risk to trust others with the truth of your past with safe people who will support, love, and encourage you. You can be fully known and fully loved.
- Pray and journal through your thoughts. Begin to renew your mind with the truth about God and about you through His word (Romans 12:1-2). Be honest with God about your doubts, fears, and anger; He understands them. Ask God to show you how past abuse is affecting life today.

Additional Resources

- Go to www.regenerationrecovery.org for stories of hope: Testimonies by Wes and Garret, Katie’s Video, Liana’s Step 5 Story
- Blog Post: Shelley’s story: <http://www.watermark.org/blog/protected>
- Books: *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault* - Justin and Lindsey Holcomb, *Healing the Wounded Heart: The Heartache of Sexual Abuse and the Hope of Transformation* - Dan Allender, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* - Edward Welch
- Consider attending Watermark’s MENd (men) or Shelter From The Storm (women) ministries.

**This Information Sheet is also available online at <http://www.regenerationrecovery.org/struggles/>*