

The Kingdom Conference June 2001, Milwaukee

The driving force and inspiration for the activities provided for these youth and children were intimately intertwined with Deana's own personal healing work.

The counseling work, prayer and art therapy that was part of her healing process enabled her to establish lines of communication with youth who were dealing with similar challenges and injustices.

An invitation came: "The National Spiritual Assembly encourages you to submit a proposal for a presentation on 'Sexual Abuse' . . . so that we might include the approach you have developed to equip the American Bahá'ís to meet the ever-growing challenges we face. . . . to teach the friends about the tested tools and methods you have developed."

On Sexual Abuse: Break the Cycle from the Kingdom Conference Presentation

Most often there is a code of silence surrounding this issue. Because incest and sexual abuse are such horrific and devastating acts, it is extremely hard to speak out, especially when the reality is heard or even seen. The reaction is: denial, minimizing and misdirected anger. Most likely no action is taken to protect and find justice for the victims of these unspeakable acts, . . . so the abuse continues.



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By giving this presentation, our hope is to inspire strength and courage to break the silence and break the cycle of incest and sexual abuse.

Prevention

Hiding the abuse can allow it to grow and continue from one generation to the next. Silence allows the abuse to be an ongoing generational epidemic within the family and the whole of society.

Where does sexual abuse happen?

In homes, in churches and religious communities, playgrounds, doctor's offices, schools, police stations, prisons, workplace—everywhere and anywhere.



What can be a part of sexual abuse?

Inappropriate touching, abusive power, verbal abuse, media, witnessing sexual acts, covert grooming, gaining trust then betraying trust, exposure to pornography, and seeing children as sexual objects.

Who can be abused?

The very old, the very young, male, female, Black, White, Persian, rich, poor, anybody.

breaking the silence

“O Children of Fancy!

know, verily, that while the radiant dawn breaketh above the horizon of eternal holiness, the satanic secrets and deeds done in the gloom of night shall be laid bare and manifest before the peoples of the world.’ ”

—Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Persian 67

“While the foregoing refers specifically to abuse of children, Assemblies should be aware that in addition to children and women, the elderly, men and particularly young men, can also be victims of abuse. Any such case that comes to an Assembly’s attention should be treated according to the principles in this policy.”

— *Canadian Bahá'í News*, Kalimat, BE 150, p. 44

“Considering that the perpetration of an immoral sexual act by one adult against another is punishable by law, the perpetration of such an act against a helpless child seems indeed heinous.”

— *from a letter written on Behalf of the Universal house of Justice to an individual believer*, 16 August 1993.

Who can be an abuser?

Men, women, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, teachers, priests, LSA members, babysitters, police officers, celebrities, Bahá'ís, anybody.

Most often a perpetrator of sexual abuse is a family member, a close friend, or someone we trust. Although we want to believe that we can spot evil when we are confronted with it, the truth is that nothing about a perpetrator would alert us. Offenders are good at hiding what they do. They are master manipulators and accomplished liars. Those few who aren't get caught. The others molest dozens or even hundreds of children over many decades.

Lack of remorse and of empathy for the victim is typical of offenders. For offenders to be rehabilitated, they must take responsibility for what they did and develop empathy for their victims.

Consequently his susceptibility to evil is proven to him when he falls into the tests, and the tests are continued until the soul realizes its own unfitness, then remorse and regret tend to root out the weakness. The same test comes in greater degree, until it is shown that a former weakness has become a strength, and the power to overcome evil has been established.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West*, Book 4, Vol. 6, p. 108.

I want you to imagine your son, father, husband, or loved one just sexually abused someone — your first reaction would be to protect them. Therefore you can't believe the victim, instead you deny, minimize, blame, and misdirect anger. This is a big part of the problem.

Instead: We have to see the abuse as horrific and see the abuser, not as a monster, but as someone we love, who needs help. In order for him/her to heal the abuser must feel remorse and regret, see how horrific the sexual abuse is and be punished for their actions. There has to be help for the abuser and part of the help is justice. The perpetrator must feel remorse and regret. The abuse cannot be covered up and hidden. Without help for both the perpetrator and the survivor, there is denial and minimizing of the abuse. This is the trick, to love the perpetrator and stand in truth, to know how bad the crime is and not minimize or deny.

Who is affected?

The abuser, the abused, the family unit, the community, society as a whole, everyone is affected.

listen, listen, listen

What are some of the possible effects and/or signs of sexual abuse?

Fear, helplessness, rage, shame, guilt, drug and alcohol addiction, eating disorders, sexual addiction, same-sex desire, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, phobias, insomnia, overachieving, panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive disorder, flashbacks, body memories, multiple personality disorder, prostitution, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, promiscuity, lack of intimacy, emotional numbing, depression, pregnancy, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, becoming a perpetrator, more abuse . . .

Memory

A memory of an experience has four parts: Emotions, Body memories or Sensations, Behavior, and Knowledge. To cope with abuse, many children fragment the memory of trauma, storing each part separately.

A flashback is a reintroduction of a traumatic life experience from the past into the present and it can come in many different

forms: body sensations, hearing, smelling, tasting, and visualizing the original experience as if it was happening right now.

As memories emerge, survivors may go through four stages:

1. Sadness
2. Anger and rage
3. Understanding and experiencing emotions surrounding abuse
4. Integration of memories into self which leads to empowerment

Ways of healing:

Group, family and individual therapy, having a support system, reading the Bahá'í Writings, making time to grieve, journaling, reading "self-help" books, joining "self-help" groups, art, music & drama therapy, rolfing (a very intensive body massage), hypnotherapy, intensive inner-child work, telling your story, educating yourself . . .

"Such an attitude (forgiveness and insight into their actions) does not preclude your being prudent in deciding upon the appropriate amount of contact with your parents. In reaching your decision you should be guided by such factors as

their degree of remorse over what they inflicted on you in the past, the extent of their present involvement in practices which are contrary to Bahá'í Teachings, and the level of vulnerability you perceive within yourself to being influenced adversely by them. In the process of reaching a decision, you may find it useful to seek the advice of experts such as your therapist."

— From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of justice to an individual believer, 9 September 1992

"Experience seems to suggest that the healing process can often be a lengthy and stressful one requiring the close guidance and help of trained professionals".

— From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 23 October 1994

"If ye meet the abased or the down-trodden, turn not away disdainfully from them, for the King of Glory ever watcheth over them and surroundeth them with such tenderness as none can fathom except them that have suffered their wishes and desires to be merged in the Will of your Lord, the Gracious, the All-Wise. O ye rich ones of the earth! Flee not from the face of the

poor that lieth in the dust, nay rather befriend him and suffer him to recount the tale of the woes with which God's inscrutable Decree hath caused him to be afflicted. By the righteousness of god! Whilst ye consort with him, the Concourse on high will be looking upon you, will be interceding for you, will be extolling your names and glorifying your action.

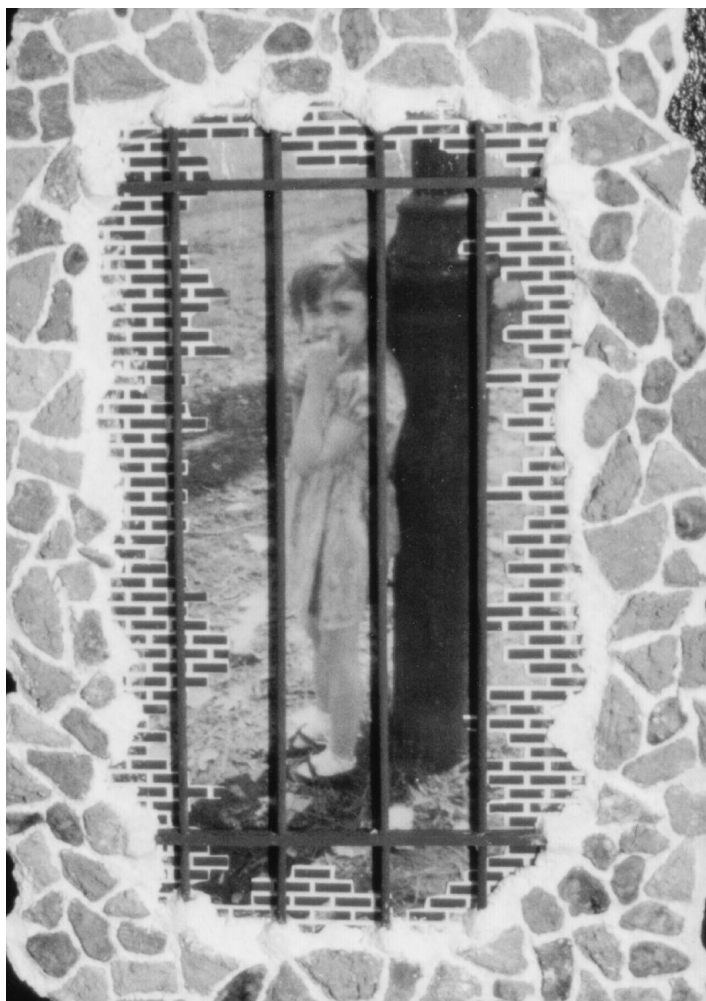
Blessed are the learned that pride not themselves on their attainments; and well is it with the righteous that mock not the sinful, but rather conceal their misdeeds, so that their own shortcomings may remain veiled to men's eyes."

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 314–315

To assist someone who is healing: Listen, Love

Listen: "suffer him to recount the tale of the woes." We assist one who has lost a beloved friend or family member to death by helping them grieve. The loss of one's body, ones freedom, one's trust is like this in that a grieving process is needed. Talking through the

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I AM KNOCKING FROM THE INSIDE
LISTEN, CAN YOU HEAR
I HAVE BEEN HERE FOR A LONG TIME
WAITING FOR YOU TO CARE
LISTEN, BE STILL
I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY
LOVE ME, DON'T HATE ME
BE PROUD, NOT ASHAMED
WHEN I SPEAK
LISTEN
DON'T COVER ME UP
LISTEN
DON'T BURY ME ALIVE
LISTEN
DON'T RUN AND HIDE
YOU ARE RUNNING, SO FAST
YOU DON'T KNOW I'M ALIVE
STOP, LISTEN
THE DAY HAS COME, FOR YOU TO HEAR
THE CRIME IS TRUE, THAT YOU FEAR
IT IS TIME, FOR YOU TO CARE
STAND IN TRUTH, IF YOU DARE
I HAVE COME FORTH, FOR YOU TO HEAR
LISTEN, TO THE WHISPERS
I AM YOUR GUIDE
I AM YOUR SOUL, THAT LIVES INSIDE
— DEANA

experiences allows one to grieve and process what has happened. When someone is in need of this type of support, a way needs to be found to safely listen and love so the victim may heal.

Ways of Grounding (bringing a survivor or self out of flashbacks):

Stomp feet, wear rubber band around wrist to snap, deep breathing, eat a green "tic tac," talk through it, drink water.

Say or have someone say to you, "It is all a memory. You are here in the present. Everything you are seeing,

hearing, and feeling is from the past. You are safe. This really isn't happening right now. It's a memory. Keep listening to the child part/inside part. You are okay. You're just receiving information."

Secondary woundedness can be caused by:

Denial, blaming, no action being taken, minimizing, discounting, misdirected anger . . . and telling someone "aren't you over that yet?"

Where does secondary woundedness happen? Secondary woundedness happens in the family, community, court system,

Religious communities such as LSAs and churches, etc. Secondary woundedness can be just as harmful as the original trauma.

Ideas on how communities can deal with the issue of Sexual Abuse:

Do not blame, be gentle, listen, be understanding, research the Writings, respect and be patient of the survivor's emotional state, educate your community, bring awareness, maintain

relationships, bring issues to the LSA, let survivors know that their experience and knowledge is valued and important for the growth of the community and the institutions.

"The Bahá'í institutions must be uncompromising and vigilant in their commitment to the protection of the children entrusted to their care, and must not allow either threats or appeals to expediency to divert them from their duty."

— *Universal House of justice to an individual believer, 23 October 1994*