

Chapter 10

Food For Thought On Awareness, Prevention, and Intervention

The perpetrator had taken so much from me, including my power, and I had allowed him to do so. Being so young, I didn't understand that I had choices. Unfortunately, this is the case with the majority of children. In allowing "children to be children," we want them to keep that innocence for as long as possible. Despite what I've personally been through, I continue to struggle with trying to strike a balance between informing my own son and allowing him to wallow in that childhood innocence for as long as possible.

I'm not saying we should allow our children to walk through life without the tools necessary for awareness and self-care. I believe prevention is the ultimate goal. However, I am also looking at life from a realistic perspective. Societal influences do not allow us to be with our children 24/7/365. The reality is that things happen, both beautiful and horrendous, and we have to be prepared for either. In each lifetime, there will be moments that take our breath away; some by the beauty that surrounds us on a daily basis, and others

by the split-second, unfortunate happenings that have the potential to forever alter our lives.

The question remains as to how to provide such education without placing unnecessary fear into them. It's a very difficult issue to discuss with children. I am not an expert in this area and cannot and will not hand out specifics on "what to do and what not to do". Though I don't have the "cure-all" answers for you, I only offer the following as advice in hopes it will help to empower you.

Every child is developmentally, genetically, emotionally, physically, etc. unique. What one can process at a certain age, another may only begin to grasp at another age. So I encourage parents/caregivers to keep the lines of communication open by being aware and asking non-threatening, yet provoking questions and then actively listening. Try to avoid any questions easily answered with a "yes" or "no" response. Engage your child in conversation about a topic they may be desperately trying to avoid. Watch for body language. Look beyond certain behaviors to the root of the issue. Don't just accept things as they are if they just don't "feel" right to you. Educate yourself by seeking expert advice, if necessary, through a counselor or child advocate. Knowledge is never wasted and it is my belief that when a child is in crisis, time is of the essence.

Most important of all (and I cannot emphasize this strongly enough) is the following statement that many of you may, upon first reading, find offensive and maybe even appalling. However, upon reflection, you may come to understand or view it differently. Some will have experienced firsthand what I write while others, still, will not be able to come to accept it at all.

So here it is: It is my opinion based on my own experiences that although such an experience is extremely detrimental, life-altering, fear instilling, power stripping, physically, emotionally, and spiritually damaging (and the list goes on), it is even more so if the injustice is not quickly ascertained and rectified. It (again, in my opinion) is imperative that the abused be immediately supported, protected, removed from further harm, counseled, and whatever else is deemed necessary and of benefit.

A disclosure must always be taken seriously and the seriousness of it should never be diminished. A support system must be built for these individuals with professional assistance as a part of that system.

It is also my belief that with early intervention, the harmful lasting effects can be kept to a minimum. One of the most important things you can do for yourself or someone you know who is being or has been sexually abused (or abused in any way for that matter), is to get the appropriate, necessary help immediately. It's bad enough that the abuse transpired, but to have to deal with the repercussions alone only continues to compound the problem. That is when survival strategies and cognitive coping patterns form which are difficult to sever when no longer needed or appropriate.

For example, as an adult having experienced abuse in my childhood, there are times I am confused by my own behaviors and actions. Often I don't immediately recognize the connection to the abuse as a child. Though I don't want to play the victim nor go to a place of self-pity, it is important for me to look at the role my past has played and continues to play in my life.

For years, even before the repressed memories began to surface, I was obsessed with protecting my child. Everything I did for him or that related to his welfare was such a serious matter in my eyes. Once the reality of my childhood hit, my seriousness as a parent quadrupled as did my ability to understand my behavior. It was also at a time when he was more involved in outside activities. He now had birthday parties he was invited to that Mom was expected to drop him off at and return several hours later to pick him up. His invitations to sleepovers at friends' houses (a natural stage in growing up) would send me over the edge. On the one hand, I wanted him to be normal and have fun as a child; but on the other hand, I'd allow these events to work me into a complete physical and emotional wreck.

Over the years, I've realized just how difficult "anniversaries" can be. When I speak of anniversaries, I mean those times that trigger crucial aspects of certain childhood ages of my own. For example, the

repressed memories began surfacing at the time my son turned four and five years old; the age I was when the abuse began.

Years later, I found my anxiety level heightened the summer before my son entered eighth grade. My son's typical thirteen-year-old behaviors began causing immense concern on my part. I found myself having repeated conversations with him asking if everything was all right or if he felt he needed to talk to me about anything. I even went as far as eluding to the fact that if there was something deeper causing his outward behavior it was important he tell me because I could only help him if he let me know what was truly going on.

Though I knew I was making a bigger deal out of something that was probably truly nothing unordinary in a thirteen-year-old's life, I was unable to just let it be. In doing my own emotional work, I was able to understand my urgency with my son. It was the summer before my own eighth grade year that I had begun planning my suicide. The "anniversary" had triggered that repressed memory and until it surfaced, I was on high alert. Understanding this allowed me to stop projecting my own "stuff" onto my son.

Another example of my past having a direct impact on my current behavior is the dread I felt about being the guest of honor at a party celebrating my 40th birthday. I wanted nothing more than to just let the occasion slip by with only little recognition. The people closest to me were the most perplexed by this. I was also unsure as to why this was so. I had no problem, emotionally or physically, with turning 40. Yet, upon closer inspection, I realized that I didn't have a large number of close friends. I had many acquaintances, but because of my isolation or inability (or my choice not to) to open up to very few people over the course of those 40 years, I had led a sort of isolated life even with so many people around me. Most of my relationships were very superficial, not because I didn't care deeply about them, but more because I would only allow them to develop to a certain level. I couldn't allow myself to have close friends. With the secret I'd had to keep for so many years, it just took too much energy and was far too dangerous.

As a child and young teenager, I was keeping the secret to literally save the lives of my family members. I couldn't take the chance that someone might slip and it would get back to them, or worse, back to

the perpetrator. There were many definites about my family, the most important being the love, care, and respect we felt and showed for one another. As the old saying goes, "Blood is thicker than water." Our blood was definitely thick! All my life, I'd been my family's self-imposed "protector". When the abuse was taking place, I became their physical protector since their lives were being threatened (as explained earlier). When the repressed memories began to surface, the perpetrator had passed away years before so their physical vulnerability was no longer an issue. However, my concern for their emotional well-being now took center stage. I had made it my continued mission to protect them on all levels in any way necessary. This is just another example of outdated survival strategies and cognitive coping patterns still being employed.

Understanding the tie between my current behavior and my past allows for a sense of self-compassion and an awareness that can lead to growth. It also allows for an opportunity to sever those survival techniques and defense systems no longer necessary, yet habitual, since formed so many years before.

Though I still struggle with related issues at times, I've also come to rely on the very important concept I learned through my own personal journey. As touched upon earlier, it is my belief that the biggest travesty was not that the abuse took place (though it was completely devastating) but that it continued to go on unrecognized and therefore, I had no support to help me through the crises. I needed to grow up very quickly and learn to self-soothe as well as develop survival techniques and strategies all on my own.

I find it very important here to be sure all of you are aware that I am in no way placing blame on any people in my life at that time, be it family members, teachers, friends, neighbors, etc. If you recall, keeping the secret was a choice I made based on the threat to my father's life. I became a very tough nut to crack and displaced and projected my feelings and actions in all directions but the one that led to the truth. Through repression, I even kept the truth from my conscious self for decades. However, with awareness, I could now begin to recognize and change these dysfunctional unnecessary thought and behavioral patterns.