

As a volunteer mentor, you may work with mentees who have suffered past sexual abuse. Despite the tough facades they may put up, a large number of prisoners and ex-prisoners have been sexually violated. Even if victims pretend it never happened, the effects remain — like an infection beneath the skin, driving them toward destructive behaviors.

Surviving a Secret Shame

Confessing sexual abuse can be extremely difficult. Often, the abuser has threatened a victim with dire consequences if he or she ever tells anyone. If the abuser was a friend or relative, other family members may have dismissed the accusation as a lie or even blamed the victim for “seducing” the abuser.

Some victims may even be confused about whether the inappropriate sexual contact was actually abuse. According to Dr. Julia Whealin and Dr. Erin Barnett, “Some victims might enjoy the attention, closeness, and physical contact, especially if these needs are not met by a primary caregiver.”

All these factors can create doubt and self-condemnation. That’s why it’s important for you to listen to your mentee’s admission of past sexual abuse without judgment or accusation.

If possible, it is also constructive for your mentee to share his or her experiences and feelings with a professional counselor, pastor, or support group.

Another good strategy is to have your mentee start writing down these memories and capturing the emotions on paper. Encourage the abused to share their pain with God. True healing will begin in His presence, though the process will take time.

Dealing With the Hurt

As your mentee recalls the pain of past sexual abuse, he or she might have to deal with feelings of confusion, hurt, blame, and shame. Sexual abuse is never the victim's fault. Regardless of whether the abuse caused pain or felt good to the person, the abuser crossed a line he or she never should have crossed.

“[The victim] did not cause the abuse or allow it to happen in any way,” writes Dr. Daniel J. Sonkin, a licensed marriage and family therapist. “It is up to adults to protect children; it is not the child's role to protect himself from adults.”

Victims often feel like they are worthless. You can encourage your mentee with these truths: God made you in His image (Genesis 1:27); God loves you so much that He sent His only Son to die for you (John 3:16); and God has a plan to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

As the victim acknowledges the truth about the past, cries out to God, and holds onto His Word, the pain and anger will lessen. But we cannot rush the process of healing.

Life After Abuse

Barbara Joy Hansen, an author, speaker, and minister to prisoners, is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. In speaking about her path to healing, she explains, “The most important part of my healing journey was forgiving the pastor who violated my trust and confronting him with the truth about his actions. As soon as I chose to forgive him, I felt the weight of the shame I had carried so long lifted from my soul.”

Your mentee may not be able to confront the abuser face to face. Mentees can still ask God for help as they work through their hatred and bitterness. Forgiving the abuser doesn't mean the behavior was acceptable, but it does help victims become free from the past.

Finally, as mentees talk about their abuse, they may realize some of their own behaviors — like addiction, violence, or refusing to trust other people — are things they did to protect themselves. It's important for victims of sexual abuse to identify these negative behaviors, decide to put them aside, and ask God to help them change on the inside as well as the outside.