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Living in the Shadow of Shame: Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse

By Jim Struve

I recently returned from a mountain retreat center in the Sequoia forest of California. That was where I met Daniel. He was just one of the 28 men who had gathered for 3 days to work on personal healing from childhood sexual abuse.

Daniel's Story

Daniel's childhood was littered with abuse, shame, confusion, and isolation. Beginning when he was 7 years old, a neighbor boy who was 5 years older enticed him into sexual play. Initially, the genital stimulation was exciting and seemed like a fun game. For several years, Daniel complied with the other boy's instructions to guard their secret game.

When he was 12, Daniel accidentally disclosed his secret relationship to his best friend at church. Much to his surprise, this friend immediately told other peers that Daniel and the neighbor boy were gay lovers. This rumor spread like wildfire, but only within the tight network of peers.

The older boy reacted violently to this violation, aggressively raping Daniel several times as punishment, then, simply ending all contact between them. Meanwhile, Daniel was cast as the "queer boy" amongst his peers. He spent the rest of his childhood blaming himself for his rape. His life became increasingly distressing, overwhelmed by shame. He isolated himself from social contacts and he struggled with persistent sexual identity confusion. Mountain biking provided a solitary escape and he discovered that risky trail rides exposed him to repetitive physical injuries, which actually became an outlet to calm his emotional pain.

As an adult, his life was characterized by relationship disasters and failed attempts to find stable employment. He expanded his repertoire of risky endeavors to regulate his deepening adversity. Eventually a family member, concerned with Daniel's chaotic lifestyle, persuaded him to talk with a therapist. The true impact of his childhood sexual abuse quickly emerged. After a lengthy period of working safely with his therapist, he took the big risk of attending this weekend retreat in California, where he would – for the first time – meet other male survivors of sexual abuse.

Not Just A Female Issue

Many people are surprised to learn that men are also affected by sexual abuse. But Daniel's story is not unusual. Most male survivors keep their sexual abuse history a closely guarded secret, even from their closest friends, their life partner, and their family of origin – sometimes even from themselves. The prevailing perception, even in the information age, is that sexual abuse only rarely touches the lives of males. Media reports about boy victims are infrequent and we only rarely see depictions of male victimization in movies or on television. Although the general

public has been saturated with information about the sexual abuse of boys by Catholic Priests, most people, including male survivors themselves, believe that childhood sexual abuse is primarily a trauma that affects females.

To the contrary, current statistics reveal that 1 of every 6 boys has been sexually victimized before the age of 18. According to census bureau data, there are currently 300 million Americans, approximately half being male. That translates to an estimated 26 million boys and men who are personally impacted by the trauma of sexual abuse. For Utah's 1.25 million residents, that computes to an estimated 208,000 male survivors in our midst!

Sexual abuse is best understood as a continuum of experiences. At one end of the continuum is "abuse of sexuality," the kind of harsh bullying that may be experienced by boys who do not conform to traditional masculinity. Another point along the continuum exposes incidents that involve physical manipulation and/or sexual invasion, perpetrated without consent and perhaps under threat or intimidation, or in circumstances in which there is 4 years or more age difference. At the other end of the continuum is institutionally sanctioned sexual contact, such as perpetration by a religious figure, a coach, scout leader, or some other organizational representative. As with Daniel's story, male victims commonly experience multi-layered abuse.

Sexual abuse of children has predictable long-term effects that are similar for both male and female victims. However, gender socialization in our culture is quite different for boys than it is for girls, so our responses to sexual trauma are notably different when the victim is a boy rather than a girl.

For many people – including male victims themselves – "male + victimization" is an oxymoron. Daniel grew up believing that he was complicit in his abuse and that he had actually precipitated his own rapes. We tend to socialize our boys to be tough from an early age. Sexual prowess is a highly valued trait of masculinity. We assume that boys have the capacity to protect themselves from harm, no matter what their age; we assume that boyhood experiences of sex are testosterone-driven or merely experimental adventures. We commonly overlook incidents of male sexual contact with the excuse that "boys will be boys!"

Misconceptions About Male Sexual Abuse

Male sexual victimization is afflicted by several powerful myths. The prevalence of these myths – both spoken and commonly assumed – is an impediment that discourages males from telling others about their sexual abuse. Following disclosure, the path to healing is littered with real or perceived barriers and with harmful obstacles that emerge from these myths. Here are just 3 of the many myths that reinforce silence for male survivors.

Myth #1: Males Who Are Sexually Abused Will Become Sexual Offenders – the "Vampire Syndrome." People frequently respond with suspicion – rather than compassion – to a boy or adult man's disclosure of childhood sexual abuse. Others may become more guarded about the safety of their children when they come face to face with a known male survivor, assuming that male victims will "act out" their sexual trauma on the next generation of young children.

While existing data confirms that most convicted sexual offenders have a history of prior sexual victimization, it is grossly unfair and an inaccurate leap to conclude that most males who are sexually abused will become sexual perpetrators. To the contrary, many male survivors are hyper-protective of young children and are out-spoken advocates for child protection issues.

Myth #2: Sexual Abuse Against Males Is Perpetrated By Homosexuals. This myth is reinforced by the fears and insecurities of heterosexism. Direct or veiled references to “gay” as synonymous with “pedophilia” is a standard tactic used by religious and political conservatives who seek to reinforce homophobia. Overall, most people misunderstand who molests children and why. The linkage of homosexuality to male sexual victimization however creates the circumstances in which male survivors fear that others will reflexively assume they are gay if and when they reveal their trauma experience.

Because most sexual offenders are male, it is true that there is a higher incidence of same gender abuse for male victims. However, research does not support implications that gay men are more likely to engage in sexual offending behaviors. Existing data reveal that most convicted offenders self-identify as heterosexual. Because same gender abuse does include behaviors and activities that are correctly defined as homosexual, comparing same-gender abuse to adult gay male relationships is similar to lumping all heterosexuals with heterosexual pedophilia.

This myth not only harmfully reinforces stigma and prejudice toward gay and bisexual men but it also allows the true issues of pedophiles, child molesters, and their victims to fall under the radar and thus perpetuate abuse.

Myth #3: Males Who Are Sexually Abused Will Become Homosexual. Unlike female victims, there is a distorted fear that male victims are at higher risk for “converting” to homosexuality. This myth is reinforced by the reality that genital arousal can occur even in circumstances of trauma, no matter what the sexual orientation of the victim. With no other way to interpret why he ejaculated during sexual play – and even during his rapes - Daniel could only conclude that he must be gay. Heterosexual male survivors worry that genital arousal during incidents of victimization is an omen of latent homosexuality; gay male survivors often have difficulty labeling their sexual encounters as abusive if they experienced sexual arousal and pleasure during their victimization.

There is no research to indicate that male survivors are more at risk for becoming homosexual. However, sexual identity confusion is a common and predictable repercussion for male survivors. Our first sexual experiences leave a lasting impression on our psyche. Gay and bisexual men who were sexually victimized as children frequently question whether their sexual identity is the result of their abuse - or they may blame themselves for inviting their abuse. Male survivors who are heterosexual may spend a lifetime feeling insecure about their sexual identity.

Healing & Recovery For Male Survivors

The movement to recognize male sexual victimization and provide treatment services for male survivors has moved forward by leaps and bounds in the past 10 – 15 years. As research and clinical writings have begun to populate the professional literature, qualified clinicians are emerging with expanded awareness and training to provide treatment services and organizations are springing up to provide resources for male survivors.

Like Daniel, many male survivors simply accept the familiarity of silence and remain paralyzed under a shroud of secrecy and shame. Too often men operate from the assumptions that “real men” can solve their own problems and that seeking help is a sign of weakness. Attempts to seek help from others may have previously been met with misunderstanding and invalidation. Consequently, male survivors are predictably reluctant to reach out for mental health services. The devastating and punitive response that Daniel experienced after his disclosures is not uncommon.

Some men display disguised symptoms of unresolved trauma that become more obvious to the observer than to the survivor himself. As with Daniel, it is not unusual for men to be “bumped” into therapy by the urgings of a loved one – a partner, parent, close friend, or workplace associate. Depression, anxiety, aggression, and addictions that are caused by the sexual abuse may be the initial reasons some men seek help.

Male survivors generally must address the influences of gender socialization as an integral part of their healing journey. It is in this arena that therapeutic recovery is somewhat different for male survivors than for females. 3 of many important issues that male survivors must grapple with and resolve include:

Exaggerated Efforts to Reassert Being Masculine: Male survivors seem to gravitate to either end of a continuum of perceived masculine identity. Some men focus on unachievable standards that could reassure themselves of their masculinity and worth, often becoming overwhelmed and giving up in discouragement. Other men invest huge amounts of time and energy in developing hyper-masculine attitudes and behaviors that disguise underlying feelings of insecurity. Anger or aggression may be the only appropriate feeling for boys or men to express rather than feelings of vulnerability, sadness, and hurt.

Vulnerability to Compulsive Behaviors: Because men are socialized to believe that it is more acceptable to act on their emotions rather than feel them, male survivors are more vulnerable to externalize their feelings. This makes male survivors prone to seek coping tools – such as alcohol, drugs, pornography, etc. - that may develop into compulsive behaviors. Unfortunately, there is also a vast arena of socially acceptable masculine behaviors – hyper-sexuality, strenuous exercise, finances, submersion into work or career, etc. – that can function as disguised compulsive behaviors and that sometimes even reap praise. Nobody suspected that Daniel’s repetitive injuries from his mountain biking escapades were really self-harm behaviors in disguise.

Fear of Intimacy: Intimacy is universally difficult for male survivors. Insecurities about gender and sexual identity create instability in forming relationships. Confusion about what it means to be a male with a history of sexual victimization encourages avoidance of vulnerability in relationships. Closeness with other males is especially frightening for most survivors, especially if they experienced same gender victimization. After being punished at age 10 for disclosing his sexual activities, Daniel was hyper vigilant that nobody should ever hurt him again.

Weekends of Recovery For Male Survivors

Resources are increasingly available for male survivors. For example, four to five times each year, a committed group of therapist facilitators, myself included, assemble groups of men to assist them on their individual journeys of recovering from childhood sexual abuse. Men, like Daniel, who attend the Weekends of Recovery commonly report that this retreat environment is their first opportunity to meet other male survivors in person.

Since 2001, over 300 adult male survivors have attended these Weekend of Recovery retreats. 300 men may seem like a small ripple in the bigger pool of 50 million male survivors, but changing lives – one Daniel at a time – does make a difference.

In September, 36 previous participants will gather at Alta. Daniel has already registered. I am excited to join him again on another leg of his healing journey.

Jim Struve, LCSW (www.jimstruve.com) is a private practice psychotherapist in Salt Lake City. He specializes in working with male survivors of sexual abuse. He is a founding member of Male Survivor and a facilitator for that organization's Weekend of Recovery retreats.
www.malesurvivor.org

Plan B Theater Company will perform the play "The Tricky Part" about one man's experience in dealing with the impact of childhood sexual abuse. The play runs from May 30th thru June 15th.

Plan-B, Salt Lake Film Society, and The Village present a screening of the movie "The Boys of St. Vincent" at 7:00 p.m. on Monday, June 2nd at the Tower Theatre. The subject matter of this movie is male sexual abuse. This movie will be free and open to the public.