

The Aftermath of Abuse

Recovering from sexual assault is possible.

[Joy Beth Smith](#)

Every [minute and a half](#) another American is sexually assaulted.

This statistic is staggering, and others are just as discouraging: 5 to 10 percent of men and 20 percent of women [report](#) being sexually abused as children, and that's in addition to the [18 percent](#) of women who are raped during their lifetime. Sexual assault is a real, prevalent threat to both men and women, one that has consequences that extend far past the end of the assault.

[Shannon Ethridge](#), author of [The Passion Principles](#) and a sexual assault survivor, describes her own personal experience with sexual abuse:

I grew up hungry for attention, primarily because my father and brother seemed so emotionally unavailable after the sudden death of my 8-year-old sister when I was only 4 years old. As puberty approached, three uncles taught me I could get attention, if I'd play their little games—games like, “How far have you gone with a boy? How far would you let me go? Where will you let me touch you?” and of course, “No one would understand our special ‘love’ for each other, so let's not tell anyone!” After several years of such grooming and inappropriate encounters, I became very promiscuous between the ages of 15 to 20.

Shannon's story echoes those of countless men and women: seemingly harmless touches that turn into inappropriate comments and eventually lead to midnight trips into a bedroom. This [grooming behavior](#) that Shannon describes isn't new, but the discussion surrounding it has certainly gained [attention](#) in [recent years](#).

Recovering from a sexual assault or from ongoing sexual abuse can seem unimaginable. Every fear and insecurity becomes magnified under the lens of such trauma. Recovery is possible, but it's often a long road to get there.

Living with Wounds

Unfortunately, Shannon's natural response to her abuse was to turn to a life of promiscuity. Counselor [Valerie Kuykendall-Rogers](#) defines this kind of [reaction](#) as “wounded attachment,” explaining, “It's the unconscious way of being attracted or attached to someone or something that reminds the survivor of or reinforces the wound, or in this case the sexual assault.” After surviving abuse, victims will pursue relationships that reinforce the trauma or confirm lies about themselves.

According to clinical psychologist [Dr. Juli Slattery](#), there are often psychological ramifications when women develop a wounded attachment: “A woman who was abused in childhood will usually grow up believing statements like, *I'm damaged goods. No one would ever want me. To please a man, I have to give him sex all the time. I'm helpless to stand up to anyone—I'm a victim.*” While these statements are hardly (if ever) said out loud, they become self-fulfilling prophecies. A woman will often choose a man who reinforces these beliefs.

As a 16-year-old, [Alisa Kaplan](#) was sexually assaulted by three men she knew and trusted, and the whole event was caught on videotape. After the attack, she fell into a vicious cycle of making choices based on her own warped perception of herself. “The assault took a terrible toll on my life, and I made the mistake of letting the shame, guilt, pain, worthlessness, and hopelessness I felt after the assault make my decisions for me and define who I was for many years,” she explains. “Allowing those feelings to run my life caused me to spiral into drug addiction, depression, suicidal thoughts, and homelessness. Eventually I lost my family, which was all I had left.”

Unfortunately, as both Alisa and Shannon have experienced, victims of sexual abuse often have to deal with emotional fallout that negatively impacts future romantic relationships in their lives. In my interviews with them, both women mentioned mistakes they made in their relationships as they attempted to live in the wake of abuse—mistakes that other survivors may identify in their own lives.

Reverberating Trauma

Sometimes, assault victims will experience the tendency to punish their significant others because of how other people mistreated or abused them. Often, in an attempt to gain control, a victim can use his or her sexuality as a tool of manipulation, withholding or initiating sex solely out of a desire to be the one in a position of power.

“We have a drive to revisit our most traumatic events, subconsciously, to gain mastery over them,” Dr. Slattery notes. “This is why some who are abused become the abusers—to relive the trauma but this time in a position of *power* instead of *weakness*.”

Many of these problems stem from a gross misunderstanding of intensity versus intimacy. Intensity centers on euphoria, the exchange of power, and excitement. In contrast, intimacy grows out of vulnerability, the surrender of power, and unrelenting trust.

But trust is a huge struggle for those who have survived sexual abuse. In her book, Shannon writes, “I simply didn’t trust my husband, even though he’d proven himself very trustworthy. I expected he’d eventually wake up after really getting to know me, and that he’d also abandon me or use and abuse me in some way.”

“Trust is the hardest struggle to deal with in any kind of relationship after an assault,” Alisa seconds. “I had issues with not trusting myself or my own judgment on the people I chose to have in my life, and I definitely didn’t trust others.”

Because of trauma, women often believe lies about themselves: that they are undesirable, undeserving, or even unlovable. The victim of abuse is likely unaware that she has built relationships and even an entire life based on these core beliefs resulting from her abuse.

But the violation of a person’s body doesn’t have to result in this lack of control and agency for the rest of one’s life.

Taking Charge

There is hope for healing and recovery. In her book, Shannon writes: “Believe it or not, the very sexual acts or sensations that have brought you great pain in the past can eventually become a source of great pleasure. You can retrain your brain to accept and celebrate the healthy sexual energies flowing between you and your mate.”

Praise God that every single case of sexual assault or sexual abuse is an opportunity for God to write out his plan for redemption in all things. But how is this story written? What steps should you take if, after surviving sexual abuse, you begin to self-destruct or sabotage all of your closest relationships?

Alisa’s advice for survivors is pretty straightforward: healthy boundaries and open-mindedness. “Be trusting of others, but don’t let yourself be too vulnerable,” she says. “And go to therapy to learn what a healthy relationship consists of and should be like.” Therapy is an [invaluable tool](#) in not only identifying personal coping mechanisms after abuse but also in establishing healthy patterns of behavior in place of harmful tendencies.

According to Dr. Slattery, if a woman doesn't address the trauma she endured, it will inevitably (and negatively) impact all aspects of her life including marriage, parenting, sexuality, and even her relationship with God. This is why counseling, which offers a safe atmosphere to process trauma, is helpful. "Painful experiences act like a beach ball you are trying to hold underwater," Dr. Slattery says. "In time, you will have to work harder and harder to not let the memories of childhood trauma emerge."

Shannon, who pursued counseling after almost relapsing into a destructive, promiscuous lifestyle years into her marriage, describes the most useful tool she found in therapy: a sexual history worksheet. Essentially, she listed every sexual encounter she could remember, described her partner in detail, and then described the perceived payoff of this encounter.

This listing led to a revelation for Shannon: "I realized that each of my partners were significantly older than me and in some form of authority over me (boss, pastor, professor). I'd really been searching for a 'father figure' to make me feel as if I was worthy of the attention and affection that I'd felt so starved of." This discovery was important to Shannon's recovery. "Until we look at the who and why behind our relationships, we're in danger of repeating history over and over again," she says.

But there is hope. As Dr. Slattery explains, "Sexual abuse is a relational trauma, so it plays out in our relationships. That also means that the most effective healing comes through a healing relationship." This fight isn't meant to be fought—or won—alone.

Breaking the Silence

"There is nothing more dangerous than shutting down public debate around sexual assault and domestic violence with a dismissive 'lock the perpetrators up and throw away the key,' [response]," assault victim Monica Tan says in [The Guardian](#). "Such violence is rife in our society—in many shapes and guises—and any hope for change demands we face this ordinary thing squarely in the eye, and find better ways to talk about it, as troubling and deeply uncomfortable as that process is."

But finding a way to talk about it isn't easy. The very things that make sexual assault so important to address—the private nature of the problem, the shame in admitting it, and the sheer number of both reported and unreported cases—make it difficult to discuss.

Secondary survivors, the friends, parents, or relatives of sexual abuse survivors, play a large role in healing, but unfortunately, many people are unwilling or unable to break the silence surrounding sexual abuse because they feel ill-equipped to enter into such a discussion. What we have to remember is that we're *all* ill-equipped—and therefore we're all responsible for helping others.

Many Christians don't want to admit the evil of sexual abuse. We prefer to believe that our churches are safe places, places that heal and grow instead of grieve, and we prefer easy hypotheticals where bad things only happen to bad people. But sexual abuse and assault fall far outside of simplistic formulas, and it's time we altered our expectations. This life is a messy one, and ignoring the mess won't make it go away.

When one member hurts, the whole body hurts. We, as the body of Christ, should be actively looking for ways to help victims. We should be willing to talk about it, to ask tough questions, to engage in dialogue, and perhaps most importantly, to listen.

Shannon and Alisa give a few pieces of advice to those wanting to help other victims of sexual abuse:

- Initiate time together and be persistent. Don't give up pursuing them, even if they resist your efforts.
- Give them leeway. Survivors *will* make mistakes in learning how to cope with their abuse. Be patient with them. Allow them to grieve as they need.

- Don't fall off the radar. Most likely they will struggle with fears of abandonment, so even if the healing journey takes years, your constant support will make a difference.
- Encourage them spiritually. As they are in the trenches, survivors will be desperate for your help. Point them to God—to his grace, mercy, and stability—and eventually encourage forgiveness.
- Above all else, constantly remind them that the sexual assault was not their fault.

Sexual assault is an epidemic, one for which, unfortunately, there is no inoculation. No one is beyond the reach of this plague, so as survivors, Christians, and decent human beings, we should be fighting for all our worth to counteract its effects.

Sin cannot win here. A sexual assault is not the death of a life. Survivors, I encourage you to carry on, to find counseling, to open up and be willing to bear that wounded soul to people who love you. And to the people who love the survivors, let's actively and intentionally be willing to live out 2 Corinthians 1:3–4: “God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.”

Special thanks to:

Shannon Ethridge, MA is a life/relationship coach, international speaker, radio co-host (*Sexy Marriage Radio*), and author of 22 books, including the million-copy best-selling *Every Woman's Battle* series, *The Sexually Confident Wife*, *The Fantasy Fallacy*, and *The Passion Principles*. To learn more about Shannon's coaching, workshops, and other resources, visit her website at ShannonEthridge.com.

Alisa Kaplan is a state-certified sexual assault victim advocate, a crisis intervention counselor and a volunteer at a rape crisis center in Los Angeles County. In *Still Room for Hope*, Alisa shares the raw details surrounding the life-changing event, her struggle with depression and meth addiction, and the road that eventually led her to hope and healing through God's grace.

Joy Beth Smith is the editorial coordinator for *Today's Christian Woman*. You can follow her on Twitter at [@JBsTwoCents](https://twitter.com/JBsTwoCents), on Instagram at [@JBstwocents](https://www.instagram.com/JBstwocents), or on her website JoyBethSmith.com.