

# **Voices: Sexual abuse survivors can enjoy life again**

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Recognizing Southern Baptists have experienced a great number of sexual abuse cases in churches and denominational entities, it likely will be helpful for church leaders to understand how counseling can help a survivor of sexual abuse.

While pastors can refer a survivor to a professional counselor or medical doctor, a framework is beneficial for understanding what has happened to the survivor and what counseling involves.

## **Effects of sexual abuse**

The abuse survivor—female or male—has endured major trauma. We never want to discount or minimize sexual abuse, even if the survivor is in denial.

Sexual abuse deregulates emotions. Anger, shame, loss of innocence, loss of faith in a religious leader and possibly oneself are common reactions. Getting better will happen when emotions are regulated again.

This involves identifying emotional triggers precipitating fight or flight reactions, anger and/or depression, and establishing an internal locus of control to cope with symptoms.

The brain of a trauma survivor has been rewired or changed to some extent by the trauma experience. While this cannot be undone, coping skills to manage the condition can be learned.

# Healing the effects

Talk therapy, deep breathing exercises such as biofeedback, rapid eye movement therapy and medication are possible helps. The Holy Spirit is present in each session with a counseling client, and Christian counselors pray with and for their clients.

It is appropriate for a survivor to receive financial assistance to pay for medical and psychological help. Such help may be needed over a significant time period.

It is vitally important that a person taking medication use it as the doctor directs and not try to medicate his or her symptoms with alcohol or drugs, which likely will bring about another layer of illness.

Over time, we expect a survivor will feel better and empowered again to meet the challenges of living. We also can expect a survivor gradually to enjoy life again.

Prayer, friendship, fellowship and family support aid the healing process. Spiritual growth through one's time in counseling is invaluable.

# Thriving survivors

Trauma survivors will never be the same, but they can move into a positive future with support.

Ultimately, the abuse survivor may forgive the abuser. Whether that happens, the survivor's life will not be controlled by past trauma. Triggers and symptoms become less frequent and are manageable with learned coping skills.

Many survivors live with the feeling of having been treated unfairly, ripped

off or cheated. When they can let go of that feeling, when they realize abuse is not their lifelong identity, they can find the freedom God offers to each of his children.

The present can be a beautiful place to live. God is so patient. This takes as long as it takes, and we know this from personal experience.

Whether someone is abused by a minister, family member or stranger, God heals brokenness and restores his beloved creation. He will not let sin win if we place our lives in his control.

*Ruth Cook is an abuse and crime survivor. Joe Cook is a counseling professor at Liberty University. He holds a Doctor of Ministry from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from Regent University. The views expressed are those of the authors.*