

## **Open Letter to Teenage Girl Survivors of Sexual Assault & Those Who Know Them**

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By: Louise

### **For Teenage girl survivors of Child sexual abuse and rape:**

Are you somebody who has been sexually abused in childhood or more recently? Perhaps you feel that you are no good, and that what has happened to you is all your fault. Maybe you've decided that there is no point in trying to be different because you have been hurt so badly regardless of what you did. If you grew up with child sexual abuse, you may have decided that your only value is sexual, and you may have been used sexually by people who say they love you and then leave you once they've had sex with you. And you've found that people talk about you and call you names - because you've had sex, or because you were raped. Maybe you have a boyfriend who blackmails or forces you into sex, or beats you, or puts you down in front of his friends, and since others have treated you that way, you see little wrong with it. Indeed, it may by now seem "normal" for people to treat you abusively.

You may not have connected the way you feel or some of the choices you make with having been assaulted, and you may feel as if you are a bad person. You are not bad, sister, you are hurt.

Here are some common effects of sexual assault in teenage girls (see footnote for source):

- A sense of loss of personal integrity - You may feel worthless and ashamed of being you. People have done things to you and said things to you that made you feel bad so you "act" bad.
- A sense of Loss of Control - One or more people have done things to you against your will, so you believe there is no point in trying to control anything in your world.
- Damage to Emerging Sexual Identity - Sexual exploration and curiosity is a natural part of developing as a young woman. But sexual assault may have caused you to feel that sexuality and womanhood are bad, and maybe you feel ashamed of your body.
- Personality changes - Perhaps you have outbursts of anger, and people are asking why you are suddenly so moody. You may have become withdrawn because you're frightened that people can "see" what happened to you, and you want to make

yourself "invisible." You may feel depressed - or you may actually be experiencing depression. You can get help - please see "Getting Help" below.

- Lowered School performance - You may have stopped trying to achieve anything as the effort doesn't seem worth it. Perhaps the sexual assaults are playing on your mind and emotions so much that you have trouble concentrating.
- Withdrawal from school or social activities - Perhaps you were outgoing, but now shut yourself in your room. Your friends wonder why they can't talk to you. You're in trouble a lot for truancy. Many girls experience gang-rape or other sexual assault, and find that other people who know spread the news, saying it was consensual and calling the survivor terrible names - if this is you, you will naturally be terrified of going to school.
- Flagrant promiscuous behaviour: Because sexual things have been forced on you, you may believe that you and your body are of no value, and that you have to give sex to whoever wants it. If you were raped after saying no - or were otherwise unable to say no - you may actually be too frightened to say it again, or you might believe it is pointless. Child sexual abuse may have taught you that you actually don't have the right to say no. You may also be seeking to be loved.
- Drug and Alcohol abuse - Perhaps you feel distanced from the pain in your life when you've used drugs or alcohol.
- Eating Disorders - Starving yourself may be a way that you feel you can have some of the control over your body that rape took from you back. Conversely, overeating and excessive weight-gain may be a way of trying to protect yourself from being sexually assaulted again.
- Risk-taking and other self-destructive behaviour: You may believe your life is of little value, and so you do things that you know are very risky, such as driving with drunk people, taking drugs, or placing yourself in situations where you may be sexually assaulted again. You may self-injure as a way of punishing yourself, or because the physical pain helps dull the emotional pain. Maybe you have sex without protection from STDs and pregnancy.
- Alienation- Maybe you feel that the dark secrets you keep are things that nobody else could ever understand. You feel completely alone..
- Super-achieving and trying to be "Good enough" - Perhaps you believe you were assaulted because you were bad, and you try to be "good enough" to stop it from happening again. Straining to achieve and be perfect may be a way that you try to hide your inner sense of shame from the world.

Maybe you've had nobody to challenge the bad messages about yourself that sexual assault has given you, and you may feel that nobody cares anyway.

If you've paused to read this article, I want to challenge those messages. I want you to know that I care.

I once felt the way you do. I want you to know you're not alone, and so I'm going to share the story of my teen years with you.

I grew up a beaten, neglected and sexually abused child. Some of the sexual abuse I experienced was the only affection I ever got, and I believed that having sex with somebody was the only way to be loved. As well, my self-concept was ruined by other abuse from my drug-addicted, mentally ill mother.

Consequently by the time I was 13, I changed from a sweet, obliging child who tried to do all the right things for approval into a little tough who did all the wrong things for approval of a different kind. I was so desperate to be accepted, I hung with dangerous and damaged people. Before I even had my first period, I had a sexual encounter with a guy who said he loved me. He would have sex with me and make me walk home on my own on cold dark nights – and would not pass a word with me at school the next day. He bullied me into having oral sex with him in front of his best friend. I was so ashamed, but also afraid to lose his affection. He consciously used this, and I now know that the shame is his. At some level, I knew he was using me, but I wanted to believe he loved me. Of course he shot his mouth off to everybody, and people began to call me names like "slut" - and if you're an Australian girl, you'll be familiar with "moll". Yet, even after he dumped me and said such terrible things about me, he would still show up at my home every few weeks, and use me again. I let him.

What I remember so acutely about this time was the sudden welter of interest from other guys. There was nothing romantic about it; not the stuff of a teenage girl's fantasies; it was obnoxious, disgusting, and as I now know, veered into the criminal. They'd heard I could be "had", and they acted as if they were entitled to me. Daily, the abuse ranged from harassment of the "I've heard *alllll* about you" variety, to name-calling, being spat on, being

groped, having fingers shoved in my vagina – once in a deserted corridor and another in the swimming pool. I was held down in the science labs while a group of boys felt up my skirt, shouting with disgust when they discovered I had my period. It was perfectly amazing too, how many claimed to have had sex with me when they hadn't been anywhere near me.

I wish that I had known that they weren't entitled to treat me that way. I truly thought that if I'd earned the name, I had to suffer the consequences. I cannot convey what it felt like to truly believe I was worthless, but if you've been there – and I'm so sorry if you have – you'll understand. By the time I was 14 and had slept with somebody else who said nice words to me only to be used again, I thought that the business of trading sex for affection wasn't working out so well. I didn't want to do it anymore and resolved to say no. But then I was raped twice for testing out my new-found determination to say no. The first rapist was really angry that the likes of me had felt entitled to say no, and didn't care when I cried, he just stripped me, raped me and then offered me cab fare home.

It felt like there was no escape. And it really felt like it was okay for people to treat me that way. I knew I could never tell, because people would only affirm that it was my fault. I did not believe I could tell anybody I had been raped because firstly, I was deeply ashamed, and second, I didn't think anybody would believe somebody who had a reputation for being a "slut".

The second rapist had been my boyfriend before, and then dumped me. But I accepted a date to the drive-in with him, and when he got too close, I told him I wanted to go home. After he raped me, I didn't menstruate for three months and had my mother drag me off to the doctor calling me everything she could lay a tongue to. Thankfully, I wasn't pregnant.

So in my 14th year, there was not a lot I wouldn't do, and I had had numerous sexual partners by the time I was 15. It wasn't just young guys either, but older men, some married and including my best friend's father, who seemed to "smell": my badness and be drawn to it.

It actually felt strange when somebody didn't want to be sexual with me. I was in a foster home when I was 14. The shock for me was that the foster-father DIDN'T want to lay hands on me - and I had fully expected that he would. I kept waiting for it. And then there was Uncle Ray. I lied about where I was staying one night so that I could go off with my first

boyfriend, who stood me up, leaving me with nowhere to stay the night. So in desperation I went to the home of a family friend whom we called Uncle Ray. I'd have rather faced that danger than go home to my mother. Uncle Ray let me have his bed, did not tell on me to my mother, and did NOT, to my surprise, want anything in return for letting me stay. I still feel grateful for that. In my world, not having my vulnerability exploited was just such a rarity. I remember who was nice to me, and I remember how I cried and tried to think of ways to pay them back.

What I mostly felt was irretrievably dirty – all the time. I certainly had a well-established victim mindset - but I simply didn't know how to think otherwise. I felt as if there was a sign on my back, and I now know this is common with many survivors of multiple sexual abuse.

Nice girls were warned off me by their parents, which fuelled my sense of dirtiness. One day I was pursued into a park by eight guys who said they were going to take turns. The ringleader tried to kiss me; I belted him and ran. I went into a public toilet cubicle and saw there a girl from school, whose name was also Louise. She was a beautiful blonde girl from a good home. I was panting and sobbing and she asked what was wrong, but I knew she would never understand. It was like living behind a wire fence; there was no place in the world of safety and nice girls for me. I remember how very sad I felt – and then I felt numb. It was just part of life.

Some people saw good things; the occasional teacher or classmate. But I thought they were having me on. I couldn't see what they could see. When I was 15, I got involved with a guy who beat me up, but again, I thought it was okay. I didn't much care what happened to me; I hitch-hiked and took all sorts of risks. I self-injured, drank, smoked and took booze to school.

At 15 I was expelled and became pregnant. It's not a good idea for very young girls to have babies, of course, and I wasn't looking to my child to "save" me. But I can honestly say that this tiny wee boy did straighten me out. I was 16 and more cynical, and knew guys would be after me because a girl who's had a baby is supposed to be an easy lay. But because of my baby boy, the first stirrings of self-respect and determination began. It was like I didn't need that fake affection anymore, and I could much more easily tell them to take a hike. Of course I was yet to learn it really wasn't okay for people to treat me badly, and to become

involved at 18 with a partner abuser, but some change did begin.

It took along time to stop the sense of damning shame and dirtiness. I did a lot of healing around it when I was 26, and became very close friends with my 14 year old self. Despite these horrors, she was also funny, loyal and kind. She was not bad, she was hurt. She deserved help, not hate. Nobody was entitled to abuse her, no matter what sort of mark she wore. She has grown up to be a person who doesn't like to see anybody degraded.

I am now a university graduate with a wonderful family, great friends, and who have had the privilege of spending the past 22 years of my life assisting survivors of sexual assault.

And now back to you, Teen sister. If you have seen yourself in any of the above, there are several things I wish I'd known that I want *you* to know:

- You are *not* garbage, no matter how many times you have been sexually assaulted and used. It was not your fault, no matter what the circumstances. Please [read this](#) to understand why it wasn't your fault.
- Sexual assault causes feelings of shame and dirtiness - this is something many survivors feel. This is due to long-held - and completely wrong - myths about rape and sexual assault. In reality, sexual assault is nothing for you to be ashamed of. The shame belongs to those who have coerced, bullied or forced you into doing sexual things against your will, It doesn't matter if you were drunk, dating the rapist or other - you have nothing to be ashamed of. If somebody shames you by saying things like "What did you do to deserve it" or "You asked for it", they are wrong. This is called Secondary Wounding, and you can read more about that [here](#).
- Even if you think nobody will believe that you were assaulted - or are still being assaulted - they will. See Getting Help below.
- It does not matter how many people you have had sex with - you ALWAYS have the right to say no. Nobody is "entitled" to have sex with you or rape you because others have done so. If you are facing the sort of sexual harassment and assault at school that I described in my story, it needs to be reported and stopped.
- Sexual and other abuse is not a "normal" way to treat you. It is also not a normal part of a relationship. It is NOT okay for anybody to hurt you, ever – even if those who are supposed to care for you call you names and blame you – they are simply wrong.

- When people call you names, that doesn't make them true. Names like "slut" are ignorant value-judgments that happen for a number of reasons, perhaps from people who are either young themselves or who can't understand your pain. Also, it's grossly unfair that it's girls who cop these names, isn't it?
- If you are still being sexually assaulted, you deserve for it to be stopped as soon as possible. Perhaps it is a family member who has been abusing you for along time, or somebody from your school. There may be more than one person abusing you. You may be frightened because you've been threatened about what may happen if you tell, or you may be afraid of getting the abuser into trouble. But the person hurting you is relying on your silence so that they can continue to do so. You DON'T have to deal with this alone. They can be stopped. Please see Getting Help below.
- Even if you feel there is no hope, there is. With the right help you will one day feel differently about what you are going through now.
- If you are doing self-destructive things, then please find somebody who can help you stop. You are worth too much to be lost or to be hurt again. I'm going to make some suggestions about how to get help, and I hope you'll reach out to somebody.

### **Getting Help:**

The first step to getting help is to tell somebody. Even if you have told about the sexual assault/s and were not believed, there are people who will believe you.

If you've been raped or sexually assaulted, there are services that help teenagers. Even if it feels very difficult to discuss, reach out to a counselor who is trained in working with sexual assault. You won't be expected to tell them about the assault/s straight away - these counselors understand that this can be difficult. Please see [this page](#) for services you can contact. You might also like to read Jes' wonderful article on telling about rape and sexual assault [here](#).

If you are over 16, you are most welcome to join [Pandora's Aquarium](#). We have many members who were or are in the same situation as you, and they will give you support.

If you are under 16, we at [Pandora's Aquarium](#) believe that you deserve special help that an online board can't offer you. Read [this page](#) for suggestions for help, and please reach out. Please also feel free to come and join us when you've turned sixteen if you still need support from other survivors.

You are beautiful, you are worthwhile. Even if you can't believe that right now, I do. You deserve support. You can heal, sweetheart, believe me.

[Here](#) is a song I'd like you to listen to - it's from my heart to you. Remember always that you are not alone.

**For adults in contact with abused teenage girls:**

Sexual assault extracts a most grievous cost in the lives of teenage girls. Like me, you probably find it appalling that teenage girls are sexually assaulted, judged, disbelieved and their pain ignored. When you see signs like the above in a teenage girl, please try to talk to her sensitively and gently about sexual assault, and assist her in seeking professional help. If you don't feel that you understand how to deal with sexual assault, a rape crisis service can give you guidance. Even if she doesn't want to talk about it right away, she will at least know you care. You may save her a lot more pain - and you may even save her life.

**For teenagers in contact with abused teenage girls:**

If you know somebody like what I have described above, you might not understand her behaviour. You will be doing a very great thing if you refuse to join in calling her names and exploiting her pain. Please try to reach out to her and suggest that she seeks help. You might tell a trusted adult about your concerns for her. She doesn't do what she does because she *is* bad. It's because she *feels* bad. She feels bad because people have done bad things to her. If you sexually abuse or assault her yourself, this is far worse than any of the things she has been accused of doing and called names for. Please don't add to her pain. Importantly, never make news of a peer's rape the subject of scorn and gossip, and try to be brave enough to challenge others who do. You are in a position to do something good here.

**Source for effects on teenage survivors of rape:** Wilson, KJ, *When Violence Begins at Home: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding and Ending Domestic Abuse*, Hunter House Inc. Publishers, California, 1997



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