

REVICTIMIZATION

From Aphrodite Wounded

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By: Louise

I am a survivor of sexual and other abuse in my childhood, as well as domestic violence and partner rape. As I began to heal, it occurred to me that many of the things I had felt in the abusive relationship were things I had felt much earlier as an abused child.

While it is important not to subscribe to stereotypes that a certain "type" of person is repeatedly raped or experiences domestic violence, it is known that the risk of revictimization by sexual assault is approximately doubled for survivors of child sexual abuse (1). For example, in Diana Russell's study of women who had experienced incestuous abuse as children, two thirds were subsequently raped (2).

This article discusses revictimization drawing on literature together with my understanding of how it worked for me. It should not be seen as a generalization that only child abuse survivors experience repeated rape or domestic violence - or that survivors of child sexual abuse are sitting ducks for further abuse. Sometimes, even people from stable, loving families are subject to the dynamics of later domestic violence. And it cannot be stated strongly enough that any person can be subject to sexual assault. Nevertheless, child sexual and other abuse can leave us with vulnerabilities that abusers may be quick to exploit. It's important that we see repeated victimization not as a reason to hate ourselves, but as a wound incurred through no fault of our own and for which we deserve our own compassion.

Read through, and if this fits for you, please know that there is help available.

CHILD SEXUAL / OTHER ABUSE AND REVICTIMIZATION

Were you sexually, physically or emotionally abused as a child? Did you experience more of the same when you got older? Have you been in a relationship where you were beaten, raped or otherwise abused? If the answer is yes, you may feel, as many survivors of repeated abuse do, that you have a "sign on your back", that you "attract" abusers or even that you were born to be the recipient of other people's abuse. One of the saddest legacies

of repeated abuse is that survivors often feel that if it's happened so often, they must somehow deserve it. Unfortunately, we live in a society that agrees. Judith Herman writes:

The phenomenon of repeated victimization, indisputably real, calls for great care in interpretation. For too long, psychiatric opinion has simply reflected the crude social judgment that survivors "ask for abuse." The earlier concepts of masochism and the more recent formulations of addiction to trauma imply that victims seek and derive gratification for repeated abuse. This is rarely true (3)

So, why does revictimization happen? Before we go on to look at just some of the reasons, a reminder: This is not an exercise in how to blame ourselves more. Even if there are factors that make some of vulnerable to further abuse, *perpetrators alone are responsible for the abuse they commit.*

WHY REVICTIMIZATION HAPPENS - SOME OF THE REASONS

Personalities forged in an environment of early abuse: Children who are abused by people they are close to learn to equate love with violence and sexual exploitation. They have not learned to create safe and appropriate boundaries with people, and they grow up unable to see themselves as having any right to choice. Their self-image is so damaged that they may see nothing wrong with even extremely abusive treatment of them by others. It is seen as unavoidable and the ultimate cost of love. Some women sexually abused as children may believe that their sexuality is all they have of any worth. (4).

Compulsion to repeat trauma: Bessel van der Kolk writes, "Many traumatized people expose themselves, seemingly compulsively, to situations reminiscent of the original trauma. These behavioral reenactments are rarely consciously understood to be related to earlier life experiences (5)". Survivors of earlier rape and abuse may put themselves at risk of further harm, not because they want to be abused or hurt, but because they may be seeking a different, better outcome, or to have more control. It may also be because they believe they deserve the pain inflicted on them. Often, reenactment has a compulsive and involuntary feel. Survivors may feel completely numb, and unaware of how reenactment is

taking place (6). Conversely, it may call forth the same terror and shame as experienced in childhood. van der Kolk further explains,

People who are exposed early to violence or neglect come to expect it as a way of life. They see the chronic helplessness of their mothers and fathers' alternating outbursts of affection and violence; they learn that they themselves have no control. As adults they hope to undo the past by love, competency, and exemplary behavior. When they fail they are likely to make sense out of this situation by blaming themselves. When they have little experience with nonviolent resolution of differences, partners in relationships alternate between an expectation of perfect behavior leading to perfect harmony and a state of helplessness, in which all verbal communication seems futile. A return to earlier coping mechanisms, such as self-blame, numbing (by means of emotional withdrawal or drugs or alcohol), and physical violence sets the stage for a repetition of the childhood trauma and "return of the repressed" (7)

The effect of trauma: It is true that some people may have a series of violent partners, or encounters with rapists. I had a friend who was subjected to rape three times in two years. A family member - echoing typical victim-blame - sneeringly asked me "why she kept leaving herself open to it. - wouldn't you think that if she went through it once, she should have known how to steer clear of creeps?" This reflects a lack of knowledge about the workings of trauma: While some survivors may be overly cautious about everybody, other traumatized people actually have a harder time forming accurate assessments of danger (8). The above question also absolves the perpetrator who falsely seeks to engage the trust of a trauma survivor in order to abuse them.

Traumatic Bonding: Judith Herman writes about the tendency of abused children to cling tenaciously to the very parents who hurt them (9) Perpetrators of sexual abuse may capitalize on this tendency by giving their victim the only sense of specialness, or being loved, that they have ever had. Bessel van der Kolk tells us that people subjected to trauma and neglect are vulnerable to developing the tendency to traumatically bond with those who harm them. Traumatic bonding is often behind the excuses of battered women for the violence of their partners, and for the repeated returning to a batterer (10).

REVICITIMIZATION AND ME

Unfortunately my adult experiences of rape and battering were not new to me. Being battered by both my parents since infancy and sexually abused throughout childhood and early teens (by non-related perpetrators), and receiving little in the way of protection or belief taught me some powerful lessons, which I brought to an abusive partner. I remember exactly what I felt the first time he hit me. He cracked me across the face, and as I cradled my rapidly swelling cheekbone, I was certainly upset. But there was another, deeper feeling of validation; something went "click" inside me. It was a sense of correctness about what he had done, an utter familiarity which confirmed a bone-badness I had always felt. The first time he raped me, there was a similar - and terribly powerful - sense of meeting with something I seemed destined for. It works differently for different people, but let me share with you some of the specific lessons of childhood that I believe made me fair game for a battering and raping partner - you may identify:

- **The belief that I was dirty and utterly corrupt:** From a very early age, the sexual abuse I experienced combined with the words and actions of my parents left me with a sense that I had been born inherently dirty. Judith Herman writes that children who experience abuse and abandonment conclude - need to conclude - that their inner badness is responsible for the abuse, in order to sustain attachments to those who hurt them (11). By the time I was 18 and met my abusive partner, that sense of me - but not an abuser - being bad had been intact for a long time
- **The belief that I was not worth standing up for:** Abandoned to my fate as a child, there were times in the violent relationship where I honestly felt embarrassed and foolish for complaining about the violence; it was, after all, only me it was being done to. As a 4 year old child, I had disclosed sexual abuse to my mother, who had said she didn't want to hear about it. I concluded - and I remember thinking it - that if something bad happens to me, it doesn't matter. In short, I didn't matter. This was to have a devastating impact as I grew up.
- **The belief that It was my fault:** Haven't many people who were beaten and sexually abused as children heard things like "you make me do this to you" or, "I wouldn't do this to you if you weren't so bad"? Hence, this is what we learn, and what we believe when people continue harming us.

- **The belief that love involves pain:** Love and bashing and rape were not incompatible to me. Even when I felt so hurt, and was being degraded so badly, I still believed there might be some love in it that I could get if only I was good enough. And this is what I'd been told; that I would be loved if I was good enough - which I somehow never seemed to be. By the time I was older, the computer file in my head on love always came up with themes of abuse. I had been sexually abused at 13 by a particularly nasty piece of work, a man whose kids I babysat, who told me how much he loved me; how special and beautiful I was to him. Anytime I objected to the abuse, he threatened not to love me anymore: "Don't you want to be Uncle Bill's darlin'? Don't you love your Uncle Bill?" I was so completely affection-starved - I remember this as a time in my life when *nobody* gave me any love - and that is no exaggeration. I did not want to be abused but I did want to be loved. Like many abusers, he preyed on that.

I had only ever received love from poisonous sources; I simply did not see any other options. How can you recite a beautiful poem you've never learned? Perhaps all you know is the gutter version. I fantasized about other more ideal forms of love, but I knew that for someone as fundamentally bad as me, they were but wishful thinking. I had been taught that I was beyond the pale of the tender, safe love I desperately craved. I reasoned that if my own life-givers could not love me, whom else could I expect to love me?

- **The belief that sex is supposed to degrade you:** For some time, I was orally raped on a daily basis at age 4, and a close family friend started raping me when I was eight. This lasted until I was ten, and was extremely painful and frightening. These things were my first point of reference regarding sex, and for a long time, it was to determine how I viewed all other encounters. I believed that the sexual abuse in my childhood meant I was bad. Growing up did not change that view. From the unhealed child in me the belief operated that sex was actually supposed to involve hurt, degradation and no choice for me. This influenced a large part of my response, or more correctly non-response to my partner's brutality.
- **The belief that you must always forgive because an abuser matters more than you:** Many abused children unconditionally forgive the adults who hurt them - it's part of traumatic bonding and part of the way they blame themselves. This didn't change as I got older either: As a little girl, I picked up my battered body and went to mummy

who had done the battering. I continued to offer daddy my love - even though he didn't really seem to want it, and as he raised the bar ever higher as to earning *his* love. If mummy cried and said she didn't mean to hurt me, I flung my arms around her, cried with her and said it was okay. I recall my mother saying often as I grew up, "Louise, you have such a forgiving heart." That unconditional forgiving for the worst treatment; the most outrageous betrayals, was also to be taken into my relationship. He hurt *me* - I felt sorry for *him* - and forgave him.

- **The belief that I didn't deserve any better:** I honestly believed that I was a cheap slut who had failed to be good enough to get better treatment. I was taught that men don't respect "girls like me" and any bad treatment is thus justified.
- **Regression and being drawn into the same space as childhood:** I believe the sexual abuse in my childhood most severely affected my autonomy. Can a child say no to an adult? Some may argue, "but an adult can say no to an adult." Yes, but not where there is an established power differential, especially one based on the fear of violence. And not when you've learned again and again that "no" has no currency. As a child I was used by whomever felt like it with no say in the matter. Even if I was older in the relationship, a sense of choice still seemed an abstract absurdity.
- **Traumatic bonding:** Abusers traumatically bind their victims to them by alternating threat with intermittent kindness (12). After my partner had hurt me, he sometimes offered me comfort - really warm, loving comfort, which would make everything okay again for awhile - just as it had in childhood. As the young woman being harmed, I felt very little girl-ish, and sometimes I just wanted a cuddle. It felt like only he was there for me, even if he hurt me too. As in my childhood, it did not matter that violator was also comforter, it was still better than nothing. I just needed that contact. His duality of roles as both violator and comforter was to cement my sense of entrapment further.
- **Inaccurate assessments of danger:** Abuse survivors are not to be blamed, of course, for not being able to second-guess that a batterer will be a batterer. But for me, there was a tendency to follow anybody who "acted nice", believing that they would be nice - and this even when niceness alternated with cruelty.

As a woman who lived in a violent relationship; returned to it again and again, loved the abuser and truly cared about him, I have been patronized, had insulting inferences drawn

about my intelligence, been branded as "sick", and "masochistic" - that last by a psychiatrist whom I told about the relationship. Many of us will recognize these labels. People who blame you don't understand that layer piled upon layer of trauma may tend to produce a crippling of ability to care for oneself in the ways non-traumatized people would see as commonsense.. Child abuse really is like a cancer; left untreated that malignancy can metastasize into further and possible fatal dangers - indeed, I am lucky to be alive.

But does this need to be the case? Let's look at the next section.

SOLUTIONS AND HEALING

Socially, picking up on children who have been hurt and offering early intervention so that they carry far less damage into adulthood with them would be a great big plus. Not kicking abuse survivors in abusive relationships or who are repeatedly hurt by rape when they're down by branding them "stupid" and abandoning them - thus proving to them again that they're worthless - will also go a long way.

I think that what worked for me was that I at least had a concept of safe, nurturing love - even if I didn't feel I deserved it. Some people don't even have that concept, and I believe I am lucky that I did because it gave me a starting point. My fellow survivor, If you have identified with any of the above, I implore you to seek counselling to overturn those old scars and recognize that you too, have the same place in the scheme of fairness and love as anybody else. All that I learned, and all the ways in which it was reinforced have not, after all, stopped me from growing into a woman who knows that I don't deserve to be the recipient of other people's abuse. It was not my fault; I was not bad, and I can tell somebody with a mind to hurt me to go to hell - I owe them nothing; least of all my soul.

Does such a change in attitude rape-proof us? No, as long as there are perpetrators, we are all vulnerable regardless of what we think about ourselves. To say that somebody is raped because of their self-image is victim-blame - again - it's the perpetrator who takes advantage. But I do believe that the reduction in self-hatred and boundaries that come with healing make us less inclined to accommodate people who are disrespectful and even dangerous. Knowing I deserve to be safe - that I do not deserve to be raped - means that I

listen to my gut, put distance between myself and abusive people and reduce my chances, at least for now, of being harmed again. Our safety is *sometimes* contingent on how much we value it; healing means changing patterns of devaluing it.

I healed. You can do it too, even if the damage is extensive. You are worth it. You are. You were not abused again and again because you deserve it. You have been traumatized, you were set up and others capitalized on it. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Please feel free to discuss multiple victimization here at Pandy's - we understand, and we value you even if many others didn't.

Please give yourself compassion - you certainly have mine.

SOURCES

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