



The following is an excerpt from the book *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion* by Theresa Burke, Ph.D., with David Reardon, Ph.D.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### SEXUAL ABUSE AND ABORTION

As a child, Heidi was an attractive little girl with a petite stature and a tenacious personality. Her large brown eyes were framed with a long set of auburn braids.

Heidi was only seven when her 15-year-old brother Eric began sexually molesting her. Eric would sneak into her room at night to play “monster.” He would sometimes hide under the bed until the lights were out, and then make scary growling sounds, banging from underneath the bed in a pulsating rhythm while Heidi nervously laughed and screamed. Afterwards he would reach around the sides of the mattress to grab her. Heidi would squeal and kick as Eric tackled her, wrestling with her in a rollicking match. One night Eric pulled down her pajama bottoms and began fondling her. Eventually, he began having sexual intercourse with her. This secret ritual was shrouded by a pact of silence. “Don’t tell anyone,” Eric instructed, “or you’ll get in trouble.”

Again and again her brother insisted, “See, Heidi, see what you make me do!” Somewhere inside, Heidi felt responsible. Her emotions progressed from fear to submission and helplessness. At times, the sex caused a lot of pain. Sometimes she would endure the abuse by imagining another scene to get her mind refocused on something more pleasant. Other times, she would zoom in on the ticking of the clock, concentrating very hard on each rhythmic tick-tock—counting each beat into what felt like infinity. “It will be over soon,” she promised herself. “It will be over soon.” When Eric was finished, she always felt an awkward sense of shame . . . like something inside her was too dirty ever to be seen.

As Heidi grew older, Eric continued to sexually abuse her. By the time she was a teenager, Eric’s friends were taking turns having sex with her. Heidi mistakenly assumed that this was what *all* boys did. She accepted the mistreatment, thinking it was normal conduct for girls and boys. Added to this embedded concept was the unfortunate message that it was the *girl* who supposedly drove the boy to acts of passion and lust. Heidi began to hear the same message from other boys: “Oh, girl, just look at what you do to me!” Not surprisingly, by age 12 Heidi was overly sensual and carried herself in a provocative manner. The childhood sexual abuse and

incest led her directly into a promiscuous teenage lifestyle where she allowed herself to be used by men as an object for their pleasure and perversions.

Heidi was trained from a tender age to believe that her value and acceptance as a female originated from her sexuality. She did not know how to set boundaries with men. They took from her what they liked, and offered nothing in return. Having experienced the violation of her most intimate physical boundaries, Heidi had never learned to set limits when someone desired her body. In addition, she grew up blaming herself for all the things that were done to her.

Heidi had her first abortion when she was only 15. While sitting in the waiting room, Heidi dimly heard the old familiar voice running through her mind: "Don't tell anyone; you'll get in trouble."

Later, while she was lying flat on the abortion table, her feet were placed firmly in stirrups. Heidi felt terror as the abortionist entered the room. "Open your legs," he firmly instructed. Reluctantly, Heidi did as she was told. The doctor moved in quickly, plunging his cold steel instruments in and out of her body . . . destroying the life inside. Another familiar voice began to re-play inside her mind. "Just listen to the clock . . . tick-tock one, tick-tock two," she whispered. "It will all be over soon." Heidi had become skilled at dissociating from bad things as they were happening to her.

Before her twenty-first birthday, Heidi had already undergone five abortions. After that, she stopped counting them. Each procedure left her with more self-loathing and shame. But for Heidi, these feelings seemed normal. She had never been treated with dignity or respect. She was a disposable toy for the boys and men who came into her life. Her body had always been an object dissociated from her real self, which lay shrunken and hiding inside. Why should anything her body created be any less disposable? Why should the tiny life hiding inside her be treated with any more respect than she had ever received?

## **ABORTION AND SEXUAL ABUSE**

It has been my experience that a high proportion of women suffering post-abortion trauma also have histories of molestation, sexual abuse, or incest. Most other post-abortion counselors with whom I deal have reported a similar observation. In the Elliot Institute survey, 21 percent of the post-abortive women surveyed reported a history of childhood physical abuse and 24 percent reported childhood sexual abuse. In a random sample survey of the general population, Dianne Russell reports that approximately one in three girls is sexually abused before age 18 and one in four is abused by age 14. These alarming statistics have a good deal to do with patterns of abuse and crisis.

Sexual abuse, at any age, can impair one's ability to be healthy in the present. Sexual abuse is even more injurious when it is experienced during the formative years of childhood, since the distortions sexual trauma inflict can be deeper, more stunting, and more ingrained into the child's developing personality.<sup>1</sup> Sexual abuse survivors describe a sense of lost selves, injured inner children, wounded souls, and stolen psyches.

It was not until television talk shows began to open the window on the experiences of those affected by sexual abuse that millions of women received permission to emerge from their closets of shame. Women began to examine the reality and prevalence of sexual abuse and started to discuss openly the wide-ranging detrimental effects it has caused in their lives.

At first glance, the idea that abortion can be an extension of sexual abuse may seem unlikely. However, in my experiences with women traumatized by abortion, common themes reappear within each group. For those with similar painful backgrounds, such as parental alcoholism or sexual abuse, the collective pain reveals a deeper meaning beyond the crisis pregnancy and abortion. So much of human behavior, healthy and unhealthy, can be motivated by conflicts and psychological cravings, unmet needs, and compulsive behaviors that feel normal because they are familiar.

If a history of sexual abuse has existed before an abortion, the woman may experience the abortion itself as simply a further continuation of the violations of self that have gone before. The way in which abortion resembles sexual abuse is striking. In the abortion, the abortionist's hand or instrument penetrates deep into the protective and sacred part of the woman's womb. The abortionist is usually a male, and the entry point is the same as where the woman has been violated by men in her past. The abortion's destruction of the child growing inside her echoes the way sexual abuse destroyed her own innocent childlike nature. In such cases, abortion can take on elements of a symbolic suicide. The death of the innocent "inner child" is a reenactment of the traumatic loss of the abused woman's own self.

The effects of trauma often provide numerous invitations to crisis. Desires, beliefs, longings, past experiences, and fears can be employed by the traumatized person in the form of fantasies, reenactments, or repetitions which are assembled unconsciously around the issues of the trauma. Most experts in the field of trauma and abuse support the idea that victims recreate their abuse or trauma in many ways. It is unfinished business, and the victims will continue to act it out until it is somehow resolved or completed. The reenactment can be a ritualized means through which a woman will intensely grieve and mourn.

The grief of abortion, like the grief of incest, is held in unvoiced cries of secrecy. It is a powerful recreation of the intrusion forced upon the woman during sexual abuse, in which she is once again called upon to lie helpless on her back, silently enduring the invasion of her body. Afterward, just as after episodes of sexual abuse, she must be prepared to hide her shame, guilt, despair, and grief behind a painted mask of normalcy.

## REENACTING ABUSE

Sheila was sexually and physically abused in her childhood. Not surprisingly, she often ended up with abusive partners. She "looked for love in all the wrong places" and repeatedly found herself pregnant with no partner support. She wrote the following about her five abortions:

There is an enormous hole in my heart, a source of tremendous grief at not having my children. I usually experience deep depression during the holidays, especially at Christmas. Abortion for me has been as inhumane as any abusive relationship I have ever been in. My abortionist took the place of my abusive father and my abusive partner. Neither had any comprehension of my real needs as a little girl or later as a woman. Now I continue to be punished by empty memories of what could have been—what should have been. It's a stark reality that I must live with. The truth of my life is hideous. My abortions, like my childhood, are a pain that will never go away.

Sheila's abortions served as a way to symbolize the damage done to her inner child by mimicking the deprivation of love, childhood, and life that had occurred during her own traumatic childhood. Sheila terminated each pregnancy with tremendous grief and heartache, and saw herself as a victim of her unfortunate circumstances. She felt helpless each time and consented to the procedure as just another casualty. Her road to recurrent trauma was predictable, even habitual. Abortion was a continuation of a pattern begun in childhood and extended into her adult life. It only served to reenact her trauma, while also depriving her of the joy of having children who might have restored meaning and hope in her life.

Maggie had a long and violent history of sexual abuse, which began at the age of four in a child prostitution ring. Years later she described her abortions as her own sentencing and execution.

I remember walking into the clinic and feeling like I was about to take my rightful place in an electric chair. I knew a part of myself would die. I wanted that baby. I wanted all of them. Yet each time I felt like abortion was something that I just had to do.

Maggie felt compelled to sacrifice her children through abortion because of an abusive history. Her own "inner child" had been sacrificed when she was repeatedly and violently sexually abused as a young girl. For Maggie, the analogy of an electric chair verified abortion as a life-threatening shock, similar to many episodes of abuse she had endured as a child. Her inability or

unwillingness to carry a child to term and to take on the responsibilities of being a mother arose from the developmental handicaps she suffered as an abused child. She saw herself as that stunted, abused child and could not see how to make the developmental leap to becoming a responsible, loving parent. She felt emotionally stuck and thus trapped in a pattern of abortion, which recreated the traumatic themes of grief, loss, powerlessness, and violence which had shaped her childhood.

Barbara's history of sexual abuse, followed by six abortions, began with her mother's abortion when she was only seven.

After her abortion, my mother was never the same. She suffered depression and became a heroin addict. The family split up because of my parent's drug abuse. I was abandoned by my family and spent years in foster homes, where I was sexually violated by my caretakers. I became a prostitute. I sought love and human touch with sex. Many men had me, many times. I remember times when guys sat at a table playing a game of cards over me—I was the winner's prize. They played the same game when it came time to see whose turn it was to take me to the abortion clinic. I was high most of the time, trying with futile effort to drown my pain.

Abortion had become just another tough break in life that Barbara had to accept and endure. It kept her trapped in despair and pain. As a seven-year-old child, she experienced survivor guilt associated with the knowledge that one of her siblings had died in an abortion, while for some unknown reason she had been allowed to survive. As her mother's life deteriorated, so did Barbara's life. Sexual abuse and prostitution led her full circle back to abortion, again and again. She kept returning to the disparaging arena of prostitution because she did not feel worthy of anything more. Her sexual degradation and multiple abortions echoed unresolved issues related to her mother's abortion, and her own survival guilt and childhood sexual abuse.

With counseling and the support of those who understood and accepted what she had endured, Barbara is now free of all the secrets that held her bound. She is now capable of speaking about the unspeakable and connecting private anxieties and fears to their source, instead of acting them out in destructive repetitions. She is married to a patient man who is a stable and loving support in her life and is developing a spiritual life that furnishes her with hope and strength. These are the ingredients that will help her continue to heal as she continues to do extensive grief work related to all these agonizing losses.

Marsha remembered a childhood with habitual molestation from her uncle and his friends. As an adult, she became a topless dancer in a sleazy nightclub. In the nightclub setting, she could reenact the humiliation of being an object of the desires of men, but with an empowering twist. In the nightclub Marsha held the reigns of power. Through the stage manager and bouncers who protected her from the groping hands of the customers, she could excite men, as she had as a child, but control their advances. Also, as an erotic dancer she was paid a great deal of money to do what she once experienced as humiliating. As for many, if not most, erotic dancers, the nightclub was a place where Marsha could attempt to master the traumatic experiences of her abusive childhood. It provided a forum in which she could reenact sexually provocative behavior while exercising some control over the excited men, the type of control she never had enjoyed as a child. She was unable to see, however, that while her erotic dancing provided temporary emotional and financial compensations for her wounded childhood, it was not truly empowering or healing. Her offstage life still lacked a sense of the control and dignity she so deeply craved.

As a result of her promiscuous relationships, Marsha endured eight abortions. For years, she had believed that abortion rights gave her command, authority, and control over her life and the lives of others. It was the type of power she had longed for as a child when she could not make the abuse stop. Yet each abortion only fueled new rounds of dysfunctional relationships, crisis pregnancies, and abortions. Marsha continued to be used and discarded by men who cared nothing for her. It was not until age 51 that she sought help. Her grief over her life and her missing children was profound. However, by dealing with her losses, she began to recognize her inherent worth as a human being, and her desire for real dignity and love.

Certainly not all sexually abused women become prostitutes or erotic dancers, but they are more likely to engage in behaviors that invite despair and humiliation. Even though a sexually abused person can appear on the surface to be quite normal and functioning well, unresolved shame can surface during times of stress. This stress can take its toll in the form of eating disorders, alcohol and drug addiction, extra-marital affairs, shoplifting, child abuse, and a host of other behaviors.

## WHEN COMPLEX NEEDS CLASH WITH SIMPLE DESIRES

Like all women, sexually abused women long for real love. The difference is that because their sexual boundaries were violated at an early age, they are more likely to use their bodies in an attempt to obtain that love. Through provocative and promiscuous behavior in the present, they express the sexual abuse and victimization they experienced in the past. In short, women with a history of abuse are seeking a way to satisfy complex needs regarding love, respect, and trauma resolution.

Unfortunately, in this era of sexual freedom, there is a nearly unlimited supply of men who want to satisfy a very simple impulse: their desire for uncommitted sexual release. When sexual abuse victims with complex needs meet predators whose interest in them is limited to their ability to satisfy their sexual desires, the result is predictably disastrous. Rather than finding resolution of their trauma and fulfillment of their need for love and respect, sexually abused women are more likely to encounter additional betrayals of their love, attacks on their dignity, and reenactment of their traumas. Sadly, sexually abused women and abusive males even tend to gravitate toward each other. It is as if these women's heightened vulnerability is a perfect match for these men's dysfunctional need to dominate and humiliate their mates.

When a pregnancy results between a needy woman and an abusive man who does not want the child, the woman is very likely to be subjected to increased levels of verbal or physical abuse, which is intended to compel her to submit to an unwanted abortion.<sup>2</sup> Under these hostile circumstances, many women submit. Their abortions do not free or empower them, however. Instead the abortion experience only strengthens their feelings of self-disgust, shame, and isolation, which serves to reinforce the dynamics that are keeping them locked in abusive relationships. Such was the case of Karen, who had been involved in numerous abusive relationships.

In my situation, abortion was just another form of sexual abuse. It was just another way of abusing me. He had power over me in demanding that I abort. He was completely "turned off" by me being pregnant. He actually punished me with his anger and rage. I could see that I would have to pay the price. Who cared that we created a life together? His sex with me was just as empty as his heart was. I can't believe I allowed him to control me as much as he did.

Another victim of sexual abuse, Dorinda, commented on the similarity between the horror of incest and the trauma of abortion.

Nothing that happened to my body mattered. As an incest victim, I had absolutely no volition regarding the integrity of my body—somebody wanted it and they took it, no matter what I wanted. In the case of my abortion, I had no understanding regarding the integrity of my body and spirit—"it" had misbehaved and had to be corrected without thought for how much the act would hurt me.

But who could think that a new life nurtured inside the body as one flesh could be severed from that body and ended without causing lifelong grief and yearning? Only a woman who had no idea that her body, or the spirit that infuses it, or the sexuality that permeates it, were connected or mattered.

I was not alone. The common experience of the women in our post-abortion group was the shock of the devastating feelings surrounding this act that was supposed to have no significance—as if our bodies and what they create have no significance, as if we have no significance. Our experiences were similar. I think it's because there's a common value underlying incest and abortion (and rape and promiscuity and our historic perception of sexuality)—an incredible callousness toward our bodies and others' bodies.

## ABORTION AS ANOTHER RAPE

Nina was raped one night while away on a business trip. To her horror and shame, she discovered she was pregnant. In an effort to destroy all reminders of the rape, Nina consented to an abortion.

The fact that I got pregnant because of the rape was disgusting. I felt like I had to get rid of it. Somehow, I figured that because I got pregnant I must have enjoyed it. I couldn't tolerate that concept. I was so ashamed. I got my abortion out of state so that no one would know.

The rape was nothing compared to the abortion. I developed a raging pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) because I never received any antibiotic to prevent infection. My gynecologist also informed me that besides the scarring from the infection, my cervix is badly damaged from the abortion procedure. I will never have children of my own because I am sterile due to the PID.

The rape was bad but I could have gotten over it. The abortion is something I will never get over. No one realizes how much that event damaged my life. I hate my rapist, but I hate the abortionist too. I can't believe I paid to be raped again. This will affect the rest of my life.

Like many rape victims, Nina blamed herself, believing that somewhere along the way she had invited or consented to the rape. Rather than removing her self-blame, her abortion reaffirmed her sense of shame and guilt. Now she knew she was culpable; she had even consented to the abortion in writing.

Nina loved children and had always wanted to have a family. The abortion demolished all her dreams of having children in the future. No one at the abortion clinic had ever mentioned that possible "side effect." The child she had lost to abortion was the only child she would ever conceive. This realization gave rise to intense grief and heartache. When it was too late, she longed for the aborted baby, even though he or she was the product of rape. She began to see herself as the guilty party and her baby as the innocent victim of her violence. The anger she felt toward the rapist became bitterly directed against herself. After such a devastating experience, her journey to recovery was long and difficult.

Nina's experience is not unusual. The largest study ever done of women who had pregnancies resulting from rape or incest was recently published in the book *Victims and Victors: Speaking Out About Their Pregnancies, Abortions, and Children Resulting from Sexual Assault*. In this study of nearly 200 women, 89 percent of those who aborted a pregnancy resulting from sexual assault explicitly stated that they regretted having had their abortions. They often described their abortions as more traumatic and difficult to deal with than the sexual assault. Over 90 percent stated they would discourage other pregnant sexual assault victims from opting for abortion. Only seven percent believed that abortion would "usually" be beneficial in cases of sexual assault. Conversely, among the sexual assault victims who carried to term, in retrospect they *all* believed they made the right decision in giving birth. None regretted not having an abortion.<sup>3</sup>

## FATAL ILLUSIONS

Many in contemporary society are concerned with ending the vicious cycle of abuse, yet they cannot see that the perpetrators of violence are often responding to their own memories of abuse. The theme of the victim becoming the perpetrator permeates the literature and clinical research on family violence. Countless articles and intervention programs have been developed with this aspect of trauma in mind.

The concept of victims becoming perpetrators can also be played out in a broader social context. For example, many of the women who initiated, fought, and are fighting the battle for abortion rights have themselves been badly mistreated, abandoned, and forced to suffer the hardships of life alone, victimized and unloved.<sup>4</sup> For many, the battle for abortion is symbolic of their battle to restore a sense of control and dignity to their own battered lives.<sup>5</sup>

Given the fact that many early advocates of legalized abortion suffered sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, it is not surprising that the language of abortion rights centers on "controlling

one's body." For many, the battle over abortion, even on a political level, involves a symbolic reenactment of their struggle to gain mastery over past trauma and abuse.

Unfortunately, those who use abortion as a means of mastering past trauma are doomed to suffer both disappointment and a deepening entanglement in the cycle of self-destructive violence. Mastery over past victimization can never be achieved by depersonalizing or destroying others.

Abortion only offers women who hunger for some resolution of past abuse the illusion of power. Victims of abuse have a deep hunger for respect, love, and justice. Abortion simply cannot fill these needs because it is inherently a destructive, negating act. Abortion does not create; it can only destroy. It cannot fill holes in one's spirit; it can only create new holes. But these truisms are not obvious to those whose needs and yearnings overpower reason. To an uninformed famine victim, for example, a huge mound of cotton candy appears to be a prize worth fighting for. If won, it may even seem sweet for a time. But it will not produce any lasting benefit, because it is not the nature of cotton candy to nourish. In the same way, it is not the nature of abortion to heal broken hearts or to empower the powerless.

Nothing was ever created by abortion. It can only destroy. And like so many other tools of destruction, it can often destroy far more than we intend.