

Voices in Action provides support for incest victims

By Alicia Gano
Of the Emerald

Incest is more than intimacy between a father and a daughter, a brother and a sister, family members that cannot legally marry.

Incest is "a betrayal of trust involving overt or covert sexual actions between a child and a trusted adult and/or authority figure," according to Voices in Action of Eugene, Inc., a counseling and support organization for survivors of incest.

Incest perpetrators may include adult neighbors, aunts, uncles or friends of the family who engage in sexual activity with a child, said Marie Leonard, director of the Eugene non-profit organization.

According to Leonard, incest or sexual molestation of a child can be anything from sexually implicit or degrading looks to inappropriate physical touching to sexual penetration. It may come in the form of loving attention or actual violence.

Women are the primary victims, with one of every three women having suffered some molestation as a child, Leonard said. But men are victims as well, with one in six men molested as children, she said.

Female victims are molested 95 percent of the time by men, 5 percent by women, but male victims are molested 60 percent of the time by men and 40 percent by women, according to Leonard.

Victims often feel guilty about being sexually molested as children and blame themselves for it, Leonard said. The result, she said, is a hesitancy to seek help.

One of the primary word cues Leonard looks for when she first interviews a client is the use of the word "just." "It was just the man next door. It was just my uncle. He just..."

The result of this self-blame or denial for women can be a blocking of their sexuality, Leonard said. In other words, they were molested because of their womanhood, and that was bad, so their womanhood must be bad, which has to do with their sexuality, so turn it off, she said.

Women also may react to the molestation by becoming promiscuous, she added.

Both male and female victims experience a lack of self-esteem and trust from the powerlessness they felt as



Photo by Maria Corvallis

Marie Leonard is director of Voices in Action, a Eugene group that provides counsel and support for incest victims.

molested children, which transfers to future relationships and parenting, Leonard said.

One common result of this sense of powerlessness is a compulsive desire to control the environment, she said. Victims may become obsessed with cleaning house or controlling children or just feeling responsible for everything that happens around them, Leonard said.

In addition, she said sexual relations between husband and wife can be strained as a woman consciously or unconsciously tries to gain control of her life and her sexuality.

A victim of incest herself, Leonard said she used to feel like it was her responsibility if she came home and found the dog had messed on the floor. She was in charge of making everyone happy and controlling all possible eventualities — she carried the welfare of the whole world on her shoulders, she said.

This exaggerated sense of responsibility comes from children feeling the need to keep the sexual abuse they suffer a secret, Leonard said. They feel that if they don't keep the secret, the family may fall apart,

she explained. They make a decision to keep the family together, and they take this decision into the rest of their lives, she said.

Incest victims make decisions as children about their powerlessness, their worth or their need to take care of the whole world and continue to live out these decisions, Leonard said.

Men, if molested by their mothers, often feel they are the

victims of something unbelievable and weird, that no one will believe a mother would do such a thing, she said.

Men also worry that people will think they're gay because they were molested, Leonard said, so they hide it. But inside, men often irrationally worry that they should be gay because of the molestation, she said.

These fears keep men from being open about having been molested and result in skewed statistics, Leonard said. She believes more than one in six men have been molested, but the figures just may not show it accurately.

Leonard believes, however, that figures on female incest victims are accurate.

Self-destructive behavior among women who were incest victims is common, Leonard said. Suicidal tendencies, eating disorders and a compulsive need to control their environment can all be results of their childhood experience, she said.

Rosemarie, a University student and mother, was abused as a child and said she felt suicidal most of her life. With the help of Voices in Action she is now happier and able to maintain long-term relationships with men, she said.

"I thought the only way to survive was to become a man," Rosemarie said.

Thinking men were rational creatures who didn't feel and were in control all the time, Rosemarie sought to regain power in her life by denying her female sexuality, she said.

Feeling uncomfortable with — even a dislike for — women

most of her life, Rosemarie thought women were not to be trusted. It was not OK to be a woman because that was why she was sexually molested in the first place. Rosemarie said that in the last few years she has learned to like and relate to women.

A former compulsive housekeeper, Rosemarie used to pride herself on keeping her house so clean "you could eat

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