

Why Teens Keep the Secret of Sexual Abuse

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"I didn't know it was wrong until another man did it."

As a young girl, Connie Ferris (name has been changed to protect her identity) didn't realize her father's strange touches and secret talks about the birds and the bees were anything unusual, until she was sexually abused by her boss when she was 15 years old.

Her employer owned a popular small-town convenience store and was more than friendly to Connie. He bought her a cashmere sweater and an extra-small T-shirt, both of which Connie said fit a little too snugly. She said he took pictures of her wearing them. He also brought her an Appaloosa horse. Along with the gifts, Connie said there were inappropriate hugs, pinches and comments.

One night, Connie's boss told her parents that he would drive the teen home after her shift. Connie said she had to sit close to him in his pickup because there was a big box on the floorboard. She said that once he pulled into her long driveway, he stopped his truck and sexually assaulted her. Connie said he told her not to tell anyone because no one would believe her.

"At that moment in my life, I just didn't want to live anymore," said Connie. "I knew my parents weren't going to believe me."

"I mean, this man...everyone loved this man," she said.

In desperation, Connie says she swallowed a bunch of aspirin that night from her family's medicine cabinet. When her mother noticed something was wrong, she told her about the assault.

Connie said her mother told her to go to bed and assured her they would tell Connie's father and the police the next day, after their house guests went home. Connie still hadn't connected the dots between what was happening with her father and what had happened with her boss.

The next day, her parents didn't called police.

Connie said her father simply told her to go back to the store, thank her boss for everything he had done for her and resign. "It made me feel terrible, like we were hiding it," said Connie. "I was told if I talked to anyone, I would be homeless."

Connie was alone with her secret.

Sexual assault remains the most underreported crime for teens and adults, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Nearly 70 percent of all reported sexual assaults happen to children age 17 and younger, according to Darkness to Light, a national child sexual abuse prevention program.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network says teens may drop hints to find out if the response will be supportive. If they feel supported, they may choose to share more

information over time.

Sue Lewis, a licensed clinical social worker and forensic interviewer supervisor for the Children's Center of Clackamas County, says there are many barriers that keep teens from disclosing abuse.

"They are afraid to tell because they fear it can't be proved," said Lewis. "They worry they won't be taken seriously."

"They may blame themselves or think they will be blamed," continued Lewis. "If they were drinking, they might feel it was somehow their fault."

Lewis has more than 20 years of experience as forensic interviewer in the field of child abuse. As a supervisor, she helps train other interviewers in the technique of talking to young people in a child-friendly, neutral manner in order to learn about their experience in a forensically sound manner.

She said the child gets to decide what they want to talk about and tells their story without the listener tainting their recollection with assumptions or judgment.

"We try to ask questions in the most open-ended manner," Lewis said. "Tell me why you're here today? Tell me what happened?"

The interviewer has already informed the child that their disclosure is being digitally recorded by a discreet camera. The child is also shown that law enforcement and representatives from the Department of Human Services are watching from the next room through a one-way window.

"We don't keep any secrets," said Lewis. "We ask them to be honest, so we are honest with them."

Lewis says one of the main goals is to minimize the number of times the child needs to be interviewed. "Research tells us, by having them tell their story over and over, they begin to feel like they're not being believed," said Lewis. "They can shut down, saying, 'you know what, this didn't happen.' They recant."

By the time a teenager gets to the Children's Center, Lewis said they typically are ready to talk about what happened, but they may have faced many challenges to get to that point. Lewis said teen girls often first talk about the abuse with their friends, rather than their parents. Then, those friends might keep the secret, not wanting to violate their friend's trust.

Lewis said teenaged boys face different barriers. The sexuality piece is a big concern, with many boys worrying about a stigma of being presumed gay.

"It actually might have felt good physically, yet it doesn't feel good in their head and their heart," said Lewis. They might feel responsible for the way their body reacted to the abuse.

Similar to Connie's situation, many children might not realize that they are being abused. Or, teenagers may say they didn't realize it was a big deal. Some don't understand the seriousness of

the situation, Lewis said.

Another reason for not telling is a desire to protect their mothers. A daughter sees that her mother loves her boyfriend, and she doesn't want to cause a problem between them.

"Many of the barriers have to do with fear," said Lewis. "Fear of the consequences, fear of the offender. Will they be removed from their family? Will someone be taken to jail?"

There is also the concern among teens and younger children for their physical health. Those who come into the Children's Center are offered a non-invasive medical exam with the center's specially trained staff. Lewis said many teens are reluctant and always have the choice to decline the exam. But she said, it is a good way to assure children that everything is OK with their bodies.

For Connie, her abuse affected her self-esteem, leading to weight issues throughout her teen and adult years. She began wearing big clothes to avoid men looking at her. When she began to get in shape and feel good about herself, she shut down again when a man would offer a compliment.

Her relationship with her mother also deteriorated. "I just wanted her to believe me," said Connie. "But she never said she believed me, even as an adult."

Connie finally decided to share her secret nearly four decades after her abuse began. She and her family returned to her hometown to attend Connie's 30-year class reunion. As she drove by her old house with her husband and children, the one question that had been on Connie's mind since the age of 15 finally needed to be answered.

"I thought, what if I tell my story and it helps one person?" Connie asked herself.

She enrolled in the Darkness to Light child abuse prevention training course, which she had heard about during a work luncheon. It turned out to be her catalyst for change. During that first training, she realized she wasn't the only one needing support: Her brother had recently confided in her that his daughter had accused him of sexual abuse, which he denied.

"I realized, oh my God, we're going to go through this again," said Connie.

Connie knew how important it was to tell her niece that the teen would be supported and believed. Connie told her niece's mother that she was available to answer any questions her niece might have. She even helped her niece pursue charges – something that never happened in Connie's case – by enlisting the help of the Children's Advocacy Center.

Weeks after taking that initial Darkness to Light training course, Connie said her brother was arrested on charges of abuse of six people, some children, including his daughter. He eventually struck a plea deal with the court.

Empowered, Connie decided it was time to put

her story down in writing and share it with more people – 300 more people, in fact. She agreed to read it during the Children's Advocacy Center annual luncheon. The room – filled with law enforcement officers, business people and elected officials – fell silent as she finally decided to tell her truth.

"I felt like this black cloud I'd been carrying with me all these years was gone," Connie said. "I just felt lighter."

Connie said organizations, including the Children's Center and the Children's Advocacy Center, are the key to helping communities learn about child abuse prevention. The centers also offer survivors invaluable resources for health and healing.

Lewis agreed there needs to be a "shift" in society to stop putting the responsibility of preventing child abuse on the victim, who may feel powerless, especially if their offender is an authority figure.

"We parents need to tell children there are bad people, people with touching problems," suggested Lewis. "If someone is making you feel uncomfortable, you need to come tell me, and I will deal with them."

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) recommends parents talk openly with their children about sexuality, boundaries and consent, and inform teens that they can talk to you about difficult situations and you will be available to help them, even when they break a rule.

Lewis said teen brains are still developing, so teenagers are going to practice poor judgment at times. Parents shouldn't blame them for it.

The NCTSN and Lewis both recommend the Darkness to Light program to educate yourself about child abuse. Check out its website, www.d2l.org, or get more information on group trainings, similar to the course Connie attended, through the Clackamas County Children's Center.

Additional Resources:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.org

Victims of Crime: www.victimsofcrime.org

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN): www.rainn.org

Teen Source: www.teensource.org/relationships/healthyrelationships

That's Not Cool: thatsnotcool.com

Futures Without Violence: www.futureswithoutviolence.org

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