

EFFECTS OF CHILD ABUSE ON SELF ESTEEM.

PCP 539 Counseling issues in life span development

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Abstract

Self esteem is highly valued in today's society, yet a great number of adults lack good self esteem due to various forms of abuse in their childhood. This book review looks at the reasons for such abuse, the long term effects of that abuse, and some things that can be done to raise the esteem of an adult survivor of abuse. Five books are covered in the order that they are most helpful to the individual who needs this help to improve their outlook on life, with the final offering being primarily for counselors and professionals. Similarities between the different views, contrasts between them, and special contributions to a general understanding have been given where appropriate.

Self esteem is an important component of our society; the belief is that everyone should feel good about who they are and what they are doing with their life. The primary underpinning of good self esteem is a positive self-worth and self image. There are many in today's society who have had that self worth destroyed in their youth by various forms of child abuse. Although the physical scars of abuse, the outward evidence, is rarely seen by the rest of society once a child reaches adulthood, the inward scars remain and will affect the adult survivor of abuse, and society, for the rest of their lives. The question then is; what can be done to raise the self esteem of a child abuse survivor to a positive and healthy functioning level?

One of the most cost effective and helpful methods is biblio-therapy; books that promote healing. One of the primary books that deal specifically with understanding how abuse of a child directly affects the child's self concept and therefore self-esteem, is entitled; *Toxic parents, overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life*, by Dr. Susan Forward. Whereas most people get a mental picture of physical battery when they hear the phrase 'child abuse', this writer shows quite plainly that such abuse goes beyond physical beatings. Forward (1990) writes;

Whether adult children of toxic parents were beaten when little or left alone too much, sexually abused or treated like fools, over protected or over burdened by guilt, they almost

all suffer surprisingly similar symptoms; damaged self esteem leading to self destructive behavior. In one way or another they almost all feel worthless, unlovable and inadequate. These feelings stem to a great degree from the fact that children of toxic parents blame themselves for their parents abuse, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. (p.6)

It is true indeed that the forms of abuse are many, some so subtle that they would hardly be recognizable as abuse except in their long term implications, yet the loss of self esteem will affect that person for their whole life and may even impact society in a dramatic way.

One of the major underpinnings of this low self concept and blame aspect is in how a child views their parents when they are young. This is covered by Forward (1990) as a major factor in how this self esteem process works, or doesn't work, as the child grows. Part one, chapter one, called Godlike parents, says, "When we're very young our godlike parents are everything to us." (Forward, 1990, p.15) The child relies on their parents for everything and in that dependence the child builds a concept that these almighty beings are somehow always right no matter what happens. This seems to have two corresponding effects; first that any abuse cannot be their fault since the 'gods' are always right, and secondly that they as children must not be any good because they are beaten and are powerless to change the situation.

Another author on this subject concurs with this analysis in the idea of, "the idealization of mother love." (Miller, 1981, p.4) Miller sees a two way street here in that the child has no perception of love apart from that which is received from the mother initially. (even an abusive mother somehow does what she does out of love.) From research done this love is really more of a parental love aspect as fathers can not be left out. The other aspect is that the child, and adult survivor of abuse, is required to somehow show love to these parents and absolve them of responsibility. Miller (1981), calls this a myth "that has withstood all the recent efforts at demystification" (p.4)

Forward, (1990), points out that victims spend great quantities of time and energy at not demystifying this parental love. Instead ways are found to mask this idea that the parents are really the ones at fault, or to somehow put a better spin on the reason for the abuse. Denial is a

major contributor that is called “the most primitive and most powerful of psychological defenses.” (Forward, 1990, p.21) After all if it never happened, it can’t hurt. If the abuse can not be denied completely, the conclusion will be made that somehow there were good reasons for the abuse and the fault is the child’s, not the parents. The major problem here is that the victim knows this is a lie and the internal conflict will some day come out in some violent or self destructive way. In the meantime, the now grown child believes that somehow because they are to blame, nothing they do will ever be alright.

There are many forms of abuse that are covered in *Toxic parents* that primarily serve to show the extent to which abuse is connected with esteem in it’s many nuances. One of the primary questions this raises is why this abuse goes on at all. The answer given in this work is that there are unacceptable and inadequate coping strategies the parents engage in. Five specific “coping mechanisms” (Forward, 1990, p. 178) are; 1} Denial, were the parents sees nothing wrong with their abusive techniques. 2} Projection, were the parents problems and fears are somehow the fault of the children, or are to be corrected in them. 3} Sabotage, or making efforts to keep the family dysfunctional because that is all they know. 4} Triangulating, where one parent looks for comfort from a child, to offset problems with a spouse, which can lead to additional abuse on both that parent and the spouse. And finally 5} keeping secrets, which can cause feelings of shame and guilt in both parents and children, and can lead to physical abuse if shared. These are not offered as excuses, but as understanding. “Understanding is the beginning of change. It opens new options and choices. But seeing things differently is not enough. True freedom can only come from doing things differently.” (Forward, 1990, p. 180)

Since the main emphasis here is not the abuse, but overcoming the low self esteem it generates, understanding the motives is a good first step. The remainder of Forward’s book, Part

two, is about reclaiming your life; protocols that one can implement to rebuild self esteem for adult survivors of child abuse. The first of these protocols is interesting: “It is not necessary to forgive your parents in order to feel better about yourself and to change your life.” (Forward, 1990, p.185) Her explanation of this statement is that forgiveness is only good if it means getting away from the negative concepts of revenge and making things even. Forgiveness does not mean absolving the abuser of responsibility and accountability; this according to Forward actually impedes the process of recovery. The replacement protocol then after responsibility is established and anger is dealt with is called a burial exercise:

I hereby lay to rest my fantasy of the good family. I hereby lay to rest my hopes and Expectations about my parents. I hereby lay to rest my fantasy that there was something I could have done as a child to change them. I know that I will never have the kind of Parents that I wanted, and I mourn that loss. But I accept it. May these fantasies rest in Peace. (Forward, 1990, P. 229)

True forgiveness according to this philosophy is to get over the grief without absolving the parent of their crime.

Confrontation of the parents, or other offenders, for the abuse in its many forms is the one of the final stages offered, followed by tips to break the cycle that only will serve to hurt again.

Another book well worth reading to help in the rebuilding of self esteem does not deal specifically with effects of physical abuse, but rather what might be seen as a form of neglect or mental abuse. *The blessing*, by Gary Smalley and John Trent, (1986) is written from a Christian perspective using biblical illustrations, and deals with seeking parental approval, i.e. blessing, or in the case of abuse, losing out on parental approval by intent or ignorance.

All of us long to be accepted by others. While we may not say out loud ‘I don’t care what

Other people think about me', on the inside we all yearn for intimacy and affection. This yearning is especially true in our relationship with our parents.(Smalley & Trent, 1986,p.9)

This yearning for parental approval is one of the reasons that abuse victims blame themselves for their suffering in that they somehow failed to measure up to parental expectations. Many cases of sexual abuse especially are rationalized away by the victim as being a way to gain that coveted parental approval even at the expense of self worth.

The primary message in this writing is that this parental approval, or blessing, contains five parts that, working together, communicate a message of positive self worth. These five are:

A meaningful touch.

A spoken message.

Attaching high value to the one being blessed.

Picturing a special future for the one being blessed.

An active commitment to fulfill the blessing. (Smalley & Trent, 1986, p. 24)

If each of these is essential to a positive outlook on life and good self esteem, then it is easy to see how abuse can do so much to undermine that outlook.

Being physically abusive is not a meaningful touch, but may be the only touch received by many children. "In A recent study from UCLA, it was found that just to maintain emotional and physical health, men and women need 8 to 10 meaningful touches each day" (Smalley & Trent, 1986, p. 42) Such meaningful touches communicate a warmth and acceptance; what abused children do get are mainly mean-full touches.

The spoken message is not always encouraging in abusive homes; words spoken are more often destructive or demeaning. What a child seeks is a message of worth and value; what they

too often receive are worthless and degrading words. For some children the message is that one's worth depends on performance, and failure to achieve indicates stupidity or incompetence.

Attaching a high value to a child can not be totally performance related. Children need to believe that they have worth in themselves apart from the talents, aptitudes, or physical attributes they possess. This author is a Christian and believes that God sees worth in all of his creation; that all are valuable in God's sight because he created us and desires a relationship with us. God wants to bless us and forgive us; his message of worth in Romans 8:1, is that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Attaching a high value to the one being blessed is absent from an abusive home. Even if some such words are uttered, the actions of abuse negate them; such treatment is not indicative of value. "Words of blessing should carry with them the recognition that this person is valuable and has redeeming qualities." (Smalley & Trent, 1986, p. 26) This attribute of blessing ties directly to the next two attributes; first picturing a special future for the child. When a parent communicates a message of uselessness, especially in verbal abuse, they usually include pronouncements that the person will never amount to anything worthwhile; that they will surely fail. Secondly, the only active commitment such children see from these parents is a commitment to further abuse, which will do nothing to build self esteem.

In as much as this book deals with the right way to build good self esteem, it is recognized implicitly and explicitly that most do not receive such an ideal upbringing. Since many long for a blessing they have not, and may not ever receive, there are protocols here for rebuilding esteem.

Being honest with one's self by accepting and believing the truth is the beginning point. Here again scripture is used from Romans 8:32, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you

free” Knowing and embracing the truth is similar to what Susan forward believes about placing blame where it belongs and being able to remove the blame from self.

Smalley and Trent also teach an understanding of parents as Forward does, yet that is where the similarities end. Rather than confronting parents, the concept is taught that what abuse truly has done is to rob one of this needed blessing, so their idea is to seek a new blessing from God and his spiritual family. “God’s spiritual family blessing begins with the fact that we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; our spiritual parentage is secure.” (Smalley & Trent, 1986, p. 158) As this new blessing is embraced, and the idea that self worth and self esteem are now derived from God develops, a new vision of the abusing parent begins to grow. The teaching here is that this vision will be of parents who need what the child has found, and one is encouraged to do as Jesus taught and “bless those that curse you, pray for those that mistreat you.” (Luke 6:28)

Another book of value for rebuilding self esteem in adult children of abuse is *Hide and seek*, written by Dr. James Dobson, also a Christian, in 1974. As stated earlier, low self esteem induced by abuse and neglect can have a dramatic impact on society. Dobson begins by relating the sad tale of Lee Harvey Oswald and his life of neglect; he concludes the story with this indictment. “The rejected, unlovable failure, killed the man who more than any other man on earth, embodied all the success, beauty, wealth, and family affection he lacked.” (Dobson, 1974, p. 10)

Rather than deal with all the forms of abuse and their effects, Dobson, (1974) directs his book to raising children. “This book is dedicated to the proposition that all children are created worthy and must be given the right to personal respect and dignity. It can be done!” (p. 11) Parental strategies are focused on in order to teach parents how to properly raise children to

affect this ideal, and create proper self worth and self esteem. The same idea that Forward(1990) and Smalley & Trent (1986) put forward that knowledge and understanding are important ingredients of change, is the basis of Dobson's work. Knowing what should have been done can help one to see what needs to be corrected and why. One example on page 20 is the truth that something relatively minor can be blown out of proportion. This might help one to focus on the things that are not wrong, and the things that one can do well. Most any person can see themselves, and this truth, in this statement; "If physical attractiveness is considered important during childhood, it becomes supersignificant and all-consuming during adolescence." (Dobson, 1974, p. 24) The realization that all cannot be physically perfect, that such demands of perfection are an illusion of the visual media, and that each person has something to contribute no matter what they look like, if embraced by the victim, can help build esteem. The well known writer and actor, Dale Evans Rodgers, concurs with this side effects of the visual media; "It makes us wonder about the effects of TV on the children of today" and "on the whole family." (Rodgers, 1978, p. 68)

Again, not all abuse is physical, and it is not all from the parents, yet it still manages to be a detriment to ones self esteem. Dobson aptly points out that the nations education system can contribute and even inflict abuse on a child, especially children who already suffer abuse in their homes or have any variety of defects in their life. "Make no mistake about it! School is a dangerous place for children with fragile egos." (Dobson, 1974, p. 38.) When a child feels that they are somehow slow or stupid because their parents tell them so; rest assured that the children in school will not hesitate to confirm these feelings. Teasing, being picked last for a team, getting up before a class, or being singled out for correction, which schools do; all can harm self worth.

Dobson (1974) declares that we need to “declare all-out war on the destructive value system I have been describing—the system which reserves self-worth and dignity for a select minority.” (p. 47) He proposes using 10 strategies for this that he gives in detail through the rest of the book that cover the age range from the small child, to the adolescent, to the adult. The tenth strategy deals with the discouraged adult where he makes this statement: “Low self-esteem is extremely common among adults today, being particularly prevalent with American women. I simply cannot overemphasize this point. Virtually every woman I have counseled has expressed a poverty of inner confidence.” (Dobson, 1974, p. 131) His solution is to reach out to a confidant and share one’s burdens with another who has a love and concern for you. Let them help build up that needed self confidence and self esteem.

The final chapter on coping strategies deals with how children and adults deal with their upbringing. Withdrawal from life and relationships, and fighting when threatened or to overcome doubts and insecurities are some methods of coping. Acting the part of the clown, denying the reality of situations, conforming to expectations, and attempting to compensate for presumed deficiencies are the other coping strategies examined by Dobson. These are all areas that are common to children of abuse who need improved self esteem.

The next book to consider is *Prisoners of childhood*, by Alice Miller, from 1981, who actually translated the works of Ruth Ward from German. The primary emphasis of this work is in a neglect that involves both manipulation and control of the child, not for the child’s good, but for the emotional benefit of the parent. One of the reoccurring themes of the literature on this subject of abuse and self esteem is its cyclical consistency; parents abuse because they were abused in some way. The premise in this book is that a deprived parent attempts to either live

through the child, or to have their adult needs from a child who is unable to fully meet those needs.

Parents who did not experience this climate [of having needs met] as children are themselves narcissistically deprived; throughout their lives they are looking for what their own parents could not give them at the correct time—the presence of a person who is completely aware of them and takes them seriously, who admires and follows them. (Miller, 1981, p. 6)

Rather than let the child be a child, they must conform to the desires of narcissistic parents.

For the self esteem issue this has an impact even if all else in the child's life seems alright, which is especially true for gifted children who seem to have everything going for them. A person from this environment may not have made the connection that their low self esteem has anything to do with abuse because the abuse is not outward and visible. In this environment most children do well intellectually yet suffer other problems directly tied to self esteem:

What is described as depression and experienced as emptiness, futility, fear of impoverishment,

and loneliness can often be recognized as the tragedy of the loss of the self, or alienation from

the self, from which many suffer in our generation and society. (Miller, 1981, p. 30)

For some who can see themselves in this narcissistic parent trap, there are helps offered to Guide them though to finding the way out.

One final Book that might be worthwhile is called *The battered child*, written by Henry Kemp and Ray Helfer, both medical doctors, in 1980. The primary audience targeted by these authors, are counselors and professionals, to help them in evaluating and dealing with child abuse cases. For the adult survivor of abuse one main benefit of this book is the thorough

coverage it gives on the history and effects of abuse; here again, if knowledge aids understanding, then help can be found in the information contained in this book.

Some of the specific information gleaned from this book for the abuse survivor is the contribution stress makes to abuse. “A major cause of the high rate of child abuse is the stress and conflict which tend to characterize families.” (Kemp & Helfer, 1980, p. 92) These periods of stress are highest during times of transition between the different phases of development a family will experience. Stress and abuse also factor in to marital satisfaction; in a comparison done on this satisfaction, the unsatisfied had an 87% higher rate of abuse than those who were satisfied by their marriage. Stress can be effectively managed, and recognizing the stress factor can aide in coping with these destructive effects of abuse.

When one does not comprehend the motives behind actions, wrong conclusions are often made and hope is often lost. Since a standard method of dealing with abuse is self blame (a wrong conclusion) and withdrawal (hopeless-ness), then understanding what has happened and why, and seeing the ramifications of the abuse as shown in this book, then great benefits will come by reading it. As the authors point out: “Adaptations which may be valuable for survival are usually self-defeating in helping the child grow up with a sense of worth, with an ability to have friends, and with the capacity to enjoy, and appreciate ones self and others.”(Kemp & Helfer, 1980, p.360)

If, as has been said, knowledge is power, then any of these books will give the adult survivor of child abuse power over the harmful effects of their upbringing. Self esteem and self worth will not rebuild themselves; hopefully these books will help start the process.

References

Dobson, James C. (1974). *Hide and seek*. Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell.

Forward, Susan, Ph.D. (1990). *Toxic Parents; Overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life*. New York: Bantam.

Holy Bible, New International Version. 1984. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervon.

Kempe, Henry C. M.D. & Helfer, Ray E. M.D. (1980). *The battered child*. (3rd edition).
Chicago Il.: Chicago university press.

Miller, Alice (1981). *Prisoners of childhood*. New York: Basic books

Rodgers, Dale Evans (1978). *Hear the children crying*. Old Tappan N.J.: Revell

Smalley, Gary & Trent, John, Ph.D. (1986). *The blessing*. Nashville Tenn.: Nelson publishers.

Dobson, James C., (1974). *Hide and seek*. Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell.

Dobson's work is primarily aimed at "the preventative measures against inferiority to be taken on behalf of small children by the home and school." (p.131) For an adult reader suffering the effects of abuse, the benefit gained from seeing oneself in the scenarios given and resultant disorders make this book worth reading. The final area of the book has specific strategies for coping with poor self worth and low self esteem.

Forward, Susan, Ph.D., (1990). *Toxic Parents; Overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life*. New York: Bantam.

This author hits the mark connecting the different forms of child abuse with the clients self esteem and self worth. She groups "toxic parents" into inadequate parents, the controllers, the alcoholics, the verbal abusers, the physical abusers, and the sexual abusers. Whereas as the book is easy reading utilizing case studies and analysis, it also contains a significant amount of vulgarities within the transcripts of clients dialog and as such would not be suitable for most Christians.

Kempe, Henry C., M.D. & Helfer, Ray E., M.D. (1980). *The battered child*. (third edition). Chicago Il.: Chicago university press.

This is mostly a technical book dealing specifically with child abuse and the detrimental effects on development. The author gives guidance for counselors and professionals to deal with both the victim and the abusers. There is a section on "retraining and relearning" (p.391) with protocols to assist in rebuilding self worth.

Miller, Alice. (1981). *Prisoners of childhood*. New York: Basic books

This book originally written in German by Ruth ward and translated into English, is specific in its coverage of abuse to the effects of narcissistic parents. The main premise is with an abuse that occurs from the parents seeking the devotion of the child to supplement the parents loss from their own childhood. This reference is helpful for the grown child trying to understand themselves, and in seeking how to raise their own child differently. Others suffer from poor parenting that could imitate this and these findings may help them as well.

Smalley, Gary & Trent, John, Ph.D. (1986). *The blessing*. Nashville Tenn.: Nelson publishers.

While not directed specifically at child abuse as a cause for low self esteem, this book examines some of the reasons that abuse of varying kinds can cause low self esteem. The title, *The blessing*, refers to a parents approval of their child and the lack there of is shown as the catalyst for low self worth and esteem. "Gaining or missing out on parental approval has a tremendous effect on us, even if it has been years since we have had any regular contact with them." (P. 9) Most cases of abuse are an indication to the child that they do not have this coveted approval so here again the victim of abuse can gain help by relating to the scenarios presented.