

LIVING WITH FEAR

FEAR OF THOSE YOU LOVE

I learned responsibility incredibly early. My parents' expectations of me were extremely high. I learned how to care for my younger siblings and complete household chores at a young age. Being a responsible child did not save me from being beaten by my father. From about age three, if I did not obey, I would most certainly get a whipping with a belt. Physical punishment helped shape my view of the type of parent I wanted to become. When I was eleven years old, I remember not going home immediately after school one day. I got home about an hour and a half late and my father was waiting with the leather belt. There were no discussions, no explanation requested, no questions asked; he just immediately whipped me with a leather belt across my back, legs, and other areas, leaving scars on my legs and back. To this day, it saddens me to look at the scars. I got so many beatings from my father that I lost count of the number of times in a day. He would usually beat me when he was angry, making

the beating worse because he used more force to hit. I became resentful and angry, strengthening my resolve to get away when I got older and be a more loving, empathetic parent when I grew up.

I am shy and passive by nature, but growing up with this kind of harshness shaped me into a tough and determined child who yearned for a different life. I developed an intense fear of my father and his physical abuse. On a daily basis I would wonder what I did that would cause me to get another beating after school. My father would often beat me for minor things, such as adults in the community telling him that I was rude to them. I did not know it then, but I was building up fear and anxiety from worrying about my parents' fighting and from the beatings that I got from my father.

I did not know how to classify or name all my emotional pain developed from these experiences until much later in my adult life when I learned that I had depression and anxiety. It is important to note here that research has shown that physical punishment can lead to mental health and other issues.

AT AGE FIFTEEN, A FRIEND SAW THE SCARS ON MY LEGS AND JOKINGLY ASKED ME IF I WAS ON THE TITANIC WHEN IT WENT DOWN. I DID NOT THINK IT WAS FUNNY THEN NOR NOW, BUT I TOLD HIM THAT THE SCARS WERE DERIVED FROM MY EXPERIENCE IN THE *WAR ZONE THAT I GREW UP IN, MY CHILDHOOD HOME.*

FAMILY & COMMUNITY ISSUES INTERSECT

The disruptions in my daily life were consistent and pervasive and were caused by my parents' dysfunctional, unstable relationship. After a fight, my mother moved out only to move right back days or weeks later. As a result of all the fighting and moving, we did not have anything of value; everything of value was broken or destroyed. We slept on the floor in rags—pieces of old sheets. Seven of the eight of us slept on the floor in the two-room house we lived in. It was built by my father, his friends, and neighbors; this is the usual way those with little money built houses. We were all bedwetters, so we would have to take the rags we slept on to the river to wash daily while the entire community watched. It was embarrassing and a source of gossip.

Gossiping was a way of life in the community. There was talk about the problems in my family, specifically my mother's mental illness. Domestic violence was a norm. Whenever there was a fight between a couple, it was public knowledge because it usually spilled out into the streets. People would gather around to watch. I do not recall anyone trying to stop the beatings from happening. I remember a couple fighting in the street across from where we lived, and a crowd gathered watching. The husband took a huge rock and hit the wife with it. I thought she was dead, but no one intervened. That was the norm, and it was the same in my household. My parents' fights were public from the house to the yard. Everyone saw but said nothing. Just recently, I asked a friend if she knew what was going on in my home, and she said she knew nothing about the violence. I was not surprised because the community turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to all the abuse that occurred.

I grew up in a small, rural community. We called it "the country" in St. Mary, Jamaica, WI, the kind of place where everyone knew each other and each other's business. Adults and children alike would gossip and say mean things about other people's children. I recall at sixteen, I went back home to have my first child, and a good friend's mother told her not to speak to me anymore because I would be a bad influence on her. That advice was given specifically because I was about to become a teen mom. This attitude was a part of the pretense of being better

than others. The culture in Jamaica is very hierarchical and class conscious. It is your family background and your material possessions that define your status. The community looked down on my family because we were a poor struggling family with an illiterate father and a mentally ill mother. This treatment was contradictory because my father was beloved by the community, especially the women. The attitude and treatment of the people in the community were a large part of why I yearned to leave home. I could not imagine spending my life in a place where people treated others the way they treated my family and me.

THE LOSS OF INNOCENCE

As a vulnerable child, I felt insecure and unloved. This level of vulnerability played out in two ways in my life. I was sexually abused multiple times by family members and family friends. Consequently, as a teen, I became promiscuous. Promiscuity is one of the possible outcomes for children who were sexually abused. The experts from the American Academy who specialize in post-traumatic stress confirm that a large number of childhood sexual abuse survivors engage in promiscuous behaviors. According to these experts, childhood sexual abuse results in symptoms that include depression, poor self-esteem, guilt, shame, dissociative disorders, anxiety, and relationship difficulties. In my case dissociation, shame, anxiety, depression, and poor self-esteem were the PTSD

symptoms that I believe led to my promiscuous behaviors. My PTSD went undiagnosed until I became an adult. I thought that all the symptoms were normal because I had them all my life. These symptoms also contributed to my looking for love and acceptance, in all the wrong places and with the wrong people, who pretended to care about me but only took advantage of my innocence.

I trusted the people in my family and my family friends, but I was sexually abused on more than one occasion by those same trusted male family members and family friends. The most shocking of all was my father, the person who should have been the most protective of me, sexually abused me. For years, the memories of his image, sensations of the act, and smells of his body odor would surface during my most intimate moments.

**I VIVIDLY REMEMBER HAVING A MEMORY
IN THE MIDDLE OF AN INTIMATE MOMENT
THAT PUT ME IN A TRANCE. I JUST
COULD NOT ALLOW MYSELF TO FULLY
EXPERIENCE THAT MEMORY, BECAUSE IT
WAS SHOCKING AND DEVASTATING.**

My mother had an elderly cousin whom we knew well. He would visit us, and we would visit him. He treated me extra special from the time I was a little girl. We had a

special relationship, but he used that trust to abuse me on many occasions. There were other trusted males who repeatedly touched me in inappropriate ways, but it did not occur to me to tell anyone about these experiences. As an adult, I became aware of other people I grew up with who were also abused as children. One person told their parents, but they did not believe them—that is not surprising. It never occurred to me to tell my parents. In some cases, like my own, the abuse happens in the home, so who do you tell?

**SEXUAL ABUSE AND INCEST WERE
RAMPANT WHEN I WAS GROWING UP,
BUT NOTHING WAS SAID. YOU HEARD
WHISPERS, BUT NO ONE BELIEVED. EVEN
TODAY, WITH ALL THE KNOWLEDGE AND
INFORMATION AVAILABLE, PEOPLE I
KNOW WOULD HAVE TROUBLE BELIEVING
A CHILD REPORTING SEXUAL ABUSE.**

Without realizing it, I allowed anger toward the men who abused me to take up too much space in my life experiences. Due to my inability to trust, I had difficulties opening myself up to creating lasting bonds in relationships. Sexual abuse is devastating in any form,

done by anyone. Sexual abuse by the closest male figures in my life as a child is difficult to comprehend. I could not have moved on with my life without exercising forgiveness. I had to learn forgiveness. Forgiving all the men who sexually abused me gave me *my power back* and the freedom to live an emotionally balanced life. I spent years in and out of therapy, learning how the past impacted my life and ways to minimize, improve, or change the effects left behind.

Moving away from all the abuse and my unkind hometown was the beginning of a different life where my determination, resiliency, and perseverance guided my path.

