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Interview

## **An Interview with Susan**

"Until about age 12, it didn't seem to affect me. But, it was around 12 when I began having recurring dreams that were very disturbing. As a matter of fact, I still have them. Then as I became more sexually aware, I realized that something was different about me, but I wasn't sure what. I liked boys, but if a guy liked me, I'd run away from him. There was a feeling of fear and I didn't know why."

This is an interview with a girl named "Susan." I am not using her real name to protect her identity. Susan is now in her mid-twenties. About five years ago a repressed nightmare she had suffered in her past began to emerge into her consciousness. It was the nightmare of sexual abuse when she was very young.

I chose to do an interview about childhood sexual abuse because I was stunned to learn how many children are molested. Statistics show that one in five female and one in eleven male children are sexually abused at least once. Tragically, the results of the abuse reach far into the victim's adult life.

Sexual molestation is a horror I can only imagine about. Fortunately, it never happened to me. However, I have learned that many women, and men, close to me were molested as children.

My purpose is to understand what effects childhood sexual abuse can have on the child's adult life. I think that many people, like myself, don't understand how difficult it is for someone to overcome this very frightening experience. It was a taboo subject in the past. It's only recently that it has come into the open.

A few years ago, a woman accused her ex-husband of sexually molesting their young daughter. The story drew national attention because the woman chose to go to prison rather than to allow her young daughter visitation with her ex-husband. The father vehemently denied the accusation.

A spouse's accusations of child molestation tend to be seen as mud-slinging by people involved in a bitter divorce. The accusations aren't given much attention. Unfortunately, it is difficult to prove this kind of accusation. For that reason, it's easy to use as slander. It's an accusation much like rape. Who do you believe? For this reason, it often goes unreported even when one parent (or another adult) knows it's going on.

Even more tragically, a child doesn't know *how* to tell anyone. They are often too young to comprehend that sexual contact with them is a wrongful act. More often than not, the molester is someone the child trusts, like a father, a brother, an uncle, or a grandfather. (Women are also child molesters, but this is much less common.) So, the child is frightened and confused.

When Susan was about 12, she began to have recurring dreams that frightened and haunted her. The dreams were always about her grandparent's house. In these dreams a man would be trying to get into the house. The house had many doors and windows, and she would run frantically throughout the house trying to lock them all so he couldn't get in. These dreams persist even to this day.

In high school, Susan had the same teenage crushes as her classmates. If she knew that a boy liked her, though, she experienced an inexplicable fear and ran from a possible encounter. Her friends didn't react the same way, so she knew there was something different about her. She eventually did go out with a couple of boys. However, if the boy tried to be affectionate or kiss her, she became nauseous and wanted to get away. She rationalized her fears and attributed them to a variety of reasons.

In college Susan fell in love. But the intimacy of that relationship caused anxieties far more intense than she'd experienced before. She wanted affection and intimacy from her boyfriend, but the intimacy brought on horrid bouts of fear. At times she became frigid and couldn't stand to be touched in any way. She

became nauseous to the point of wanting to vomit. Obviously, these reactions were creating havoc with her relationship.

Then Susan began to experience flashbacks. The flashbacks came during intimacy and were indescribably powerful. She said there was nothing specific, like a place, a person, or an action. Nonetheless, there was no doubt in her mind what they related to. One of the times she experienced a flash of red, perhaps a piece of clothing. She said it was like someone had stuck a picture in front of her face. She had an immediate urge to vomit. These flashbacks confirmed in her mind what had happened to her.

Since she couldn't say exactly what happened, with whom, or when, she also had difficulty comprehending it. Regardless, she just knew it had happened. For some reason she suspected her Grandfather. This feeling caused her terrible guilt because she had no specific recollections that it was actually him. She was accusing someone when she couldn't even say for a fact that anything had happened. But where did these awful feelings come from? She had no answers.

Susan tried talking with her boyfriend about it, but he had a hard time dealing with the subject. She finally talked to her Mother about what she suspected. Her Mother took her to a therapist who specialized in sexual molestation. After spending time with Susan, the therapist talked with the Mother. According to the therapist, Susan's experiences were common among women who have been molested as children. The child often represses this kind of experience because it is so traumatic. It usually comes out when the girl is in her early twenties or thirties. And sadly, it often leaves emotional scars.

In Susan's case, she may never know who it was, exactly what or when it happened. If she was molested at a preverbal age, the memory of the incident(s) would have been on an emotional level. This is unfortunate because for her, it will always be unsettling about what happened and who did it. She has only a strong sense that it was her Grandfather, and possibly her Father, or both. For her, suspecting them brings guilt because she has no proof.

Susan spent a while in therapy. She said it was very difficult for her to talk to the therapist. She cried at every session trying to come to terms with her feelings. For a period, she experienced an inner anger that she describes as rage. The anger was not towards anyone in particular, but towards everyone. It was a rage she didn't know how to get rid of. She learned through counseling that this, too, was a common feeling with victims of sexual molestation.

The therapist told Susan that there were three ways the body remembers repressed events:

- Visually
- Emotionally
- Physically

Susan's experience was physical. The body knew and responded to certain touches that triggered responses, for example, feeling sick and not wanting to be touched. It's similar to shell shock in that the mind blocks out visual memories when it can't handle the events that are occurring. So, the information comes out either emotionally or physically. The visual memories come out only when the mind is ready to handle the information.

The events had a strong impact on Susan's relationship with her boyfriend. He felt that her anger and problems with intimacy were his fault. Sometimes Susan took him to counseling with her so he'd know that it wasn't his fault. He still had a hard time accepting and comprehending what she was feeling and why.

I asked Susan if her experience still affected her relationships with men. She said there are still times when she can't stand to be touched. She would always explain the situation if this ever happened. However, the guys' responses were usually unsympathetic. They've told her that she should forget it because it's now all in the past. They weren't empathetic and didn't try to understand or appreciate the

long-term affects of an experience like this. So rather than understand what she was going through, they made her feel guilty. After that, the unsympathetic indifference would begin to erode her trust in her partner. As a result, the relationship would begin to fall apart.

I asked Susan if she was afraid to talk about her experience. She said she was uncomfortable but she wasn't afraid to discuss it. She agreed to do this interview because she knows there are women who are afraid to deal with this subject. She wants them to know that it's OK to admit it and to talk about it. She wants them to know there is nothing to be ashamed of. Many women feel guilty because they feel they must have been responsible in some way. They believe they should have prevented the incidences. Susan wants them to know that it wasn't their fault. A child couldn't possibly comprehend the nature of what was happening to them then.

Susan stresses that in talking about this, she doesn't want pity. Rather, she wants sexual abuse of children brought into the open. Also, if anyone knows this is happening to a child, to do something about it. Don't cover it up or deny it to protect the perpetrator. The damage done to the child is irreparable and will leave emotional scars that last a lifetime.