

Years Later, Healing the Wounds of a Stepfather's Abuse

By Marguerite Kelly
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Q. I was 12 when my mom, a widow, married a bachelor who was nine years younger and had no children.

Our relatives thought he was a saint to marry a woman with four kids, but he sexually abused two of my three younger sisters repeatedly, and physically abused all of us. Once, he hit my head so hard that I lost consciousness, lost half of my hearing and now must use a hearing aid.

When we grew up, my mom, now 80, insisted that we send cards to this man on Father's Day, his birthday and their wedding anniversary -- and we did! My husband finally asked me why we sent cards to the pedophile who had ruined our childhoods, so my sisters and I wrote to our mother instead and told her about the heinous things her husband had done to us. She said she hadn't known, but we reminded her that my little sister -- a preteen -- had told her what he had done and that she had made this child apologize to him for lying! That sister is now 52 and still awakes in a sweat, thinking that she hears his heavy breathing. My youngest sister, now 45, has never dated, had a boyfriend or married and is still afraid of men. After rehashing these things, Mom said, "Let bygones be bygones."

She won't even confront her husband -- he has never admitted anything -- and once she said that she didn't want to lose her nice lifestyle in a divorce.

We haven't seen or spoken to her husband for eight years, and except for one clandestine lunch, we haven't seen our mother either, because she won't travel alone. She does call us regularly, however, but from her sister's house, so her husband won't hear her talk to us.

These are my worries: What if our mom dies before he does? We fear a confrontation with him and don't want to see him or have him see or speak to us. Do we stay home? Do we out him in front of his relatives? (That's my fantasy.) Are we overly concerned about the funeral of a mother who essentially sacrificed us to a pedophile?

And can he be prosecuted 41 years later?

A. That man, as you call him, should be made to pay, one way or another.

It's too late to file criminal charges, but you can still bring him to justice, either by suing him for damages in civil court or by breaking your long-held silence -- or both. He'll deny your charges, but he'll almost surely be too ashamed to talk to you at a funeral or anywhere else.

When you and your sisters stop protecting this man, you'll start protecting yourselves, as well as any children he's around -- and they must be protected. A person who has hurt one child often feels free to hurt others.

Proceed with care, however, and get plenty of professional help.

You and your sisters should start by seeing a psychotherapist who has treated many victims of sex abuse. And if they won't go? Love them anyway -- we can only do what we can do -- and carry on alone. In time these sessions should give you the emotional strength to tell your extended family -- by letter or in person -- what this man did and how much it hurt your family.

You should also tell your mother that you're going to therapy and why, and ask her to attend a few sessions. If she does, they could assuage some of her guilt and help her figure out why she blocked the abuse from her memory, or denied it, or whether she ignored it because she was as scared of her husband as you were.

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If your mother was -- or still is -- afraid of him, make sure that she is safe when you do break your silence and that your lawyer or your husband has told him that he will be put under a restraining order if he ever threatens your mother, or anyone else, in any way.

Some of these steps may seem too difficult to contemplate right now, but the truth really will set you free. If it doesn't, you might also try Emotional Freedom Techniques, an alternative treatment involving tapping on certain points of the body while the patient holds a disturbing emotion in mind. Its proponents say this process balances the body's energy system and that it can ease depression, anxiety, anger, fear and phobias and eliminate the effects of a trauma, without medication. To learn more, read "The EFT Manual" by Gary Craig (Energy Psychology Press, \$15), "Energy Medicine" by Donna Eden with David Feinstein (Tarcher, \$17) and "The Promise of Energy Psychology" by Feinstein, Eden and Craig (Tarcher, \$16).

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