

Protecting God's children for adults: Support groups for family members

————— *Fifty-fifth in a series.* —————

The experience of having a loved one abused, exploited or harassed at any age is difficult.

For family members who have been standing by, not really knowing what is truly wrong with their child, sibling, husband, wife or other loved one can be a frightening, unsettling and disturbing life experience to watch.

How do we help them, or ourselves, for that matter? What is the best way to help someone else, whether he or she has confided in you, or not?

What should you do?

Take the first step and join a support group; it may be helpful for both you and your family. To begin, it will help you as you try to unfold and understand the abuse and your feelings about it. What do you need to heal from this experience, and how can you work with the survivor?

The important concept to remember is that you are not alone on this journey, because others have suffered the same losses or pain that you have experienced in a like manner. A support group is a group of people who are parents, family members, and loved ones of those who have suffered from sexual abuse, exploitation or harassment.

The purpose of a support group is healing and empowerment with a trained therapist or other group leader. Groups led by a therapist usually have a weekly or monthly fee. A support group can be sponsored by a church or a family agency, organization, or members who want to get together to share some of their experiences of abuse. This is often done to begin the healing journey by processing anger, the sense of betrayal, loss of trust. Support groups facilitate healing, one step at a time.

Attending a support group can be difficult at first. It takes time to feel comfortable about sharing your problems with others. It is important to focus on your perceptions of what happened to your loved one and how you feel it has affected you.

The key to encouraging group members to share difficult and personal issues is confidentiality. Everything said in the group by the members stays at the group meeting. Confidentiality, along with respect and trust, promotes safety which is a necessary component of support groups.

To feel safe is a basic right of every person, and learning how to be safe is at the core of healing. You need to have the freedom to be able to speak directly

about your pain. It is important to speak for yourself and use statements containing, "I think," "I believe," and "I feel." Once people feel comfortable with one another, they open up and find their problems are not so different from the other members of the group. By sharing their concerns, they begin to feel less alone.

The number of participants may vary depending on the format used. The ideal size for any group is five to nine members. However, educational groups can be larger.

Meetings begin at a time that most members can get together at a regular scheduled time. Organize groups for a set number of weeks or for ongoing meetings. It is important to set guidelines for the group at the very beginning. Being with other people who have

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experienced the same thing as you is a critical part of the healing process, and joining a group is an ideal way to work with others.

Support groups encourage members to share information, give and receive mutual support, and exchange practical coping skills. The group can provide sources for mental health, social service, and mentoring program referrals.

By joining a support group for family members of a sexual abuse survivor, you have taken action to try to understand how deeply your loved one was hurt. This action can be of great significance to you, the survivor and other family members.

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