

## Chapter 4 - Step 1: Recognize

*...because, if nothing else, it gives you permission to dig.*

The first question anyone reading this book should have is, “Am I a child of pain?” If my 2014 childhood abuse survey was any indication, then 21% - or about 1 out of 5 - of the U.S. population has survived some form of sexual abuse when they were children. But there are other kinds of childhood abuse, too, including verbal, emotional, physical, and neglect. And even though I will usually refer to abusers as adults, sometimes our abusers were children, too. So, the true number of silent soldiers involuntarily enrolled in this community must be far greater than anyone wants to imagine.

We have to keep in mind that all of these victims are children, including newborns, toddlers, preschoolers, kindergartners, elementary schoolers, middle schoolers and high schoolers. By definition, they were not fully-formed, mature adults, and, because of the abuse they had to endure, until they have the opportunity to heal, they never will be. These are people who were preyed upon by those much larger and stronger than they were. These were little people in the land of malicious giants, and those giants held all the cards and control.

We must also consider what is the definition of

abuse. To answer this, I always ask two questions. First, *is the action in question age appropriate?* While it may be appropriate to strongly scold a fourth grader who is playing with matches, I cannot think of any circumstances where one would be justified in yelling at a newborn. Also, I know of no circumstances where it is appropriate for an adult to engage in sexual behavior with children.

Next, the second question I would want to consider is *who is the behavior meant to benefit?* If a four-year old child runs out into traffic, no one might be surprised to see their parent spank them. But if a parent or other adult takes a child into a room alone and spansks them for their own adult pleasure and gratification, then that is abuse. The distinction here is that, in the first case, the person in charge was acting in the best, long-term interest of the child, while, in the latter one, the adult was using the child in an inappropriate way for their own short-term satisfaction.

Of course, having rules for defining abuse also begs the question of what kind of abuse is worse: verbal, emotional, physical, sexual or neglect? The answer is simple: all of them. It is not a competition, and it is not a question of who suffered more. It is simply yes or no, did you survive childhood abuse, and, if so, how has that impacted your life? The focus here is not on comparing yourself to others, but in understanding yourself so that you can heal from your unwanted past.

The problem is that these are often not easy questions to answer. Remember, the giants who abused

you did so in order to satisfy their own needs, even though it was at your expense. Additionally, they also wanted to protect themselves from the consequences of their behaviors, so they lied. They hid the truth of what they were doing, especially from others in the same households as themselves and the children they were abusing. They denied any involvement in such actions when even the slightest association with this behavior came to the surface. And some threatened violence in order to keep these children quiet, while others went even further and killed their victims so as to keep them silent forever.

Is it surprising then that someone might have trouble remembering the details about the abuse they survived? Is it unwarranted to assume that some would have repressed these nightmares out of concern for their own safety and that of others? And is it so unimaginable to consider that after years of trying to forget, of trying to deny a past they never wanted, that some might have difficulty in admitting their own truth? No, no it is not, not at all. In fact, it is quite expected.

When we were abused, there was no one there keeping records so that we would have a scrapbook of memories to look accurately back upon. While we were in so much pain, there was no one there taking pictures for us to share and recall later in our lives. And as we were falling and fracturing further apart with every additional act of abuse we were forced to endure, there was no one there who wanted to help us glue all of these

pieces back together. No, we were alone, simply objects of little concern into which they could pour all of their anger, vitriol, and dark desires. And our abusers wanted for there to be no record of that: none at all.

How then were we to remember? If we tried to speak out, we were yelled at. If we tried to tell the truth, we were called liars. And if we tried to get others to believe in what we said, we were diagnosed as being crazy. No one wanted to hear us, and no one wanted to believe us, because no one wants to deal with the ticking time bomb of childhood abuse, even if they were not predators, but especially if they were.

In the end, an accusation of abuse is usually impossible to prove. There are no photos, recordings, or newspaper articles to back these charges up. The victim who speaks out has little to go on, except for their own word. Passionate as they may be in their cries for help, everything quickly devolves into a “she-said, he-said” situation where people take sides based on who they believe the most and not on the truth. For the truth was buried long ago, along with the survivor’s soul, and neither can be exhumed because the murderer hid the grave.

One might think that this would make the perpetrator invincible, but it does not. While it might be near impossible to prove an accusation of abuse, the mere act of making such a claim does have consequences: an indelible stain is cast upon the accused. Even if the claim goes nowhere, even if no one believes what the victim

says, there will forever remain the question of *did it really happen?* For people can believe you are innocent, but they can also still wonder. People can stand by your side, but they can also hold judgement in reserve. And people can tell you they still trust you, but they can also silently draw back. Of course, this claim is devastating for the person wrongly accused: even in innocence they will pay a price. But for the perpetrator rightfully identified, it is like teetering on the edge of falling into a bottomless pit. So, is it any wonder that child abusers work so hard to cover their tracks, even if it means heaping more and more abuse upon their victims?

The point here is that the odds are stacked against you, if you think it will be easy to say, even to yourself, that you were abused. While there are some people who knew from day one that they were being victimized, the vast majority of survivors whom I have met have struggled, often for years, to finally admit their truth, even to themselves. They were not in control, they were scared, and all the messaging they received told them to forget, or else. And that *else* was bound to be as bad, if not worse, than the abuse they had already survived. So, the victim that was left alone for years, even decades, is now tasked with finding a single grave of hidden memories buried somewhere amongst the infinite square miles of their past's subconscious.

There is little wonder, then, that admitting the truth about what happened to us seems so daunting, even impossible. Yet, it is our goal to unlock the past, to

remember the violence, so we can bring it out into the open where it can be seen, heard, and understood. For left hidden, buried, it will simply fester and seep into our lives in unimaginably destructive ways that are confusing, contradictory, and uncontrollable. But once you see the evil, once you draw back the curtain hiding the ghost in your machine, you will know it for what it truly is: a cry for help that was never heard, a beg for mercy that was always denied, and tears of pain that were never wiped dry.

These are your missing parts, the ones you thought were dead: your long-lost pieces of fractured glass that had once been integrated into your childhood. These are the empty holes in your adulthood that can only be healed by coming to terms with your unwanted past. But the first step in any healing process is to admit that a problem exists. For how can you ever retrieve your lost parts from that grave if you don't even know that you need to pick up the shovel? The first step in any process is to take the first step, and the first step in recovery is honesty.

But how can you see in a smoke-filled room? And how can you find your way out of a fog-bound forest? With no one to guide you, and no lights to illuminate your way, what is the best way forward? How does one proceed? The answer is much simpler than you might imagine: just start wherever you are.

While it may not be as hard for a teenager to remember what happened to them, a six year old may not be so sure, and a two year old may have nothing but

vagues feelings or emotions to go on. But whether they are vivid, movie-like re-enactments which repeatedly play in your mind, depicting every sight, sound and smell in lurid detail, or it is merely an unpleasant tingling in the back of your memory, if that's what you have, then that's where you begin. For even a fleeting whisper makes many suggestions, and if just one of those suggestions points toward abuse, then the least you can say, and the very least you must admit to yourself, is, "*I may have* been the victim of childhood abuse." And that is all you need in order to move on to step two.

It is worth reminding ourselves that recovery is not a one-time event in our lives. Instead, it is a life-long process of continually refining and reinforcing our belief in ourselves and our right to be heard. As such, there will be cycles of certainty which will be followed by those of questioning and then certainty, once again. So, we cannot expect to ever have all the answers, for some of our parts were rendered into microscopic dust that no shovel can ever retrieve. Yet, our goal is to keep digging so that we may restore as much of ourselves as possible, in order to reach our final goal of reclaiming control of our lives. This means that accepting uncertainty is part of the bargain when one embarks on this journey toward self-renewal and healing. If "*may have*" is the best you can start with, then that's good enough for me, and it's good enough for you, because, if nothing else, it gives you permission to dig.