

Published on January 29, 2011

Blogs

Psychoanalysis 3.0

Psychology Today web site

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/psychoanalysis-30/201101/talking-about-sexually-abused-boys-and-the-men-they-become>

Talking about sexually abused boys, and the men they become:

When difficult talk is healing talk

By Richard B. Gartner, Ph.D.

Talking about boyhood sexual abuse and its aftermath for men can be difficult, even painful. But such talk is absolutely essential.

By age 16, as many as one in six boys in America has had unwanted sex with an adult or older child. Millions of men, abused as children, continue to live with the debilitating effects of shattered trust.

The media has been of little help deepening the conversation about male sexual victimization. Recent coverage about the sexual abuse of boys has emphasized preventing abuse, making sure sexual predators are sequestered from youthful prey, and "moving on." For example, the crises of a church that harbored predators have gotten far more air time than the harm done to the boys molested by priests.

To be fair, while these boys - and the men they become - have mostly been neglected by the media, at least those scandals brought boyhood abuse into the public discourse. We can talk about it now, and we must do so, no matter how difficult this talk can be.

It's disturbing to think about what it means to a boy when he's sexually abused by someone he trusts. Uncomfortable as we feel, however, we must either talk about the reality of his experience or continue to live in silence, with devastating consequences.

Abusers use their age or authority to satisfy their own needs without regard to those of their victims. Seemingly unbreakable bonds are broken when treachery is introduced into these relationships. Consequently, many sexually abused boys grow up distrustful, considering people dishonest, malevolent, and undependable. They often become frightened of emotional connection and isolate themselves. This may alternate with merging with loved ones so they hardly know where they end and others begin.

Confusing affection with abuse, desire with tenderness, sexually abused boys often become men who have difficulty distinguishing among sex, love, nurturance, affection, and abuse. They may experience friendly interpersonal approaches as seductive and manipulative. On the other hand, they may not notice when exploitative demands are made on them - they've learned to see these as normal and acceptable.

Believing sexual closeness is the way to feel loved but experiencing love as abuse, some of these men solve their dilemma by engaging in frequent, indiscriminate, and compulsive sexual encounters. These are not free, joyous expressions of erotic passion. Sex is pursued incessantly, but with little chance for intimacy. Although strongly desiring love, these men have no sense of feeling loved once the sex act is concluded. They're left feeling empty and lonely, while the idea of fully pursuing relationships fills them with dread. Many believe sexually abused boys almost inevitably become sexually abusive men. But, while a significant proportion of male abusers were victims themselves, there's evidence that relatively few sexually abused boys actually become abusers. Because of the myth, however, many men fear they'll become abusive or worry that if they disclose their history, others will consider them predators.

Sexually abused boys are also troubled if they were aroused while being abused. Teenagers are easily aroused, having little control over the hormones surging through their bodies. But if they're stimulated by aspects of their experience, they may feel they participated in or even invited the abuse. This confuses a boy who also knows he was also repelled by the experience. Feeling guilty about any sexual pleasure he felt during his molestation, he may become ambivalent about all sexual pleasure.

Also, masculine gender expectations teach boys they can't be victims. Boys are supposed to be competitive, resilient, self-reliant, and independent, but certainly not emotionally needy. "Real" men initiate sexual activity and want sex whenever it's offered, especially by women. For many men, these qualities define masculinity.

As a result, boys may not even recognize their sexual victimization. They may assert that they weren't abused, weren't hurt, or were in charge of what happened. For them, acknowledging victimization means admitting they're weak or "not male."

Finally, when the abuser is male (and even sometimes when she is female), many boys - whether straight or gay - develop fears and concerns about sexual orientation. Conventional wisdom says sexual abuse turns boys gay, although there's no persuasive evidence that premature sexual activity fundamentally changes sexual orientation. Nevertheless, a heterosexual boy is likely to doubt himself, wondering why he was chosen by a man for sex. A homosexual boy may feel rushed into considering himself gay, or may hate his homosexuality because he believes it was caused by his abuse. Whether boys are gay or straight, these manipulative introductions to sexuality can set lifetime patterns of exploitation and self-destructive behavior.

These aftereffects are ugly. They're not only painful for victims but also costly to our society. Boys who grow up without coming to terms with their childhood abuse often

struggle as men with addictions, anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide as well as the inability to develop or maintain relationships.

The good news: healing is possible.

A first step is acknowledging that abuse occurred and articulating what has been silenced. Putting the experience into words is freeing for many men, whether they tell a loved one, a professional, a confidant, or simply write in a journal. Beyond that, there are several options. Knowledgeable professionals can help, as can healing retreats, some 12-Step programs, and men's groups focused on victimization and masculinity. The Internet offers several options, including web sites for sexually abused men such as www.malesurvivor.org, where men can find one another and talk, anonymously if necessary, about their common dilemmas.

Talk about it.

About the author:

Richard Gartner, PhD, is Training and Supervising Analyst, faculty and Founding Director of the Sexual Abuse Program at the William Alanson White Institute. He wrote *Betrayed as Boys: Psychodynamic Treatment of Sexually Abused Men*, for professionals, and *Beyond Betrayal: Taking Charge of Your Life after Boyhood Sexual Abuse*, for the general public. Dr. Gartner was a founder and is a Past President of MaleSurvivor: the National Organization against Male Sexual Victimization (malesurvivor.org). He has been quoted widely about male sexual victimization and was the subject of a full-length interview in the Science Times section of the New York Times. See www.richardgartner.com.

© 2011 Richard Gartner, All Rights Reserved