



The Victim Blames Himself
John was twelve when the abuse began. (All characters are fictitious.)
"The man was a teacher and the coach of my football team," John told me.

"When he started asking me to after practice and help carry equipment, I was thrilled. I thought I was special. Later I figured out that was just his way of getting close to me."

John had come for counseling at his wife's request. "Just because I don't want to make love as much as she does, she thinks I'm depressed," he told me during his first session. As John and I talked, I began to see that his wife was right.

Of the information sheet that my clients fill out prior to their first session, there is the question, "Have you ever been abused?" John answered, "No," but I have learned not to believe everything I read. When I asked him in our second session about abuse, he looked down and did not answer. This spoke volumes.

It was not until the third session that John told me about the abuse. "Coach began taking me home after practice," John remembered, "and buying the ice cream. Then one day he began to touch me in ways I knew weren't right."

I jumped out of the car as quick as I could when we got to my house.

I was afraid to tell Mom or Dad, so I just went to my room. I felt dirty and took two showers trying to get clean."

"After that first time, I tried to stay away from Coach," John continued.

"But he would get me alone and try to do things to me. I would protest, but it never did any good. Finally I just let him do what he wanted to get it over with. I asked Dad if I could quit football, but he gave me a long lecture about not being a quitter, so I kept on playing. Coach did things to me all season long. I keep wondering what I did to cause this. I must have done something."

While victims of robbery or assault do not blame themselves, sexual abuse victims usually do. "You did not do anything to cause this," I assured John. "What happened was your coach's fault, not yours. He was an adult, and he took advantage of an innocent child."

Getting victims to stop blaming themselves is a difficult task. Sometimes I succeed by asking them a question about their own children. "John, what would you do if someone did this to your son?"

John did not even hesitate but looked me straight in the eye and said, "I'd kill him."

"Would you blame your son?" I asked. "No way!" John nearly shouted. Then he paused. "I see your

point, Doc," he said after a moment. "If I wouldn't blame my son, then why do I blame myself?"

At this point John began to be aware of the anger that he felt toward the man who abused him. "If he was still here, I'd confront him," John said angrily. "He ought to have to pay for what he did."

Shame is one of the worst leftovers of abuse for many victims. "It's hard to explain exactly," John said, "but this feeling comes over me sometimes that I know I am not as good as everyone else. When that happens I want to get away from people and be by myself."

"Telling your story will help to get rid of the shame, John," I explained. "In telling, there is freedom."

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