

# Healing *the* Wounded Heart

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The Heartache of Sexual Abuse  
and the Hope of Transformation

Dan B. Allender



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In order to protect the confidentiality of those who have shared their stories, sufficient details have been changed to alter their identities. The stories are most often an amalgamation of a number of people; no story describes a single person unless otherwise noted.

This publication is intended to provide helpful and informative material on the subjects addressed. Readers should consult their personal health professionals before adopting any of the suggestions in this book or drawing inferences from it. The author and publisher expressly disclaim responsibility for any adverse effects arising from the use or application of the information contained in this book.

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To my holy, unpredictable, wild-hearted,  
ferociously kind wife, Becky.  
Nothing of this labor or life would have  
been possible without you.

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I love you. I love your spouses. I especially love your children. I wrote this book for your children. I pray they never endure sexual harm, but their young lives can't help but be thrown into a sexually mad world. May we all know the wonder and grace of a love that never dies because the Son died and was raised to sit at the right hand of the Father for eternity. May it be!

# Introduction

## *Why a New Book about Sexual Abuse?*

**M**y oldest daughter, Annie, was nine when I wrote *The Wounded Heart*. It was during that season of writing that I received an unmarked cassette tape from a musician who had asked me to review a song she had written about her sexual abuse. I sat at our kitchen table; Annie was sitting to my left and talking with me as I opened our mail and pulled out the letter and the tape.

She often sat with me and talked about her day or asked a wide variety of questions that I usually had no clue how to answer. As we sat and talked that day, she asked a question I had never even thought to consider. “Is that a tape about sexual abuse?” she asked. I had no time to think. “Yes,” I said. “How did you know?” Instead of answering, she looked at me fiercely and asked, “How do I know that you will never sexually abuse me?” I assured her that while I would likely fail her in countless ways, she would never need to be worried about me harming her sexually. But instead of diminishing her concern, my answer prompted another disturbing question. With even more intensity, she asked, “Yes, but what if you lose control just like you sometimes do with your anger?”

As is the nature of all memory, what I have described feels bright, intense, and sharp, but what happened next is pure conjecture. It is likely I mumbled some meaningless words and broke off or redirected the conversation.

My daughter turned thirty-five this year, and I wish I'd had the courage then to ask her what she knew about sexual abuse and why it was a concern. I wonder to this day how my entry into this field affected her, my other children, my marriage, and the course of all our lives.

There have been scores of times in the past twenty-five years when I have felt like one of the most fortunate men on the planet. The privilege to be invited into the stories of thousands of women and men as we explore some of the darkest chapters of their lives is a gift that precious few on earth experience. This journey has taken me from the jungles of Thailand to the savannah of Ethiopia and into countless homes, churches, and conversations that all in some sense define my life and calling. I am a therapist, theoretician, speaker, writer, professor, administrator, husband, father, and grandfather. I am also a victim of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse has affected for good and ill everything I have done and likely will do on this earth. The harm from the past simply doesn't go away.

Decades ago we were in a car accident in Anchorage, Alaska. An intoxicated woman ran a red light and crashed into the driver's side of our car, just a few inches from crushing my upper body. I sustained a neck injury that over twenty-three years has cost me thousands of dollars of chiropractic care, and it still aches as I write this. I can't imagine what my condition would be without the immense care I have received, but even more so I can't allow myself to consider what my life would be like if that accident had never occurred. The same is true with sexual abuse in that I can never fully eradicate the consequences of the harm I have endured—yet unlike the car accident, it has given me the opportunity to be transformed with each tear I have shed.

Would I trade these benefits for not being harmed? Of course, without a doubt; I'd do so in an instant. But that is not an option, and until God's final victory over darkness fully removes the harm of living in this world, it is best to embrace heartache and determine to use it for larger purposes. It is to that end that I write this book.

When I began writing and teaching about sexual abuse in the late eighties there was little material available from which to glean those first putative steps on the journey. At that time it was assumed that informing people about the diabolical damage of abuse would decrease the likelihood that it would continue to occur at the same rate, and I wanted that outcome with a passion.

I have learned a lot in the past twenty-five years. Mostly I have learned from my clients. I have also gleaned an immense amount of understanding from fellow professional and lay therapists who continue to lean into darkness that most fear to name, let alone enter. While I am encouraged by the advances that have been made in bringing the reality of sexual abuse into the light, I have seen the culture flip from massive denial to indifferent minimization. In spite of the growing body of research that underscores how one abusive moment can shadow a human life for decades, date rape, sexting, pornography, unwanted sexual advances, sex when intoxicated or stoned, groping, and other behavior that is sexually suggestive, demeaning, or harassing have become so common that in many people's minds they hardly warrant being called sexual abuse.

In reality, our day is vastly more adversarial, opportunistic, shallow, and violent than ever before.<sup>1</sup> Abuse often creates a twenty-eight-car pileup with massive debris, bent metal, and wounded victims. It spirals into generations. It sinks into the depths of the heart. I believe there is value in writing a twenty-five-year retrospective because so much new data and research have enhanced our understanding of the nature of the harm of abuse and trauma.

For example, we understand the human brain better; it's as though we have landed in the new world and discovered the first few miles

of a vastly unexplored continent. We are clearer about the need to involve the body in the process of addressing the by-products of abuse, especially dissociation and triggers that prompt addictive behavior, sabotage, and self-harm. The role of the internet, pornography, and post-traumatic injury to the body and soul are understood today in ways they were not twenty-five years ago. Most important for me, I am clearer about the work of evil—both human and in the unseen realm of spirits—in the design and devastating consequences of sexual abuse. As disconcerting as it may be to some to be asked to consider the realm of foul and dark spirits, it would be cowardly for me to ignore that dimension.

If there is a central, driving factor as to why I am writing a new volume about sexual abuse, it is because I am a grandfather of four wonderful, wild, beautiful grandchildren. Each of them will grow up facing the dark prospects of an earth heating up from global warming, oceans that may see a radical deficit of fish, shorelines being swallowed by encroaching water, and nations rising and falling due to calamities that go far deeper but involve no less than the weather.

As the winds blow foul, there will be upheaval in this century that will directly and indirectly turn the strong against the weak, resulting in what has occurred for millennia: more women and children and men will be sexually victimized. It is in this world that my grandchildren will become men and women. While I have no guarantee they will ever read my work or know or follow my life trajectory, I can't stand idly by and not fight a little harder and longer for their sexual future.

I am blessed to be working with a small cadre of therapists in the Allender Center for Abuse and Trauma whom I trust will carry on our labor far after I am residing in another world or am unable to speak and write as I wish. There is good reason to hope that we will continue to make progress in addressing the harm of sexual abuse. However, the war will not ever be finished until the Lord Jesus Christ returns to set his kingdom right in the midst of this broken and scarred world. Until then, this labor of inviting those who know

sexual brokenness and scars to wholeness and beauty is an endeavor worthy of all the suffering, struggle, and sweat.

When I reread *The Wounded Heart* in preparation for writing *Healing the Wounded Heart*, I found myself grateful beyond words that I would not recant or change any of the major categories I addressed when I was a young theorist and therapist. You may wonder if you need to first read *The Wounded Heart* to understand what I am saying in this book. Every author hopes his or her work is read in a somewhat progressive fashion; however, I am realistic enough to know that few will read all of my work, let alone in sequence. If you read *The Wounded Heart* years, if not decades, ago, a review of what you underlined will be immensely helpful, but it is not required before reading this book. However, if I have my druthers, I would want you to read both *The Wounded Heart* and *Healing the Wounded Heart*.

I also view the workbook that accompanies this book as an indispensable part of processing and applying the thoughts I offer in the pages ahead. It is one thing to consider the concepts as they relate to your life; it is an entirely other experience to welcome the process of healing into your life. The workbook invites you to reflect and write your way to greater freedom. It is best to join with others in reflecting on the questions that are provoked and ally yourself with a group that is working out the implications of past sexual abuse. The material in this book is also given further clarity through podcasts and videos found at [theallendercenter.org](http://theallendercenter.org).

It is my dream that my readers will see the massive war clouds and not turn back due to fear or hopelessness. I long for a few more brave, foolish, and wild-hearted men and women to embrace the calling to engage this scourge with the hope that what God has begun he is faithful to bring to completion. He will bring about passionate, holy delight in sexuality, and in his design for sex he will draw our hearts into the depths of wonder and gratitude and, ultimately, to the worship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is to this end that we proceed.

*Part One*

# The Wounded Heart

# 1

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## The New Face of Sexual Abuse

*The period in which we now live may well go down in history as the Erotic Age. Sexual love has been elevated into a cult. Eros has more worshipers among civilized men today than any other god. For millions the erotic has completely displaced the spiritual.*

*A. W. Tozer, 1959*

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*Hookup sex is fast, uncaring, unthinking and perfunctory. Hookup culture promotes bad sex, boring sex, drunken sex you don't remember, sex you could care less about, sex where desire is absent, sex that you have "just because everyone else is, too," or that "just happens."*

*Donna Freitas, 2008*

The majority of people believe sex is just sex. It is good, not so good, and most of the time just average. It titillates and serves as the currency for lots of conversations, prompts the purchase of products, and sustains the superficial connection with a stranger. Sex just *is*, and as one person said, "If you think about it

too much, it exposes the middle-aged bald guy behind the curtain. I want my fantasy to be uncontaminated by reality.”

But sex is more than sex, and sexual harm is more than a mere violation. It reverberates to the deepest parts of our humanity and returns with an echo that doesn't stop even decades later. It is imperative that the noise of abuse—even if it has been turned down to an imperceptible level—be turned up so that we don't allow it to settle into the background of our stories.

For many, this means giving up the presumption that we have not suffered sexual harm. We all have. Each and every individual on the earth has known some assault against their gender and/or their genitalia. Some of the harm is obvious and severe. Other harm is so subtle and normalized that it seems ridiculous to call it abuse. But sexual abuse is often far subtler and extensive than most of us have considered.

Monica, a young woman whom I counseled, told me that while she was in college sex for her was like eating at a sketchy diner. Most of the time sex was not great, but it was also not a big deal. There were a few times when she “got food poisoning” and it took a long time to recover. When I asked what she meant, she shrugged and said, “I didn't say yes or no. I didn't want him to do what he did, but I was high and it went further than I wanted, but it was my fault, so why cry over spilled milk?”

The goal of a hookup is sex that in no way obligates either partner to any level of a relationship even a minute after it is finished, let alone in the future. My client expressed a sentiment I have heard countless times: “Sex just happens—whatever.” But as Monica began to explore her indifference regarding her sexuality, she began to acknowledge how seldom she had a voice or registered her displeasure. It took far longer for her to own that several of the “food poisoning” interactions were demeaning and cruel. And even after doing the work to name the exploitation and violation, she could not call the experience rape.

She balked to call what happened rape because, she said, “I didn’t stop it. I shouldn’t have had three beers, and I should know better than to hook up with a guy who treated me so poorly from the beginning.” She was violated and she took responsibility for the harm—then, like many, she chalked it up to a bad night and was grateful it didn’t happen more often.

Monica was not on this earth when I wrote *The Wounded Heart*, and her experience is one of the new faces of sexual abuse. She is sexually sophisticated and cynical. Sex has been woven into her childhood through music videos, sexting, hallway gossip, and sexual violations that are dismissed as no big deal.

The reality of sexual abuse is dark and torturous terrain that many choose not to walk because too much is at stake; it is far easier to shrug it off, take the blame, and be more wary the next time. Why is this deep harm against the human heart, soul, and body so difficult to address? The answer is compelling and simple: God loves sex. But Satan, God’s enemy, despises sexual joy and is perversely committed to marring it.

Sex is God’s idea, and he delights in the sensual pleasure and soul intimacy that grow when one gives fully from the heart to pleasure and be pleased by one’s covenant lover. God thrills when his creation enters the complex interplay of making love within a covenant relationship. Sex is meant to be both a sacramental gift and a rip-roaring sensual feast. God made sex for our pleasure and to offer us a glimpse of what it means to be known by him. It is that simple. Sex is earthy and sacred—a blessing of body and soul that glories in the earth of creation and the breath of God’s kiss to animate our dust. The sensuality of being a body is woven into the wonder of being more than a body. We are far more than a set of physiological processes and biochemicals lighting up through movement and touch; we are people engaged with others in a process that calls us to be more than we are in the moment. The moments of sexual

engagement are potentially the most intense, alive, intimate, and holy moments one can know on this earth.

Monica's story at first glance might be called a tragic story of promiscuity and poor choices. Further, it is not hard to imagine someone saying, "Sadly, she is reaping the consequences of sin and needs to get right with God." This sentiment is not merely cavalier, irrespective of how biblical it sounds; it is cruel and blind to the legion of influences that shape how a young man or woman becomes sexual in our culture.

Many months into our work, Monica told me about how her older brother had taken a video of her when she was showering as a twelve-year-old. She covered herself, but her developing body was clearly seen. He threatened to post it anonymously if she didn't grant his friends sexual pleasures. The encounters were, in her terms, "some groping and slobbery make-out sessions with boys who didn't have a clue how to kiss."

When I asked her what she would call this whole narrative, she said, "Gross and weird, but no big deal. Even my mom told me to chalk it up to boys being boys." I asked her if her mother knew of the video and the "make-out sessions." She stammered, "Sort of, I guess, maybe not the groping part, but she found out about the video and kissing."

Monica's brother was her mother's favorite. He could do no wrong, and he got away with little more than a slap on the wrist. Monica, on the other hand, took the brunt of her mother's anger. Monica never did exceptionally well in school and didn't play sports like her brother did. Perhaps most problematic, she was the apple of her father's eye. He had divorced Monica's mother when she was eight and overtly gave her more time and gifts than any of her siblings. Her brother and his friends had sexually abused her, but she not only didn't have the language to name it but she was also determined not to call it abuse. She could not say that her mother failed to protect her from the abuse and gave implicit permission to

her brother to do whatever he wanted to her without consequences. Her sexual and family story felt like no big deal to her; in fact, compared to her friends who had “really been sexually abused,” her story felt almost innocuous.

Without a doubt, Monica had made some deeply harmful choices, but they simply can't be summarized and swept away under the rubric of “immorality.” She is far more than merely sexually immoral; she is living out significant sexual harm against herself and others without much of a clue as to what throws her into those sexual scenarios. The cost for Monica to understand what she actually experienced was to step deeper into all that had led her to cross the border into sexual nonchalance. Once the category of sexual abuse became a smidge wider than her original understanding, she began to tell me of countless experiences of being groped in the cafeteria line, shown pornography on the school bus by girlfriends and male acquaintances, and flirted with by older men who dated her mother. The story of sexual marring seemed endless. But Monica refused to see the harm in her story, nor could she name it in her culture.

### **Sexual Harm Is on the Rise**

Just as a fish is unaware of the water that sets the parameters of its world, so we often fail to take in the milieu in which we live. In the past twenty-five years girls have become far more sexualized. Examples of the pressure to grow up sexually are legion. Brittany Spears, in her 1998 music video “Baby One More Time,” depicted herself as a Catholic schoolgirl who breaks out of the humdrum of school boredom through a pornified exhibition of erotic desire. More than fifteen years later the ante was upped when the infamous Miley Cyrus twerked to the fascination and denigration of the teddy-bear-wearing dancers surrounding her. Beyond the glorification of sexual acts, far more disturbing to me was her choice to wear a teddy bear outfit and act out her “liberated” sexual power through debasing

innocence. Whether her goal was to mock innocence or not, it accomplished what she desired: she furthered her brand.

The sexualization of young girls has been addressed as a growing trend. The American Psychological Association developed a task force that released its findings in April 2007.<sup>1</sup> One of the members of this task force, Sharon Lamb, wrote a compelling analysis (with her coauthor, Lyn Mikel Brown), *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes*, in which she detailed the ways in which Bratz dolls, youth thongs, and “sexy dressing” are sold to preteens. Another researcher, Donna Freitas, writes:

There is an emerging cultural trend where many young women learn to trade sex and its allures—sexual favors and/or sexy dressing—for popularity, long before they step onto a college campus. Young girls and women as early as middle school and certainly by high school barter their sexed-up bodies for status.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways the trend is not just the sexualization of our children but the normalization of pornography as not merely a rite of passage but a mark of sexual liberation. Innocence is considered a burden, a constraint; it appears that breaking its bonds offers status and benefits.

Perhaps the greatest social change regarding sexuality in the past twenty-five years and the structure that has increased the sexualization—if not the pornification—of our children have come from the ubiquity and godlike status of the internet. Monica’s story included sitting on the bus in fifth grade and having her friend show her pictures on her cell phone of two women having sex. She was both fascinated and disgusted. Her friend was an intense, powerful force in her class who could turn classmates against someone in an instant. Monica knew not to withdraw or show revulsion; instead, she regularly watched whatever her friend wanted to show her.

Young adolescents turn to their peer group far more than to any other group of people or institution to normalize their social

interactions and define their identity. As pornography becomes more ubiquitous and acceptable, it is becoming entrenched in children's daily interactions with their peers.

Research indicates that internet porn is first encountered between the ages of ten and fourteen.<sup>3</sup> It is likely that this age is dropping as digital devices become more common and pornography is normalized in our culture. Pornographers often utilize the technique called "typosquatting," in which frequently accessed children's internet sites that might be misspelled by a child are used as portals to funnel children to pornographic sites.

It was estimated in 2006 that 13 percent of website visits in America were to sex-related sites.<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, a significant and unresolved debate as to the level of addiction, relational impact, and identity formation issues related to the use of pornography; the direct and immediate result of watching pornography is difficult to assess. But what is impossible to ignore is the vulgarization and degradation that seem to arise in a sexually pervasive and exploitative culture. It is impossible to deny that ever more egregious sexual harm, including bestiality, child pornography, and sadomasochistic harm, is depicted and being accessed by a wide range of men, women, and children.

Whatever the factors are that promote degradation, it is unquestionable that there is a rise in sexually violating harassment and intimate partner violence. The extent of sexual harassment in our schools between elementary school and high school is staggering. In 2001 the American Association of University Women study on harassment indicated that 89 percent of girls and 60–79 percent of boys were sexually harassed.<sup>5</sup> The onset of the harassment was in sixth grade. In this group 59 percent experienced harassment occasionally and 27 percent often. And the incidence of sexual harassment increased through high school.

Harassment has often been viewed as a form of bullying, but the problem with the term *bullying* is that it is seen as relatively innocuous and not against the law, whereas sexual harassment has

a specific, legal definition: it must be “sufficiently severe, persistent or pervasive to deny or limit a student’s ability to participate in or to receive benefits, services or opportunities.”<sup>6</sup> It is all too easy to dismiss “teasing.” Kids will be kids and boys especially will be boys. However, what is being addressed in these studies is far more insidious and abusive than being teased about being overweight or remarks made about not developing quickly enough. A significant percentage of children and young women and men are being marked by verbal sexual violence, touch, and gossip. Simply put, sexual bullying mars many children’s ability to go to school and learn on a daily basis.

As well, research indicates that 40–60 percent of teenagers experience intimate partner violence, including psychological, physical, and sexual abuse.<sup>7</sup> Over 13 percent of girls in the study had been raped by a boyfriend. It is not an exaggeration to say that growing up as a girl occurs in a sexually hostile environment. One young woman, when asked if she had experienced sexual harm, turned her eyes away and said, “Being touched in places I don’t want, by people I don’t want, is another way of saying being at a dance party.”

And both boys and girls are the victims of sexual harm. One high school senior told me that where one stands on the pecking order of sexual cruelty is a constant issue. If you are high up the ladder it means you must either participate or at least ignore the harm done to others who are not part of your group. To stand against degradation and mockery is to lose one’s social standing. If you are on the bottom rung, you likely undergo a weekly, if not daily, experience of being made into the scapegoat for others’ cruelty.

If there is a darkening of this era through pornography and harassment, there is an even darker shadow over what has been called the hookup culture. Hookup sex is not primarily about the sexual experience but far more about maintaining social status and avoiding being viewed as a social outcast. Hookup sex is defined as having three core elements: (1) casualness: the design is to keep relational

entanglements, expectations, or desire out of sex; (2) brevity: the faster the better because the brief time spent in sex keeps expectations and desire at a minimum; (3) sex: a hookup might be simply making out or include sexual intercourse, or anything in between. (For many high school and college age men and women, oral sex is viewed as little more than a form of kissing.)

Hookup sex often occurs when one or both parties are significantly affected by alcohol, which is readily available, especially to college students. Binge drinking on college campuses is so common that between 25–40 percent of college students have recently consumed so much alcohol that they could not remember their activity.<sup>8</sup> Alcohol—either as a social lubricant, a justification, or a defense—is a perceived and/or real basis for entry into hookup sex.

It should not be surprising that a relationship exists between alcohol and sexual assault. An article in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* found that 62 percent of unwanted sex occurred because of alcohol impairment.<sup>9</sup> In a follow-up study,

approximately 44 percent of the women participating in the study reported at least one unwanted sexual encounter while in college, and 90 percent of this unwanted sex took place during a hookup. Of all the reported incidents of unwanted sex, 76.2 percent involved alcohol, which played a significant role in blurring the lines of consent. The researchers found that often, the victim was too drunk to properly give consent. Often, the victim did not really remember what had happened after waking up the next day.<sup>10</sup>

Bottom line: sexual harm has been normalized in a sexually indulgent and demeaning age. We live in a vastly more sexually indulgent, indifferent, impersonal, and hostile world where it is harder to name the abuse that has been normalized and ignored. Like Monica, we find it easier to shrug it off than to step into what feels overwhelming to engage. But sexual harm, like all brokenness, doesn't fade away because we minimize it or try to forget. Rather, it lingers in the

crevices of our heart, slowly but surely dividing us from ourselves, others, and God.<sup>11</sup>

### **Sexual Harm Can Be Healed**

Monica told me in no uncertain terms that she loved sex in her young adult life. It made her feel powerful, free, and desirable. She continued to deny the impact of her childhood sexual abuse, and she was proud to say that, unlike in her college years, she now made better choices in her relationships with men and didn't drink as much as she used to. She was "not as stupid, needy, or usable as I was when I was younger."

Her desire to see me professionally had nothing to do with her sexual history; rather, she was troubled by persistent patterns of frustration and failure in relationships with friends. It is never my task to get a person to engage what they are not ready to explore. Monica continued, episodically, to let me see even more of her sexual heartache, but once it came to light, she would yank it back under layers of denial and indifference.

That remained true until she took a job as a nanny for a family with an eleven-year-old girl whom she came to love. The preteen was starting to experiment with dressing sexy and flirting online with boys she didn't know (who could easily have been thirty-five-year-old predators). Monica freaked out. The lioness in her roared, and she took active measures to protect the girl and help her make better choices about exploring her sexuality in a crass, sexually absorbed, boundary-free world. Her new awareness and passion awakened Monica sufficiently to say that if this girl were to be harmed the way she had been violated, she would call it sexual abuse and respond accordingly.

No one, including Monica herself, had given her room to ponder her life. This is not done in an afternoon, and seldom is it done even in the closest of relationships. However, while the price to name

our abuse may be high, it is far higher if we refuse to do so. Working with Monica was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle that had many pieces missing; it was painstakingly slow as we returned to moments of great harm with greater insight and care each time we traversed the terrain. There were countless sessions in which I was tested, accused, ignored, flirted with, and engaged. I loved the privilege of walking with Monica through the topography of her life, and in time she began to address the young, broken parts of her heart. Slowly, as she found the courage to explore the deep questions of life through the lens of her story, she began to heal.

Sex has the power to touch the deepest dimension of what it means to be human and alive to God; therefore, it stands to reason that it is hated more than any other dimension of humanity by a kingdom that opposes the glory of God. There is a power that uses sexual violation as its choice means to turn the human heart away from the Creator. This opposition to beauty and innocence is at the core of all sexual harm.