

## **Select Illustrative Case Studies**

### **Margaret and Rob,**

### **Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse Who Thrived**

Being sexually abused is a risk for becoming an abuser, but most survivors have enough protective factors that they do not. These persons can be thought of as the wounded well. Some survivors have a few risks and many protective factors, but abuse children once or twice as teenagers and then stop. These persons can be thought of as naïve experimenters. The following are two case studies of adult survivors. They had several risks for poor outcomes, but both had the essential protective factors: emotionally expressiveness and lack of interest in sexually abusing children.

#### **Wounded Well**

Rob and Margaret were sexually abused in childhood. Rob's father abused him while on camping trips in the summers when Rob was between the ages of eight and thirteen. The abuse consisted of Rob's father masturbating him and showing him pictures from *Playboy* magazine. Rob hated these episodes and came to hate his father who beat him and made fun of him as gay because he did not get erections when looking at *Playboy* while his father masturbated him until his penis was sore.

Margaret was abused in toddlerhood by her father a few times and by two other men one time each. Both men were family acquaintances. She hardly remembers her father's sexual abuse, but she recalls the smell of beer on his breath, his sense of urgency and fear, his breathing, and the pressure of his penis against her vulva. The second time she was abused, she was about six and the abuse involved a man who lived across the street from her putting her hand on his erect penis through his pants pocket and rolling her hand around his penis. She was afraid to tell anyone. The man moved soon afterward. A few years later, she overheard her father telling her mother that the man had died. She was relieved and glad.

The third time, she was about twelve, when another man fondled her breasts. She was too ashamed and embarrassed to tell him to stop or to tell anyone what he had done. She simply avoided him, as she had avoided the man who put her hand on his penis. She did not tell about these abusive episodes because she was confused and embarrassed. She did not think she would be punished.

#### **Emotionally Abusive Fathers**

The fathers of both Rob and Margaret were alcoholics and were emotionally abusive. Neither of their mothers did much to stop the emotional abuse and were sometimes neglectful themselves. They did not, for example, comfort the children after their fathers berated them but instead told them to stay away from their fathers. Yet, the parents of both Rob and Margaret sometimes were emotionally available. They received enough sensitive, responsive care from their mothers and sometimes their fathers to seek it out with extended family members, family friends, and peers.

Rob's father was physically abusive and often hit Rob. He made fun of Rob's interests in writing, poetry, music, and drawing, saying they were girls' interests. The mother also was a well-organized homemaker, keeping the house clean, the children well-clothed, and making nourishing meals. The parents kept the family on a regular schedule for mealtimes, homework, bedtime, and waking up. The father had a steady, well-paying job. The family owned their own home in a pleasant neighborhood, where they lived since the parents were married. Both parents went to church each Sunday with the children. When Rob was a teenager, his father used to ask Rob to take walks with him. Rob went because he thought he had to, but he did not enjoy them. He would not talk to his father and would walk behind him.

Rob suffered at least two episodes of depression when he was a teenager and attempted suicide. The first time, he took all the pills in the medicine cabinet, but woke up the next day. The second time, he drove his car—that he bought with his own money—into a bridge abutment. He totaled the car but walked away without injury. Both attempts were responses to his rage and despair when his parents told him he had to break up with girlfriends they thought were not good enough for him. He obeyed them, but at great personal cost.

Rob did not feel close to anyone in his family. He said, “We never touched, and we never hugged.” His mother, however, did step between him and his father when his father was hitting him. The father would stop. When Rob was thirteen, he refused to go on any more camping trips with his father, and his mother backed him up. The camping trips stopped. Rob did not did not confide in any family members, but he had other outlets for his emotions. When upset, he listened to music that soothed him. He also wrote in a diary for several years where he expressed his most private thoughts and feelings. He stopped writing when his mother read his journal and made fun of him about it.

### **Rob’s Second, Loving Family**

Rob had a life-long best friend named Pete and felt like a second son to Pete’s parents. This family lived across the street. Rob spent as much time as he could with them. He talked freely to Pete and Pete’s family about his family issues, although he did not tell them about the sexual abuse. Rob loved being with this family because they seemed to like and respect each other and to like and respect him. Rob and Pete used to take Rob’s father home from the bars on occasion when the father was too drunk to find his way home by himself. Rob was home more than once with Pete when his father came home drunk. Pete simply accepted this situation and did not give Rob cause to be ashamed.

Pete’s father spent a lot of time with the two boys, teaching them how to repair small appliances and motors. Rob also talked to Pete and Pete’s father about relationships and how to get along with others. Rob received his sex education from Pete’s father. This man also loaned Rob money to buy a lawn mower so that Rob could set up a mowing service. Rob built up a good business and expanded to clearing snow in the winter.

Rob did well in school and was a particularly good chess player and was president of the chess club. He thought he did not have enough money for college but had saved enough from his business to go to trade school where he learned to be an electrician, building on the skills and knowledge Pete’s father had given him. Rob is now thirty, has a thriving electrical business, is married and has a son and daughter. He and his wife own their own home in a pleasant, residential neighborhood. Rob is active in several community organizations.

### **Rob Realized He had a Problem**

At age twenty-six, Rob realized that he had a problem. He never hit his wife, but he yelled at her loudly enough that she would become frightened and leave the home with the children to be with her parents. She used to tell him they need to get some marriage counseling but he refused. One day, after she left with the children, he saw that he had broken one of his children’s toys. He then realized that he had had a tantrum, like the tantrums he used to hate in his own father. He cried for a long time and then phoned his wife to tell her that he would get therapy.

After a few sessions, he remembered being sexually abused. Right before the session, he had seen a television show on incest. He thought the show in combination with the counseling triggered memories that he had long ago put out of his mind.

He sought therapy for being a survivor of child sexual abuse, which he successfully completed. He and his wife had marriage counseling. While doing this therapeutic work, he realized that he was also physically abusive to his toddler children. He used to spank them over their diapers starting when they

were less than a year old. He thought his wife was crazy when she told him that you don't hit babies. He realized how wrong he was, joined Parents Anonymous, and became a national leader in the organization.

Rob had the good sense to deal with issues that troubled him and that stressed and frightened his wife and children. He somehow realized that he was at fault, and he had the inner strength to do something about it. It is likely that his long-term connection to Pete and Pete's family over a long period of time had made a difference in how he thought about himself and what he believed he was entitled to do. His family of origin had several positive factors as well. That he developed capacities for emotional expressiveness also was a factor in the pro-social turn he navigated in his life.

### **Margaret's Emotional Development**

Margaret's father was not physically abusive and was proud of her accomplishments in music, sports, and schoolwork. When he was in a good mood, he was a funny, attentive father. Margaret felt very close to her mother, older sister, and two friends whom she knew all her life from early childhood to adulthood. She could talk to her sister, mother, and friends about what was troubling her, and she often did. These family members and friends encouraged Margaret to pursue her interests and were themselves good at many things and popular with their own friends.

### **Margaret Sought Professional Help**

Margaret did not have major issues with depression and anxiety and had the resources to imagine a positive future and to achieve her dreams. Sexually abusing children did not cross her mind, but as a young adult, she had a series of problems with jobs and boyfriends and sought therapy for several years and then spent three years in self-help groups for adult children of alcoholics.

As a result of her participation in therapy and self-help groups, Margaret gained even more confidence in herself, went to medical school, and is a well-known academic physician, specializing in child neurology. At the age of forty-three, she has a long-term relationship with a man who is a college professor.

Both Margaret and Rob had risks for becoming perpetrators of child sexual abuse. The thought never crossed their minds. They apparently had many positive factors in their lives that helped them to overcome some of the effects of their own childhood sexual abuse and other traumas. They both had confidants and were able to express a range of emotions appropriately. They had many friends, did well in school, and did many things well. They did not have "me first" beliefs and typically were sensitive and responsive to others. If they were not, they usually realized it, had remorse, and apologized. They preferred connection to others and found cut-offs painful. They knew how to repair breaks in relationships.

In adulthood, both of them engaged in therapy and self-help to see themselves through to a fulfilling careers and adult lives. Wounded by childhood sexual abuse and other negative life events, they demonstrate capacities for coping with, adapting to, and overcoming adversities. They are examples of adults who show resilience.

### **The Case of Mike, A Man Who Sexually Abused his Stepdaughter**

Mike's life story is an example of a man who was not sexually, physically, or psychologically abused and neglected as a child or teen. In fact, he described a happy childhood that went wrong after the one remaining sibling besides himself left the family home when Mike was twelve. Despite being raised in what appears to be a "good enough" family, Mike sexually abused his stepdaughter June for several years, beginning when she was three. He also raped his wife many times and beat her as well.

He had the qualities identified earlier as characteristic of persons who abuse children sexually. He appeared to have capacities to detach from his emotions and the emotions of others. He never discussed personal, painful problems with others. He believed he could do whatever he wanted regardless of what others wanted. He believed he was entitled to be sexual with his stepdaughter, and he acted on these beliefs.

The youngest child of seven children and the only son of a working class, two-parent family, Mike was smart, handsome, and personable. His older sisters and his parents doted on him. His parents and his sisters, all married, had good incomes, owned their own homes, and were law-abiding, contributing members of their communities.

He went to church every week with his parents, and he liked going. His friends were other children from the church and from his neighborhood. His parents did not drink alcohol, and they socialized with other families. They were married for thirty-seven years. The marriage ended when Mike's father died at age seventy-five. Mike spent a lot of time with his father who taught him how to repair cars, how to build houses, and how to care for the house and yard, which Mike said was "immaculate." Mike appeared to respect his father. He said

I learned a lot of stuff from him. A lot of it I didn't use later on. He gave me a good example, but I chose not to follow it.

He said his father was always busy, always doing something for work or around the house and yard. "The only time he wasn't working, he was sleeping," he said. Mike did not like to talk about his father who died when Mike was in his early twenties. He regretted that he had not gotten to know his father better. He said, "I still have a lot of pain about talking about him." He did not elaborate on the sources of his pain, but at least he acknowledged some.

Mike's mother was a homemaker who occasionally worked part-time. She was an excellent cook and an organized homemaker. After her husband died, she did not remarry and bought her own home in a neighborhood to be close to Mike and his family and to two daughters and their families. Mike said that he felt like he was an only child because his siblings all were married and out of the home by the time he was in his early teens. A sister six years older than him was like his second mother. She would take care of him when his mother was working.

Things changed for Mike when he was an early teen and his sister left home to get married. He began using drugs and alcohol, no longer wanted to go to church, and began to disobey his parents. He dropped out of high school and worked at low-paying jobs. In one job, he became angry at the boss and vandalized the workplace as revenge.

He said he abused his stepdaughter June because he liked doing it. His description of the abuse illustrates many of the points made earlier about what perpetrators say about child sexual abuse. This is what Mike said in his own words.

I don't think about why I did it too much. There's a lot of different reasons why I did it. Number one was because I liked it. I liked the control and what I felt was intimacy or whatever. She and I didn't have anybody else. It was like a challenge, too, to get her alone. That part was almost more exciting than actually having sex with her, setting everything up just to get her alone. It took a lot of my time and a lot of my energy to do that, a lot of preoccupation, a lot of planning involved in it.

I had to think what time her mother gets home for sure. She worked part-time. So she got off different times. Knowing if I had to pick her up or if she is getting a ride some. So she may come walking in.

Keeping June scared, more or less. What's going to happen to her if she tells. A lot of awareness of where the kids are. I always knew where they were at. I used a lot of verbal threats. Mom would leave or something.

At the beginning I guess I used to think that it was good to do this. She was younger. She believed me then. When she started to resist, it turned into threats and manipulation with money. Or 'You're grounded,' or 'You're not going to get anything.' 'You can't go there. You can't go here, if you don't do this for me.' That nobody would want her, stuff like that. I used a lot of shaming.

So it went from caring, what I felt was caring, down to more stronger forcing, towards the last three or four years, actually. June was convenient. She was always there.

There's no stopping once, I started. There was no turning back after that. I just figured that I enjoyed it and why stop. Why tell anybody because I'd get thrown in prison then.

The actual sex — I liked that. Then the control, being in control of her life completely was a thrill for me. I thought about it more than I thought about my wife. She occupied a lot of my time.

I don't think of people's feelings. I still have a hard time with that. I'm pretty insensitive about other people. I'm really self-centered. It's just selfish, sexual gratification and that's all. That's about all there is to it.

She was a pretty girl--no question. I mean, other people say that, too. I looked at her at her other than just an object--also as a pretty girl. Then it would run in my head that she's not just a girl. She's mine and always will be. It would run in my head that she always will be mine.

I eventually think I would have run off with her. I thought about that. I would someday. That's where a lot of pornography and stuff comes in with people like child molesting and stuff, that they control - it controls their life so much that they finally get involved with child pornography and stuff like that, where they can manipulate the kids into doing things to make money for them. I think that was the road I was traveling.

We'd talk about sex abuse all the time at work, stories on TV and all that stuff. We talked about that. Here I was doing the same thing. Anyway, I took a real hard line on it with him, that they weren't fit to be alive, stuff like that. I was doing the same thing.

Mike's mother and siblings stayed in close touch with him while he was in prison for sexually abusing his stepdaughter. All but one sister visited him regularly, at least twice a month, with phone calls and letters in between. One sister thought his sexual abuse of his stepdaughter had crossed a line, and she did not want to see him because of it. He had no contact with June. June's mother divorced Mike, and the judge ordered no contact with the family.