

**Full interviews of the 3 women from Chapter 13 of Daughters and their Dads,
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NB. Their identities have been altered for privacy purposes.

Judy, Albany

Abandonment

My mother died when I was nine years of age. She was 41 and had breast cancer which had spread throughout her body.

I had always been Dad's little girl. I adored my father. He was a builder and I used to go out with him in his truck when he was doing different jobs. But after Mum died he didn't handle the grief very well. So he went out a lot and did a lot of drinking. Looking back, I understand that it was his way of coping. But I felt abandoned. He was never home, but when he was home I was really happy. If I saw his car there in the driveway I would get really excited. But after a year he sent me off to live with another family who had five other children. They were friends of the family. Dad sent me there because he couldn't cope and thought I would be better off with them. Also, he had found someone else and I don't think that person wanted to take me on. I wasn't the only one sent away - my sister was sent to another home, so in the end I had lost all of my family, not just my mother.

I had been spoilt and had lots of attention from my father. I adored him and I loved being with him. But now I was in a family where I was just one of five children. There was a lot of love. But it just wasn't my family. I wanted my Dad.

I adored my father. He was up on a pedestal in my mind. That is why the abandonment was so hurtful to me

My advice to fathers, especially if they are required to take responsibility for their daughters, is to always be there for their children. Definitely.

When my father moved me to the home of another family, the father of that family was very nice to me. I did feel some love from him, yes, but even if he'd taken me out regularly for milkshakes and talked to me about life I doubt that that would have been enough for me. That's because he wasn't my father and I had a very strong bond with my Dad and he was around but not involved. Maybe if my father had died, rather than abandoning me, it wouldn't have been so bad. I don't know. It's hard to look back and imagine how things might have been otherwise

After my mother died and Dad moved me in with another family, he still picked me up and dropped me to school everyday. But that only 5 minutes together. We didn't do much else together and he just wasn't there for me emotionally. We didn't do anything special together. Even if I'd lived with that family and he'd taken me out two or three nights a week to the movies or for a milkshake that would have been enough for me, particularly if he'd been interested in how I was feeling.

My step mother, after she had a few drinks one night, said to me "You should have lived with your father and I after your mother died. Maybe things wouldn't have gone bad. Your father thought that living in a family environment would be better for you".

Addiction

When I got to high school I started to rebel. I think it was attention-seeking behaviour. I was crying out for my Dad. I was always crying out for Dad. I started to play up in class and became the class clown. Then I began to skip school. I was nearly expelled. By the time I was 16 I was going out and drinking a lot. Often I would go out drinking and just would not get home at all. Then there were weekends, lots of them, when I would just drink myself unconscious and spend most of the weekend that way. Alcohol gave me an escape and it felt good.

I was an alcoholic for many years but I didn't get into heroin until I met up with my daughter's father when I was 35. I'd known him for a while. At the time I was trying to stop drinking and he was trying to quit drugs, so we ended up in a shared house. But it was then that I got into heroin. He got me onto it. There was a period of time when I was addicted to benzodiazepines as well. I did heroin for four years. My daughter Lily was born at that time, six years ago.

At my sister's 50th birthday I made a complete fool of myself. I had been trying not to drink but I had already had some drinks before I got there and then I was drinking almost straight vodka, but telling people it was only lemonade. Then I made a complete fool of myself when people tried to stop me drinking and I realised I was spoiling my sister's party. My father came up to me and said to me "Whatever you do don't spoil your sister's birthday party". Afterwards I realised this type of life and the drinking just had to stop. This is ridiculous. I have not had a drink since. In fact I haven't touched drugs for three and a half years nor alcohol for one year now.

My father hasn't handled my addictions too well. He doesn't talk about it much but I know it hurts him a lot. Once he got angry and said to me "If this happens again, I will make sure your daughter is taken from you".

For many years I blamed my family for my addictions, especially my Dad. That's not the case now. I understand that I need to take responsibility for it not blame others. And I have finally forgiven my father for abandoning me. I now realise that that's just him. He just did not know how to deal with his own huge grief when Mum died and didn't know how to deal with his nine year old daughter by himself. He and Mum were very close. I had seen him cry a lot around that time. He's a very emotional man and he cried a lot when mum was dying. He tried to handle her death by going out and drinking a lot. So me and my sister were alone at home a lot.

Through my years of growing up all I ever wanted was my Dad.

I suppose I just don't know if my father will ever talk to me about my drug and alcohol problems. He's just not the sort of person who likes to look back and delve into things. My father just doesn't like talking about the past. I think he does suffer guilt from what he did, particularly knowing that he should not have abandoned me. But I have never sat down and talked about my mother's death with him. I would really love to, but I am not sure that it will ever happen.

Once my father came up and spoke to the doctor that runs my rehabilitation programme. He told him that he just hadn't known what to do with me. The doctor explained that my addiction is just another disease. I think that discussion helped him accept me a little bit more.

Alcohol is poison to me. Valium and Serapax are poisonous too.

My dad is now 74. I don't see much of him now. Even when he calls in to see me he only stays for a minute or so – it always seems that he's got something on, something that he just has to rush off to somewhere. Even when I telephone him he can only spare a few minutes to talk with me. I think he's like that with all of his children.

My recently had a heart attack. When my sister rang me to tell me my father had a heart attack, I just broke down crying. The person that I turned to was the doctor who's looking after my recovery from drug addiction. He's like a father-figure to me, especially because he listens to me. And I know he's always there for me. Without him I could be dead now. Definitely. But I am not demanding of him like others have been. Also, joining the local church community has been very helpful to me. When the doctor sees me there he introduces me to other people and tells them how long I have been off heroin. It is nice to hear that and that community of people is very supportive.

Although my Dad can see that I am doing well now and, getting better, I know it will be hard for me to regain his trust again. That's because he and the rest of my family have lost their trust in me. I lied to him and the family so much when I was on heroin. I used to ask him for money and say things like "I need the money for the telephone bill" or "I need the money for my daughter". But I was lying. And I would also lie about my drinking and drugs and say that I was OK, that I was not drinking etc., even when I was. I've lost a lot of trust from my family, particularly with my father, and it won't be easy to regain that.

A lot of addicts are manipulative. They lie through their teeth. By the way, I am not lying to you now when I speak to you about this.

I'm not now very close to the family that I had lived with after my mother died. I think that's my fault. People who are addicted become very selfish, very self absorbed and they don't care about what anyone else is doing. That was what I was like. So I don't have much to do with that family anymore. I spent so many years in denial saying things like "I haven't got a problem. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm OK".

The link between experimenting with drugs and becoming a drug addict is hard to work out. Part of it is just the way you are, a chemical imbalance in the brain. A lot of addicts are very caring and sensitive people and things that do not upset most people can often upset drug addicts deeply. So one reason that they enjoy alcohol or drugs is to escape from their excessive worrying about things that they experience, to block it out. This is especially bad if they lack the essential coping skills of life.

Grief/bereavement & growth.

And dads need to be open with their daughters. I would say to dads, 'talk to your daughters and don't sweep things under the carpet'. 'If there is grief, let's grieve together'. My Dad has never talked to me about my mother's death or my drug addiction, and maybe he never will.

I don't think my older sister, who was 16 when my mother died, handled her grief very well either. Initially she had to look after the house and also look after me. That was on top of worrying about Dad, who was going out, getting very drunk and then

not getting home till late. Then she had to move out to stay with other family members in the north of the State.

I think my older sister hasn't handled the grief very well. She avoids talking about it. She says "What's the point of bringing up the past and rehashing old stuff. What's that going to achieve?" I tell her that I know that it could achieve a lot.

I don't think any of the three daughters has grieved properly over mum's death. Nor has my father. We never ever discuss it together.

It's just so important to learn to talk about how you feel.

Advice re abandonment

It's hard to give advice to adult daughters of a father who have abandoned them or who has been distant from them in childhood. Dealing with that is especially hard if it seems like it will be impossible to resolve things with him. First I would say "don't give up, keep trying". But if it's not possible, you have to get on with life. But in the end you have to forgive your father and acknowledge that maybe they thought they were doing the best for you at the time. You can't be resentful and hold onto your resentments all the time. It's not good for you and you're the only one that gets hurt. I did that for many years but I finally found that I could forgive my father. What brought me to that point of forgiveness? The first step happened when I stopped drinking and doing drugs because it gave me a clearer head and I was able to look at things more closely. Also I had counselling at the time which enabled me to deal with the issues that I had and helped me face reality. I used to blame lots of people but I don't do that now.

Should I write to my father and tell him I forgive him? Tell him that I understand that he was just doing what he thought was best for me at the time, even though it was wrong? Yes I think I should. That's a good idea. It might be easier to do that because he always avoids talking with me about these things so maybe a letter would be easier.

He has suffered shocking guilt, deep down. He's said to me "The day your mother died that's the day everything started to go wrong".

Brenda, Sydney

Fathers and attractiveness

Daughters need to be loved and accepted. I know it sounds strange that they need that from their Dads, but it's just so important.

It's that whole female thing about having to prove yourself to men in some way, which is especially evident during adolescence. By prove yourself I mean that deep need that females have to be acknowledged as being a beautiful person inside. If you don't have that from your father then you will tend to look for it in other male relationships.

I didn't get love and acceptance from my father. I didn't get that feeling of being a beautiful person inside. So when I was an adolescent I looked for it in male

relationships. I wanted them to ‘put me on a pedesta’. I now know that things like ‘mutual respect’ are important but that just wasn’t important to me then – I wanted to be thought of as fantastic. I wanted boys to not see my faults.

Father affecting a daughter’s male relationships

Because my Dad was so much in control of us, I wanted that in my relationships. I wanted to be able to call the shots. Looking back I know why I was that way – I saw my father being in such total control of my mother that she had no freedom. I think she let herself be pushed around because her own mother was like that so after she’d escaped from her mother’s control she walked into a similar controlling relationship with my father. But I decided there was no way I was going to fall into the same pattern. I broke the sequence.

When I met my husband it was different – he was the first man I couldn’t push around, although he didn’t try to control me either. What is it about my husband that is different? There’s just something about him. He knows all of my faults very well and yet he loves me so much. His love for me is unconditional and that is what is so amazing.

How special must God be to give people like us unconditional love. He just pours it out, despite the crap he gets back from us.

Not showing love

I know now looking back that my father loved me, but I didn’t know then. I can see it looking back now. You can always see things more clearly as an adult. What I realise is that his biggest problem was that he was just not able to show his love for any of his three daughters. He’s not really a good communicator. Maybe it would have been easier for him if we were boys and not girls. He just didn’t know how to relate to girls.

Emotional abuse

Dad was always short tempered and controlling. For example if he was going fishing he would insist that we go with him. But it wasn’t relaxing, it was stressful. That’s because he had such a short temper so that if we did anything wrong or we got bored and started to play around, he would yell at us. We’d be frightened for example of doing something simple like dropping the bait, that kind of thing. He would yell at us.

My Dad still has that short temper, but he’s learnt to control it more. But kids notice these things. His grandson (my son) said to me recently ‘I don’t like Grandpa. Why is that? Because he’s no fun and he gets cross with me’.

Of the five love languages, my most important one is *touch*. I love being hugged, cuddled and snuggled by my husband. My husband has the same love language I think. I don’t know what my Dad’s love language is though – I’ve never really thought of it.

I look at the way my husband relates to our daughter and I think ‘I wish my Dad had been more like My husband’.

When we got married, I did not want my father to walk me down the aisle. I did not love him. Because he had been abusive to me it was the last thing that I wanted. I wanted my mother to walk me down the aisle. But both my mother and my fiancé

thought it through, talked with me about and spoke to me with great wisdom – they said ‘no, you can’t do that. It would crush him if you made that decision’. So one of the biggest steps I made in terms of being reconciled to my father was to allow him to walk me down the aisle. I’m glad I did it. But I’ve never told him but that’s how I felt at the time.

Is my father now aware of the feelings I had when I was young? No, he’s not, not really. Even if I spoke to him now he wouldn’t be quite sure of what I’m talking about.

I love my father now. I hug him and I talk to him. That was a big step for me and I do it intentionally. I sit there and listen to him, often when he’s rambling on and on about things that are boring. He does not ask me in return how I am feeling, how my week has been and things like that. Like a lot of people he’s just too self-centred for that. Occasionally he does it to me, but pretty much I have to tell him. But I’m not resentful about that. I accept the fact that it is up to me and that I have to choose to speak to him and I think that has been an important step in re-establishing our relationship. You have to make those choices and not sit around being resentful all the time.

My father doesn’t know any of this. That’s why these comments are anonymous. Part of the reason for that he’s just so unaware about humans and their feelings. So why have I chosen not to discuss with him the bad stuff from my childhood? Well I believe if you get to a point where you have established a great relationship after years of hurt, and you’ve forgiven someone, and he’s responded to that, why do you need to bring it up. It’s not an issue with me and I don’t think about it now. There’s nothing in my mind to forgive because I am at peace with what happened.

One of the problems is that my Dad has always had trouble relating to women. He had no real contact with his own father who had abandoned the family when he was very young, and hadn’t had much chance to learn how to relate to women. His own mother had been a dragon. So he only related with difficulty to women and only at a certain level with men. I think my father therefore may not comprehend what I talk about. I would hope he would, but I am worried that he would not and I don’t want my relationship with him affected. But I make it clear that I don’t have a burning desire to ‘get it out into the open’. If I felt it was necessary to achieve something then I would. If I felt that our relationship would benefit from doing that, that it would be better, then I would do it. But I love what I have now in our relationship. It’s not perfect, but that’s just ‘people’. But I don’t need to talk to him about it at this point in time.

I found out that four years ago that my father had tried to get my mother to have an abortion when she was pregnant with me. What was my reaction to that? Actually I didn’t react badly. I guess that’s because I was aware that he didn’t know it was me, he just thought it was ‘a baby that did not fit into his life at the time’

My father is very self-centred yet surprising he is also capable of heading off and doing helpful things in the community. For example at the moment he’s supporting a man who is a prisoner and supporting his family too. It is hard work for him but he is being very supportive. He also spends time with his grandchildren. For example, just the other day he phoned me and said ‘Can I pick up Toby from kindergarten. I’d like to pick him up and take him for an ice-cream’.

What was it like for me as a child? My Dad had a strong temper and was very physical. I had lots of beltings. I don't know how common they were – as a child you often imagine they were more common than they really were and that you were getting belted all of the time. But certainly I would lie on the bed and be hit with a belt. This would be for little things like being bossy to my sisters. I would certainly get a belting if there was any questioning of his authority. For example if I said 'Why Dad? Why do I need to do that?' He wasn't good at allowing us to articulate our thoughts as children, and so he perceived all questions as a challenge to his authority.

My Dad belted me up until the age of 11 or 12. I guess he stopped when I started to go into puberty. But at the same time my mother and father's relationship had deteriorated so much that the family was beginning to fall apart. For example, when it got to be really bad Mum and the kids would all move out at various times to other families from the Church. Then we would all move back home again.

It was from around that point that I have clear memories of my mother being hurt by my father. He would hit her and she would scream. This happened at night when we were in bed. And she has since told me that he would rape her at those times. I slept in the next room and so I could hear her screaming and hear him hitting her. What did I do? I cried. And I pulled a pillow over my head to try to stop myself from hearing it.

I bottled up the emotions that came from that time.

But later on I came to the point where I realised that that kind of hurt, experiencing those kind of emotions, can be 'bitter root' experiences which can profoundly influence you later on.

I first realised this about six or seven years after I was first married. Our marriage hit a difficult patch and I realised that there were things that I hadn't resolved from my childhood that were interfering with my relationship with my husband. Basically, because I had seen my mother totally controlled by my father, I had decided that I would never lose my freedom like that. So I had spent my teenage years trying to be control in my relationship with males. So when I got married I tried to control My husband. But I began doing stupid things. For example, if I thought that something I wanted to happen was the right thing, I would want him to do exactly that. But if he disagreed I would still insist on getting my own way.

I was very much helped by counselling. This happened through our Church where I spent some time with a woman who had a real gift for counselling, prayer and healing. That was the beginning of the start of the real healing that needs to be done in these kinds of situations. It helped me identify that the root cause of my controlling behaviour were things that happened in my childhood.

It's been a long journey.

Adult Christians in churches are not free of these problems. I've only ever taught in one school, a fundamentalist Christian school, and a lot of the teachers would take the view that when you became a Christian you had a new life which was perfect and the past would not be a problem. I think that is naive and simplistic. I believe that God

allows us to experience healing by looking at and dealing with these problems. That's part of the experience of the healing power of God's love.

One of the important parts of that process is that I began to understand my father as a person as well as a father. That has meant that I don't just see things from the perspective of the 'hurt daughter'. That's true healing. I think that is the real healing, the real second birth that can happen when you become a Christian if you have the courage to learn to forgive.

But how would my father have known how to show love and be close to his daughters. He had no role modelling. His own father took off. He abandoned the family. Dad was only a toddler when his father left.

This left his mother very bitter. I don't know if she was already a difficult woman but she became a very, very hard lady. I guess to some extent she was a product of her times. She worked, had three children, had no husband to help her and had been abandoned. Was she bitter – probably. I was never that close to her so it's hard to tell. But I do know that as grandchildren, we never enjoyed having her around as our grandmother.

Many, many years later my Dad found out where his was and wrote him a letter. Then he went to visit him, and I went with him.

When I got married I met my husband's grandparents. I realised that they were the grandparents that I wished I had. They made me laugh – our family didn't ever laugh, there was no sense of humour in the house. I enjoy laughing a lot, particularly laughing at life.

In fact laughter really only came into our house after our father left.

All the time that my father was physically abusing me and my mother, and raping her, we were a church family. I don't know that anyone outside the family knew of our difficulties. In those days people weren't very honest. But there were a couple of other families in the Church that we were close to, but I didn't really know them. In fact we had no extended family around at all, and even though we had these other families that we were close to, none of them provided a father figure for me.

The only father figure I really had was my grandmother's second husband. He did make me feel special. He hugged me – he was also fun to be around. He had a good sense of humour and had a way of saying those odd phrases that are amusing. For example I remember he had a purple car, and whenever we travelled in it as grandchildren and he was going to put on the brakes he would always use phrases like 'hang onto your britches'. He would do special little things for us and we would have afternoon tea parties which were nice to be at. We never had anything like that in our family.

Our house was a very effeminate house, very 'girly'. My Dad was the only male in the house and he didn't know how to relate to females. My husband commented on the femininity of our house the first time he encountered it.

For example, our 'female radars' were finely tuned to nuances of feeling – our radars were out for any criticism, any hurting, any incident where we were being made fun of etc.

When I look back I am so thankful to my mother. That's because despite all that Dad put on her, and all she went through, she would always say positive things. For example when I'd complain about Dad she would say things like 'I know, but he is your father'. She could have reinforced what I said but the view she took was helpful and I am very thankful to her for that. She was a woman who couldn't really tolerate criticism anyway, but I'm glad she didn't reinforce my feelings but tried to balance them up.

I know that because I never had a sense of being loved, accepted and affirmed as a special person by my father I definitely fitted into that category of woman who was at risk of becoming sexually promiscuous. And as a teenager I did like to spend time with boys and I 'teased' them a bit. I could have been sexually promiscuous, but it was because of my mother that it didn't happen. She would teach us about love and sex and say things like 'You know that sex can be very physical but it's meant to be special, with someone you love deeply. You've got to find that right person'.

That had an effect on me. I was a tease to guys, and I was going out to nightclubs and pubs, but I never actually let go. I never let myself lose control. For example, although I drank alcohol, I never drank enough to lose control. Although I was going to Church and had developed a conscience about this, that wasn't the main factor – it was really the talks that my mother had given to me.

In my relationships with boys, I would get to a certain point where they would be expecting a sexual relationship and I would dump them. I didn't dump them just because I could. I dumped them because I wasn't willing to take that extra step to a sexual relationship. I enjoyed the notion of going out with these guys. I liked it when I could control them.

The first step a woman can take to heal a relationship with an abusive father is to get some insight into their feelings. But it's not just insight, it's more than that. That first step in the pathway to forgiveness is to understand and know where the pain is greatest, and not to block it out. It is important to not block out the memories. But then don't let that hurt linger otherwise it just interferes with other relationships.

How do you stop the hurt lingering? I can't speak for others but for me it involved time talking with friends and having counselling. For me it also involved prayer. I believe that a lot of my peace has come from the Holy Spirit, that it is a gift from God.

Another thing that is critical in dealing with hurtful relationships with your father is to allow time for the healing. When I realised that I could begin to forgive my father, I knew that I had to start building up our relationship from scratch. So I decided to spend some time with him. Until then he hadn't engaged with me at all. He had engaged a bit with my husband, but that's because they have sport in common. So I began having him around to visit our home. And I began to talk to him. I'd ask him about what he was doing, what he was enjoying and what he thought about things. Of course he wouldn't ask me about my life, so I would just have to tell him anyway. I would still have to take the initiative in that. And I still do. He asks me a little bit

more now about myself, but he's really too self-centred a person to do much of that. But I don't wait for that and I don't resent it if he doesn't do it. So I'm enjoying talking with him even though I am the one doing the asking.

Children are a good vehicle for this healing too. When I look at my Dad, I see someone with a huge need to be loved and there's something about young children, about their ability to give love unconditionally, that is special. They just show love, unconditional love, to their grandparents. And they don't mind being held, not like many adults.

Now, when I look at my Dad I don't see the man who was beating and raping his wife in the room next to mine, causing her to scream and causing me to cry and put my head under a pillow. I see a man who was a product of his own environment, who didn't know how to communicate especially with women, who had a short temper, low self esteem and a desperate need to be loved.

And I do love my Dad now. I've learnt to love him. That love only began to happen once I began to understand why he is like he is.

Eventually I decided I wanted to tell him that I loved him. I planned that moment and talked about it with my husband My husband. I wanted to tell him. It's wasn't the situation of feeling like I ought to tell him.

It was nice to come to the realisation you love someone like him enough to want to tell him and to be able to do so. So I told my husband that 'I really want to tell my Dad that I love him'.

It happened on Kangaroo Island. We were taking the children over there and we invited my father to come and stay with us because we knew he loved the island. We were on vacation there and we thought he would enjoy it there too. So one afternoon I went for a walk with my father. I was very nervous. I had that silly butterfly feeling inside. I didn't know when I should tell him. Do I say it now? Or do I wait? Do I say it now? Finally we stopped on a cliff and looked out over the ocean and I just put my hand on his shoulder and said 'Dad. I love you'.

What did he do? He smiled and put his hand around my shoulder. What's interesting is that because he had physically abused me as a child and because I hated him, I couldn't handle him hugging or kissing me. But I find that I can handle him hugging and kissing me now since I have learnt to love him again. And I've told him so. That only happened after I allowed him to do so.

My advice is 'don't expect to leap into this'. Take small steps. Don't expect to give or receive hugs if that makes the other person feel uncomfortable – an arm on the shoulder may be enough. Just take one step at a time.

I am so grateful that I have a relationship with my father again and that I now love him. He's had a tough time in the last few years, but we have seen him grow. I think that the forgiveness and love he has experienced from m have helped him to grow. For example, he has come on several Church beach missions with us and that indicates just how far he has come. He would never have done that years ago.

You hear so many sad stories where women talk about their fathers as ‘that bastard’. I am so grateful that I do not hold that resentment for my father because I have learnt forgiveness, understanding and love for him.

Most of my closest female friends have not had bad relationships with their fathers. They have had good relationships with them.

I know now that my Dad has low self-esteem. It is very low. That’s why he feels the need to tell people things that he thinks might lift him up in their eyes.

Hannah, London

General comments on fathers and daughters

Mothers and fathers both play critical roles in a daughter’s life, but their roles are different. A father is especially important when the children are young. That’s because whilst both parents are protective, mothers are often more protective whereas fathers are less worried and therefore able to ‘draw children out’

I think fathers are more likely to talk to children in a way that seeks clarity, that tries to help their children to be understood in the world and that way they have a role in the children’s early language development.

When fathers are lacking in a daughter’s life there is a “hole” in the girl’s life, a hole in the sense of who you are as a woman. This is especially the case in adolescents because so much of adolescence is about who you are as a woman and a father can be very important in defining that. For example it is partly from the way a father treats his daughter that she gets the sense of values and respect that she carries with her when she is amongst her teenage girlfriends. Then when she is amongst those of her friends who are into experimenting eg. smoking, drinking, being sexually active, the daughter is more able to be able to say ‘no’. although that could be partly because of fear generated by the a high sense of values imparted by father, fear of letting him down, it is mostly to do with the quality of the relationship with the father and the sense of self worth and respect for herself that that relationship generates.

If the father gives strong signals to his daughter that “she is something special and she should respect herself and not let herself be used by anybody”, she is less likely to try such activities. When I was a teenager one of my 14 year old friends had really lax parents and early on in her life they let her go and do what she liked. Consequently she tried everything. She said to me once “sex is great”. She was only 14. But when think about her back then I believe it’s because her father never focused on her, never discovered who she really was as a person, so she was looking for that from other males.

If there is a deep sense of affection between fathers and daughter then I think a girl is more free to focus on her own life, what she wants to do and achieve. Then for her it becomes “goals not guys”.

The other thing that fathers should give to their daughters is encouragement for her to find her role in life.

The relationship between a mother and a father models, to some extent, the way she will live her life in relationship to males. For example a dominant father who is married to a woman

who allows herself to remain submissive can model a message that says, “girls, don’t act too confident, that’s not OK, and don’t be too ready to go out and explore your potential. But if a father encourages his partner the opposite thing can happen – his daughter would see this and think it is normal to have confidence and to try to achieve her potential in life.

My father

My father fought in the Second World War and he had actually expected to die during that war, so when he didn’t he somehow lost his sense of direction. I don’t know why.

Our family started to unravel after my older sister died young. Mum was hit hard by her death and she withdrew into herself for many years afterwards. I imagine that during those years she withdrew from him sexually, but that is never an excuse for a man to abuse a child. She used to go out one night a week to choir practice and that was when my father began to abuse me. I don’t know why he did it and there was an aspect of his personality which I think was a bit unhinged. But there was no excuse.

Sexual abuse

I have read about how often it happens that children are abused and the way he did it to me is very similar to what I have read. It was almost like my father courted me. He had a fascination with my hair. None of this was related to alcohol – he hardly ever drank. He would say things like “You are special”. That’s a very important thing for a child, but unfortunately it has to be done with appropriate boundaries and that was not what he did. That’s what happens – child abusers ‘court’ children and make them feel special. And they create a secretive context by saying things like “This is something special between us – don’t talk to other people about it”. I always get cry and get upset when I talk about it, even though I have been able to talk about it with others for some years.

I have a close friend whose father also abused her. But that has not come out till a lot later in her life. But the situation is fairly similar. Her father had groomed her and pursued her and taken advantage of her.

I had felt very connected to my father and what he did destroyed that. It destroyed my sense of trust in him. Like other children in my situation I wanted the abuse to stop but I didn’t want my special relationship to go.

At the time that I was subject to this abuse I experienced some sort of ‘conversion reaction’ in me because I always used to get gut pain when the abuse happened. That is how the whole story came out eventually when I was around the age of 10. One day after being abused I was sent home from school with gut pains and I just told my mother what my father had been doing to me. She immediately packed me up and moved me out of the house.

I never trusted my father again after he abused me. After I told my mother about what was happening it had some good results, because it did destroy the bad that was happening - it stopped the abuse. But it also had bad results because it also destroyed the good things I had with my dad – the love that existed between my father and myself. I still find it difficult to talk about. The sexual abuse was invasive and intrusive. The thing that hurt most was that I did feel close to him and that closeness was destroyed. Kids who are abused do not want to lose the relationship with their father but they do want the abuse to stop.

Has my sexual abuse as a child impacted my sexuality? Yes it has. It's hard to know how I would have been different. It hasn’t blocked me being physically responsive, climaxing, etc but it's more a sense of feeling unclean. This sense of uncleanness is not related to my

Christian faith, to thinking of sex as sinful. It is more about my still remaining somehow connected to the sexual abuse that happened to as a child and to the loss of trust and their effects on the emotional aspects of sexuality rather than the physical aspects.

After I was abused and the family broke down, I ended up feeling responsible for it. It was bad enough that my older sister had died of cancer, but now I was responsible for the mess that my family was in because by then I had been sent away, Mum had had a nervous breakdown and Dad had been sent away from the house. Eventually the whole family ended up being scattered.

If I hadn't been abused as a child how would I be different? Well, for a start I wouldn't have married my first two husbands. Neither of them had a mature sense of relationships. My first husband had affairs. He's one of those charming people who needs to be liked and when I found out that he was having an affair during our marriage it really disturbed me. It was another betrayal of trust. But by then I had found words to express myself...

I was subsequently told by another woman's husband that he had had an affair with her before then. We were hideously young when we got married.

Effect on the family

My mother sent me away after finding out that my father was sexually abusing me so I lost my family as well. I was moved in with another family for about a year. Then my mother had a nervous breakdown, she and my father separated and the other kids were farmed out elsewhere to other houses.

Mum went away and so did Dad. They ended up with a legal separation because of the abuse. In the end I felt responsible for the whole thing, because I had told my mother what he was doing. I knew I had to tell her what he was doing.

After my father abused me and our family disintegrated, I had a tough time from then on, particularly during my adolescence. I blamed myself because by telling my mother what my father was doing I had broken up the family. I was very depressed for a lot of that time. Around then there were several men who were important father figures in my life. One was a camp leader at the church camps that I went on. He and his wife were a very special couple to me. The thing that I remember clearly is that he was always interested in me, he always asked how I felt and what I thought. This was unusual in my life, not just that he appeared to be interested in me as a person, but that he would be bothered to ask me about things. In the end I got quite close to them and I used to babysit for them. They were very special to me. Because this happened close to the breakdown of my own family, they were a strong stability point in my life. They were a real gift to me at the time.

I had another important father figure at the time, the husband of one of my mothers closest friends. They was another couple and mum and she were "soul friends". We spent a lot of time with them and we even lived in the same house for a few years. He was one of those sturdy, silent types who was just 'always there'. He would give me a hug whenever I came into the house and I always knew that he would be around. He never said a lot but I knew that he was always there. I guess that feeling of having someone always there was more important to me than others because I had such a huge personal sense of abandonment around that time.

The key issue for father figures is to have a close relationship with girls but a relationship which is "appropriately bordered". These borders are basically to do with the type of

contact. For example a hand on a shoulder or the top of the back is very affirming and non-threatening but there are obviously other ways of making physical contact that will not be appropriate. I can remember as a child being aware of the issue of appropriate contact because for me, having been sexually abused as a child, I was hyper-sensitive to physical contact by t men and was more guarded with men than I might have been.

We had no extended family so I had no other father figures amongst relatives. My mother did remarry but I was virtually an adult when this happened and I never lived at home when my mother was with my stepfather. I mostly appreciated him because he was good to my mother. But he had old fashioned views and never encouraged my sisters to achieve anything in life. They were still living at home and he thought they were would be better off just getting married and having children, so he didn't encourage them in their careers at all.

Church leaders

Recently we have had a discussion at church about youth leaders and how they work with teenage girls. The suggestion came up that 'no male youth leader should ever drive a teenage girl anywhere in a car without other people being in the car at the same time'. Whilst I can see that modern social concerns encourage that sort of careful bahaviouir, I don't think it's in the best interest of anyone.

It is very important for adolescent girls to have the chance to talk with older men about things that are important, things that are honourable, things that affirm the girl's abilities and gifts. These types of conversations are very important for girls and they can really only happen in a one-on-one situation. It won't happen when there are other people around. But it is extremely important to have clear appropriate boundaries always in place. When this happened for me as an adolescent it helped me enormously and it made me feel that I was valued, that my presence in this life was valuable.

I felt much more connected to my father than my mother. I vividly remember having conversations with my father about life, about the war, about God, etc. Dad rode a bike and I often used to go on the back of the bike with him.

Has my father apologised?

Has my father ever had any remorse because he sexually abused me? I don't know. Maybe. Probably. But I have never trusted any apology he might have made because he lost all of my trust, completely. That's what happens – a relationship between a father and child is one of trust and I never ever trusted him again after that.

The sexual abuse I experienced occurred at a very formative stage of my life. I did not have the words to express myself and to tell my father to stop. I was powerless and passive in it. My father would come in to my bedroom when mum was out at choir practive, get me out of bed in my bedclothes, get undressed and abuse me. As a child, you are powerless. There's just no way to tease out how to feel safe and how to create a boundary when you're that young.

How did I tell my mother? I think she just asked me why I had stomach pains and I just told her what dad had been doing. I don't recall having had to gather the courage up to tell her. But in the end it was me who was moved out to live with another family. So I left instead of him. That was a shock. I would rather it had been the other way around.

A huge sense of abandonment came from that. When I found that my husband was having an affair, it took me back to my childhood of abuse by my father – it was yet another total

betrayal of trust in an intimate relationship. But did I blame myself this time for that? No. I did not. But it did make me feel like I wasn't good enough for him.

It's very important for a father to make a child feel special. It is very important to create appropriate boundaries with children. It is important to make sure that what you do with children is full of love and is for their sake, that it is not selfish.

At the time I chose to marry Paul a big shift had taken place in my life. A big shift at the emotional level. Until then I had lived not allowing my emotions to affect me. My ability to trust had been destroyed, and that had made me decide to live my life intellectually. I had felt from childhood that my feelings were untrustworthy as a guide. My first two marriages reflected that – the decision to marry each of them was essentially an intellectual decision. I was not able to tune into my emotional danger signals at those times.

The reason things changed was that before I married Peter I had decided that the time had come to come to terms with all of those bad feelings from my childhood. When I did that I was free to enter the second marriage with both my head and my heart.

I had an enormous amount of rage over what had happened to me as a child but I had never been able to express it. There's always a big cost for this sort of childhood abuse. For me it caused a disconnection between my head and my heart. Your heart will often tell you when something is wrong even when your head can reason its way through. But I had turned off my ability to listen to my heart. Neither of my first two husbands had grown up psychologically and I think they were both searching for a partner who would look after them. Neither of them are good at taking responsibility for their actions. Both of those relationships were mostly in my head, not much in my heart.

My specific advice to women who have been abused by their fathers is to get some help to start talking about it. Therapy is well worth it. It helps you resolve your own feelings about things. It also gives you the ability to communicate with other people about what happened, eg other members of your family such as your family of origin, your husband or whoever else. It's very important that this secret comes out.

The rest of the community often makes child abuse situations worse. The victim can be marginalised. Abuse has happened often in communities. You would imagine a church would be good at dealing with it but they aren't - they do not pursue people who commit abuse. They are frightened that all hell will break loose. And all hell can break loose. That is what happened in my family – the family totally disintegrated after I told my mother that my father was abusing me. But maybe the truth about incidents of child sexual abuse should break loose. It's an issue of justice. Men who abuse children should be held accountable. There is no excuse for it. Even if a man's wife is not sexually available to him that is never an excuse to turn to a child.

Therapy is a good way to come to terms with your own emotions and develop the skills to talk to others about it. That's because it's a confidential relationship in which a person has the freedom to express herself knowing that the information won't be passed on to others. It's only because I have worked on this stuff in therapy that I am able to talk about it and been able to work through it to this point in my life.

Neither of my sisters had known about the abuse I had suffered. I was an adult before I was able to tell them. I organised a meeting with them and I told them. They accepted it. In fact it kind of made sense to them when they pondered the broken marriage relationships I had had and when they thought back to why the family had broken down so many years ago.

They had never ever known why that had happened until the point that I told them about my abuse.

When my mother found out, did she think her husband was disgusting? Yes. The marriage split up on the basis of the sexual abuse. They did have a trial reconciliation and I can remember my father being back in the home for a while, but it didn't work. She was repulsed by him. I remember one time when he approached her and wanted to sit on her lap and kiss her but she just repulsed him and told him to go away. At that stage I was fighting with him all the time and never listened to anything he had to say. I took no advice from him at all and fought with him. Maybe I would have done that anyway, but I think it's partly because I'd lost all respect for him and all trust with him.

As an adolescent I was still able to get close to guys but I always had a clear sense of boundary. I was always able to say 'no'. This was not driven by church morality and by rules but by my desire to have relationships based on trust. Whenever I felt that that trust was being undermined I would withdraw from the relationship.

I was in a Church Youth Group and pairing off wasn't common because that would have removed us from the Group. We felt it was better to all be together and enjoy each other's company. That approach is common among young people nowadays too I think. There was a recent book that I read that suggests that young people should not seriously date because it doesn't add much to a relationship but creates opportunities for intimacy which are hard to deal with.

Another piece of advice I would give to any woman who has been sexually abused is that forgiveness is very significant. I was able to forgive my father but not for a long time. My ability to forgive happened slowly. One significant thing that I remember happening was reading a book called "What's So Amazing About Grace" by Phillip Yancey. When I read that book I felt convicted about the need to forgive my father, and to forgive my two ex-husbands.

I wanted to extend grace to my two ex-husbands so I wrote them letters. I laid out why I think our relationships had broken down and what my role in it was. My first husband didn't reply and has not spoken to me since, and my second husband was furious and said that what I'd said was libellous.

The reason that forgiveness is important is that when you fail to forgive someone, you end up being bound to them in some way. This is because you are always holding them to account. That means that whenever they're with you they always feel defensive and they feel an urge to rationalise their behaviour. But when you forgive someone, not only do you get your own sense of freedom and liberation but you release them. They then become free to think about their role and to deal with their own consciences.

My father died when I was 22. A few years before that I did go to see him to talk to him. I'd been to a place called L'Abri in Holland and one of my friends there had said to me the following words "don't do what you should do, do what you can do". That was liberating for me. That meant that I could go to see him but I wouldn't necessarily have to be able to totally forgive him, just go and see him. So when I returned home from Holland I felt a need to talk with him and went to see him. Did he apologise to me? No, not in a genuine way. He did say something like "I'm sorry" but he didn't really seem to see or hear me. In fact he was mostly interested in getting back with my mother and he wanted me to help him get back with her. He wasn't really interested in me.

The thing that I remember clearly is how powerless I felt as a child. It's hard to think as a child and that's why I struggled in those early years to hone my reasoning power in the midst of emotional turmoil.

The trust a father has with a daughter is a sacred one. Children are very vulnerable. They don't have the psychological armoury to protect themselves.

The closer you are to someone and the more intimate space, the greater the risk of hurt. A home is a child's base of safety, and being at home with parents that you can rely on and trust is very important. Children give parents their trust completely because they can't do anything else; there is no option, no alternative in life. That is why child abuse is so hurtful, because the trust is broken.

If I'd had a good relationship with my father, it's hard to know how my life would have been different. I certainly suspect that I might have chosen my marriage partners differently. I was certainly looking for security, for the feeling of belonging and being cared for. Being able to depend on the trust someone else. I didn't get that in my first two relationships just like I didn't get it from my Dad.

Has this destroyed my confidence? It did then but not now. I have obtained confidence from healing, and from what God has been able to do in my life. A child definitely has a sense of God that relates to their relationship with their father and because my father had sexually abused me and broken our trust, God never felt trustworthy to me when I was young. He was distant and this distance increased after my first marriage breakdown. I never felt that God had let me down by not saving me from the sexual abuse, interestingly

After my mother found out that I was being sexually abused, I was moved out of the home into another family. But I felt lost. I wanted to go home. That family were good to me but they weren't mine. I didn't belong to them.

I think kids tend to take on a responsibility for things. I blamed myself, not for the sexual abuse, but for the disintegration of the family. When marriages break down kids often blame themselves for that.

When I was a teenager I also had a greater sense of responsibility than I should have. In fact I became my mother's friend rather than being her daughter - I took on some of the responsibilities of adulthood too early.

Even when a parent suicides, children can feel responsible for it. They can feel they weren't good enough to make them stay around, that they didn't matter enough to them. This feeling of being responsible takes away from the children the freedom to just be.

I felt awful most of my adolescent life but I didn't feel free to tell my mother about it. We would talk a lot but we tended to talk about everything else but these personal things. But then again she was just struggling along in life herself. She was a migrant working in a factory job, she had to catch buses because we didn't have a car, she had four kids and no husband and she had had a breakdown and was on medication for years. Also one of her daughters had died and she was a migrant.

I was depressed as an adolescent. One reason I didn't talk about it much was that when you're depressed you tend to lose the words to talk about stuff.

I have counselled a few other women who have been in sexual abuse situations. I've mentioned it a couple of times at different churches over the years and various people have come up to me afterwards. I've also been sent to people by others in this situation. I could make it part of a professional calling but I'm not sure that I want to make that commitment and I'm also not sure I want to spend all day talking with others about the one sort of problem.

It's really significant in general, but to daughters in particular, that their dads time out of their lives to accompany them to events. It's the driving to and from the events that's as important as being at the events. I've noticed that kids whose parents do that sort of thing with them have a greater sense of security than the kids whose parents give them a huge amount of freedom. I think teenagers are reassured when their parents come to pick them up. And I think many daughters have been saved from difficult situations by having their fathers come to pick them up.

Forgiveness was a difficult road for me. Initially I had seen my mother as perfect. That was because I needed her to be perfect. Then a friend and a pastor talked to me about that issue and I became aware of the fact that my mother had actually been absent during my abuse.

My father was dead already before the issue of forgiveness came up. It took a long time. How do you forgive someone who is dead? I prayed to be released from the feeling of being "sinned against" by my father and by my first two husbands.

I have forgiven my father. There's no residual hate or anger left in me. The only thing I still have is a sense of sadness about the loss of relationship with my father. But there's nothing left that I need to forgive.

One other thing that helped me on the road to acceptance and forgiveness was to 'journal' my thoughts over a period of time, to write them all down.

I've learnt from this not to get caught up in other people's emotional baggage. I've realised that you can still communicate with people even though they might send negative emotional signals back to you. It's important not to get caught up in their emotional baggage. This happens with my two ex-husbands.