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When Men Are Victims

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Fraidy cat. Wussy. Cry baby. Don't be such a baby. You're acting like a girl. What are you afraid of? Don't be afraid. You have no right to be afraid. There is nothing to be afraid of. You shouldn't be afraid. What are you crying about. Big boys don't cry. Quit your crying. That doesn't hurt. Grow up and act your age. What's the matter? Can't you take care of yourself?

Ever hear comments like that? If you're like me you've probably heard them all your life, ever since you were a little boy. It was very early in childhood that we were taught to deal with our pain. Our mothers told us to stop crying, our teachers told us to be quiet, and our mentors told us to deal with it and buck up and be a Man. So we learned to say, I can handle it. I'm fine. It wasn't shameful to admit we were hurt, but admitting we couldn't handle it, oh boy that was a one way ticket to being a Loser. And being a victim, well geez, you might as well hang a note on your back that says, Kick Me. So what do you as a man when you've been victimized? There's not much help available, unless you're rich, well insured, and surrounded by a loving fully functioning family and an incredible support group. How many of us have that? What little help that is available for victims is usually directed towards women that have been victimized, and the staff often has a biased view of men and are ignorant of men's emotional needs. So what's a fella to do?

First of all, I would like to say to anyone who has suffered through some kind of trauma (whether that's a car accident or a sexual assault or a history of childhood abuse) and is experiencing extreme emotional reactions:

You are not sick. You are not crazy. You are not "mentally ill." There is nothing "wrong" with you. What is happening to you are normal, natural reactions to an extraordinary experience that you have survived. It was an experience that was beyond the capacity of any human being to handle, and it is going to take some time for your system to process it and integrate it. You are going to encounter a tremendous number of people who don't understand that, who are uncomfortable with that, and will want you to control yourself. Ignore them, and stay away from them. Find a safe place to attend to your own healing. Surround yourself with people who will let you process the experience at your own pace, in your own unique way, and will help you move forward with dignity, grace, and compassion. You are a survivor.

Having said that, I think the first thing you need to do as a man is to tell yourself, I need help. Asking for help is not something we have been socially conditioned to do. Not only is it often seen as a sign of weakness, but most of the social support systems in this country are geared towards taking care of women who have been victimized. There are no crisis

hot lines or shelters for battered men, there are no hot lines for male victims of sexual assault, there are no halfway houses for men recovering from a life of prostitution, and there are very few resources for men or boys who are victims of childhood sexual abuse. The few resources that are dedicated to men are things like soup kitchens or shelters for men who have fallen so far they are homeless. They may be good places to start if you have an addiction problem and need help getting back on your feet, but they often times don't have a clue about the depth of pain and anguish that a trauma survivor has. And you will probably need a lot of help healing that.

One of the main sources of help I have found in my own healing has been the support I have gotten within 12-step recovery community. The 12 step movement began when Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935. Dr. Bob and Bill W. put together a program that addressed the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of the disease called alcoholism. For perhaps the first time in the history of the western world there was an organization with a mechanism to heal wounds of the spirit. That program gave birth to hundreds of different 12-step programs, which in my mind are all dedicated to healing wounds to the spirit. Through these programs thousands of people have found the courage, strength, and hope to heal from the insanity of what they have lived through. In my experience Alcoholics Anonymous is not just a bunch of people who have problems with alcohol. Most of the people I have met through AA have survived one or more horrendous traumas, and they were abandoned or neglected or abused by their family of origin. You don't know how powerful it is to walk into a room filled with people who have lived through the insanity that you have faced, and have them tell you that you are welcome, and that your story is real, and that you are not making everything up, and that what you did in order to survive was normal. Unfortunately that's not something our medical -- psychotherapeutic community understands. Each group is different, and it is helpful to remember that everyone is in a different stage of healing and recovery, and that some people haven't been able to escape the painful reality of their own situation. AA and other 12-step groups are designed to help people help themselves, and to provide a structure for personal growth. Part of the healing process involves telling your story, and hearing other people's stories as well, and I know of few forums that are better than a 12 step meeting. By the way, most of the people I've met in 12-step groups were abused in some way, shape, or form in their family of origin.

There are many ways to ask for help: private and group therapy, workshops, 12-step recovery programs, books, and even videos. I suggest you experiment with different approaches and find what works for you. Some approaches can be confronting, others warm and gentle. You may need

different approaches and techniques at different phases of your healing. Sometimes what may seem most confronting is actually a lesson needing to be learned. Don't concern yourself with being efficient and timely. Time may not heal all wounds, but all wounds heal at their own pace. But no matter what route you take, I think the most important step is finding people who can provide you support as you work through the emotional repercussions. There will be plenty of people who will simply not understand what you are going through. You may want to change them, to make them understand, or to act differently than the way they do. You may want people to act compassionate, or to be outraged, or to get excited, or to cry with you. Give it up. You can't control how other people will respond, and you can't change them. All you can change is yourself. Let people respond to you as they will, and seek out those people who respond positively and can support you. But be aware of the charlatans who talk about providing support, but don't walk the walk. There may be times when you feel alone and isolated and that nobody understands or cares. That is the most important time to reach out. Call suicide hot lines. Go to 12-step meetings. Find support groups. But get support.

I've also found a great deal of healing in the men's movement, although just like the feminist movement, there are many different factions and interests. Check out some publications and groups and keep your eyes and ears open and you can find some kindred spirits. One great thing I have found in the men's movement is the freedom to do things in my own way, to not have to do something in a way that is Nice, or Gentle, or Quiet, or Feminine and Pretty. I can be as ugly and as loud and as unexplainable as I need to be. I can let it all hang out so to speak. But beware, when you let it all hang out, things might happen to and within your body that can only be described as . . . unusual. Normal body functions may seize up and fail, strange tremors or numbness might happen in certain areas, unexplainable aches and pains might appear. Most "trained" medical professionals will look at those symptoms and dismiss them as psychosomatic (and tell you to get over it because it's all in your head), or they may want to treat it as a physical disorder and medicate or operate or who knows what. But sometimes all that is really happening is that your system is trying to process an overwhelming experience and your body is reacting. So take care of your body. Get good nutrition. Get plenty of rest. Drink LOTS of water. Take long baths. Do healthy things that make you feel good. Get a massage. Get plenty of hugs. Play with puppies and kittens and teddy bears. And lastly, find a safe place to let whatever is happening in your body run its course. Find a place where you can cry and let your body tremble. Shake your head and mutter, "bugga, bugga, bugga, bugga, bugga." Hit pillows and rage. Throw rocks. Spit into the wind. Swear out loud. Walk. Dance. Do jumping jacks. Rock yourself to sleep. Move your body in whatever way you can. And remember to BREATHE.

P.S. Give yourself some credit. After all, you're a survivor. And one hell of a man to boot.

