

When I began this article describing my journey from victim to survivor of sexual abuse by a priest, I made the mistake of reading other articles written by survivors. I knew this was a bad idea because now I find myself struggling with how to share something as deeply personal as my own journey, knowing others have done it before me so eloquently. I know I'm out of my league, but I also know that just as our experience of abuse varied greatly, so does our journey to healing. So I write this in the hope that it will be helpful for other victims who may be trying to find their way.

I have been participating in the Victims Assistance Program of the Arlington Diocese for five years. My initial contact was with Pat Mudd, the coordinator of the program, who continues to be a great help. She listened when I was ready to talk, she accompanied me to my meeting with Bishop Loverde, she encouraged me to participate in the survivor support group meetings and she occasionally nudges me, ever so gently, to share my story. The few times I have agreed to do this have been opportunities for healing and growth, and I am glad I overcame my initial reluctance. It makes me feel strong, powerful and in control – just the opposite of how I felt as a child victim.

The first step, coming forward and admitting the abuse, was the hardest for me. I had spent years trying to pretend it didn't happen, carefully guarding that secret, and the thought of telling someone was terrifying. I knew once I started down this path, there would be no turning back, and I didn't know where the path would lead me. At the time, I didn't understand that talking about the abuse was the only way for me to begin to recover from it.

Finding the right professional to talk with is critical. Just because a person has training and a license doesn't mean they will be the best fit. For my first attempt at therapy eleven years ago, I spent the better part of a year crying. I thought it was part of the process of healing and didn't realize I was so deeply depressed that just getting through the day was using all the energy I had. It wasn't until I changed doctors and addressed the depression and anxiety, which are common among victims of abuse, that I could begin the process of healing. The doctor I have now is wise and compassionate, and I am grateful to him because his skill and insight have greatly improved the quality of my life.

The survivor support group meetings sponsored by the diocese have been extremely helpful for several reasons. Getting to know others who have suffered abuse and have worked so hard to recover from the devastating effects has been an inspiration to me. When I first started this process and was unable to imagine feeling happy and whole, they gave me hope just by their presence. I am grateful for the Bishop's attendance at these meetings. He expresses his sorrow for what we have experienced and constantly reminds us that the abuse was not our fault. Honestly, you can never hear that too often. I am humbled by other survivors who are working to forgive their abusers. One person said he prays for his abuser every day, asking God to give him forgiveness and peace. Calling to mind my own difficulties with forgiveness is an ongoing reminder to me that I still have work to do. But I'm happy to follow the counsel of St. Francis de Sales who said "have patience with all things, but first of all, with yourself."

As I mentioned earlier, I struggled with depression and anxiety. While the depression made me sad, the anxiety made me ill, and was causing panic attacks. I worried about things that happened in the past, reliving the worst moments, and I worried about things that might happen in the future. My doctor suggested bio-feedback training as a way to understand the consequences of worry and learn relaxation techniques. I haven't the space here to adequately describe the process, but what I learned was life-changing. I was able to see, through the use of receptors measuring my body's response, the negative effect my worrisome thoughts had on my physical well-being. So I started training myself to stop worrying and I won't say that it's easy to do, especially when it's a lifelong habit, but I can tell you that it's possible. And it is definitely worth the effort.

Last, and most important, this is not a journey anyone should take alone. I am blessed to have caring people who have been with me from the beginning: my friend who showed up at the first Mass for victims that I attended, because he thought I shouldn't be alone; another friend and newly commissioned spiritual director who makes time for me that I know he doesn't have; and most of all my husband. There are no words that can adequately express my love and gratitude for everything he has endured with me. I believe that God, knowing all that would happen in my life, decided I would need an exceptionally good husband, and that's what He gave me.

*Submitted by a survivor of abuse who wishes to remain anonymous.*