

## Abuse survivors / God brings freedom

**Carol:** Today on Women of Hope we'll try to understand how being abused affects people, and find out how to help them. Fran is with us again. She's a counselor who often works with people who were abused as children or as adults.

**Tammy:** Hello my friend. I'm Tammy. Carol, Fran and I are with you again on Women of Hope. Today's topic is difficult, but important. I hope you'll stay with us.

**Carol:** Fran, you've talked with us before about abuse. Can you remind us: what is abuse?

**Fran:** Hello. Carol, we call it 'abuse' when one person who has more power than the other, uses that power to please themselves. They do this in ways that hurt a weaker person. Abuse can be saying cruel words, or hitting, or starving someone, or forcing a weaker person to have sexual contact that they don't want.

**Carol:** So, it's any time someone uses their power to hurt and humiliate another person. We've said before that this is always wrong, and God hates it. Fran, from your experience, how does it affect people?

**Fran:** Well, it depends on lots of things. Like... when it happened, who did it, how long it went on for...whether the victim had someone to tell. Their personality makes a difference too. Many people are very badly affected and they carry that damage all through their lives. I hope we can understand how abuse affects people so we can help our friends - or ourselves. We need to understand that these are people who have lived through terrible treatment. They are not bad people.

**Tammy:** I read that when children are abused, it actually affects the development of the brain, as well as the body.

**Fran:** That's right. Sometimes if the abuse happened before a child learnt to talk, they had no way of understanding or explaining what was happening. That memory is stored in their body, not in words. They might not even remember the abuse, but they are deeply affected.

Imagine an abused little girl. She learns that the world is not safe, and adults can't be trusted. She becomes very anxious, and perhaps angry. She's always alert, looking out for danger. She might be intelligent but it's hard for her to learn in school. It's very hard for her to trust anyone. She feels that the abuse is somehow her fault, so she grows up hating herself and others. At the same time she longs for love and care.

**Tammy:** How sad! I guess if children are always trying to keep safe, it distracts them from learning. And if you can't trust, it's hard to get close to people...or make good friends...or take risks to try new things.

**Fran:** That's right Tammy. And because they often hate themselves and their bodies, they might hurt or punish themselves. Some starve themselves. Others eat too much to make themselves fat, hoping no-one will think they're attractive. Sometimes they start doing this when they've grown up. And sometimes children who've been abused sexually think sex is the only way they can get attention, so they might look for sex far too early, and take big risks.

Adults who've been through abuse often seem to give out mixed messages - they want love but they don't feel they deserve it. So they do things to test or drive away people who get close to them. They can be very confusing friends, but we need to remember that they're doing what they know in order to survive, and life is very hard for them. I really respect my friends and patients who have survived abuse, and I feel a lot of compassion for them.

**Carol:** How can a child accept the terrible truth; that adults, who should care for her and protect her, are treating her as an *object*, *using* her for their own needs and wants? Even if you are abused as an *adult*, it must be very hard to feel safe and to trust people again. We might wonder, how does a person *cope* who's been abused?

**Fran:** That's a good question Carol. Some abused people cope by keeping themselves distant from others, and keeping strong control over whatever parts of their life they can control.

People often cope by pushing down these feelings and memories, or denying them. Does this work? Not very well; often the abuse comes back as vivid memories, or flashbacks, as though it's happening all over again. It might come out in various body pains and illnesses. The bad feelings might come back when a person grows up and gets married, and has to face sexual feelings and acts.

Some people learn to switch off their feelings and memories. As adults, when they meet situations that remind them of the abuse, or frighten them, they can lose touch with reality for a while. Their bodies can become numb and they seem as if they're not really present. It's like they go somewhere else in their heads. It's one way children learn to cope with abuse, but it can cause lots of problems later on.

**Carol:** Here on Women of Hope, we've been talking about how abuse affects people. Fran, that helps us to understand why some of our friends might act in strange ways. So, as their friend, can we help?

**Fran:** Oh yes! If someone tells you about abuse, that's because they've learnt to trust you. It's a very hard thing to share, so it's really important how you respond. If it's the first time they've spoken about it, they'll be scared that you will judge them or reject them. If you listen well, understand how they feel, and take them seriously, that will encourage them. Show that you believe in them.

**Tammy:** What if you're not sure that they're telling you the truth? People could make false accusations.

**Fran:** That's a fair question Tammy. I would say that it's not your job to decide that. You can give them support and say that abuse is always wrong. Ask how you can help. Don't go around gossiping about the situation. Your friend *might* want to tell the police or other authorities. If so, you can support them. Those authorities can investigate what happened.

Don't give advice either, unless you're qualified to do so. It can be very helpful for abuse survivors to talk to a counselor or psychologist. But it's just as important for them to have good friends who stand with them. You *might* need to help them to move out of a situation where there is still abuse happening.

**Carol:** I can imagine how shocked I'd be if a friend told me about abuse. I don't know how I'd react. I suppose we should focus on our friend, not our own feelings. (*Presenters: if you have had someone tell you, you could say how you felt*).

**Fran:** That's a good way to put it. You need to try to keep your own emotions under control so you can support your friend. Remember, that awful secret has held them captive and stopped them living freely. Talking about it is a very important step, as it breaks the secret that's bound them. When they put it into words, it helps them to see it as an adult, not as a child or a helpless victim - especially when someone agrees that it was wrong. It's a big first step to trust someone with such a big secret.

**Tammy:** But it's only a first step. If you were abused, it could take a long time to understand what happened to you and be able to move forward.

**Fran:** That's so true. As a friend, you need to be patient, and be prepared to help for a long time. Sometimes the abuse survivor might seem to reject *you*. You might need to talk with them about the way they act towards you, but

don't reject *them*. Remember, they're *likely* to test you to see if you really care for them. It can be hard to be a friend like this, so make sure you have people who support *you* as well.

**Carol:** Fran, what would you say to someone who's been abused, and never told anyone?

**Fran:** I would say, the abuse was *not your fault*, and you don't need to feel ashamed. If it's still causing problems in your life, you need to ask for help. Is there someone you really trust...someone who cares for you? Someone who seems strong enough to cope with this? Ask if you can share a difficult secret with them, and tell them, a bit at a time. If you can see a professional counselor, that could be really good.

But you know, there is someone who already knows what happened, someone who hates abuse but loves you. God knows and cares, and you can tell him everything. It will be good for you to put it into words and tell God about it, even if there's no-one else. You can trust him to love you, to help you. And he will be just and fair in how he deals with those who abused you. Abuse can cause a kind of slavery, where you don't feel free inside. I want to tell you that God can set you free from that slavery, free to be the person God made you to be.

**Tammy:** Welcome back to Women of Hope. Fran's just been talking about the slavery of abuse, and I know she's got a story for us that also involves slavery and freedom.

**Fran:** I've told you several stories from the Bible about Paul. He was one of the first Christians. You could call him a missionary, because that was his mission - to travel about telling people that God sent Jesus to save them from their sins. You might remember that last time, we heard about a businesswoman called Lydia, who accepted Jesus as her Lord and Saviour. This was in Philippi, in northern Greece. Today I want to tell you about a very

different woman that Paul met in Philippi. Here's the story from God's word. It was written by Luke, who was there with Paul.

Paul and his friends were on their way to the place of prayer, when they met a slave girl. She was possessed by a snake spirit, which controlled her speech and gave predictions about the future. She would tell fortunes, and this made lots of money for her owners. This girl followed Paul, Luke, Silas and the others, shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God. They are telling you the way to be saved.' She kept doing this for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled about this that he turned around and spoke to the spirit that was controlling her. 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' he ordered. At that moment the spirit left her.

**Fran:** Let's stop and think about this. Do *you* believe that spirits can control people?

**Tammy:** Well, in the Bible we read stories like this, and Jesus and his followers ordered the spirits to leave people. These spirits were bad, causing trouble.

**Fran:** Yes, these spirits *controlled* the people, so they didn't have control over their own choices. Predicting the future like this was part of the Greek religion at that time. I've met spirit-possessed people like this, even in our time. This poor young woman was a slave to her human owners. That was bad enough; but she was also a slave to this evil snake spirit. No wonder Paul was troubled.

**Carol:** It's interesting that the spirit knew that Paul and the others were controlled by *God's* spirit. They weren't slaves; they had *chosen* to let *God* be their master. And the spirit knew that Jesus Christ represented the true, the Most High God, the Creator. This spirit *had* to obey them when they ordered it to go, in the name of Jesus Christ.

**Fran:** That's right Carol. The power of Jesus is stronger than any other spirit in the world. We must never forget that. Jesus is Lord over the spirit world. And he set this girl free from her slavery to the snake spirit. But you know, her owners weren't pleased. Let's hear what happened next.

**Fran:** The owners of the slave girl realized they couldn't make money from her any more. So they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the marketplace, to face the Roman authorities. They told the magistrates, 'These men are Jews and they're upsetting everybody, bringing customs that are against our Roman ways.' The crowd joined in the attack. The magistrates didn't hear their case legally. They just ordered the soldiers to strip Paul and Silas and beat them, and throw them into prison.

So that night Paul and Silas were chained to the wall of the deepest prison cell, their feet locked in wooden frames, hungry, bleeding and sore from the beating. So what were they doing? They were singing! They were praying and singing hymns to God, while the other prisoners listened.

Suddenly, about midnight, there was an earthquake that shook the prison violently. The chains came loose from the walls, and the doors flew open. The chief jailer woke up and saw the doors open. He knew he would be punished for letting the prisoners escape, so he pulled out his sword to kill himself. But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We're all here!'

**Fran:** The jailor was shaking all over. He called for lights, and rushed in to get Paul and Silas. He fell on his knees, trembling, and asked them, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'

Paul and Silas replied, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.' Then they explained God's word to him and all the others in his household, and they believed the message of Jesus. Though it was the middle of the night, the jailor took them to his house. He washed their wounds and gave them food. He was baptized in water, and all his household, to show they had believed and were starting a new life. They were filled with joy because now they'd been put right with God, through trusting in Jesus.

**Tammy:** This is Women of Hope. Fran's been telling us a story from the Bible about some early Christian missionaries, Paul and Silas. Let's remind ourselves about what happened. They commanded a snake spirit to leave a poor slave girl, and this got them into trouble. They were dragged away by a mob, and beaten and locked up without a trial. But what happened? Yes...an earthquake broke open the prison. The chief jailor was very frightened, but Paul and Silas told him the message of God's love through Jesus...

**Carol:** ... and the jailor received it with joy, didn't he!

**Tammy:** I think he was genuine when he believed, don't you? First, he was baptized - that was a sign that he believed. Then remember how he treated Paul and Silas; he humbly washed their wounds himself, and took them to his own house, and gave them food, and got all his family and servants to listen to their message. He didn't seem to care that he might get into trouble for letting prisoners free.

**Carol:** You can usually tell when a person really follows Jesus - they change in good ways, and they want to tell others about Jesus. The message of Jesus really sets people free, and gives them hope, so they can become joyful servants of God. Has that happened in your life?

**Fran:** Well, let me tell you the rest of the story.

**Fran:** In the morning, officers came and said, 'You can let those men go.' But Paul said, 'They beat us publicly, without a trial, even though we're Roman citizens. They threw us into jail; now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.'

When the magistrates heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were frightened. It was a very serious crime to beat a Roman citizen. So the magistrates came and apologized and asked them politely to leave. Then Paul and Silas went back to Lydia's house, where they met the other believers and encouraged them. Then they left the city, free men.



That's the end of this story from the Bible.

**Carol:** Well, we've heard a lot today about being slaves...and being free. I want you to know, my friend, that you can be truly free when you accept Jesus to be your Lord and your Saviour. You don't have to fear spirits. You don't have to be controlled by your past experiences...or your own failures. You don't have to fear what other people think. You certainly don't have to fear that God will punish you. You can thank Jesus that he took all your guilt when he died on the cross. And now he's alive with his father God in heaven, and you can *choose* to be his follower and his *free servant*. Like that jailor, you can be filled with joy because you're right with God, and *his Holy Spirit* guides and helps you.

**Tammy:** It's time for us to go. We'd love to hear from you; you can contact us at.... Goodbye.

**Fran:** Goodbye for now...

**Carol:** ... and God bless you.

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