

***Survivors and Partners: Healing the Relationships of Sexual Abuse Survivors***

by Paul A. Hansen., Longmont Co., Heron Hill Publishing Co., 1991.

**Reviewed by Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.**

This book is written for couples suffering the disruptions which can occur when one of the partners discovers that he, or she, was sexually abused as a child. The author, a therapist who has been working with abuse survivors for over a decade, writes in an easily comprehensible style, based not only on his professional experience, but on his own history, first, as the partner of a survivor and secondly, as a survivor himself. This book is unique and valuable in addressing the concerns of partners of survivors at a time when very little has been written for this population.

Because of the relatively higher frequency of abused girls to abused boys, the book is written from the perspective of the victim / survivor being female and the partner, male. However, Hansen stresses, the impact of childhood sexual abuse on the victim, the victim's partner, and the dynamics of an intimate relationship does not vary greatly on the basis of gender or sexual orientation.

The book describes the emotional upheavals which attend not only the survivor, but her partner, after the abuse surfaces. The crisis of disclosure is followed by a series of emotional challenges which must be faced by both the survivor and her partner if the wounds of abuse are to be healed. The stages of the healing process, presented in the book as separate chapters, including coping with the crisis of disclosure, accepting the need for healing, struggling with denial, the quest for safety, coping with anger and grief, and the dilemma of sexual intimacy. These different stages affect both partners in similar, but not identical, ways.

A limitation of the book is that the complexities involved in the healing process are given only cursory treatment. The author could have referred readers to additional works. However, the author's goal was not to write yet another book on individual healing, but rather to extend our

knowledge by elucidating the effects of the healing process first, on the relationship, and secondly, on the partner, who is viewed throughout the book as a secondary victim of the abuse.

Just like the victim, partners often feel stigmatized by the abuse and powerless in controlling its negative effects. However, the author continually points out ways in which the partners can be supportive of the victim's healing, without falling into the role of rescuer and neglecting their own needs. Also like the victim, partners feel betrayed, first, by the perpetrator who may still be in the couple's life, and secondly, by the victim herself.

"What happened to the woman I loved?" Many partners wonder as they witness their loved one journey through states of denial, rage, acute pain and grief, and try and assist her with flashbacks and other dissociative states. Partners can also fear that the beginning of the healing process for the survivor may mean the end of their relationship. This fear is not entirely ungrounded. Both the victim and the partner can easily display the anger they hold toward the perpetrator on each other. Furthermore, the revelation of sexual abuse almost always diminishes or otherwise negatively affect the couple's sexual life, which can lead to serious strife.

Hansen's suggestion for coping with sexual problems are excellent, as are the books seven appendices, most of which contain original material. For example, the appendices entitled "Twenty four stages of growth for survivors of incest," "Flashbacks--What they are and how to handle them," "How adult survivors of incest function in a relationship," and "How stages of healing affect relationships," stand as the creative contributions to traumatology. They are easily readable and promise to help many struggling couples.

Also original is Hansen's conceptualization of three levels of acceptance of the abuse and the notion of the "thrivor." While others have written about how trauma victims can progress from victim to survivor status, Hansen is the first to identify the status of "thrivor."

Hansen also makes an innovative conceptualization of flashbacks as not limited to visual re-experiencing, but to emotional, sensory, thought system, belief system, and behavioral system flashbacks. Given the technical definition of "flashback," Hansen seems to be overstepping his bounds. The wide variety of re-experiencing phenomenon and behavioral and other reenactments, which Hansen considers "flashbacks" cannot be legitimately categorized as such.

Also, his presentation of PTSD is incomplete. Nevertheless, the book is an excellent support of guide for survivors, their partners, and clinicians.