

Incest and Sexuality

**Messages about
Sexuality
and Sex Roles**

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Messages about Sexuality and Sex Roles

Incest profoundly influences what female survivors learn about sex and what they come to believe is expected sex role behavior. By understanding the effects of incest on their sexual socialization, survivors can realize that what they heard was a biased, inaccurate, and limited perspective that essentially had its roots in perpetuating the sexual abuse. While no one can erase the past, it is possible with this knowledge to break away from the crippling beliefs of the past and to learn to appreciate healthy female sexuality.

Given our culture's secretiveness and discomfort about sexuality, the lack of comprehensive sex education, and the myths from past generations, most teenage girls grow up with a limited sense of what positive female sexuality is all about. Feeling good and secure about themselves sexually is unusual for most teenage girls. Five feelings that commonly prevail are guilt, confusion, fear, isolation, and dependency.

For female victims of incest, the situation is even more pronounced. They tend to experience these same feelings more intensely than most other girls do. They also experience two additional feelings, powerlessness and hopelessness,

which are direct results of having been sexually abused. Contending with these two extra feelings along with the five other intensified ones leaves incest victims with a double burden. This dilemma of incest survivors is called the piggyback effect of sexual socialization. Table 6-1 shows the relationship between what most teenage girls feel and what teenage incest victims feel in more detail.

*Table 6-1
The Piggyback Effect of Sexual Socialization*

<i>Feeling</i>	<i>Concerns for Most Girls</i>	<i>Additional Concerns for Incest Survivors</i>
Confusion	As to how to express and receive physical affection without jeopardizing personal values or social standing	As to whether any physical affection expressed by others, especially men, is intended as sexual
Fear	That they aren't attractive, won't be sought out by boys, and that others will discover that they are self-stimulating, making out on dates, menstruating, etc.	That the perpetrator's demands will continue or escalate; fear of refusing the perpetrator and of what will happen and what people will think if they find out
Guilt	About sexual desires, fantasies, behavior, and self-stimulation	About participation in the incest and why they didn't stop it before
Isolation	From others in their inability to share sexual feelings, experiences, and thoughts	From others in the secret of incest
Dependency	On boyfriends, parents, doctors, and teachers for information about their own bodies and about which sexual behaviors and feelings are acceptable	On the perpetrator as critical to providing for the family's welfare. Participation in sex is seen as necessary to ensure family survival.
Powerlessness		In their ability to stop the incest
Hopelessness		That they are doomed to sexual submission; that sex will always be

Powerlessness for the female incest victim means that she views sexuality as something over which she has no control. Sex was learned as an act of physical submission. Because it was coercive, the sexual activity did not permit the victim to develop limit-setting and assertiveness skills. Abuse survivors often feel at a loss as to how to prevent sexual activity from occurring or how to interrupt it once it has begun. Because their self-concepts are poor, they fail to give themselves permission to say no. During sex they feel unable to express their needs when presented with the demands and needs of their partners. Survivors must develop an ability to project to others the belief that they can set limits in relationships. This ability comes from believing that they are worthwhile and have an equal right to decide the path of the relationship.

The following excerpt reveals a survivor's sense of powerlessness about sexuality and her tendency to assume sexual responsibility and blame. After years of feeling socially isolated, this survivor began having positive experiences in a church, which led to her first romantic relationship:

The members of the church made me feel loved, wanted, and a part of their happy church family. Soon I was practically living at church, and when I wasn't at church or school, I was with church friends. I was really happy to feel loved. They truly liked me. I began singing in church and was praised for my voice. Through church I met a boy. Soon we were boyfriend and girlfriend. He didn't scare me, because I knew he was a person filled with Christ and wouldn't hurt me. But his morals weren't as high as I thought, and soon we were making out at the movies. This scared me and made me

feel wonderful at the same time.

I liked being kissed and touched, but I felt guilty for doing so. We did a lot of heavy petting, and then one day he wanted to go all the way. I didn't want to. I told him no, no, no, but he just wouldn't stop. I was scared, and finally he entered me. I can still remember the physical pain. It was horrible. Afterwards, I felt mentally kind of numb, like I wasn't myself anymore. I was physically sore for a couple of days, and of course, I felt guilty for being a sinner.

I thought the Christian thing to do was marry him. At fifteen and a half years old I was engaged. A month before the wedding, I broke our engagement. My mother had found out why I was marrying him and told me I didn't have to marry him just because I had sex with him. I was relieved. I really did love him, but I didn't want to get married. I'm sorry for hurting him. He loved me, and I broke his heart.

This same survivor went on to describe her next major relationship five years later.

I started college in September and began seeing a boy. He would come to my dorm room every day and we would get into deep, intellectual, heavy discussions. This wasn't very romantic! I started to fall in love with this person, who was gentle, kind, and unlike any other person I'd ever met. Our relationship was not at all physical. One day he told me that he had to have sex. I told him I wouldn't have sex until I was married, and he told me he would find someone else to have sex with. This frightened me because I had grown dependent on him. So again I committed the act of sex, which always made me feel guilty. But this time I was in control of the situation. I knew that what I was about to do was wrong and that it would physically hurt. So I had sex with only one thing in mind, to fulfill his needs and keep from losing him. But in doing this, I had to give up my religious beliefs. There was no way I could believe in God and Christianity while doing something that I knew was a sin.

In the second relationship, the survivor felt powerless to balance her own needs for love with her partner's desire for sexual interaction. The control she spoke of was not control of the situation but rather of her decision. She made a conscious choice to exploit herself. Sex was not at all positive. It was physically painful; she was engaging in it only for another's pleasure; and she compromised her religious beliefs and self-esteem.

The feeling of hopelessness reflects the sense that somehow the events of the past will forever predict the events of the future. Survivors may have made the assumption that sexual relating means being exploited, humiliated, and overwhelmed. Here again, the learned victim role from the abuse is evident. There may have been years of abuse, during which the victims hoped and prayed it would stop but it didn't. Past hopes that things would change went unfulfilled for too long, and hope itself became a disappointing experience. Survivors may acquire a fear that they will fail if they ever attempt to change. As one adult survivor wrote:

I find myself angry at filling out the [sexuality] questionnaire and would prefer not to think of myself as a sexual person at all. I think that because sex and violence were barely distinguishable in my life, I will always be alone and isolated from intimate relationships. I think of sex as a defeat.

Incest survivors have been robbed of the opportunity to experiment with their own sexual feelings in ways that evolve naturally. Self-stimulation and self-exploration were often hindered by the abuse or have become charged with

images reminiscent of interactions with perpetrators. Unlike girls raised in families in which sexual boundaries were clearly maintained, victims of incest never got to experiment with expressing their sexual energies on males who could not be seduced. Many survivors did not get to experience hugging and kissing their grandfather, uncle, or father freely and sensually, without any adult sexual overtones present. And many survivors didn't get to experience these males setting limits on their children's touch to avoid sexual arousal. Consequently, many survivors do not know how to initiate sexual behavior based on their own sexual feelings or how to pace sexual contact so that they remain at ease with it or how to stop sexual contact when they feel it is inappropriate.

The basic sex role learned by survivors is that of submissiveness. Their partner's needs are allowed to dominate. This appears to be true for survivors both in same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. Incest teaches victims a self-defeating way to relate to a sexual partner: "I am there for the other person, I am obligated, my feelings don't matter, my enjoyment doesn't matter."

The female victim's sex role corresponds with sex role stereotyping, which is limiting and unbalanced. Male sexual abusers may hold to some very rigid and clearly sexist ideas. For instance, offenders may believe that within the context of the family, women and children are essentially the property of men. A woman's importance in life is viewed as less than a man's. Men are seen as having certain privileges because they are males or because they bring home the paycheck.

Women's needs and feelings are seen as subordinate to the male's needs and desires. Women's worth is determined by how well they support and satisfy their men. Children, especially female children, are viewed as extensions of their mothers, with responsibilities to respect the male authority figure. Within this belief system, male authority figures feel justified in using fear, intimidation, and even physical abuse to secure the submission of other family members. This stereotyping establishes a climate in which male domination can go unchecked. Survivors are sometimes amazed to discover that male-female relationships can be based on mutual respect and equality.

Many survivors may have learned myths about the male sex drive. Common myths are that men's desires are more important than women's desires and that once a man feels sexual he must act on his feelings or something terrible will happen to him. These misconceptions leave the survivor feeling that men are sexually wild animals who are out of control. This impression in turn is reinforced by the sexual offender's out-of-control behavior. Survivors often feel it is their obligation to satisfy these overwhelming sexual urges and that if they don't, they will be responsible for the terrible discomfort the male will then experience. A teen survivor said, "I heard that if a man wants sex, you're just supposed to lie back and spread your legs." It's as if men are like cows that require milking on a regular basis or their udders will burst. The truth is that the male sex drive is no greater than the female sex drive; nothing bad will happen if sexual urges aren't acted upon; and the satisfying of sexual feelings is the sole responsibility of the

person experiencing them. When a consenting partner is not available, masturbation and abstinence are choices men can and do make.

Another commonly distorted view of sex role differences is the belief that a man can justify having sex with his child or stepchild if his wife refuses or isn't available. In this distortion, female family members are seen as responsible for meeting the needs of male family members. To the offender, going outside the family to get sexual needs met may be seen as less desirable and may represent a failure of the family. The offender may erroneously feel that he is being virtuous by keeping his sexual activity inside the family.

One teen survivor told her story:

My mom was never home. She worked nights, which was a perfect opportunity. She's worked nights since I can remember, and that's when he started, because she wasn't ever home. I'd ask him why he was doing it and he'd tell me he did it because my mom wasn't home to do it. I'd tell him that just because my mom wasn't there didn't make it *my* responsibility, but he'd tell me that I was the girl of the house. I knew that wasn't fair, but I'd have to do it anyway.

Many female incest survivors have such a strong belief in the inequality of male-female roles that it is difficult for them to entertain the idea that the roles can be otherwise. Some survivors appear to have lost the motivation required to make these roles more equal and to have accepted exploitation instead.

Teen survivors often express fairly pessimistic views of what it means to be

female. Many have seen their mothers act submissively in relation to men. In many cases their mothers were emotionally and/or financially dependent on men and were afraid to assert themselves for fear that family survival would be jeopardized. Some survivors expressed a lack of respect for their mothers because they did not take their daughters seriously when they disclosed the incest or when obvious indicators of abuse were present. One teen recalled that during bath time at age four she very clearly told her mother, “He made me put it in my mouth.” The mother was startled and yet remained silent. She was living with a boyfriend, who was supporting her and her three children—the natural father had committed suicide one year earlier. An incest survivor herself, she felt paralyzed by the information and forced herself to ignore it, hoping it wasn’t true. The message to the daughter was that her needs were less important than the preservation of the male’s role in the family.

Incest survivors are particularly vulnerable to the repercussions of our culture’s sexual double standard. According to the double standard, the male’s social status increases with sexual contacts, while the female’s social status decreases. We have only to look at our language to see how this message gets conveyed. Females who engage in frequent sex are given socially derogatory labels, such as tramp, whore, and loose woman. Males are given such labels as stud, jock, and Casanova. Females who lose their virginity are “dirty,” males are “experienced.” There is one standard for males and another for females concerning the same behavior. Thus, the double standard serves to reinforce

survivors' beliefs in male-female role distinctions and makes it more difficult to view themselves as equal with men. To a girl who has not been sexually victimized, male privilege may be an irritating nuisance to be overcome, one that requires her to be assertive. To the girl who has been sexually victimized by a male, male privilege is experienced as a fact of life.

Victims receive distorted messages about love and sex. Given the coercive dynamics of incest, many survivors have assumed that in order to get love they must have sex. Sex becomes the key to obtaining closeness, attention, touching, and intimacy. This confusion about love and sex is experienced as truth by the victim and can often lead to self-exploitation. One woman explained that she made poor relationship choices as she attempted to find nurturing.

I tend to choose a partner who I can continue the abuse pattern with, i.e., who I can't get my needs met by, feeling like I have to be willing to be sexual at all times for the relationship to be "right" or how it should be (in other words, if I need a day or a week or longer off— that *isn't* okay). I'm being sexual in order to get nurturing and attention, which is what I *really* need.

Another adult survivor expressed her dilemma with regard to sex and caring.

I have always felt obligated to have sex with any male who gives of their time or spends money on me or seems to care about me. I have felt that since I have been married and even while I was single that I just plain did not have any justification for saying no. Then if I did say no, it was always knowing that if I was pressured in any way by my partner, I would go

ahead. Also I would put a lot of pressure on myself to have sex. I felt very selfish and uncaring if I did not show my concern by sex.

Feeling that they must satisfy their partners with sex in order to secure love triggers negative feelings in survivors. “Why aren’t I loved for myself?” “Am I prostituting myself for love?” “I hate his/her desire for sex with me—it’s a demand.” This orientation, which makes sex a prerequisite for love, establishes sex as a chore rather than something engaged in out of a desire to openly express loving feelings. For many victims, sex with the offender was the only experience in which they felt they were being physically cared for or loved. Receiving sexual attention came to represent being loved. Much confusion then resulted. One survivor remarked, “I confuse arousal in violence with love responses.” Incest survivors consequently may have difficulty seeing that sexual expression is only one form of showing love and receiving love. Though the offender may have called it love, the sexual experience of incest was not an expression of love because it was motivated by a desire to satisfy personal needs at the expense of the sexual partner’s best interests. Many survivors cannot comprehend that when love is truly being expressed sexually, partners will show sensitivity to the survivors’ feelings and will not seek to control or dominate. When a survivor feels she does not have to engage in sex to secure her partner’s love, it is a sign of personal growth and security with her partner.

Incest offenders are incapable of teaching anything helpful about sex roles and sexuality. Some offenders cling to the distorted belief that by having sex with

the victim they are teaching her to be a good lover. The concept of being a “good lover” only reflects the perpetrators’ stereotyped idea of females as submissive pleasers. It’s accurate to say that offenders do teach much about love and sex to their victims. However, what they teach is their own harmful, distorted misconceptions about love and sex. It’s as if offenders see life through a pair of tinted glasses that color experiences with their fantasies, frustrations, and sexual addictions. When they teach about sex and love, they teach only the view they see through the tinted glasses, not an enlightened reality.

Sexual offenders may pride themselves on being authorities on sex when they are not. They often have inaccurate information about sexual functioning and view sex in an immature fashion. In talking about her experience of having oral sex with her stepfather, one teen shared:

When I was little he’d make me do it, but I didn’t have to drink it or have to swallow it. When I got older he made me swallow it. I’d go, “Why?” and he’d go, “This will make your boobs grow bigger.” I started reading some books on sex and told him, “It will not make my boobs grow bigger—those are guy hormones.” Then when I started to fill out he said, “That’s ‘cause of all the cock you sucked.”

This teen’s stepfather had the audacity to state that her female development had been benefited by the incestuous sexual activity.

Incest survivors can learn to cast aside negative residual feelings of guilt, confusion, fear, isolation, dependency, powerlessness, and hopelessness. They can

learn to overcome the false, distorted messages they received about love, sex, and sex roles. Obtaining accurate information about sex, defining what love means to them, and breaking free of oppressive sexual stereotypes are important steps survivors can take.

By correcting misconceptions about sexuality and sex roles left over from the abuse, survivors can become confident in their ability to relate in healthy sexual ways. They may eventually feel more confident than their peers who were not molested. Thus a positive type of piggyback effect is possible. Survivors have a very great potential for creating positive sexual experiences and for relating in mutually respectful sex roles.

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Suggested Resources

Outgrowing the Pain, by Eliana Gil, 1983 (San Francisco: Launch Press).

A short, readable book for adult survivors of child abuse which clearly explains how early abuse affects self-esteem and relationships. Especially good for people who wonder whether they were actually abused.

Betrayal of Innocence, by Susan Forward and Craig Buck, 1978 (New York: Penguin Books).

Basic information on the history and dynamics of incest, including many

case examples. Sections on variations of incest, including mother-daughter, mother-son, father-son, and sibling.

Father-Daughter Incest, by Judith Herman, 1981 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

A comprehensive book on how incest affects daughters, including a historical overview, research findings, and treatment concerns.

For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality, by Lonnie Barbach, 1976 (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books).

A good overview of sexual socialization and sexual pleasuring. Especially helpful for women resolving orgasmic difficulties.

For Each Other: Sharing Sexual Intimacy, by Lonnie Barbach, 1982 (New York, New York: New American Library).

Female perspective on healthy couples sexuality. Lots of exercises and suggestions for improving physical relationships. Contains basic sex therapy techniques.

Male Sexuality: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment, by Bernie Zilbergeld, 1978 (Boston: Little Brown and Company).

Excellent section on male sexual socialization, harmful myths, and reasons for male sexual problems. Includes sex therapy techniques for treating common male dysfunctions.

Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction, by Patrick Carnes, 1983 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Comp-Care Publications).

Overview of common types of sexual addictions, including incest. Can help survivors understand why some perpetrators sexually molest.

Learning About Sex: The Contemporary Guide for Young Adults, by Gary F. Kelly, 1977 (Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 113 Crossways Park Drive, Woodbury, New York 11797).

A good book for teens over fifteen years old and their parents, in paperback. Straightforward sex education for older adolescents. Includes section on love, responsible sex, and decision making in relationships.

“Identifying and Treating the Sexual Repercussions of Incest: A Couples Therapy Approach,” by Wendy Maltz, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 142-170.

Primarily written for clinicians. Presents a model for assessing and treating the sexual effects of incest in couple relationships. Includes intervention strategies, techniques, and therapeutic considerations.

Partners in Healing: Couples Overcoming the Sexual Repercussions of Incest (VIDEO) produced by Wendy Maltz, Steve Christiansen and Gerald Joffe, 1988. (For information and to order, contact: Independent Video Services, 401 E. 10th St. Dept. L, Eugene, Oregon 97401, telephone 503-345-3455).

Hosted by Wendy Maltz, this video program helps couples identify sexual problems caused by incest histories, and journey toward sexual healing and emotional intimacy. Symptoms of sexual concerns and specific steps in the healing process are discussed. Features three heterosexual couples (one with a male survivor). Helpful to incest survivors as well as a resource for therapy, education and training.

Two major self-help organizations for adult incest survivors are *VOICES* (Victims of Incest Can Emerge Survivors) in Action, Inc., P.O. Box 148309, Chicago, Illinois 60614, and *ISA* (Incest Survivors Anonymous), P.O. Box 5613, Long Beach, California 90805-0613.

About the Authors

[Wendy Maltz LCSW, DST](#), is an internationally recognized sex therapist, author, and speaker, with more than thirty-five years of experience treating sex and intimacy concerns. She authored a number of highly acclaimed sexuality resources, including the recovery classic, [*The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*](#), as well as [*Private Thoughts: Exploring the Power of Women's Sexual Fantasies*](#), and [*The Porn Trap: The Essential Guide to Overcoming Problems Caused by Pornography*](#). Wendy compiled and edited two best-selling poetry collections that celebrate healthy sexual intimacy, [*Passionate Hearts: The Poetry of Sexual Love*](#) and [*Intimate Kisses: The Poetry of Sexual Pleasure*](#). Her popular educational website, www.HealthySex.com, provides free articles, podcast interviews, posters, [couples sexual healing videos](#), and more to help people recover from sexual abuse, overcome sexual problems, and develop skills for love-based sexual intimacy.

Beverly Holman holds an M.S. in counseling psychology from the University of Oregon, where her master's thesis was entitled "The Sexual Impact of Incest on Adult Women." She also holds an M.A. in human development from the University of Kansas. Beverly is currently in private practice in counseling and mediation,

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