

HEALING ~

an act of courage

It is never too late to get rid of the pain from being sexually abused. So says Hetty Rose Junius, who met with Mari Dahl Adolfsson to talk about the healing process...

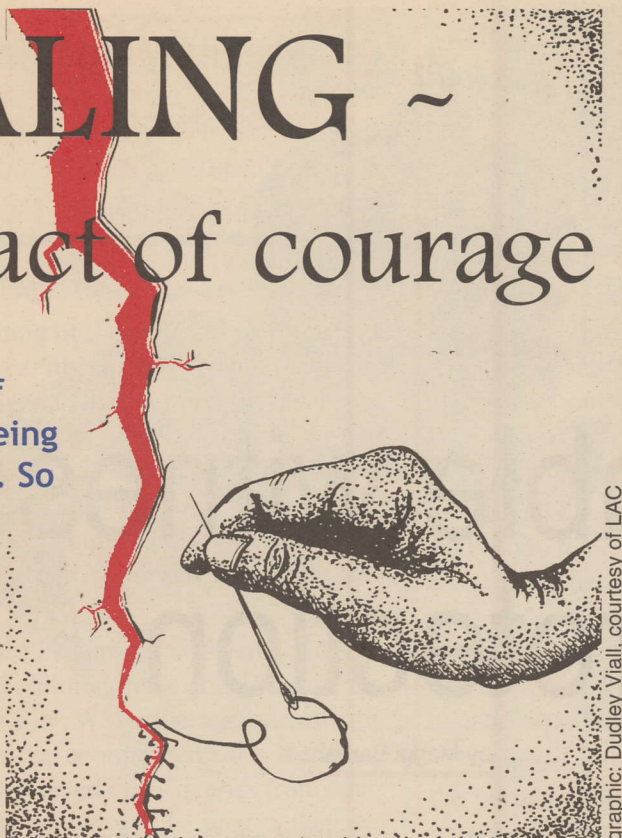
"There is a journey that the person who has been sexually abused can make," Hetty Rose Junius begins softly, as she sits down to talk to me. "During this journey the person heals themselves."

Hetty is a trained social worker who is also working as a researcher for the World Health Organisation on family violence issues. She works with people who have suffered sexual abuse, and are struggling to cope with what has happened to them. She believes that it is vital that people who have been sexually abused go into a healing program. "If you don't," she warns, "the pain will always manifest itself in another way."

Yet the decision to take part in the healing process is one that only the survivor of sexual abuse can make. "The important thing is that you feel ready to heal, that you yourself make the decision that you want to change your life. There must be no pressure on you to start the process."

No easy road

The journey towards healing is not a simple one. The road you must travel is a tough one, and one that you must walk in your own time and



way. It is a journey where you go through different memories and feelings.

Hetty says that the decision to heal yourself is very scary for most survivors. "It is scary because you are brought back to what happened, and your memories bring back all the emotions."

On the other hand, it is probably the most empowering decision that a survivor can make, because you are making an effort to get your life back, to take control again.

Reclaiming your innocence

I ask Hetty if it makes a difference if the abuse happened long ago, when you were a child, or more recently. Her answer is that time and age do not make the slightest difference: the need to heal yourself is always there. "When you take the decision to heal, you have to remember what happened and talk about the memories.

"Most people don't remember everything: they have brief flashbacks that join the pieces together like a puzzle. Bringing back the

memories brings back all the pain, hurt and humiliation," she says. "That is why the decision to heal is such an act of courage."

The healing process also helps the survivor to believe and understand that they are not the guilty one. It is a way of shedding shame and self-blame, and finally learning to trust yourself.

But what about the guilty party, I ask. Can they also be healed?

Hetty is firm on this point. "It is my definite opinion that the perpetrators also need healing, and that there is hope for them too. But the problem with perpetrators is that we can find it very hard to separate the person from his deeds. But if we don't work with this person, he will go on causing damage. If he is healed, we will have saved a lot of people."

Finding support

Healing cannot be done on your own. You need a therapist and a support network, like family, friends or church. "Unfortunately, some families may not believe or support you. Some families reject the survivor. Therefore the network might not include family. But apart from the therapist, you do need someone you trust. I believe in using friends to break the isolation of the pain and the suffering. You have to suffer and that's why you should not be alone," says Hetty.

I ask Hetty how the survivor knows that they have reached the end of the journey. "That is not always easy to know," she answers. "But sometimes the last thing we do is have a grieving ritual. It could be very simple, like letting a balloon fly away or burning something that reminds you of the pain. With this small ritual, you symbolically let go of the pain. And when times are hard, you can always go back to that in your mind."

If you need healing, Hetty's advice is to contact a social worker, a Women and Child Protection Unit, or a private therapist. ♀