

# A Black Woman's Journey Toward Healing From Childhood Sexual Abuse

Contributed by Amerah Henrene Shabazz-Bridges, BSW

One of the first things one notices about Amerah Shabazz-Bridges is her name. Like biblical characters whose names are emblematic of their faith and struggle, Amerah's name is a clue that this woman has journeyed long and fought hard. As a victim and survivor of incestuous rape and the by-product of a dysfunctional environment, Amerah is winning the race. She has become one of the most compelling voices on the subject of childhood sexual abuse and has received numerous awards and honors for her work. This is her story.

When I was abused, my boundaries, my right to say no, my sense of control in the world, were violated. I was powerless. The abuse humiliated me, giving me the message that I was of little value. My reality was denied and twisted.

As an 8-year-old, I did not know how to express my pain or fear. I was scared as I stared down the barrel of the 38 snub-nose handgun the perpetrator threatened to kill me with if I told anyone about the sexual abuse. Yet, I could not afford to feel the full extent of the abuse, the fear and the terror. I learned to block out my feelings, and eventually, I learned to simply stop feeling at all. I also learned about betrayal, because I was not believed by the people I loved and trusted. For me, the world was not a safe place. I had to cope with incestuous rape, as well as growing up in a dysfunctional and abusive environment. The person who abused me also emotionally and physically abused my mother as I lay listening in the next room. I lived in constant fear of losing my mother and losing my life.

In order to survive, I learned what we call in recovery "survivor skills"—unhealthy behaviors. I learned to mask my pain, and I searched for peace and stability in unhealthy relationships, religion, food, and spending. I had grown up with confusing messages about the relationship between sex, love, and trust, so I developed skills for establishing and maintaining nurturing relationships. I became a people pleaser, and I was manipulative. As a teenager and young adult, I was promiscuous. Simply put, I learned to survive.

As a 13-year-old child, I needed validation. I wanted to hear someone say to me, "I believe you. It wasn't your fault. I'm sorry for what happened to you. I am sorry for the pain and suffering the abuse caused. No one had the right to violate your body." Instead, I was told, "he said he didn't do it. She's lying." Later as an adult, when I confronted my parent, I was told, "I thought you could handle it."

As a teenager and young adult, I searched for peace and understanding in the church and at the mosque. In both, seasoned and well-meaning folk told me to just pray about it. They said, "Baby, you just got to forgive and forget about it. It's in the past. Vengeance is the Lord's (or Allah's). Just pray about it." However, what I did not understand at the time was how the same God who allowed this to happen to me in the first place could love me and give me the peace and understanding these people spoke of. And, if this God they spoke of sees all and knows all, what was taking Him so long to come down here and take me out of misery? Or better yet, why didn't this God just come down here right now and wipe this "blank, blank" off the face of the earth? Couldn't he see me crying? Didn't he know that I was afraid that I would be raped again or killed? Didn't He? Didn't He?

As I continued to cry out in my pain, searching for answers, my Higher Power (God) heard my moaning and groaning, and I hesitantly started down the road of recovery. I came to understand that incest and rape must be looked at for what they are. They are not crimes determined by gender—boys are abused, as well as girls. Reports tell us that some sexual offenders (male and female) were abused themselves (physically, sexually, and in other ways). As the offender grows into adulthood, he or she is missing important pieces about how to relate to people, how to express love and affection, and how to deal with anger and disappointment. Consequently, some abusers take out their rage and anger about their own abuse on a victim.

Researchers have found that many people who were sexually abused find that denying it ever happened keeps them sane. Authors on sexual abuse state that boys, especially, may find the "denial tactic" useful. Forgetting is another powerful coping mechanism. It allows a victim to move on with his or her life and never have to consciously deal with the impact the abuse has had on them. However, sexual abuse always has an impact, whether we are willing to acknowledge it or not. The effects can be seen in the way we interact with other people, the hurtful things we do to our bodies (alcohol, drugs, self-mutilation), and our basic attitude toward life.

After saying all of the above, I can tell you that, in spite of years of living in a world of chaos, healing from abuse is possible. Becoming a survivor is a conscious decision. It is making the decision that you will no longer be a victim of anyone or anything. You will not allow your past to dictate your future. Healing takes time. It takes coming to grips with the fact that somebody wronged you, and robbed you of things you had a right to own&hellip;your self-respect, your self-worth, your self-esteem. The abuser robbed you of yourself.

I had to learn to believe that the ultimate responsibility for the abuse was with the perpetrator. The abuse is not the victim's fault&mdash;the abuse was not my fault. It did not matter how I dressed, talked, or acted. The bottom line is that the perpetrator is always responsible. I have come to believe that I am valuable and have the right to be treated like a valuable human being.

However, the most wonderful and blessed thing that happened to me on my road to recovery was my realization and understanding of the greatness of my Higher Power&mdash;God. I realized that all through my life a &ldquo;Power greater than myself&rdquo; had led me out of the dark places when I was ready to turn to the light. As I prepared to part with old ways, it was important for me to look back with honor and compassion on the strengths that brought me from victim to survivor. Looking back, I could see my emotions and my spirit were malnourished. I have been in counseling and work a 12-step program for survivors of sexual abuse. And, today, this is what I say to anyone who will listen&mdash;in group meetings, in the church or mosque, or on the street:

Hi, my name is Amerah Henrene &ldquo;Fluggie&rdquo; Shabazz. I am a survivor of incestuous rape. I have been in recovery for over eighteen years. I am learning that I no longer have to use the survival skills I learned to protect me from feeling the pain of my abuse. I no longer have to act out. I have learned that forgiving is not forgetting&mdash;it is letting go of the hurt and getting on with my life. I have turned my will and my life over to a Power who is greater than me, who is restoring me to sanity and freedom. I live life one day at a time, striving for serenity, acceptance, and wisdom. I believe &ldquo;if any one of us can heal, then so can all of us.&rdquo;

Amerah Henrene Shabazz-Bridges, BSW, graduated from Jackson State University in May 2005. She was honored for being the oldest (a 66-year-old great-grandmother) undergraduate student graduating from the program in 2005. She got married the next day, on Mother's Day. She currently volunteers as a community educator and advocate for abused and neglected children at a rape crisis center in Memphis, TN.

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