

## **Abuse takes many forms, all of them ugly.**

● As a small child, Kenyon was beaten and humiliated—first by his mother, later by his father and stepmother.

● At first Dawn's husband called her fat and ugly and said no one else would ever want her. Later he began hitting her.

● Ryan's stepfather kicked and hit him as well as his brother and mother.

● Family gatherings became a nightmare for Eunice when an adult relative began molesting her.

## Surviving Abuse: Four True Stories

The four people profiled in this book are dissimilar in many ways. When they were being abused, Kenyon was a little boy. Dawn was an adult woman. Ryan was an adolescent. Eunice was only eight. They were separated geographically: Kenyon's abuse occurred in Maryland and Delaware. Dawn was living in Pennsylvania. Ryan was moving all over the country, and Eunice lived in Mexico.

But certain things bind all four of these people's experiences together. The same things could be said of almost any victim of abuse.

- Each of them felt *powerless* to stand up to his or her abuser. They saw their abusers as bigger, more powerful, and more important than they were. It seemed to them at the time that their abusers held all the cards, and that they had to take what the abusers dished out.

- Each of them felt somehow *responsible* for the abuse. In their minds, the abuse happened at least in part because they were doing something wrong. They came to believe that if only they were smarter, or quicker, or better, or prettier, or braver, they would not be targeted for abuse.

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● Each of them remained *silent* about the abuse for a long time. They didn't tell what was happening for a variety of reasons. Kenyon was too young to ask for help. Dawn was ashamed and wanted to believe her husband's promises to change. Ryan feared that asking for help would further endanger his mother. Eunice thought she would not be believed, or that if she was believed that she would be blamed.

Finally, however, all four of these people did speak out about what had happened to them. Although they still bear emotional as well as physical scars from their abuse, they have moved on and are living whole, happy, productive lives. As Eunice Ruiz puts it, "Being molested is something that happened to me. It does not define who I am."

Tragically, many victims of abuse have not taken the positive steps that Kenyon, Dawn, Ryan, and Eunice have. Weighed down by fear, guilt, depression and confusion, they continue to live in abusive situations today.

Because there is so much secrecy involved in domestic abuse, it's hard to be sure exactly how common it is. But here are a few statistics that reflect what we do know:

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- Domestic violence is the #1 cause for women to visit emergency rooms.

- Seventy percent of men who batter their wives or girlfriends also beat or molest their children.

- One in four girls and one in seven boys is molested during childhood.

It's upsetting to know that domestic abuse is so common. But that knowledge could actually be comforting to someone who is being victimized. Victims of abuse usually feel very alone. They often believe that no one could understand what they're going through. They think there must be something very unusual and wrong about them to be in such a position. But the fact is, many hundreds of thousands of people have lived—or are now living—in similar situations.

The stories of Kenyon, Dawn, Ryan, and Eunice show that abuse can take many forms, not all of them easy to detect. Spousal abuse can be especially hard to identify, even by the adult who is being abused. To help clarify what abuse of a partner actually is, here is a list of questions to consider. People who answer "Yes" to any of these questions should consider the possibility that they are in an abusive relationship . . .

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Does your partner frequently tell you that you are stupid and everything wrong with the relationship is your fault?

Does your partner tell you that no one else will ever want you?

Does your partner control which friends or relatives you can see or talk to?

Does your partner control how and when you use the phone?

Does your partner threaten to hurt himself/herself, your children, or your pets if you leave him/her?

Does your partner force you to have sex?

Does your partner demand that you account for every minute you are out of his/her sight?

Does your partner ever lock you in or out of your home?

Does your partner prevent you from going to school or getting a job?

Does your partner take your money?

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Do you keep trying to please your partner in the hope that he/she will change?

Does your partner hit, slap, kick, or push you?

### **What if a person is being abused? What steps can he or she take?**

If the person is an adult, here are some steps she or he might consider:

● **Reach out.** As a victim of abuse, you are probably feeling very alone. Your abuser is counting on this isolation to keep you quiet and controllable. One of the most effective things you can do is reach out for support from family, friends, co-workers, church members, social service agencies, and hotline volunteers. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Merely talking to people about what's happening will be a big step toward dealing with it.

● **Develop a safety plan.** Look ahead and decide what you will do if you reach the point that you choose to leave. Have an “escape bag” ready and hidden somewhere safe. That bag should include an extra set of car keys, identification documents, insurance cards, medications you need, some cash, etc.

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Determine where you would be able to go if you left. Your destination might be a friend's house or a shelter. The important thing is that you have a place in mind and know how to get there.

- If you have children, talk to a lawyer (call your local Legal Aid office for low-cost help) before you leave so that you know how to protect your custody rights.

- Remember: **IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT YOU ARE BEING ABUSED.** Your abuser may blame you for “making” him/her angry and abusive. This is a lie. No one “makes” another person become abusive. The abuser is the one responsible for the abuse, not the victim.

### **What if you are a minor who is being abused?**

- Remember that there are very strong laws to protect children from abuse. But those laws can only help if you let people know what's happening to you.

- Get the help of as many people as you can. Tell a trusted teacher or coach or guidance counselor at school. Call your local child protective service agency. Or call the National Child Abuse Hotline at

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1-800-4-A-Child (1-800-422-4453). Report your situation to a police officer. All these people are required by law to investigate your report.

Whether you yourself are a victim of abuse, or whether you are concerned about someone who may be being abused, remember this: Abuse is a practice that thrives on secrecy and shame. Whatever any of us can do to pull it into the bright light of day, look directly at it and talk about it openly will lessen its power.

*The only one who should feel ashamed about abuse is an abuser.*

*There is no excuse for abuse.*

*If you see abuse, tell someone.*