



Time Passes, Wound Remains

by Carina Chan and Samantha Chung

Even time may not be enough to heal the wounds of the sexual assault victims. They have to face the stigma of the abuse no matter how long ago it happened.

For 18-year-old Yee and her mother, Ms Hui, the scars run deep. The difference is in how the two women deal with their past. Yee and Ms Hui were sexually abused by the same man, Ms Hui's husband and Yee's father.

It started when she was just nine years old. Yee had recently arrived in Hong Kong from the mainland, and as her mother had yet to join the family, she lived alone with her father. Every

night, Yee slept with her father and he began to kiss her and touch her in the middle of the night.

At first, Yee thought her father was being affectionate with her. "At the time, she was too young to understand what was going on," said Yee's mother Ms Hui.

But Yee began to realise something was wrong after attending sex education class in school, and seeing her father abusing her mother. It was then that she confided to her mother.

Ms Hui confronted her husband, only to be the next victim of his sexual assaults. It was only after her husband

raped and abused her, that Ms Hui called the police. The police referred both the mother and daughter to the Social Welfare Department, and placed them in refuge centres.

The abuse left Ms Hui suffering from an emotional disorder and she had to see a psychologist for three years. By confronting her experience, she learned to leave her past behind.

Now, Ms Hui works for the Hong Kong Association for the Survivors of Women Abuse (Kwan Fook), helping others to overcome their suffering through peer support. "It is different from seeing a psychologist," she said,

"We are willing to share our past history in a safe and private environment. The psychologists will listen to us but they don't really know our background. They can't empathise with our experience."

Unlike her mother, Yee is still traumatised by the abuse. Although she visited social workers and psychologists, she is still unwilling to open up and chooses to avoid her terrible experience.

Today, Yee becomes a reserved young woman who distrusts others. She just surfs the Internet and is disconnected from society and her friends. She lacks self-esteem and confidence.

Ms Hui, who has managed to step out of the shadow of abuse, is at a loss how she can help her own daughter.

Among the victims of sexual abuse, Ms Hui is a rare and outspoken survivor. Most victims keep their feelings bottled up like Yee.

Koo Kam-wing, a social worker and qualified sex therapist at the Caritas Project for Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma, said some victims think that if they can endure the incident in secret, they will be able to suppress it forever. But Mr Koo believes those feelings can be set off and will create psychological problems in the future.

According to a report by the Caritas project, the top three emotions felt by female victims of sexual assault are inferiority, uneasiness and fear. For male victims, the most common emotions are confusion, inferiority and shame.

These feelings make it hard for victims to talk about their abuse, and it is made worse when others treat their claims with suspicion.



Koo Kam-wing said some victims are unwilling to seek help as they are afraid of being questioned and judged.

Mr Koo said in such cases, victims often do not come forward until they seek help for other problems like depression. He related the case of a boy who had been abused by an older man but had been brushed off by the police when he tried to report it.

In another case, a girl who had been abused by a male teacher felt further humiliated when another teacher she confided in distrusted her account.

Abuse leads to anxiety as well. Mr Koo said he met a victim who was unable to take public transport during rush hours because she felt uneasy to have people around her. She feared those who sat next to her might hurt her.

Other victims might be afraid of their own body after a sexual assault. They do not dare to touch themselves and feel they have lost control over their own bodies. Especially if the abuse has happened more than once, victims may detach their emotions in order to survive the trauma.

Helping these victims to reintegrate themselves may involve personal counselling with social workers, small-group counselling with other victims, and various therapies like music, dance and art therapy.

For instance, in music and dance therapy, participants may be asked to freely move their bodies with the music while they are videotaped. When they view the recordings afterwards, they realise they are still able to appreciate themselves.

"They are able to control their emotions, their movements, what they see and feel," said Mr Koo, "and to learn that the body is not just a tool for being sexually assaulted."

Through these therapies, participants can learn to accept their own body again,

“But the wound will still stay with me no matter how long ago it happened.”

and to perform everyday functions like walking down a crowded street and taking public transport.

Counselling and therapy can help victims of sexual abuse to rebuild their lives but not all victims seek professional help. For Susan Ng, the road to recovery has been long and difficult.

Miss Ng was molested when she was eight years old. She was waiting for her brother at a bus stop after school when a man approached her and started talking to her.

He told her that her schoolbag was heavy and asked her to put down while she was waiting. He slowly moved closer, then he suddenly hugged her and began touching her.

At first, she thought he was only being friendly, but then she realised something was wrong. She tried to grab the bag and run away but he pulled her back. Eventually, Miss Ng tugged hard and managed to get away.

From that day onwards, Miss Ng became afraid of men, even of her brother and father. She became weary of them.

But the hardest part was pretending there was nothing wrong. “I had to put on a mask in front of them,” she said, “as I thought all men were evil and dishonest.”

Despite her efforts, Miss Ng could not control her emotions. She felt angry at herself and cried every day when she was alone.

“I didn’t seek help then because my privacy was very important to me and I didn’t trust my teachers and school social workers,” she said.

“I didn’t even talk about it with my family members as I needed my privacy. I didn’t tell my friends because I was afraid they would tell others, so why would I have told anyone else?” Miss Ng said.

The turning point came two years after the assault when Miss Ng watched

a programme on television called “Sex Education”. She vaguely recalled the story which was about a little girl who said all men are evil, but who is

told by a social worker that it was not true, and that sex is not scary.

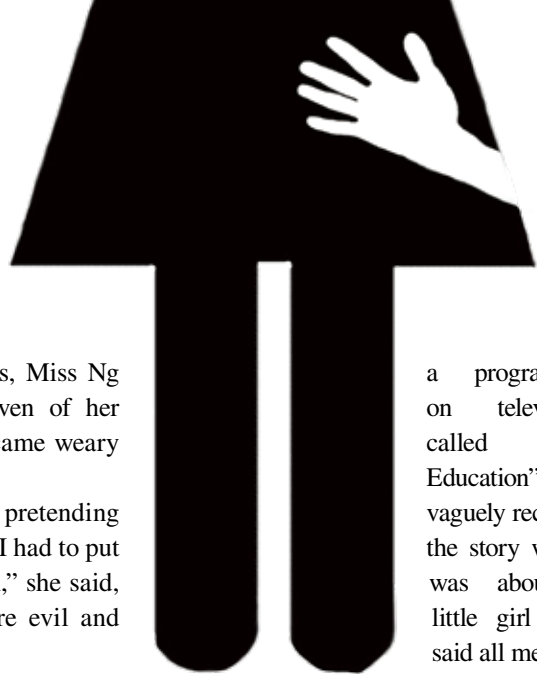
Miss Ng said she was suddenly enlightened. She believed she should not be afraid anymore and should think like the social worker. She strived to put her bad memories behind and even managed to stand up for herself.

Later when she was in secondary three, Miss Ng was standing on a tram when a man in black coat tried to get close to her. When she felt someone up against her, she turned and saw he did not have any trousers on. This time, she spoke out and scolded him until he left the tram.

Miss Ng said there are times when the incident still affects her unconsciously, “When my boyfriend hugged me, I became stiff and unresponsive,” she said, but she is not afraid to confront her past.

“I am definitely not ashamed of what occurred in the past as it wasn’t my fault. But the wound will still stay with me no matter how long ago it happened. The wound will never be healed completely,” Miss Ng said.

“The best way to deal with it is to accept it, live with it and do not try to let it hinder myself from living the life that I want. Do not try to pretend that it did not happen. It just hurts you more.”



SAMANTHA CHUNG

Susan Ng thinks her wounds may never heal completely.