

Forgotten ones — partners and friends

Group helps loved ones of sexual assault victims

By **CLAUDIA D'SOUSA**
Special to The Champion

They're the forgotten ones — the partners and friends of survivors of sexual abuse. Their experiences are always eerily similar. As someone close to them battles with past traumas and the recovery process, they cope with a host of complicated issues.

Their loved one may push them away emotionally or may overwhelm them with every detail of their past. They may become distrustful and see those closest to them as the enemy. Or, they may be riding an emotional roller coaster in the aftermath of confronting their abuser, making day-to-day life unpredictable and chaotic.

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CATHIE HOLLAND

The situation can be isolating, confusing and trying, and the statistics show most marriages and friendships end painfully along this healing path. First, because the partners and friends can't cope with the survivor's changing emotional needs and secondly,

because there are few places to turn for help.

At the Halton Rape Crisis Centre, a confidential and free support group simply called the Partners and Friends Group, has become a safe haven for many in the Halton community. Its main goal is to allow participants to share their feelings among those going through similar situations, and to get the support and encouragement they need.

"So many partners find it difficult to cope," notes peer counsellor Cathie Holland who runs the group with Nancy Wienburg, also a peer counsellor. "It's an extremely private issue few want to discuss especially the fact that sex is almost non-existent in 90 per cent of these marriages. It's crucial that they get support outside the relationship to enable them to communicate their feelings and move forward."

Recently, three members of the group, one from Oakville, one from Burlington and one from Milton, reflected on how the Partners and Friends Group continues to help them. Their wives are all in different stages of recovery.

"I've always felt there was something wrong but I could never put my finger on it, says Stan, a father of two sons in their twenties. "My wife would become remote or emotional for no apparent reason. Every time I tried to make things better, they usually ended up worse and I was getting blamed for things I didn't do or even know about. The stress on the family and our marriage kept building. To be honest, I didn't deal with it well."

When Stan learned about the Partners and Friends Group, he admits he was filled with apprehension.

"I was scared," he says. "I'd been through so much for so long and no one understood. You want to fix it but you can't. It was affecting every part of my life and at one point I turned to alcohol and drugs. Once we started talking, I saw that other people were in the same boat. It put it in a framework for me and made me see things more clearly. I learned how to respond to her better. This group is a part of my recovery process."

Tom, a thirty something father of three, searched for a support group for six years before he found Partners and Friends.

"I'm not the abuser but sometimes my wife saw me as the enemy," he reveals. "Family and friends want to help but they don't know what you're going through. I had mixed feelings because I didn't want to become immersed in it, but I saw how important it is to share with someone who understands. You have to take care of yourself."

"I thought I could handle it on my own," says Dave, a newlywed. "I was uncomfortable at first, but I found it comforting. It blew me away to hear what other people are going through. It put my experience in perspective and gave me a chance to unload in an unbiased environment. The group has been my saving grace. Now, I look forward to the next meeting before the last one ends."

Peer counsellors Ms Holland and Ms Wienberg have seen the growth of the group since its inception. Members become friends and exchange phone numbers so that they always have a lifeline if they need to talk.

"The group helps them see the light at the end of the tunnel," states Ms Wienberg. "It's their safe place and it helps keep these families together."

The next eight-week session of Partners and Friends will begin in September. It's open to both males and females.

Call Kerry Samuels at 825-3622 for more information. Several other support groups are available for female survivors.

(The names of the husbands quoted in the above story were changed to protect privacy.)

Be prepared, not scared: Red Cross

The Canadian Red Cross has released a booklet entitled 'Be Prepared Not Scared' to help the public be prepared for the effects of tornados, wind storms and flooding. The manual is available at no cost at the local Red Cross office.

Here's a sample of information in the book.

- In the case of a tornado go to the basement if indoors. If there's no basement, crouch or lie flat under heavy furniture in an inner hallway or small inner room away from windows. Stay clear from shopping malls, halls and other big buildings as the roof could collapse. If outside, crouch in a ravine or ditch. If driving, get away from the car. It could roll or be blown away.

- In a flood turn off basement furnaces and outside valves. Shut off electricity. If the area around the fuse box is wet stand on a dry board and shut off electricity with a wooden stick. Don't try to cross a flooded area on foot. Fast running water could sweep a person away. Abandon a car if it stalls in a flooded area.

- In a lightning storm stay inside if possible. If outdoors seek shelter in a building, cave, or depressed area. If caught in the open kneel with feet close together and head down.





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