

CHAPTER 1

What Will Be Your Legacy?

Nicole had wanted a baby for so long, and now here she was holding her newborn daughter, Samantha. She looked down at her beautiful baby and was full of pride. As she began nursing she anticipated feeling love well up inside her. But instead all she felt was impatience. Why isn't she sucking? I don't have all day, Nicole thought to herself. She pushed her nipple inside Samantha's mouth but the baby wouldn't take hold. "What's wrong with this baby? Why is she rejecting me like this?" Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of the problems between Nicole and Samantha, problems that mirrored those Nicole had with her own mother as she was growing up.

Peggy couldn't believe it. Once more she'd chosen a man who turned out to be emotionally abusive toward her. "I don't know why this keeps happening to me; they always seem so nice at the beginning but they all turn out to be monsters. I feel like I'm some kind of 'abuser magnet' or something."

Janice couldn't believe the words that came out of her mouth. "You selfish little bitch. You think the world revolves around you, don't you?" As much as she'd vowed it would never happen, Janice said the exact words to her daughter that her mother had so often said to her when she was growing up.

Marianne was trying to watch her favorite TV program but her two-year-old son kept screeching at the top of his lungs. Marianne had warned the boy to keep quiet but he just wasn't listening. Now she'd had it. She got up, picked up her son, and shook him hard. "What's wrong with you? Why don't you listen?" she yelled. When she finally

stopped shaking her son she was horrified to discover that he was unconscious.

Robert couldn't control himself. How dare his wife speak to him like that! He shoved her against a wall and began hitting her over and over again. Then he dragged her near lifeless body through the house and dumped her on the bed. He went back into the kitchen, poured himself another drink and sat down. He was still shaking inside with rage. "That'll teach her to talk back to me," he told himself. But several minutes later another voice inside him whispered, "You're no better than your father—you're a monster just like he was."

Jack was horrified the first time he felt a sexual attraction toward his daughter. "What kind of scumbag am I?" he asked himself. Then he found himself getting angry with her for no apparent reason and pushing her away whenever she wanted to sit on his lap. He criticized the way she dressed and accused her of being a little tramp. Even though he had blocked out the memory of his own molestation as a child on a subconscious level, Jack was deathly afraid that he would do to his daughter what had been done to him.

Karen could hardly breathe. A voice in her head kept saying, "It isn't true, it isn't true." The social worker was telling her that her daughter Heather had accused her stepfather of sexually molesting her. "That's impossible," she found herself saying to the social worker. "He's been a wonderful father to Heather. Heather lies. She always has. You can't believe anything she says. She's just trying to get attention." But deep inside Karen knew the truth. And she knew the horror that her daughter must be going through. She knew because she had been molested when she was a child.

If you relate to any of these examples, you are not alone. There are thousands of others like yourself who are reenacting the abuse or neglect that they experienced as a child, adolescent, or adult. Some, like Janice, Marianne, and Robert, find themselves acting out their frustration and anger in the same ways that their own parents did, in spite of their best efforts to the contrary. Others, like Nicole and Jack, blocked out the memory of their own abuse but are forced to revisit it when they find themselves thinking or behaving in ways that upset or even repulse them. Still others, like Peggy and Karen, repeat the cycle

of abuse not by becoming abusive themselves but by continually being victimized or by marrying an abuser and becoming a silent partner in the abuse of their own children.

If you were emotionally, physically, or sexually abused as a child or adolescent, or if you experienced neglect or abandonment, it isn't a question of whether you will continue the cycle of abuse or neglect, it is a question of how you will do so—whether you will become an abuser or continue to be a victim. The sad truth is that no one gets through an abusive or neglectful childhood unscathed, and an even sadder truth that no one escapes without perpetuating the cycle of violence in some way. In many cases, those who were abused or neglected become both abusers and victims throughout their lifetimes. Although this may sound unnecessarily negative to you, it is the truth. Research clearly shows that those who have been abused either absorb abuse or pass it on. In the past twenty-five years studies on abuse and family assaults strongly suggest that abused children become abusers themselves, and that child victims of violence become violent adults. Individuals with a history of childhood abuse are four times more likely to assault family members or sexual partners than are individuals without such a history. Women who have a history of being abused in childhood are far more likely to continue being victimized as adults.

We don't need research to tell us what we know intuitively. If abuse and neglect were not passed down from generation to generation we simply would not have the epidemic of childhood abuse and neglect we are experiencing today. "But I know plenty of people who were abused or neglected as children who did not grow up to be abusers or victims," you might counter. Even though I'm sure there are any number of survivors you can think of who seem, on the surface, to be leading normal, healthy lives, I can assure you that there are many things that go on behind closed doors that the average bystander never knows about. If you could be a fly on the wall in the home of the average couple where one or both were abused or neglected as children I can guarantee that you would see history repeating itself every day in a multitude of ways.

You might see it in the way the husband talks to his wife in the same dismissive, condescending tone in which his father spoke to his mother. Or you'd notice the way his wife passively concedes to her husband's demands, just as her mother did to her father's. You might see it in the way one or both parents has an inordinate need to dominate and

control their children. Or both parents may repeat the cycle by neglecting their children in much the same way they were neglected by their parents—putting their own needs before those of their children; not taking an interest in their children’s school work, hobbies, or friends; or being emotionally unavailable to their children because they are abusing alcohol.

If one spouse was physically abused as a child you would likely see that kind of abuse repeated as well. Even the most well-meaning person will find himself exploding in the same kind of rage he witnessed or experienced as a child. His rage is likely to surface when he drinks too much, when he feels provoked, or when he is reminded of or “triggered” by memories of his own abuse. Or, the reverse may be true; if a woman was battered as a child or witnessed her mother being abused she may have grown up to marry a man who physically abuses her or her children. Like her mother, she will be rendered helpless—unable to defend herself or to leave.

If one or both spouses was sexually abused you would have to be a fly on the wall in order to discover how the cycle is repeated in the family because it is done in such secrecy. All too often a sexually abused male (and less often, a female) will sexually abuse his or her own children. If he married a woman who was also sexually abused (which happens more times than not) she will often become what is called a silent partner—someone who is in such denial about her own abuse that she stands by while her own children are being molested. Although not all victims of childhood sexual abuse molest their own or other people’s children, sometimes they are so afraid of repeating the cycle that they cannot be physically affectionate toward their own children. Others raise their children to believe their genitals and their sexual feelings are dirty and shameful.

There are also many other ways that abuse gets passed down to the next generation that are even more difficult to spot, at least initially. Charlene couldn’t wait to have a baby. She wanted someone she could call her own, someone she could shower with love. Much to her surprise, Charlene discovered that she was unable to bond emotionally with her son no matter how much she tried. “I love him, of course, and I’d do anything for him. But somehow I just can’t bring myself to be affectionate toward him. And I always feel guarded with him—like I can’t allow myself to feel the love I know I have for him.”

When Charlene and I explored her history the reason for her inability to bond with her son became evident. Charlene's mother was unable to emotionally bond with her when she was a baby, and her mother remained emotionally distant from her as she was growing up. "I used to question whether she was even really my mother. I always felt like maybe I'd been adopted or something. She just didn't treat me like a mother should treat her own child. My gosh, is that the way I'm treating my son?"

Todd's mother was just the opposite. She had lavished him with affection and emotionally smothered him from the time he was a baby. As Todd got older his mother became very possessive of him, not wanting him to leave her side for very long, not even to go outside to play with friends. This possessiveness continued well into his teens when she would feign sickness to keep him from going out on dates. When Todd did manage to have a girlfriend his mother always found things wrong with her and insinuated that the girl wasn't good enough for him.

Surprisingly, Todd finally did manage to get married, and he and his wife had two children. On the surface, it looked like Todd had escaped unscathed from his emotionally smothering mother. But the truth was that Todd was an extremely angry man. He felt trapped by his wife and kids, just as he had with his mother, and he verbally abused them mercilessly. He also acted out his anger against his mother by compulsively seeing prostitutes and subjecting his wife to venereal disease and AIDS.

Tracey tried all her childhood and into her adulthood to get her father's love and approval. But her father was very remote and distant, and she found she could never get his attention, no matter how hard she tried. When Tracey was eighteen she left home. Although she never gained her father's love, it appeared that Tracey was a normal young woman. She moved to a nearby city and got a good job and her own apartment. Shortly thereafter she met a young man named Randy who swept her off her feet. He lavished her with affection and praise and told her he was madly in love with her. She agreed to marry Randy after knowing him for only two months.

Initially, because Tracey had been so love starved, the fact that Randy didn't like being away from her made her feel good. But gradually Randy became more and more possessive and jealous. He didn't like Tracey going out with her girlfriends because he was convinced

she would flirt with other men. Tracey understood this—she was afraid other women would flirt with Randy, too—so she stayed home with him. Then Randy started getting upset when Tracey wanted to go visit her parents. He'd start a fight every time she wanted to go, and she would end up staying home. Gradually, Tracey became isolated from all her friends and family. This was to be the first step in what was to become an extremely violent relationship. In Tracey's attempt to marry someone who was different from her father, someone who would give her the attention she so desperately needed, she had fallen for a man who was so insecure that he had to have complete control over his wife.

As you can see, someone who may seem like they have adjusted quite well to an abusive or neglectful childhood may look entirely different in the privacy of his own home when he is interacting with his partner or his children. But I'm preaching to the choir here. Most of you who are reading this book are aware that there is a risk that you will repeat what was done to you in some way. And for many of you, that risk has already become a reality. You've already begun to abuse your partner, neglect or abuse your children or other people's children, or abuse your employees or coworkers. You've already been emotionally or physically abused by at least one partner and perhaps already established a pattern of being revictimized in the same ways you were as a child.

The cycle of violence is manifested in other ways as well. Those who were raised by alcoholic parents often become alcoholic parents themselves. Those who were raised by parents who suffer from a personality disorder sometimes end up having the same personality disorder. (It can be argued that alcoholism and some personality disorders may have a genetic component, but the truth is that the environmental influence cannot be denied. When many of these individuals enter therapy and begin to work on their unfinished business from childhood, many are able to recover from their disorders.) Our parents also pass on negative beliefs that not only influence us but can cause us to become abusive or victimlike in our behavior.

From a Legacy of Pain to a Legacy of Hope

If we are honest, most of us remember moments when we heard or saw ourselves interacting with our partner, our children, or someone else

close to us in ways that are far too reminiscent of the way we ourselves were treated as children. We usually react to these moments with disbelief and horror: “Oh, my God, I sound just like my mother,” or “I can’t believe I’m acting just like my father.” We simply cannot believe that we have repeated the very behaviors we despised in our parents.

The truth is we all carry with us the legacy of our childhoods—whether it is security and nurturing or abandonment and neglect, guidance and respect, or abuse and disdain. In fact, we carry the legacy of not only our own childhoods but also the childhoods of our parents and their parents before them. Unfortunately, often times this legacy is a legacy of pain. Although many parents try to treat their children better than they themselves were treated, generation after generation of people continue to pass down emotional, physical, and sexual abuse to their children and their children’s children.

We also repeat the legacy of pain by reenacting the abuse we experienced at the hands of those other than our parents. Those who were sexually abused as children—whether it was by parents, other caretakers or authority figures, siblings, or older children—tend to either reenact the abuse they experienced by introducing younger children to sex, by becoming child molesters when they become adults, or by being continually revictimized as adults. Research shows that children who are sexually abused tend to act out their anger and rage by becoming bullies, torturing animals, and abusing other children. Women often reenact their abuse by becoming strippers and prostitutes, whereas adult males often become sex addicts who make unreasonable demands on their female partners.

The Less Obvious Legacies of Abuse and Neglect

Most people already understand that someone who was neglected; abandoned; or emotionally, physically, or sexually abused as a child is far more likely to repeat the abuse or neglect as an adult than anyone else. They know that many will become abusive themselves unless they take definite steps to prevent it. Those who do not become abusive will likely continue to be victimized throughout their lifetime. But not everyone knows the more subtle legacies of abuse and neglect. For example, those with such a history are often unable to see their partners, children, and even their coworkers clearly. Instead they see them through a distorted lens of fear, distrust, anger, pain, and

shame. They see ridicule, rejection, betrayal, and abandonment when it really isn't there. Their low self-esteem will cause them to be hypersensitive and to take things far too personally. And they will likely have control issues causing them to either have a need to dominate others or to be far too easily dominated by others.

Those with a history of neglect or abuse are often unable to trust their partners. Instead they repeat the past dramas of their parents and perceive their partners as enemies instead of allies. Those who become parents find that it is difficult to see their own children's needs and pain without being reminded of their own. They also find it difficult to allow their children to make a mistake without taking it as a personal affront or a sign that they are not a good parent. In work environments past dramas with their parents and siblings get reenacted with bosses and coworkers.

Think about the effect the neglect or abuse you experienced has had on you. How has it affected the way you view yourself and the way you view others? What kind of a legacy are you going to pass on to your children and your children's children? Although these may be depressing or even frightening thoughts, there is a way out of the seemingly endless cycle of abuse and neglect. There are coping skills that can be adopted, positive ways of dealing with anger and shame that can be learned, and ways to make up for the personality deficits that usually accompany experiences of neglect and abuse. There are ways for you to confront your pain, anger, fear, and shame directly so you do not have to transfer it to your partner, your children, your friends, or your coworkers.

Last, but certainly not least, there are ways to break into an abusive or neglectful family system, expose it for what it is, and repair the damage so that one more generation of children does not grow up to either become abusers or victims.

My Story

As a psychotherapist specializing in emotional, physical, and sexual abuse I was able to help each person described in the beginning of this chapter, as well as hundreds of others, to break the cycle of abuse and neglect. But instead of acting as an impersonal expert, throughout the book I will also tell you my own story—and my triumph over my own abusive and victimlike tendencies.

As many of you know from reading my previous books, *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship*, *The Emotionally Abused Woman*, and *Encouragements for the Emotionally Abused Woman*, I was severely emotionally abused by my mother when I was a child and even into my adulthood. This abuse seriously damaged my self-esteem and created intense shame and rage in me. It also set me up to be in relationships with emotionally abusive partners, as well as becoming emotionally abusive myself.

I was also sexually abused. When I was nine years old the husband of one of my mother's friends molested me for about six months. The molestation included being forced to orally copulate my abuser. This experience changed me forever. I was so shamed by the abuse and sexualized at such an inappropriately early age that I began acting out sexually shortly after the abuse stopped. I introduced sexual play to nearly every child in my neighborhood and came on to a young man who, out of kindness, had volunteered to teach basketball to the neighborhood children. These experiences filled me with incredible shame and added to my belief that I was a horrible person.

But nothing that had been done to me or that I had done to others at that point in my life compared with what came next. It happened one day when I was babysitting for a one-year-old boy. I was twelve years old. As I was changing his diaper I felt overwhelmed with an intense impulse to suck his penis. I was filled with a tremendous desire to feel the power of doing to someone weaker than myself what had been done to me. Fortunately, this impulse was followed by an overwhelming feeling of shame and revulsion. I was horrified at what I was thinking of doing—so horrified that it stopped me in my tracks. Because of the experience I decided to never babysit for the little boy again and avoided babysitting other young boys.

Those experiences gave me a keen understanding of exactly how abuse gets passed from one person to another. They also gave me tremendous empathy for anyone who has experienced the impulse to do to others what was done to them.

How Do You Break the Cycle?

There isn't just one way to break the cycle, there are many. In this book I offer you a program of healing and prevention that encompasses many aspects, including:

- Making the connection between your current behavior and your childhood history of neglect or abuse. This will require many of you to come out of denial once and for all about exactly what was done to you as a child and the effect it has had on your life.
- Placing what was done to you in the context of your family history. As you explore your family history many of you will be shocked to learn that such things as alcoholism, child abuse, child abandonment, domestic violence, depression, and other emotional problems and criminal behaviors have been in your family going back many decades.
- Learning to manage your emotions—especially the emotions of shame, anger, and fear.
- Changing the negative attitudes and beliefs that create a victim or abuser mentality.
- Choosing intimate partners who are capable of having an equal relationship.
- Learning healthy ways of resolving conflicts in your intimate relationships.
- Deciding whether you are a good candidate to become a parent.
- Learning parenting skills that will ensure that you will not become an abusive parent and pass on neglectful or abusive family patterns.
- Continuing to work on healing from the abuse or neglect you experienced.
- Working on gaining independence from your parents and other caretakers.
- Breaking into your dysfunctional family system to ensure that other family members do not harm your children or continue to treat you in damaging ways.

Your “Empowering Tools” for Breaking the Cycle

As you can see, this is a lot of work, and much of it will be difficult, confusing, and even painful. But throughout the process, I want you

to know that you are not alone. I'd like you to imagine that I am working right alongside you, supporting you, encouraging you through the rough times. Each chapter will offer you vitally important information that will take time to process, and questionnaires and exercises that will help move you further along on your journey. You may wish to think of each chapter as a separate therapy session. This will encourage you to take it slow and to take the time to process the material in each chapter.

I encourage therapists, group leaders, and teachers to use this book as a guide and teaching aid. If you do use it as a guide for group therapy, for group discussions, or as a teaching tool, you may find it helpful to focus on one chapter for several meetings.

I offer you seven empowering tools that will help you along the way:

1. Support and compassion
2. Education
3. Ongoing strategies
4. Abuse prevention strategies
5. Strategies to help you stop abusing
6. Long-term recovery strategies
7. Information and resources for further help

Support and compassion. It is going to take tremendous courage and determination for you to break the cycle of abuse and neglect. The rewards will be incredible, and that's what will keep you going. But you'll also need support. It is my hope that you will find that support in this book.

There is one message that I want to send you above all others: your tendency to be abusive or to be a victim is not your fault. When you were abused or neglected as a child you experienced tremendous shame. You blamed yourself, thinking that it must be your fault. You may have even been told that it was your fault. Instead of being further shamed because you've had a tendency to repeat the cycle, in this book you will be treated with respect and admiration for having the courage to admit you have a problem. And because I will share my own struggles with breaking the cycle of abuse, you will receive empathy and compassion from someone who not only understands but who has actually been in your shoes.

If we are to truly break the cycle of abuse we must remove the stigma that is attached to being a victim or a victimizer. No one consciously sets out to become an abusive person. Neither does anyone set out to become a victim. We are propelled into these patterns by our upbringing, by our own experiences of trauma and neglect, and by our inability to work through this trauma and neglect. Getting stuck in blame and shame will only hamper your progress in breaking the cycle and will serve no positive function.

Given the right amount of support, education, and strategies, anyone can break the cycle, but without these things we have no choice but to continue blindly repeating what has been done to us.

Education. Another one of the goals of this book will be to educate you about the effects of abuse and neglect. Until you completely understand exactly how you were affected by your past experiences, you will not be in the position to spot the ways you are repeating certain destructive behaviors, and you will not be able to forgive yourself for your actions.

Ongoing strategies. Those who become abusive and those who develop a pattern of victimization have certain behaviors and perceptions in common that tend to set them up for unhealthy, negative ways of relating to others. These include:

- A tendency to suppress or push down their feelings
- Poor communication skills
- The lack of opportunity to learn good coping skills (i.e., solve problems, make decisions, compromise, resolve conflict, take personal responsibility)
- Low self-esteem and shame (i.e., lack of power and control over their own lives, feelings of inadequacy)
- Unrealistic or inappropriate expectations and beliefs (i.e., lessons learned from culture concerning male privilege, promotion of violence)
- Poor habits formed while growing up (i.e., violence is a viable and perhaps only option for resolving problems)

- A self-destructive path (i.e., substance abuse, alcohol abuse, suicidal thoughts)
- Poor health (i.e., poor diet, lack of sleep, low energy)

I offer a program that includes suggestions on how to fully connect with your emotions (perhaps for the first time) and how to heal your shame so that you are not constantly triggered by the behavior of others or constantly surrounding yourself with those who shame you. I'll provide suggestions on how to build up your self-esteem so that you are not as inclined to tear down the self-esteem of those around you or to allow others to treat you in ways that will further damage your self-esteem or self-image. You'll learn how to communicate your needs and desires in an assertive rather than an aggressive, passive, or passive-aggressive manner. You'll learn constructive ways of dealing with stress and ways to communicate your anger instead of erupting in a rage, projecting your anger onto other people, or attracting angry people into your life.

Abuse prevention strategies. You will learn how to prevent becoming abusive or being a victim in your intimate relationships. You'll learn how to spot an abuser or a victim and how to avoid the most common pitfalls of emotionally and physically abusive relationships. You'll also learn how to prevent child abuse, either at your own hands or the hands of your spouse.

Strategies to help you stop abusing or being a victim. The chances are high that many of you reading this book have already begun to repeat the cycle. Because of this I offer specific strategies to help you, no matter what your particular circumstances are: emotional abuse, domestic violence, or childhood sexual abuse.

Long-term recovery strategies. The long-term program will focus on helping you to heal the dysfunctional or traumatic treatment you experienced in childhood. This will include continuing to come out of denial about what actually happened to you, and grieving your neglectful or abusive childhood so you can give up the false hope that you can now get what you didn't receive as a child. It will also include the process of emotionally separating from your family and

completing your unfinished business with your abuser and other family members.

Information and resources for further help. At the end of the book I offer resources for finding further help and assistance that goes beyond the scope of this book.

Whether you are afraid of becoming abusive or you have already begun to abuse, afraid of being victimized or have already established a pattern of being a victim, this book will offer you the support, information, and strategies that will not only help you break the cycle of abuse, but change your life. Instead of living a life in which you are stuck in the past, constantly reliving the experience of being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused, you will be able to break free from your past and create a future of your own choosing. Instead of your life being like a broken record, in which you constantly replay the same old refrain over and over, you will be free to write your own song.

This book will also help you change the lives of others. There is nothing more loving or more important than actively working on breaking the cycle of abuse or neglect in one's family. Instead of repeating what was done to you and passing on the legacy of pain to your own children, you will be able to break the cycle and offer your offspring the legacy of hope. Instead of doing to your partners, friends, and coworkers what was done to you, or allowing these people to abuse you, you can begin to treat others with respect and demand respect in return. Instead of blindly passing on the emotional, physical, or sexual abuse that has plagued your family for generations, you can be the first one to expose it and to break the cycle once and for all.

Unless you commit yourself to breaking the cycle of abuse, chances are very high that you will, in fact, do to your children or to your partner the very things that were done to you. Your own healing from the devastating damage you no doubt experienced is obviously important, but making sure you don't inflict damage on others is an important aspect of that healing. If you end up treating others the way you were treated you will not only damage that person's life but further damage your own by adding more shame, humiliation, and guilt to your already shame-bound psyche. By following the steps outlined in the book you can be successful at the biggest undertaking of your life, and by doing so offer your loved ones, your family, and all those with whom you have contact a tremendous gift.