

"The crucial aspect of the abuse (one suffers) is not what occurred, but what impact it had on you, how you explained it to yourself and others, and how it affected your life."

Eliana Gil, *Outgrowing the Pain*

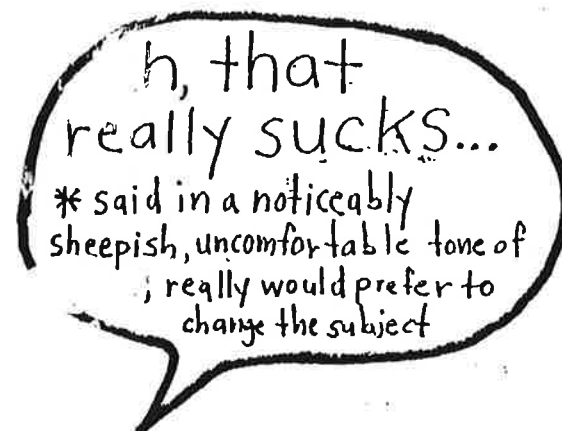
Claiming that you are taking a "neutral" stance or inclined to "sit out" a situation where a survivor has come forward with an account of abuse is anything but neutral; it is a silent, morally lazy show of support for the abuser..

Me

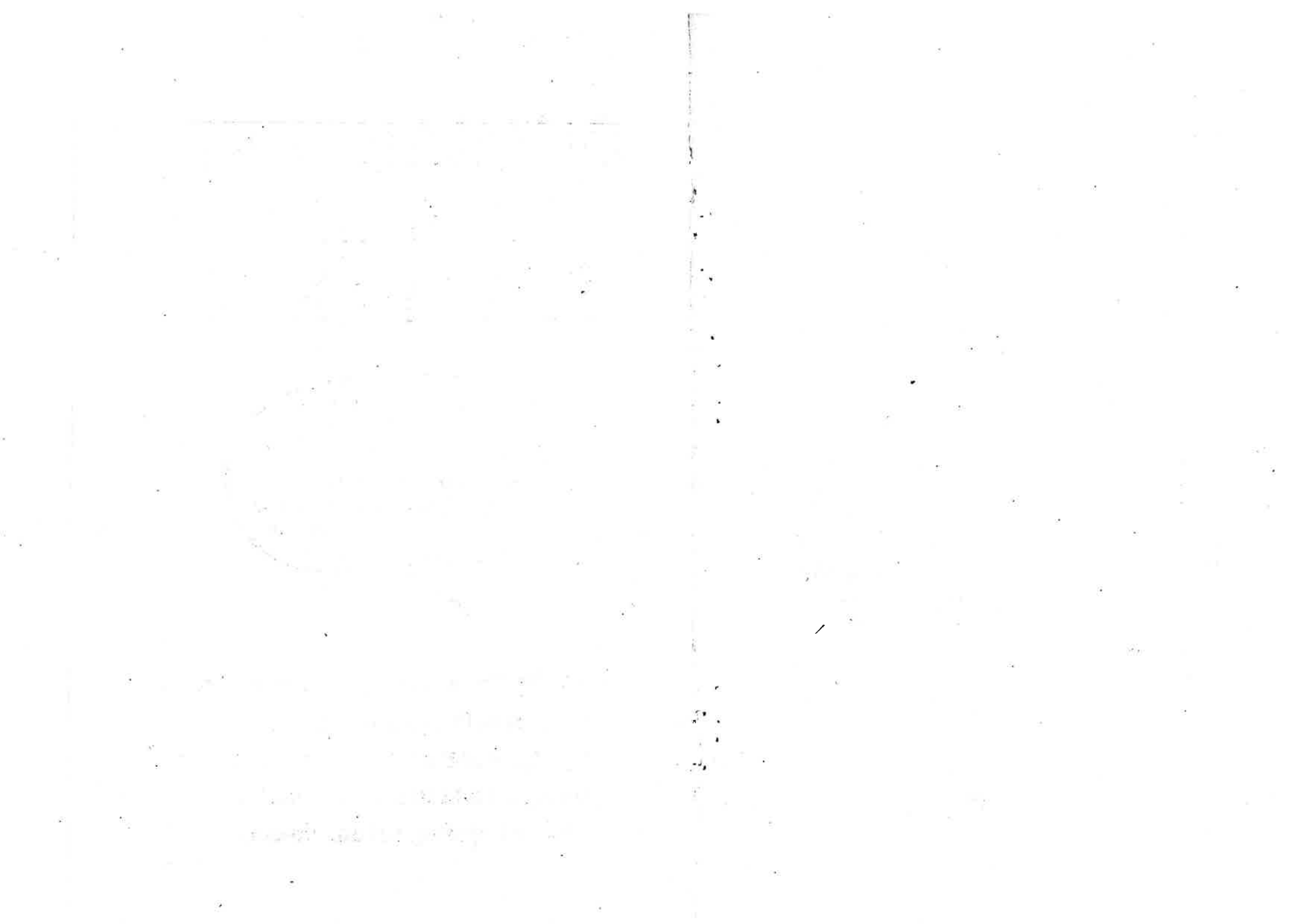
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Sexual assault

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hopefully the beginning of a necessary
yet insanely awkward dialogue on
surviving sexual abuse, being male, and
playing a more pro-active and useful
role in fighting sexual violence.



informally) a whole host of imminently useful resources and information, ranging from the practical to the theoretical. And anyone else who has sacrificed the time and considerable emotional energy to support a survivor gets major props, too.

Finally, I want to seriously and sincerely apologize to a particular survivor for a series of rash, hasty unilateral actions on my part that ended up re-opening old wounds and making the healing process that much more difficult and protracted. My only weak-ass excuse is that I allowed my judgment to be warped by my highly emotional reaction to the situation. I had no business doing what I did, and I really am terribly sorry.

no thanks:

Stephen Ratkowski and "Matt." Y'all fucked up bad in the game.

Speaking of re-opening old wounds: I truly don't wish to sound vindictive or unnecessarily mean, but I wish that folks out there who have invested time defending the reputations of serial sexual assaulters would realize that they are playing a counterproductive role in the larger struggle against sexual violence and abusive behavior. It would also be pretty cool if they would seriously reassess precisely which qualities make these assholes so valuable or, as I've overheard, "basically good," to them. When folks go out of their way to argue that an accused assaulter is innocent or in any way dispute the details of a survivor's account, it amounts to an act of intimidation and disempowerment against other survivors. Wispy's article (see above) details many positive ways in which the friends of a person called out for abuse can help that person and not fuck with the survivor. I don't presume to judge the people who opt to stand by serial sexual abusers, but when people act foolish on the behalf of assholes, I'm inclined to get angry, for reasons I hope I've already established.

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why this happened
(and to hell with anyone who thinks
'economy of language' is a virtue)

This is ultimately a product of my famous inability to cope in a timely fashion.

For the better part of twenty years, the only safe or apparent means for me to deal with the trauma of being sexually abused was to not deal with it at all. To not make any attempt whatsoever to understand it, to occasionally and vaguely recall some momentary "bad shit" when I was five or six, but never consciously reflect on its consequences. Until two years ago, my refusal to even honestly name said "bad shit" bordered on the pious.

I'm reluctant to claim that I've made any extraordinary progress towards healing in the intervening two years since a moment of drunken courage, sparked by a dear friend's off-hand (and to this day, unexplained) comment about child molestation, compelled me to finally acknowledge—if only in the intensely private context of that friendship, of that moment—that I had been abused, fairly extensively, when I was younger. Nonetheless, the importance of that seemingly inconsequential, tentative opening can't be overstated.

There is no universal "experience" of sexual assault or abuse, and I feel entitled to speak ONLY for myself, and from my experiences and still-shifting understanding of what happened to me. Even though my account necessarily focuses on a particular dynamic of sexual abuse within which men are survivors, I absolutely don't wish to obscure the more prevalent reality of sexual violence within larger communities and society as a whole, where sexual assault serves as a means for men to exert control over women. Any useful suggestions offered herein are directed largely toward the goal of confronting sexism and violence against women.

To a lesser extent, this zine is also inspired by my intense frustration with the way my community's most recent attempt to actively confront allegations of sexual assault basically collapsed. The "process" definitely broke new ground for a good number of folks in my hometown,

and may yet bear fruit in the sense that it presents a rare opening to constructively think about and institute an infrastructure for "radical" communities to proactively deal with the presence of sexual assaulters somewhere in the future. It nonetheless failed in virtually every sense of the word; the assaulter in question was never particularly compelled to offer serious accountability for his acts, and quietly rolled out of town having suffered only a few mild slaps on the wrist (namely, being asked to leave a few public spaces and contending with mean stares from some people). Worse, a shit ton of mistakes, both subtle and obscenely glaring, were made in the process—some of the most careless and harmful mistakes were made by me, and I'm still attempting to deal with the ramifications.

The entire story is simply too involved to adequately summarize in what is quickly evolving into an out-of-control, bloated introduction. However, I found the classic symbolic moment of that fiasco to be the oft-repeated insistence on the part of the assaulter's de facto support network on characterizing his actions as "merely assault, not as bad as rape." As I understood it, they were manipulating the admittedly ambiguous legal and practical distinctions between "rape" and "sexual assault" to insist that what the assaulter did "wasn't as bad as rape, since it wasn't stereotypically violent or whatever" and to argue in favor of a relatively mild, compassionate form of accountability. While his supporters' motives are undeniably open to interpretation and may well have proceeded from good intentions, I was and still am mad as fuck about the crass, callous disregard for so many survivors' experiences encapsulated by the notion that some forms of sexual violence "aren't as bad as others." I would never claim the right to speak for any of the survivors of this particular asshole's violence—only a survivor has the license to understand and define her or his experience—but having been emotionally screwed in numerous, often hidden ways for the majority of my life by the aftermath of a pattern of abuse that didn't fit some standardized concept of a "violent rape," the idea that an objective standard for how "bad" sexual assault is could exist (especially to serve as a smoke screen for people unwise enough to defend the character of serial sexual assaulters) is offensive to me.

It bears repeating: just because I wasn't abducted at knifepoint,

way the essay I wish I had written here, and is possibly the best analysis I've seen of ways in which men can constructively deal with sexual violence and oppressive behavior. It originally appeared in the Jan/Feb 2002 issue of CLAMON, and can also be found on the DEAL WITH IT website (<http://fruitofdesign.com/dealwithit>).

OUTGROWING THE PAIN: A BOOK FOR AND ABOUT ADULTS ABUSED AS CHILDREN by Eliana Gil stands out as a fairly good resource for survivors who, like me, are attempting to understand their abuse and move on well after it happened.

FIGHTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN PUNK AND RADICAL COMMUNITIES is a packet compiled and distributed by Rath and Yareak (see below). It covers many of the easily overlooked dimensions of abuse—especially queer-specific dynamics—and it works really well as an overview. To obtain this, and other useful brochures, contact them at diyentlas@ihateclowns.com.

who I owe the world to:

Above all, I have to give it up to the three strong-as-fuck, indescribably cool women who have patiently listened to my hesitant, meandering stories for the last two years. Without their love, understanding, and investment of time, the pressure may well have exploded beyond my control. I'm sorry that y'all had to endure so much of my neediness; I hope that won't continue to be the case. "Thank you" is completely inadequate as an expression of my gratitude. Y'all rule, period.

My love and support go out to ANYONE who has survived sexual abuse, sexual assault, or physical/domestic abuse. The proliferation of women's survivor accounts both within radical or punk communities and in the larger society in no small measure inspired me to get this off my chest. Also, thanks to everyone who has committed themselves to confronting the systematic problems of sexual violence and sexism within the small, insulated radical or punk communities so many of us live in. In particular, two traveling women, Rath and Yareak, have started a feminist infoshop and workshop resource that explicitly deals with many of the dimensions of sexual/domestic violence. They distribute (at least

generating the types of dialogue we need to have in order to realize the connections between our gender socialization(s) and concrete patterns of oppressive and fucked-up behaviors. Again, no proven blueprint or process exists, to my knowledge, that would simultaneously encourage the critical introspection necessary within formal men's groups to play a useful role in supporting all survivors of abuse, and yet limit the tendency toward hand-wringing evasion of personal accountability for oppressive behavior (the "damn, it sucks that it's no longer cool for us to look at porn" syndrome that an old roommate of mine cynically yet accurately identified). If anyone reading this has any constructive ideas to that end, by all means please e-mail me.

It's absolutely crucial that we, as men, learn how to emotionally support each other. Having that sort of reinforcement will, at least according to my idealistic and vaguely-deluded logic, make it substantially easier for male survivors to feel empowered enough to openly talk about their shit (my selfish motive, to be perfectly honest), but more importantly should encourage men to work together to critically analyze their own and each other's sexism, and consequently keep each other in check in a constructive fashion. Accomplishing this would by no means solve the much larger problem—the inescapable fact that sexual and domestic violence against women and men is often readily tolerated even in "radical" social groups—but I'm convinced that any other tangible forms of progress that men can make in struggling against sexual violence will be temporary and insubstantial without this basis.

resources

This list is by no means exhaustive:

DEAL WITH IT is an intense and eminently useful zine put together by anti-sexist men in Eugene, Oregon. Its writing avoids the melodramatic, hand-wringing "I'm working on my shit" sensibility, and I recommend it wholeheartedly. It costs \$1-2 per copy, and they can be reached at **DEAL WITH IT**, PO Box 5841, Eugene OR 97405.

"Taking the First Step: Suggestions to People Called Out for Abusive Behavior" was written by Richmond activist Wispy Cockles. It is in every

viciously assaulted, and left for dead doesn't imply that I haven't been forced to deal with the brutal consequences of sexual violence. This shit has profoundly shaped my emotional and sexual life, and will continue to haunt me for a long ass time. I generally don't have time for people who publicly insist that repeat sexual offenders "are really good people, deep down, who've done some fucked up things." That attitude may not constitute the most forward-thinking, comprehensive, or compassionate approach to dealing with sexual assault within self-defined communities, but I have some solid fucking reasons for tending to sympathize exclusively with other survivors. While many, many dimensions of any prospective community response to sexual assault demand an immense amount of serious thought and effort, the process of men becoming responsible and effective allies to survivors of all genders is especially crucial and overlooked; and one of my heavy, out-front motives for writing this is to offer a rhetorical space (and if need be, considerable nagging and harassment as added incentive) to honestly examine what we as men need to do to accomplish that goal.

It's more or less axiomatic that men, even men who identify as feminist or radical, are socialized not to openly discuss the traumas that shape their sexual development, especially with other men. It logically proceeds that most men are likewise unwilling to fully comprehend, much less accept responsibility for, the sexual traumas they have inflicted in their intimate relationships, with both women and other men. Witnessing the slow and tortuous process of men "working on their shit" in relation to sexism and oppressive behavior is as inspiring as observing compost decompose. Which is incredibly unfortunate, since the difficult work of intelligently analyzing one's sexist and sexually coercive behavior and taking concrete steps to correct it must, at some early stage, be done in conjunction with some intense soul-searching on the nature of one's sexual and gender socialization running back as far into early childhood as memory allows. That task is rendered nearly impossible, in my experience, by the gnawing, only somewhat irrational fear, of speaking honestly about sexual abuse. At this point, all I can do is strongly encourage, beg, and all but threaten my male friends, and other men who identify as members of a "radical" or "punk" community, to start talking about this shit, all of it, more openly. To stop holding back, to be slightly less afraid to address our negative sexual

experiences and behaviors and to fucking work together to make sense of it all. Too many of us are anonymously sitting on (and if my experience is indicative, barely maintaining any sort of grip on) an immense amount of pain, shame, and confusion for us to continue to collectively ignore the impact of sexual abuse.

A final point I want to make before we cut to the proverbial chase focuses on the accountability that I momentarily touched on above. Some feminist activists contend that the "intense soul searching" and self-critique of gender-norm socialization I allude to can easily be distorted into an evasion of responsibility for men's own oppressive behavior, especially when conducted in the context of formal "men's groups." While I don't perceive that as inevitable or universally true, I definitely have seen and can acknowledge that the process of men openly discussing childhood sexual trauma could in some ways degenerate into precisely such a rationalization ("see, I'm a victim too, in many similar ways, and thus let's forget my sexist behavior", etc.). At any rate, that is definitely not my intention here. The fact that I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and an attempted sexual assault just a few years ago in no way diminishes my responsibility for my sexist thinking and behavior, which I am still trying to fully grasp and stop. In no way am I above the fray.

And finally, this zine is not meant to serve as any sort of substantive resource for combating or surviving sexual assault. It is too extensively grounded in my personal experience to be easily generalized from. I am, however, working in collaboration with a bunch of other people in my hometown to compile a fairly comprehensive resource packet on sexual assault, hopefully combining a straightforward listing of the counseling/safer-space/self defense/mediation resources available in Florida with some more involved, theoretical readings. This sort of project always moves somewhat slower than it needs to, but god knows we'd like to have it finished by the beginning of this summer. You can e-mail me at the address on the last page for more information on this project.

Thank you for patiently sifting through an needlessly involved introduction. The ground covered in this zine has been examined much

I'm hesitant to generalize too broadly from my personal experience in trying to discuss my abuse history with other guys, but thus far, with like two exceptions (and while I can't name names, the two of you fucking rule—"Thanks" ain't the word), my efforts have played out in a predictably disappointing fashion; the reactions I've elicited have me almost convinced that the very concept of discussing childhood sexual abuse scares most guys shitless. No matter how right-on politically these guys have been, no matter how solid and sincere their understanding of gender politics or their commitment to fighting sexism and sexual violence is, the nearly unanimous reaction is to grow visibly uncomfortable, mutter a weak "wow that sucks/I'm sorry," and then attempt to either change the subject or totally pretend I didn't just tell them that I had been abused. It's not as if I want to be fawned over. I'm not secretly mining for grandiose displays of pity or sympathy. Merely being listened to, in a serious, sincere way, is usually sufficient.

But fuck it, I don't want to needlessly waste other guys' time with 'my pain', and I'm not inclined to continue trying if it makes them so visibly uncomfortable. Going it alone for the bulk of my life hasn't killed me yet, it's true.

If such a thing as a "safe(r) space" for male survivors exists, I have yet to see it take shape in either a formal setting or on an informal basis among the bulk of my male friends. Unfortunately, there isn't exactly a formula or ready-made infrastructure that we as men can simply plug into, even within the punk or radical communities we find ourselves involved in, that, if followed, will make this work any easier; certainly, none that I'm aware of. For real though, trying to develop the listening skills and building up the courage to address both one's own secrets and the very real shit that other guys have had to work through is absolutely crucial to the broader struggle to actively confront sexism in ALL of its painful dimensions. Though I am privately hesitant about the utility of formal, institutionalized "men's groups" as a site for collective critical analysis of men's oppressive behavior—primarily as a result of seeing so many men obviously hold back when the conversation shifted to really painful and difficult matters of sexuality—the idea of a men's group nonetheless appeals to me as a foundation, of sorts, at least for

have the faintest notion of sexual boundaries when I five, and my initial reaction to his sexual advances was primarily confusion. But the nagging sense of discomfort mushroomed into downright fear of him once the cycle escalated. There is no way around the fact that forcing a five year old boy to perform oral sex on a teenager is a profound shock to the object of such abuse. To ensure my silence, he routinely threatened to: a) kill me, b) seriously hurt me, and c) have the police take me away for some unspecified reason. He usually had unsupervised access to me once or twice a week, for windows of an hour or so, and for about three months (possibly more; the timeline is sketchy for so many reasons) he took full advantage of those moments.

I unconsciously became an expert at the art of lying to survive during those weeks and months. If I seemed visibly upset when my mom came to pick me up, I managed to pin it on something else, such as having seen the babysitter and her husband engaged in an argument. Those cover stories generally flew, since my reputation as a 'sensitive' child was already well established by then. And, fortuitously enough, summer vacation rolled around, and since my mother had summers off, there was no need for me to be at the babysitter's house. Better still, that family moved to Wisconsin late that summer, sparing me the dreaded eventuality of facing my abuser.

And then, an obscenely drawn out process of repression and denial; that's all I feel qualified or comfortable writing about. There it is.

My strategy of coping by not coping left me altogether unprepared for the experience of having a guy—who I had previously and briefly been intimate with—attempt to assault me in my sleep. I don't feel compelled to elaborate at any great length about that situation, other than to note that I rather violently fought him off, threatened his life (he was comparatively small in stature and unprepared for any retaliation on my part), and ran him out of my apartment. My disgust and anger, though considerable, still wasn't focused enough to allow me to explain to my roommate why "Matt" wasn't allowed back in our apartment. Afraid that she wouldn't understand that our previous sexual history didn't entitle him to violate my boundaries, I laid out some half-assed cover story to the effect that I was tired of him basically living with us

for free. In retrospect, the fact that I was perfectly aware that I had been assaulted and didn't have the stomach to admit was by far the worst consequence of that incident.

truth and consequences

The fact that I didn't tell a single fucking person for 20 years about being abused, still amazes me.

Any conclusions I might have reached about what, precisely, the abuse has meant for me emotionally and developmentally are still really tentative, since I've only allowed myself the privilege of analyzing it for about two years, and at that without the dubious benefit of professional therapy. While it might be tempting to blame all of my faults on this six-month period of abuse, I've never proceeded from that somewhat easy assumption—I saw plenty of other sorts of lame but unremarkable shit that in some way subconsciously molded me. Nonetheless, I'm pretty damn sure that my overwhelming tendency to repress negative emotions and memories and avoid confrontation might somehow stem from being convinced for the longest time that my abuser would in fact kill me or beat the shit out of me. That sort of nervous, often physically-experienced fear (which the scientific literature typically refers to as some sort of manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder) has definitely stuck with me, and over the years has managed to evolve into a broader tendency to get really depressed and not communicate when shit gets thick, no matter the cost.

Though I personally try not to invest too much faith in statistical data analysis as championed by Western social science, there is a statistical conclusion particularly salient to my experience that scares the absolute shit out of me. Namely, the fact that the vast majority of men who are convicted of sexual offenses against children were themselves abused as kids, and did not receive therapy at an early age. Wow. To be perfectly honest, I haven't had any problems whatsoever along those lines (and if I did, lord knows I would have conveniently skipped this part of the story to begin with, and most likely would have killed myself before it ever became an issue), but the fact that I managed to repress

so much of the experience of being abused, only to have it squirm out in unpredictable ways when I least expect, still makes me nervous.

Please understand that this simple overview of some of the more insidious ways in which my abuse affected me over the long term is not designed as a cry for help, an invitation for heaps of pity, or my well-rehearsed self-nomination as a martyr. I'm simply pointing out that systematic repression and denial of the reality of sexual abuse is in many ways as damaging as the abuse itself for the survivor. 'Going it alone' is terminally unhealthy and ideally ought to be unnecessary. And that is why the challenge of building communities that can nurture and confidently support survivors of all forms of abuse is so urgent.

emotional guns blazing building support systems for male survivors

It's not a coincidence or accident of history that virtually all of the close friends I initially approached with my sexual abuse history were women. For some years now, a significant characteristic of whatever rudimentary coping mechanism I've developed is the tendency to approach my women friends when I sought advice on the heavy shit; I know that I'm hardly alone in that respect. As many feminists and activists have pointedly and correctly observed, one of the more draining and subtly demeaning aspects of the gendered division of labor within activist or punk communities is the expectation that only women are capable of doing the heavy lifting of nurturing and emotional support. And, with a tiny handful of notable exceptions, that's been the story of my stuttering, incomplete attempts to come to grips with what my abuse has left me with—it's not an especially healthy or cool master scheme for the long run. But it's not simply a matter of committing to be "more open" with my guy friends. I can't quite put my hands around it intellectually, but I'm convinced that there is an intensely complex system of hang-ups, communication dysfunctions, and possibly some variants of the all-encompassing "gnawing fear" I've alluded to, that prevents most of the guys I'm friends with or whom I engage in activist work with, from being able to lay that sort of shit on the table, or for that matter to play a constructive, supportive role for male survivors.

more poetically, eloquently, and incisively by so many courageous women survivors, but if even a tiny handful of male survivors of sexual violence are inspired to speak out, or if a few men are willing to become supportive listeners and allies of both women and men who've survived sexual abuse, then this fiasco will have been well worth it.

the proverbial chase

I tend to shake almost uncontrollably whenever I tell anyone that I was abused as a kid, regardless of how close they are to me. It's still impossible to relate this in a dispassionate manner, and predictably enough, my heart is racing as I sit here simply attempting to devise even a broad outline of how my abuse played out. For reasons that ought to be obvious, I am opting to sketch out the rough contours of the six or so months of abuse I endured, and in the process glossing over the bulk of the precise, graphic details, which at any rate shouldn't be especially necessary to make my account credible. Whatever; I can't front, this shit is still incredibly difficult to describe, even from the relatively comfortable position of written anonymity. You'll have to forgive the somewhat dry and mechanical style with which I describe this.

My assailant didn't at all resemble the 'dirty old man/stranger'-type character of our society's imagination, as it were. That scenario rarely plays out when children are sexually abused; the numbers obviously vary according to different means of conducting and analyzing research data, but the number of children assaulted by people they know and putatively trust comfortably hovers in the "vast majority range. I definitely knew my babysitter's teenage son. He had existed at the margins of my comfortable world for as long as I could remember; an annoying, vaguely fearsome, ultimately inconsequential presence. It was a small, relatively laid-back, working class household like mine; where the babysitter didn't exercise a particularly heavy disciplinary hand. That benign neglect put me into increasing contact with him, though, and at some point right around my sixth birthday, a seriously fucked up power dynamic began to emerge.

The abuse started innocuously enough: a 'massage' or two that evolved into some fondling; horsing around in their swimming pool getting twisted into an opportunity to touch me 'down there,' and so on. I didn't