



TEN ABUSES FACED BY MOST JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

What is abuse? The definitions of ABUSE include (per www.dictionary.reference.com): *To put to a wrong use, misapply, to use for a wrong purpose or end, to pervert, to maltreat, to punish excessively, to hurt, to reproach (reprimand or reproof) coarsely, to dishonor, to violate, to deceive, to impose upon, physical ill treatment, injury, a corrupt practice or custom, a crime, insulting speech, abusive language, reviling (condemn), to violate.*

I have personally experienced or, since leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, known someone who has experienced every single definition in the word "Abuse." When I was a child being raised as a Jehovah's Witness, I used to pray to God that some other family would come along and adopt me. At age 12 I wrote a short story which is now the first chapter of my book, Out of the Cocoon, in which I fantasized about killing my family and myself. The story was called, "All Alone in the World," because when you are a victim of abuse, that's how you feel—all alone. And sometimes the only way "out" seems extreme.

Abuse takes many, many different forms. I'm going to focus on 10 types of abuse that many Jehovah's Witnesses experience—some abuses that others in this world have never experienced.

ABUSE #1: Being cut off from relatives and friends (non-believers): Like an abusive husband isolates his wife, Jehovah's Witnesses isolate the flock (members) from people outside the group, loved ones who could have any influence on that person. Within 6 weeks of studying with Jehovah's Witnesses, my mother told me that we could never speak to our relatives again—except to try to convert them, because Satan might be using them to keep us from learning the truth. I also had to give up all my friends and playmates who weren't Jehovah's Witnesses. I wasn't permitted to have a girlfriend for the next 9 years at a time—teen years—when normal social development is critical.

Keep in mind that the pain and isolation runs both directions. Cutting people off from loved ones is abusive, not only for that person but also for the extended family who no longer has any contact with the Jehovah's Witness family member. Nine years later, when I was able to reconnect with my grandmother, aunt and uncles, I heard about the pain they had experienced in 1972 when my mother was advised to cut them off from the rest of our family. I get heart-felt letters every single week, begging me for help, from people who have loved ones who have joined the Watchtower organization. In these letters their number one complaint is that their Jehovah Witness relative has either become distant or cut them off entirely.

ABUSE #2: Losing traditions (i.e., losing holidays and being told that you are shamefully worshipping yourself if you celebrate your own birthday): You know as a child that the explanation provided by Jehovah's Witnesses for not celebrating birthdays—that John the Baptist was murdered in the Bible during a birthday so therefore birthdays must be wrong—is not only illogical but ridiculous. If the murder had occurred during a wedding, would the Jehovah's Witnesses also forbid marriage? In my segment of the *Secret Lives of Women* documentary which aired regularly on WEtv September through November 2009, I described



losing family and friends as well as family traditions as having the joy being sucked out of my life. As mentioned earlier, abuse is described in the dictionary as “to pervert” and “to impose upon or misapply.” My mother perverted our loving family traditions into something vile and imposed Watchtower beliefs instead, misapplying a scripture that had nothing to do with birthdays being forbidden. I couldn’t help but feel a loss over a modern-day event labeled “evil” that was really quite good and loving for all concerned.

ABUSE #3: Being forced to go knock on strangers’ doors

I experienced three distinct anxieties while being forced to go door-to-door as a ten-year old child. Now, keep in mind that most kids are taught early on to not to speak to strangers and yet Jehovah’s Witness children are forced to do the opposite of what most parents and society in general teaches us! My sister and I were often sent to rural houses to knock on doors and sometimes I wondered if we would be dragged into a house and raped or killed someday by some ‘Jehovah hater.’ Not only was this frightening because of the strange people we sometimes encountered, it was dangerous for sometimes we encountered dogs who wanted to attack. We ignored “no trespassing” signs, “warning: attack dogs” signs and anything else the homeowner tried to use to keep us off the property. After all, this good news needed to be preached in all the inhabited Earth in order for the end to come and by God we weren’t going to forsake our mission to bring destruction to the human race!

Anytime an adult intentionally puts a child in harm’s way and the child realizes that the adult is not protecting him or her, it affects that child negatively. I knew in my heart at 9 and 10 years old that being forced to go door-to-door to peddle magazines in the scorching sun and freezing cold weather for 90 or more hours per month was wrong. Why couldn’t the Jehovah Witness adults in my life see it? The US has a law protecting children from being exploited through slave labor, but I guess the law doesn’t apply in the Watchtower cult! I guess they get to exploit children under the umbrella of “freedom of religion.”

A second anxiety I experienced in the door-to-door ministry involved defectors. Jehovah’s Witnesses stigmatize anyone who leaves the group and speaks critically about the organization by bitterly calling them ‘apostates,’ a term loaded with as much negative connotation as the word “rape.” It created a lot of anxiety to walk by that person’s home as a child while going out in service (door-to-door). It felt no different than walking past a graveyard and my imagination ran wild that the person might burst through the home with an axe and kill us. Terror was induced in me when I heard the word “apostate.” I truly feared the evil “apostate” as a child the same way I would fear being trapped by a serial murderer today.

The third anxiety I felt as a defenseless child was knocking on the door of a school mate and fearing that I might be beat me up afterwards.

This brings me to another kind of abuse: persecution.

ABUSE #4: Persecution (i.e., bullying) is GOOD. I encountered many ‘Jehova’ hating bullies will growing up. It was obviously related to my parent’s religious beliefs because kids would push me in the hallways at school and call after me, “Hey Jehova.” So I kept my eyes to the



floor and my head hung low to try to blend into the woodwork so no one would further ostracize me. You could be bullied because you didn't stand and salute the flag or sing the national anthem.

John Bechtel, an ex-member, wrote that he would be kicked in the back by other kids and beat up on the school bus. His father taught him that if he ever got in trouble at school he would get a whipping at home. He wrote, "This was my introduction to justice...my solution eventually was to walk the two miles to/from school. I told my parents I wanted the exercise....There was the sense of total alienation from the outside world; we knew we did not belong. And we knew that alienation was our badge of honor, proof positive of our righteousness." I too faced the wrath of school mates and teachers.

Refer to my book, Out of the Cocoon. Pages 35-37

ABUSE #5: Being subjected to violent images of Armageddon repetitively. I realize *some* parents will allow their young children to watch violent images on TV and see nothing wrong with it. But wouldn't you agree that the majority of people would never allow their 5- or 10-year old to watch a gruesome *real-life* murder caught on video in which an entire family is wiped out? But Jehovah's Witnesses are different. Jehovah's Witnesses don't cover their kids' eyes when these images appear. In fact, they *require* that their young children read about and view the gruesome carnage that they say will occur any day now. If I was a prophet and had a window into the future and knew people were going to be slaughtered in an office building in the name of God sometime very soon, I certainly wouldn't want my young child to hear about it over and over again for years on end. Wouldn't that be using fear, as the dictionary describes it, "for a wrong purpose or end"? What is the purpose of those images? To induce fear in people. Why? To control their behavior.

ABUSE #6: Spare the Rod; Spoil the Child. In Out of the Cocoon I described the abuse my nephews endured.

When I was twelve years old, my nineteen-year-old sister married a Jehovah's Witness, and one year later she delivered a beautiful baby boy. From the time Jon was old enough to walk, he adoringly followed me everywhere. I called him my shadow, and when I did, he giggled hysterically and repeated back to me in his gleeful innocence, "I'm Brenna's shadow!" A simple task such as going to the bathroom proved to be no small feat; Jon moaned and pleaded for me outside the door until I emerged. Jon gave my dreary teenage life purpose. I absolutely adored him.

Sadly, Jon would come to know at the tender age of one year old the frustration I experienced sitting on that anthill during those long sermons in the Kingdom Hall. Since there wasn't a Sunday school atmosphere at these meetings; young children weren't allowed to amuse themselves with toys or coloring books. When Jon started fidgeting, I did everything in my power to try to keep him still. I allowed him to forage through the makeup in my purse, digging trenches into it with his fingernails. I sacrificed my necklaces to distract him. When I ran out of tricks and could no longer contain his energy, his father would grab him by the arm and literally drag him to the restroom and



beat him. Jon's beating became such a ritual that when his daddy reached for him during a meeting, he knew it meant a beating. He cried and pleaded "No, Daddy" as he buckled his legs, refusing to walk willingly to meet his fate.

Everyone in the Kingdom Hall could hear his screams. The sound that echoed from the blow varied; sometimes Jon's father used his hand, sometimes a belt. After ten or fifteen minutes, they would return with Jon hyperventilating, desperately trying to catch his breath. Beaten into composure, he would sit still for a while longer. Usually he stared motionless into space, his eyes bloodshot from crying. If fate smiled on him, Jon fell asleep in my arms for the duration for the meeting. If not, then back again to the restroom he would go for another beating and the cycle continued, until the closing prayer.

It broke my heart. I wanted desperately to stop the abuse, but I was a child myself and didn't know what to do to save him, or me. (His was not an isolated incident. Sometimes there was literally a line to the restrooms so that children could receive their punishment for displaying natural restlessness during these incredibly tedious meetings.)

One heart-wrenching day in particular is forever seared into my memory. My sister confided in my mother, father, and me that Jon, then two years old, had asked his father to hit him on his hands with the belt instead of his buttocks. When asked why he wanted to be punished that way, he replied, "Because my butt is too sore." It sickened all of us. But none of the adults—my sister, my mother nor my father—did anything about it. And the Witnesses seemed to condone it with the "spare the rod and spoil the child" scripture. Within a year, my sister had another child and his fate, sadly, was no different than Jon's. Meanwhile, my sister's husband was rewarded for his devotion to the faith. He was made an Elder.

There are some jokes that circulate from time to time about "You Know You Are a Jehovah's Witness IF" and one of the bullet points says:

You know you are a Jehovah's Witness if you have a child that is three years old who sits quietly for hours at a time while adults discuss mind-numbingly boring topics...and you brag about him to all your friends...You might as well get a saddle for him and ride him because you broke his spirit and he is no longer a child.

ABUSE #7: Control through Invoking Guilt and Negative Self-Image

John Bechtel, a former Jehovah's Witness, also wrote: "I was riding in the back seat of the car and I leaned forward and asked my parents "What should you do if you don't believe this?" (referring to the Jehovah Witness religion). Mother's answer was, "You know it's the truth with your mind so if you don't believe it, you must have a bad heart. So pray for a good heart...until your prayer is answered."

John wrote that the guilt trip kept him in the faith for another 15 years. I too experienced that from Jehovah's Witnesses as an adult. When I studied with them a couple years ago to see what



kind of indoctrination techniques they use on people, I was informed they could no longer study with me because I didn't have a sincere heart and asked too many questions.

My mother used guilt on me when I was 18 years old, after I left the Watchtower organization, by saying that I caused the discord in our family because I chose to stop attending meetings and going out in service. She also told me I would become a prostitute and thief because Satan had taken hold of me. For many years I struggled with guilt for causing my family so much pain and it took many years for me to realize that while I agonized day after day over the pain I had caused them, they had absolutely no comprehension of the pain they had caused me, nor would they ever "get it" because they are under serious mind control. They still don't "get it" today—decades later.

ABUSE #8: Disfellowshipping/Shunning

Sometimes people confuse disfellowshipping with shunning and refer to them interchangeably when, if you think about it, they are entirely two different things. The reason for this is, they go hand-in-hand. While I believe any "organized group" has the right to allow or disallow membership (i.e., to excommunicate or disfellowship—as the Watchtower calls it), no organized group has the right to teach that family members must SHUN loved ones who don't subscribe to their beliefs. And most importantly, no organization has the right to shame ANYONE in front of anyone else. This is where disallowing membership to someone moves from a simple business operating plan into abusive behavior.

If the Watchtower organization simply came up to you, privately, and told you that you couldn't be a member anymore because they didn't like you to play in their sandbox (and I use that analogy because it is a sort of kindergarten mentality that they have), then that would be one thing. But the way in which they publically announce your membership termination and shame you and then shun you for life—never looking at, never speaking, never acknowledging you again. That is where they cross the line into abuse.

By the way, I was never excommunicated or disfellowshipped from the organization and yet I have been shunned by my family for the last 29 years. My situation proves that disfellowshipping *could be* a separate practice from shunning, if Jehovah's Witnesses chose to utilize it that way.

ABUSE #9: Domestic Abuse

I didn't have first-hand experience with this topic because I never married a Jehovah's Witness (thank GOD!), but I can say that I saw my sister being humiliated by her husband many times. He's the same guy that beat my nephews for not sitting still. It was not uncommon for my brother-in-law to call my sister names, slap her upside the head, kick her and order her around like she was a servant. And although I never witnessed severe physical abuse because my sister left home when they were married, the fact is, he abused her and their children physically and emotionally. When I was 12 or 13, I saw him frequently pin their son down to torture him by sitting on his arms, not allowing him to get up, until he screamed and cried in hysterics for several minutes. I sometimes wonder today how my sister has lived with this Jehovah Witness man, a respected elder, for over three decades.



ABUSE #10: Sexual Abuse

During some of my first meetings with ex-members, one of the topics that came up was the “alleged” sexual and physical abuse within the organization. Now, up until this point, I hadn’t heard anything about sexual abuse. After all, Jehovah’s Witnesses are the most righteous people on the planet, right? This could never be going on within their organization, could it? If it did, it had to be an isolated occurrence!

Then an amazing thing happened. As we sat around the table, this person came forward and acknowledged she/he had been sexually or physically abused, and then that person, and then this person, and so on. What an eye opener! My jaw dropped to the floor. I was horrified to learn that in our little group the percentage could be so high. After seeing the tears in these people’s eyes, watching the Dateline broadcast and reading the stories on Bill Bowen’s website, silentlambs (below), I have no doubt that this is a serious problem. The problems are very real and although I have never been, thank God, sexually abused, I personally have heard from hundreds of abuse survivors over the last 5 years.

Abuse takes so many different forms and recognizing it may be especially difficult for someone who has lived with it a long time. A person might think that it's just the way things are. They know it doesn't feel right. The thing is, there's a little voice inside all of us that screams out when we are mistreated—by anyone. A knot in the stomach may linger afterwards. We must listen to ourselves and seek help.

Unfortunately, children raised in dysfunctional environments, whether they be a toxic religious group or not, do not have voices. My voice was silenced for a decade while I was being abused, until I was legally able to escape, and that’s why I speak out today—to warn others. The child or woman sitting next to you that seems so quiet may be too afraid to ask for help. Make it **your** business and help them in any way you can.

I have dedicated entire newsletters to abuse and would be happy to send them to anyone who contacts me through my website at www.outofthecocoon.net.