

'My mother abused me night after night'

Suzannah Faithfull, who suffered more than a decade of sexual abuse at the hands of her own mother, explains the trauma of living the victim of a crime nobody believes...

'My first memory is from when I was two or three years old. My mum took me into my dad's room and I climbed up on to her bed. I can remember what she forced me to do, but I can recall what it was like and how painful a pillow over my face. At times, I tried to tell my mum that my mum was hurting me, but she didn't believe me. Nobody would, for many years. After all, a woman – especially a mother – could never be capable of abusing a child.'

I grew up living with my mum, grandparents, aunt and cousin in a chaotic household in a village in Kent. My mum was a kind, vibrant woman who only had me because she thought a baby would make my dad stop her tantrums when I was four months old and I saw him only sporadically after that. During my mother's tantrums, which happened for no reason, she would abuse, shove things and hit me as wherever was around. I was terrified of her and used to hide. My dad was elderly and deaf, my grandparents had a drinking problem and my aunt was a very positive character, so I had nobody to protect me.

I shared a bed with my mother, which nobody questioned. I would spend my nights protected, not knowing what she would do to me. It'd start one, it would be worse, as I learned to stay silent. Over the years, I trained myself to switch off. I would stare at the wallpaper as she hit me and wish I was dead. During the day, I would go to school and hide my pain. For a long time, I thought abuse happened to everyone – I thought that's what love was, so it was all I'd ever known.

'When I was nine, my mum was arrested. I tried to tell my dad about the abuse, but he didn't believe me. Despite my mum's problems, she was good at appearing fairly normal, she held down a part-time job and had boyfriend. Nobody would have had a clue she was capable of doing something as sick as her daughter. Besides us, it was a busy street – the street continued on, and it was not silent. In this city, I don't know whether she did it to simply hurt me or to get a reward itself.'

'In 16, I fell in love with my first lover and together we cut off all contact with



'GROWING UP KNOWING NOBODY BELIEVED ME WAS INCREDIBLY DAMAGING AND ISOLATING'

my mother. I tried to tell my stepmother about the abuse, but she didn't want to hear either. When I started missing my mum, what I'd been through caught up with me and I started having flashbacks. I tried to take an overdose of painkillers, but was found by a friend just in time.

'From then on, the consequences of what had happened to me were devastating. On the night I had a normal life I got married, had two sons and took a job in the civil service. But the physical effects of the abuse were lasting, and I was often in pain. I had great trouble being emotionally intimate with my partner, for so long, I'd believed I was nothing, and I couldn't cope with being told otherwise. I loved being a mother, as through my boys I experienced the childhood I'd never had, but having children brought home to me the horror of the abuse I'd suffered. I knew that I'd do anything to protect my boys. How could any mother do what mine did?'

'I was in my late twenties when I told a friend my secret. It was a relief, but it triggered a flood of memories. I started counselling, but when my marriage broke down, I couldn't keep it together. I had to sleep with the lights on, as I was having flashbacks and nightmares. As I was suicidal, I sent the boys to live with their father. It was when I was 30 a residential clinic came for three months that I finally turned a corner – I could let it all out and get the support I needed.'

'In my thirties, I went to visit my mother in the psychiatric hospital where



she had ended up, where she found out I had been there, lighting her own cigarette in case she burned down the ward. I made sure she didn't touch me, but she didn't even acknowledge me. I stood over her, the way she used to do to me, and told her I hoped she'd burn in hell. I visited her a couple more times after that, before she died a few years ago, and although she never acknowledged me, she did once say 'I'm sorry', leaving her so helpless and pathetic, helped me leave my anger behind.

'Now, I've been with my partner, Nick, for 11 years and am a trained psychologist. In 2006, I set up the Abuse Health Foundation for victims of child sex abuse. My own experience, and those of others, led me to believe that abuse by a woman is worse than abuse by a man, because so few people believe women are capable of it. It goes to the heart of what society believes about women – that they're always loving. One psychologist I once saw even changed the subject by asking me if I wanted a biscuit when I told her about my mother. As a victim, this lack of recognition only intensifies the feelings of shame and disgust – that it's somehow our fault.'

'Knowing my knowing nobody believed me was damaging and isolating, and I'd love to think speaking our will help prevent others going through the same thing. We need to drag this dark, shameful subject into the light.' ■

Suzannah Faithfull was part of BBC Radio 4's Female Abuse Abuse: Breaking The Silence www.bbc.co.uk/health/abuse on 14