

Dear Woman's Day,

When I came home from a weekend with my ill mother, I found my ten-year-old daughter barricaded in her room. When I finally got her to talk to me, she said my husband had been "fooling around" with her. It had been going on a long time, she said, and she wanted him to stop it.

I can't describe my horror. Why did she let him do it? Why didn't she tell me sooner? Is she just talking crazy? Is he crazy? (Am I? I've been married to him for fifteen years!) Do other fathers do this sort of thing? Is it my fault? Could I have prevented it? What will it do to her? What will happen to my family? What should I do?

Name withheld

Editor's Note: The taboo against incest is so strong that the subject is terrible even to think about. We found this letter—and others we've received on the same subject—profoundly disturbing. We didn't have the answers to this reader's questions, either, so we decided to try to find them. We enlisted the aid of Louise Armstrong, a wife and mother who spent two years doing research for her book, *A Speak-out on Incest*, which will be published by Hawthorn Books in May. Her report follows.

THE CRIME NOBODY TALKS ABOUT

By LOUISE ARMSTRONG The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect estimates that of the more than one million cases of child abuse and neglect reported in 1975, about 12 percent involved sexual abuse. Other estimates range as high as 300,000 a year. But the figures are for reported cases only; no one knows how many incidents of incest never surface at all.

The increase in reported cases of sexual abuse of girls by their fathers or stepfathers has tempted some people to call it an epidemic. It's more likely, however, that we are simply more willing to discuss it these days. I've talked to scores of women who are now—ten, twenty, or thirty years after the fact—finally breaking their silence about incest experiences in childhood.

I've also talked to social workers and therapists who deal with the incest cases that are reported. There are no easy answers to the questions asked by the distraught mother who wrote to *Woman's Day*, but there are some things we can tell mothers in the same situation that will help.

"Why did she let him do it?" Unlike rape by a stranger—which is quick and brutal and allows a straightforward reaction—the sexual coercion or seduction of a child by a loved parent is very complex. The seduction is apt to be slow, and the sexual abuse may continue for months or even years. Caught up familiarly in her father's arms, the young child hardly notices that a threshold is being (continued on page 128)

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crossed. In many cases, a girl allows her father to fondle her simply because he is her father. He's a person she loves, admires, trusts and needs. As one woman put it, "I did it at first because that's what he wanted. I didn't think it was wrong; it was expected of me. After all, I loved my father—adored him."

Sometimes there are threats. "He said he'd kill me if I told anyone," one woman remembers. Sometimes the threat is unspoken. "I'd seen him get violent. He could put us all through the wall with his anger," reported another.

Sometimes, when the girl objects, the father will try bribery. Depending on the girl's age, this might involve anything from extra cookies to extra permission to go places with friends. Some girls accept the bribes. Some don't. Some manage to find the inner resources to say no.

Maddi-Jane Stern is the director of social services for Philadelphia's Center for Rape Concern, which deals with about 150 incest families a year. She believes a child's "no" sometimes stops the father simply because he doesn't want rejection. "One woman I dealt with," she said, "had a lot of guilt left over from having been sexually involved with her father between the ages of seven and nine. But one day when she was nine her father approached her and she said, 'No.' He never approached her again. 'Why didn't I say no at seven?' she asked me. But it's very hard to reject your own father."

The strength to say no can be increased by good, continuing, overall support from her mother. "If you get a good feeling about yourself from your mother," Ms. Stern said, "you're much better prepared to say no to your father."

"Why didn't she tell me sooner?" It's difficult for a girl to tell her mother—ever. At first a girl may have very mixed feelings about the increased "affection" from her father. She may accept the fondling up to the point where her father does something to scare her. Then, if she's not even more frightened of telling her mother, she may report it. But many children fear being the agent of the family's destruction. Others fear punishment if they tell.

Also the child has no way of knowing how her mother will react. Will she be angry with the child? Will she be angry with the child's father? Will she even believe her? These are serious concerns for even an adolescent to deal with—and many incest victims are much younger.

"Is she just talking crazy?" The experts agree that it's very unlikely that a girl will make such an accusation without foundation. James Cameron, director of Child Protective Services at the State Department of Social Services in Albany, New York says that his agency takes all reports seriously. Although some states still require corroboration when incest is reported, he believes this is unfortunate. What corroboration can there be for fondling or a demand for oral sex?

In any case, it is vital that the child be listened to and taken seriously. Women I spoke to who had tried to tell their mothers and were not believed said that they never

tried to tell a second time. For them, their mother's reactions were another sharp betrayal of trust.

"Is he crazy?" Fathers who abuse their daughters often show no other evidence of disturbed behavior. David Finkelhor, who is doing graduate work on family sexual abuse at the University of New Hampshire, writes: "The composite portrait of an in-

Where to Get Help

Parents can get help with an incest problem from the following:

Deborah Anderson, coordinator; Sexual Assault Services, Hennepin County Attorney's Office, 2000 C Government Center, Minneapolis, Minn. 55487; 612-348-5397.

Robert Schrant; National Center for Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse, 1205 Oneida Street, Denver, Colo. 80220; 303-321-3963.

Mary Wells, codirector; Family Service of Burlington County, Meadow Health Center, Woodlane Road, Mount Holly, N.J. 08060; 609-267-5928.

James Walsh, director; Victims' Information Bureau of Suffolk (VIBS), 501 Route 111, Hauppague, N.Y. 11787; 516-360-3606.

Diane Meier-Erne; Alliance, 1654 West Onondaga Street, Syracuse, N.Y. 13204; 315-424-1890.

Bennie Stovall, coordinator; Child Sexual Abuse Division, Children's Aid Society, 71 West Warren Street, Detroit, Mich. 48201; 313-831-3300.

Children's Hospital National Medical Center, Child Protection Center, 111 Michigan Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20010; 202-745-4100.

Dr. Dorothy Hicks, director; The Rape Treatment Center, Jackson Memorial Hospital, 1700 N.W. Tenth Avenue, Miami, Fla. 33136; 305-225-7273.

Peter Coleman, coordinator; Child Protective Services Incest Program, Department of Social and Health Services, 1301 Tacoma Avenue South, Tacoma, Wash. 98402; 206-223-3000.

Lucy Berliner; Sexual Assault Center, Harborview Medical Center, Seattle, Wash. 98104; 206-223-3047.

Maddi-Jane Stern, director of social services; Center for Rape Concern, 112 South 16th Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102; 215-568-6627.

Henry Giarretto, director; Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program/Parents United, 840 Guadalupe Parkway, San Jose, Calif. 95110; 408-299-2475.

cestuous father is of a man who has had a surprisingly normal sex drive, a fairly normal sexual development, who is not criminal or abnormally stupid. . . . Such men are not, on the whole, oversexed or fixated on children as sex objects." When incest victims talk about their fathers, they often say, "He was a good provider" or "He was the pillar of the community." Some of the fathers I heard about were unemployed or socially derelict, but just as many were lawyers, businessmen, even psychiatrists.

"A man who commits incest," says Maddi-Jane Stern, "can be a loving husband and father. Often he's a man with a very poor image of himself—especially in regard to his masculinity." And often he is *not equal as a parent*. "When he disciplines a child, he does it on a childlike level: 'If you don't stop that, I'll punch you in the mouth.'"

Lucy Berliner, social worker at the Sexual Assault Center of Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, agrees. "I think joint responsibility for the parental role is one thing that acts as a barrier to incest," she adds. "I have never seen an incest family that had an equal relationship between the parents. It's always an unequal power thing."

"Do other fathers do this?" From the reported cases alone it's obvious that many others do. And it's hard to understand why when a little girl is involved. Some experts believe it's pedophilia—that perverse sexual attraction of an adult to children. Others are not so sure. Adolescents, emerging women, are something else again. Psychiatrists generally agree that it's perfectly normal for a father to feel some sexual impulse toward a nubile daughter, but in a working, functioning family, he will not act on such feelings.

I talked with one father two years ago, when his daughter had just turned twelve. "We were always very physical—kidding around and wrestling," he said. "But a year or so ago I realized she wasn't a kid anymore. She's mature. She's built just like my wife. When my daughter is lying on her stomach, you can't tell the difference. Well, we'd be wrestling and I'd touch her breast. The first time I did that and realized I was enjoying it I got—not frightened, but confused. I didn't know what was happening."

This man, as it turned out, had a clear idea of the dividing line between parent and child, and thus did not act on his sexual feelings. His daughter is now fourteen. When I spoke with him recently, he said: "We still kid around, but I'm a bit more careful. I don't think it would be fair to her to suddenly change the relationship completely, but it's up to me to control the situation—and I'm committed to doing that."

Although some sex abuse seems to be chronic and perverse, other cases are situational. A certain combination of circumstances seems to lead some men to go over a line they might otherwise never cross. Lucy Berliner described a case where the parents were very close. When the mother became seriously ill, the father began fondling his only daughter, who was fourteen or fifteen. When the mother died, he began having intercourse with the daughter. "If that combination of things hadn't happened," said Ms. Berliner, "he probably wouldn't have done it."

"Am I crazy? Is it my fault?" The mother of an incest victim is certainly not crazy, and it's probably not her fault. But whether some mothers know about it or subtly encourage it is hotly debated. In some cases the mothers obviously do know. "Of course my mother knew," one woman told me. "He'd wrestle me to the dining room floor, pull up my sweater and feel all over me. She was standing in the kitchen. How could she *not* know?" (continued on page 182)