

## **Incest**

### **What Is It?**

Incest is sexual activity between individuals so closely related that marriage is prohibited (for example, between a family member and his or her parent or grandparent, cousin, uncle, sister, or brother). Sexual activity may involve touching, fondling, contact between the mouth and either the victim's or the abuser's private parts (genital area), and putting body parts or other objects inside the victim's body. Incest includes sexual acts that are done to the victim or that the victim is forced to do with someone else. Victims may be males or females of any age. Every state has laws against incest.

### **Who Commits Incest?**

Any relative of the victim can commit incest. Perpetrators (those who commit the crime) may be parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, step-parents, step-children, grandparents, and grandchildren. Incest occurs in all cultures and socioeconomic groups.

### **Impact of Incest**

Victims react to incest in different ways. Particularly if they were children when the abuse began, victims may not understand (or they may deny) that the abuse is wrong. (Many victims don't call what has happened to them "rape" or "sexual assault.") Victims are often afraid to reveal the abuse because of the power abusers have over them. Perpetrators may tell young victims that the abuse is "normal," or they may threaten to hurt victims or someone they care about if they reveal the abuse. Boys who are abused by other males may be particularly reluctant to reveal abuse because they fear the stigmas of victimization and homosexuality. Victims may think that adults may already know about the abuse but refuse to do anything to help them.

For some victims, incest may have serious long-term effects. Victims may develop eating disorders, amnesia, or nightmares and flashbacks.<sup>1</sup> They may feel intense guilt and shame, experience depression, or engage in self-destructive behavior, such as substance abuse or sexual promiscuity.<sup>2</sup> Although not all victims have these reactions, some incest victims experience one or more of these long-term effects.

### **If You Are a Victim**

**How You May Feel:** You may be confused about the abuse. You may not be sure that the abuse is against the law. You may blame yourself because you do not understand that the perpetrator is responsible. You may be afraid that you will get into trouble or that the police won't take you seriously if you report the abuse, particularly if it went on for a long time. You may not remember everything that happened to you, or you may have flashbacks that bring back memories of abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Aphrodite Matsakis, *When the Bough Breaks*, (New York: Harbinger Publications, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

You may feel guilty, ashamed, frightened, angry, sad, or depressed. You may eat or sleep too little or too much. Or you may have none of these reactions.

**Common Injuries:** You may have bruises, cuts, and soreness in your genital area or any part of your body that the abuser had contact with. You may feel dizzy, nauseated, or numb. Or you may have no physical injuries, as far as you can tell. You also may have been exposed to sexually transmitted diseases that might surface when symptoms appear later on.

### Decisions to Consider:

**If you are still under 18 years old,** you need to know that some professionals (counselors, teachers, doctors, and others) are required by law to tell police or child protective services if you are being hurt to help protect you from future abuse. These professionals should let you know what information they can keep private and what they are required to report to authorities to keep you safe.

- **Medical Care:** Will you seek medical care to treat your injuries and be tested for sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy? You may want to seek such help, even if you decide not to report the crime.
- **Counseling:** You will need to decide whether to try to cope with your feelings privately or seek the help of a trained professional. Counseling can help you manage the emotional and physical impact of the crime and regain a sense of control over your life.
- **Reporting the Crime:** Will you report the crime? If you are receiving help from a counselor or victim advocate, these professionals can help you make your decision and (if you report the crime) prepare you for the criminal justice system processes.

### Resources

The best way to find out about these options is to talk to a crime victim advocate. The National Crime Victim Helpline (**1-800-FYI-CALL**) advocates can help you think through these decisions and refer you to resources in your area where you can get more help. Helpline services are free and confidential.

#### National Crime Victim Helpline

1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255)

1-800-211-7996 TTY

8:30 a.m.– 8:30 p.m. ET weekdays

Or visit: **Help for Crime Victims:** [www.ncvc.org/victimassistance](http://www.ncvc.org/victimassistance)

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