

O'Connor offers incest survivors and therapists a powerful and compassionate path to healing. Based on techniques of her own therapy and concepts and tools she uses as a Master Certified Coach, this process guides the reader toward recovery and beyond.

A Walk In The Woods: An Incest Survivor's Guide to Resolving the Past and Creating a Great Future

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# A Walk In The Woods

*An Incest Survivor's Guide  
To Resolving The Past And Creating A Great Future*

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## *INTRODUCTION*

**A**t first I didn't know I was an incest survivor. Then I knew and couldn't say it. Couldn't make the words come out of the place they were lodged in my throat.

Then my job was to say it. "Incest Survivor."

I used to call it the "I" word, and had to learn to say the words. Later my job was to own it. "I am an incest survivor." It was my job to say it a hundred thousand times. It was my job to tell the truth of my childhood. Speak it out loud.

Later still, it was my job to move beyond having my total identity be that of an incest survivor. I am a woman who is many things, and one of those things is an incest survivor. I embrace all of me, including the very strong part that was forged through surviving incest.

Today it is my job, part of my life purpose, to help others on their journey of healing from incest. How? By offering them a map and a compass for one of the most powerful experiences anyone can ever have. By helping them move through the fear, and by assuring them of the beauty they will encounter, and the amazing growth they will achieve.

Recently, a woman I was just getting to know shared with me an incident of when she was sexually abused as a child. She wanted to know if it was incest. She wanted to know if that one incident—thirty years later—could be contributing to difficulties that kept cropping up in her life. I shared a little of my experience and knowledge.

A few days later she asked me to go for a walk in the woods to talk. She needed to talk to someone who knew answers to some of her questions. She needed a witness to her truth, and a guide for moving forward. At the end of our walk, she said my words had changed her life. She's on her journey now and she knows I walk beside her.

As my husband and I discussed this experience, he said something that will not leave my head. He said, "You know, Nan, there are millions of people who really need a walk in the woods with you. Find a way to walk with them."

If you are in the process of healing from incest, or if you desire to start the process, this book is here to help you. It's not theory. It's not therapy. It's the experience of one who has made the journey. It will help you find your way, and most importantly, you will not walk alone.

## Chapter 6

### *TRUSTING THE HEALING PROCESS*

**I**t's the fear that stops us from healing. As children we couldn't handle what was happening, so we stuffed it down deep inside. Then our life didn't work very well anymore. It couldn't work because we had unresolved feelings and experiences that stunted our growth.

That's the fear at work. Fear ... that we will uncover those hidden feelings and they will drive us mad. Fear ... that we won't be able to handle the truth. So we keep ourselves as far from the truth as possible. Until *that* drives us mad.

Then the leap of faith happens. The process starts to unfold, and we move into uncharted territory. We ride the waves of recovery and hang on for dear life.

Take all of this on faith until you have experienced it long enough to feel it's true. *You can trust the healing process.*

### MY STORY

My incest recovery was filled with starts and stops. I would make great progress, then hit a brick wall. I called it being "stuck"—numerous periods of being immobilized and not knowing how to get the healing process moving again. It was horrible. Days, weeks, months ... no progress. What was next? Why couldn't I find the key? Then suddenly a rush of memories, a flood of feelings, would knock me off my feet. It was a full-time job just dealing with all that was surfacing.

Over the years, I came to understand that this ebb and flow *is* the healing process and it exists whether you have always remembered your abuse or are recovering memories for the first time. And, there is an innate wisdom to this starting and stopping. For a while there is nothingness, then a flood. Things come as we are ready to deal with them. That's when they pour out. They keep coming as long as we can handle them. Then, a pause. We may feel "stuck," but we are actually resting. Healing. Taking time to breathe.

I have gained tremendous respect for the ability of survivors to heal, and for the healing process *itself*. There is an inherent intelligence in the process. I don't know where it comes from, but I am so thankful it is there. This innate wisdom has never let me down. It regulates the pace of my healing in a way that keeps me

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safe. When I have become too overwhelmed, the process has backed off and let me relax. When I have been ready to move forward, it has given me the opening to do so. It will do the same for you. I have no doubt.

Fairly early on I came to trust this process. Given that I wasn't prone to trust much of anything back then, that's an amazing thing. What started as a leap of faith became a profound confidence. Even when I was really, really scared, I knew I could count on the wisdom of the process and an eventual beneficial result for me.

And here's the real gift: over time, this trust in the process evolved into a trust in myself, and eventually a trust in life itself. Now that's a beautiful thing!

OUR WALK

*I'm still not sure what you mean by trusting the healing process. Can you be more specific?*

Yes. Bottom-line, I mean that you will never have to deal with *anything* you are not ready to deal with. Nothing will come up that you can't handle, even if it takes some help from others. This "wisdom" knows what you are ready for—and what must wait until later.

*Does being stuck mean that you are not having any new memories, or that you have reached some kind of halt with the memories you are dealing with?*

Being stuck may or not be related to how the memories are flowing. You may be stuck when you sense there is a memory lurking, but it won't surface. Or, it may have nothing to do with memories. It may simply be when you don't know the next step to take to advance your healing.

*You say there is a wisdom to the process. How do you tap into this wisdom?*

Become still enough to hear it. It's not "hearing" like a voice, but more like a *knowing*. Some would call it intuition or instinct.

*Give me specific ways to become still, so I can hear the wisdom of the healing process.*

## A WALK IN THE WOODS

I'm sure it's different for everyone. And, for me, different ways worked at different times. Here are some techniques I used:

- *Meditation.* I used this when I was calm enough to sit down and meditate. I centered my mind on my breathing. In. Out. In. Out. Let everything be. No judgment. No trying to make things different. Just being. It helped me get in touch with the “knowing.”
- *Journaling.* Writing in my journal was a very good way to get in touch with my inner wisdom. It was particularly helpful when I was too anxious to sit and meditate. I would just start writing, whatever came up. I didn't care how the writing came out—it was only for me, not for other eyes. It is amazing how writing can tap into the heart of things and provide guidance.
- *Prayer.* When things became overwhelming and I didn't know where to turn, I would pray. I'm not religious in a traditional sense. Sometimes my prayers would begin with “I don't know if you are there or not, but if you are ...” It always worked. Brought me peace. And, in time, answers.
- *Inner Child Work.* I went to a seminar given by John Bradshaw where I learned how to connect with my Inner Child. Inner Child work was a terrific way to tap into the wisdom of the healing process. (See more about Inner Child work later in this book.)
- *Exercise.* I used running as a way to take the keyed-up physical feelings away so I could hear inside myself. This is a way I tapped into the process.

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## YOUR ACTION

Take baby steps toward trusting your healing process. For example, try browsing through this book and looking at the “Your Action” segments of the chapters. Find something that hits a chord with you. Make sure the action feels “right” (that means it’s something that feels safe, that you are ready to do, and that will possibly stretch you a bit). Give it a try.

Use this first baby step as a way to begin to trust your process. I believe you will find that you *know* what you need when you need it.

If some of what I’m recommending feels too wide open, then work with your therapist or within your incest survivor group to know where you are in your process and how to keep facing forward.

Over time, you will start to trust your “gut.” You will become expert at tuning into what you need and when. Above all, you will understand that the healing process will never give you more to handle than you are capable of at that time.



## Chapter 18

### *RAGE*

This chapter is called “Rage” rather than “Anger” because I believe that anyone who has experienced sexual child abuse has a lot of rage inside. Rage is a natural response to a very unnatural violation. Most survivors handle their rage in one of two ways. Either they are angry all the time—sometimes violently so—or, they stuff it deep inside and never let it seep through. Either way, it eats them alive.

I think most survivors, on a deep level, are afraid of their rage. Over time I have come to understand that rage is just rage—no more, no less. And we need to let it out. Constructively! Rage can become our ally, believe it or not. And it can fuel massive healing and positive change. We need to learn how to harness it.

### MY STORY

In spite of an impulse to take care of other people, I was a very angry person most of my life. Very Type A, fly off the handle, rage always simmering just below the surface. I was always mad at someone or something. It was usually disproportionate to what was really going on. This simmering rage was also effective in keeping people far enough away that they wouldn’t hurt me. It was my mode of interface with the world. And, of course, it was killing me.

Given how practiced I was with my anger, you would think that when I delved into the healing process I would have had no trouble processing the anger stuffed inside. Wrong! This was the biggest stumbling block I hit.

I had no trouble being angry at little things in my life. But I absolutely could not feel the anger about my abuse. On an intellectual level, I knew I *must* be mad. But, to feel it—or to *say* it—no way! I could not say the words. I could not feel the feelings. I had stored them away so deep inside that it took a lot of digging to access them.

Here’s what it took. I asked someone in my survivors group to be angry for me. I needed her to feel my anger and say it out loud. She was amazing. What a huge gift she gave me that day. She made it safe for me to do what was never safe for me to do as a child: feel and speak how I felt about the injustice. Finally, *finally*, it came spilling out. I got mad. I got physical (safe stuff, padded bats,

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etc.) and I got vocal. And, this time, I had witnesses to support me. I could be mad as hell, I could rant and rage. People cheered! What a moment!

Let me tell you something—experiencing your rage over what you are *really* mad about is so powerful. It absolutely sets your soul on fire—in a good way!

Finding my anger and letting it out appropriately was *the* turning point in my healing process. Once I was able to do that, I knew I would be okay.

Did you hear what I just said? Once I got in touch with my anger and learned to use it constructively *I knew I would be okay!* This was huge.

For the first time, I was engaged in *more* than a leap of faith. I knew. From then on, I started seeing results in my life. There was no doubt I was on the right path.

Before this episode of authentic anger, I had never written anything about my feelings before. On February 10, 1994, I wrote this:

*MY ANGER*

*My anger fills the oceans  
and laps the shores of all humanity.*

*My anger is the red of a thousand sunsets,  
of hot air balloons, of blood.*

*My anger is the lava of earth's volcanoes  
and spills over into all of my life.*

*I taste it on my lips.  
Thick, bitter, salty.*

*I embrace it. A sword.  
A shield. A laser.*

*I befriend it. It becomes  
my power, my strength, my passion.*

*I release it. And harness it.  
It flows through me like blood.*

*It becomes my friend.*

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*My sentry. My protector. My champion.*

*My anger is a beam of pure, white light.  
It shines into the darkness of my soul and sets me free.*

*It is my anger. And at last,  
it is beautiful.*

OUR WALK

*Why was it so hard for you to reach your anger about the incest? It seems like that is the first feeling that would come up.*

As a child, I couldn't safely own my anger. There were too many controlling, raging, dangerous people around me. It was clearly in their best interest that my anger never surface—because if it had, the truth of the incest would have surfaced with it.

Therefore I never developed the skill to process my anger. It just sat inside me like a dense, hot ball of fire. And it spilled out at times unrelated to my *real* anger. I knew how to be angry—I didn't know how to be angry about the incest.

*How do you ever let ALL the anger out? I don't think there would ever be an end to it if I let it start flowing.*

You let it out a chunk at a time, for a long time. And I don't know if it ever runs out, since I still feel it occasionally. When I do, I find a way to release it. What once was so hard has become second nature. I brushed my teeth today. I processed some anger. It becomes commonplace. Over time, the volume and rate of flow has slowed down considerably. For a long time I felt a lot of anger. Now it's just every now and then.

*Doesn't the anger eat you up as you feel it?*

No. As with all feelings, anger only eats you up when you *don't* feel it. When you let it flow, it's cleansing and healing.

*I don't have any problem feeling my anger. I'm mad as hell at my abuser. I'm so mad I can't think of anything else.*

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Great! That is, as long as you are using the anger for your benefit. Take a close look at whether you are letting the anger flow constructively. Look at whether it spills over into current situations or if it is confined to the original source. Look at whether it burns you. Look at how you can be using it most productively.

*I don't understand what you mean about using anger productively. How can you use a negative emotion productively?*

There was a period of time when I was feeling a lot of anger toward my father. This anger felt so big that I wasn't sure what to do with it. As I checked in with myself, my sense was that I needed to do something physical. I took on the massive project of building a large box garden on my deck. I did the whole thing myself. Hauled the lumber. Drilled the holes. Heaved countless bags of peat moss and manure. Dug and mixed and watered the soil. For day after day, I sweated and grunted out that anger.

That's using anger constructively. By the time I was finished with that garden, my anger was depleted. Better still, I was left with something that for years has given me a gift of beauty with each new season.

YOUR ACTION

When you are ready, make contact with your anger. As always, find a safe place. Ask yourself:

- What do I need to do or say to (safely) give voice to my anger?
- What does my body need?
- Do I need a witness? Lots of witnesses?
- Where in my body is it stuck?
- What will it take to loosen it and let it flow?
- Can I be with my anger and stay unafraid?
- Am I willing to honor it as an appropriate, healthy response?
- Is there a way to use it productively?

You will probably need to come back to this exercise time and again.

And remember, there's always more room on the outside than on your insides!

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