



Surviving Child Abuse, Living With Lupus, and Pondering Their Connection

Peggy McAloon experienced sexual abuse very early on in her life at home. Her father, the culprit, inflicted lasting trauma that she often wonders whether it caused her to develop lupus, an autoimmune disease. The ignorance of her college counselor regarding child abuse is a loud scream for the need to educate the public about the pathological effects of childhood trauma. Peggy retells the traumatic events of her life, including some helpful and some horrible experiences with various healthcare providers, in hopes that her story will help bring light to the connections between childhood trauma and diseases.

My sexual abuse started when I was seven years old. The year before the abuse started, I had scarlet fever. The first grade teacher believed in fresh air and left the windows open during the winter. Two of us sitting next to the open window contracted scarlet fever and then rheumatic fever.

The following year, my father started raping me approximately twice a week. I remember tremendous pain and his rough calloused hands. I also remember the stench of cigarettes and coffee on his hot breath. He threatened me that if I told anyone what he was doing, something bad would happen to my mother and me. I remember holding onto the lamp by the bedside when I went to sleep each night. I was convinced I would eventually have the courage to hit him over the head with it.

The abuse ended when I started having my period at age eleven. By then I had been raped over 400 times. I lived in fear, but the abuse stopped then. I can only guess that he was afraid I would get pregnant if he continued after I started having my period.

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At age sixteen, I was involved in state music contest. I needed to get something from the car of the chaperone who drove me and some of the other kids. I borrowed her keys, went to the car, and when I returned to the school, one of my groups was just getting ready to go in and perform. I handed the keys to her nephew and asked him to return them to her.

I ended up riding home with the music teacher. When I arrived at home, I was met with the threat that the sheriff was going to be called because I had stolen the woman's car keys. My father was furious and told me I would not be going to prom because I had stolen the keys. At that point, I had been so depressed and frightened for so many years that I took every pill I could find in the house. Mother was bipolar, so I had a good selection of pills. I was extremely ill and was vomiting blood when my brother demanded my parents take me to the hospital. They were not going to do it for fear that people in our small town would talk about the family.

At the end of my freshman year in college, I begged the guidance counselor to help me find a scholarship so I wouldn't need to go back home. I was terrified the abuse would begin again. Although I told her my story for the first time, she responded that it was her opinion that I wanted to stay at school so I could have sex with the boys there. I remember I sat looking at her for a few minutes and then I got up and walked out.

Approximately a month after I was married, my stomach swelled up on the right side to about the size of a volleyball. I was treated for an ovarian cyst and told that I would probably not be able to have children. I had suffered severe mittelschmerz pain monthly throughout my teen and young adult years.

I hemorrhaged at week 15 during my first pregnancy and was told I had lost so much blood that the baby would be born brain dead. The gynecologist at the University of Iowa hospital tried to convince me to sign the child over as a ward of the court prior to delivery. I refused. He was born 3 weeks beyond term. With my second child, I lost nearly 20 pounds and went from a size 12 to a size 10 during the pregnancy. He was born two months premature. At that time, they told me I would die if I tried to have another child. They wanted to do a hysterectomy immediately, but I held off for six months. I started having a period every two weeks after my second child was born.

Looking back on my life after that diagnosis, I am convinced that I had lupus reactions to major trauma after the sexual abuse.

I have said for years that my lupus attacks have been triggered by bodily stress. I also react the same way with shortness of breath and blisters when the cyanobacteria bloom on the lake behind our home begins to die in the fall and gives off tremendous amounts of hydrogen sulfide.

During the next few years, I started getting a blister-type rash when I was exposed to the sun for several hours. I also started having a lot of muscle pain that they said was rheumatoid arthritis from my 20's.

In 1978, I was hit head-on by a construction truck. I had meningitis of the brain lining that doctors determined was likely because one of my little boys probably had a virus and because of the skull fracture when my head hit the windshield. I was in the front passenger seat and saw the truck cross the center line, so I turned and grabbed the little boys by the backs of their heads and pushed their faces down on the car seat. The damage was done to the right frontal lobe of my brain.

I was in tremendous pain for the next five years with little control of my left arm and left leg. My words came out scrambled, even though I knew in my head what I wanted to say. In addition to the neck and back pain, I suddenly had swelling in my stomach, and all of the following symptoms:

- Fatigue and fever
- Joint pain, stiffness and swelling
- Butterfly-shaped rash on the face that covers the cheeks and bridge of the nose
- Skin lesions that appear or worsen with sun exposure
- Fingers and toes that turn white or blue when exposed to cold or during stressful periods (Raynaud's phenomenon)
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Dry eyes & dry mouth
- Headaches, confusion, short-term memory loss

The doctors decided to send me to a psychiatrist. I was absolutely furious when I walked into the psychiatrist's office because I had been told I was being sent to a neurologist. I walked up to his desk and leaned over and pointed my finger at him. I told him that I was sick and tired of being treated like a hypochondriac. I explained we already had two of those in the family, my mother and my aunt. I told him I was having all these symptoms that were in no way related to my car accident, but that because of the stress from the pain and the constant migraines, I started having the symptoms I had during high school. I think I yelled at the poor guy for nearly 15 minutes before I finally collapsed in the chair across from him and said, "Okay, I'm done. Thanks for at least listening...no one else has been willing to."

He laughed and told me I was probably the most-well-put-together person who had ever walked through his door. He asked me about the unrelated symptoms and I mentioned most of the above. Then, as rather an after-thought I said, “Oh yeah, I’m the sun princess. I have loved to be out in the sun my entire life. I love a tan. But now, when I’m in the sun for more than a few hours, I break out in these giant blisters that look like chicken pox.”

“Well, you’re not crazy, but there is something going on,” he started writing on a sheet of paper on top of his desk. He handed it to me and asked me to go directly to a lab for a blood test. The results were off-the-chart for lupus.

Looking back on my life after that diagnosis, I am convinced that I had lupus reactions to major trauma after the sexual abuse. As an example: Last year I had an abscessed tooth when I was on vacation. I went to a dentist down south who said I needed a root canal. He really dug on that tooth and said he had to set up a second appointment because the tooth had two roots. Again, he dug and dug and said I had to come back the third time because he had spotted some decay under the cap on that tooth. When I returned to our apartment that afternoon, I broke out in the lupus blisters. I had not been out in the sun. I called and cancelled the third appointment because we were heading home the next week. When I went to my own dentist, I discovered he had broken off the metal end of a dental tool and it was sticking down in the root of the tooth... Again, the physical stress of having a foreign object in my mouth had triggered a massive lupus reaction on my arms and legs.... I had not been out in the sun.

I have said for years that my lupus attacks have been triggered by bodily stress. I also react the same way with shortness of breath and blisters when the cyanobacteria bloom on the lake behind our home begins to die in the fall and gives off tremendous amounts of hydrogen sulfide. We have to pack and leave our home each year when that happens due to the lupus attacking my lungs and because of the blisters that I get all over my limbs.

At the end of my freshman year in college, I begged the guidance counselor to help me find a scholarship so I wouldn’t need to go back home. I was terrified the abuse would begin again. Although I told her my story for the first time, she responded that it was her opinion that I wanted to stay at school so I could have sex with the boys there.

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Resources on childhood trauma and chronic diseases during adulthood:

Vincent J. Felitti. “Childhood Trauma Linked to Chronic Diseases in Adulthood.” *Cancer InCytes* (2013), Volume 2, Issue 1.

URL: <http://www.cancerincytes.org/#!/childhood-trauma-linked-to-chronic-diseases-in-adulthood/c1jot>

Dube SR, Fairweather D, Pearson WS, Felitti VJ, Anda RF, Croft JB. “Cumulative childhood stress and autoimmune diseases in adults.” *Psychosomatic Medicine* (2009), 71:243-250.

URL: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3318917/>