

Taking Off
The Mask



MY MASK

My mask was a smile; I smiled all of the time and pretended to be happy. I was so good at pretending; I think I started believing my own pretense. No one knew my life was falling apart because I had been holding so much pain, shame, guilt, insecurity, and torment on the inside of me for over 40 years. I possessed material things, but I was very unhappy and could not keep my life together. When I talk to people from my past about my life, they are amazed because they thought I had such a great life because I always seemed happy and was always smiling. Yep, that was my mask.

I was taught what happens at home, stays at home. There was no such thing as discussing family business with other people. No matter how much we suffered, we always kept a smile on our faces and pretend all was well. Our family was definitely poor; I remember a lot of days not having enough to eat as a child. Many days we ate government cheese; it was some of the best I ever ate. We also ate tomato sandwiches, mayonnaise sandwiches and sugar sandwiches, which were more like desert to us.

I could not tell my friends we did not have enough food to eat as they were ranting and raving about the wonderful meals their mother prepared for them. Instead, I would pretend I

had a better meal than theirs. Who knows, maybe all of us were lying (wearing masks). I learned at an early age to keep things to myself, even painful things. As a result, I learned to be a master of disguise because as long as I had a smile on my face, I was happy, so others thought.

When I was a teenager, I was raped and it literally destroyed my life. I lost my identity and the little self-esteem I had. I contemplated committing suicide because I felt it was my fault it happened. I thought maybe I deserved it, that I was a bad person, or just that God was punishing me. As a child so many thoughts ran through my mind. I did not know what to do and did not have anyone I could talk to because it was such a painful thing for anyone to go through, especially a child. I did not know how to recover; I just wanted to find some place to hide. At times, I felt as if it was a dream and I would eventually wake up and realize it never happened. The memories were always there and the constantly tormented me.

I went home after the incident and didn't even tell my mother or any family member what happened. I walked into the house; clothes and hair were all messed up, looked like I had been in a fight. I thought someone would notice and ask what happened, but no one did. Instead, my mother beat me, she never asked what happened, didn't take me to

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the doctor to be examined or console me, just the beating and afterwards, there was never a mention of that day. The next day, it was as if it never happened, so I pretended. On the inside, I was a wreck.

Being raped and violated is the worse thing that could happen to anyone, it automatically causes one to feel insecure, shame, pain and guilt. A lot of people who are on drugs today as on drugs because something traumatic happened to them and they are trying to forget. When you come down from doing drugs, the painful memories return and you do more drugs to numb the effect of the pain. I started smoking marijuana when I was about 18 years old and eventually started doing other drugs. Some 20 or 30 years later I was smoking crack cocaine.

I don't even remember when or how I started doing drugs, all I know is I could not maintain a normal lifestyle. I was constantly moving because I could not pay my rent and could not manage my money form paycheck to paycheck. No one suspected I was on drugs because I kept my appearance up and pretended I had money. I was good at wearing my mask.

I had a really low self- esteem and as a result, I became promiscuous; sleeping around with men even though I knew they did not care anything about me. At that point in my, I don't

even think I loved myself. I had a lot of hurt on the inside of me, and I pretended it did not matter whether anyone loved me or not. As a matter of fact, I did not ever expect to be loved. I put up this wall and would not allow anyone to get close enough to hurt me; I just went through the motion of sleeping around. This particular mask was called, "being hard."

I had a failed first marriage; we got married when we were very young and because I was pregnant. One of the lowest points in my life was when I found out my ex-husband was cheating with another woman. I chose not to leave after I found out; I stayed. On one occasion, I came home and he was in our bed with one of our friends. Of course I was enraged, but I thought I could get over it and continue as if nothing had ever happened. It was just another thing I buried and did not have to deal with it as long as it was on the inside.

I was now compiling one pain on top of the other, still pretending. I thought I could handle just about anything. I was now wearing this hard mask that screamed, "I can get over this, or I can handle anything." Eventually my husband left me for another woman, I went into isolation or maybe even depression because I felt as if I was mourning.

Now as I look back over my life, I cannot really put all of the blame on my ex-husband

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because I had emotional problems, I just didn't know it. This wall I put up made me think I was immune to pain, but what I was doing was setting myself up for a nervous breakdown...

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