



Families haunted by accusations of childhood abuse: A growing number of parents accused by adult children of ill treatment say they are victims of 'false memory syndrome'

ROSIE WATERHOUSE Social Services Correspondent Monday 24 May 1993 00:02

ONE AFTERNOON in September 1991, 'James', a 57-year-old former Royal Navy officer living in Wiltshire, was summoned by his daughter Joanna, 28, to her flat in London.

In a cool and business-like telephone call, she said she had been remembering things that happened to her in her childhood and she wanted to talk to him about compensation. Intrigued by the call, he arranged to see her a few days later.

On the day, James arrived at the flat to find Joanna sitting in the lotus position on a dais. She motioned him to sit in a chair by the door. 'I want you to sit down there and I'm going to read you a statement and when I've finished reading it I'm going into the garden and I want you to leave,' she said.

In a statement written in green ink on note paper she began: 'I am pure and clean and I now realise the cause of the difficulties in my life. At nine months you started to tickle my clitoris and you liked it. When I was a baby you used to get me on the floor and stick pencils up my vagina. Then when I was two

you used to tie me down and stick your fingers in me. And then when I was eight years old, having stories read to me, you would get into bed with me and you raped me orally and anally.'

Since then, Joanna claims she was sexually abused as a child by her grandfather and that when she was four her father took her to a 'Satanic' meeting, at which a baby was killed and her father stood in uniform and watched other men bugger her.

Joanna claims she first recovered memories of sexual abuse after sessions with her therapist in the summer of 1991. She had visited a London clinic for treatment for candida or thrush, an infection of the vagina, on the recommendation of a friend.

In a statement handed to James, the therapist, Melissa Assilem, had written: 'As a professional practitioner I wish to state that all Joanna's symptoms, whether physical, mental or psychological, are consistent with her being a survivor of father/daughter rape, over a continued period of time. She will need very careful therapy, counselling and support, over at least the next two to three years. She will also need a safe place to live. Joanna has drawn up a schedule, with costs, for this time of healing to begin.'

Joanna said the cost was pounds 70,000, but James did not pay.

She has changed her name, moved house, returned cards and letters unopened and will only speak to her father on his answerphone. James said a tape of one message, in which she rages and swears and calls him 'a rapist of children', still reduces him to tears.

Last month, James related his story at a conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he and another British couple joined 450 other parents who claim they are victims of false allegations of sexual abuse made by their adult children.

In March last year, a group of parents who had been similarly accused set up the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in Philadelphia. By the beginning of this month, almost 3,700 other accused families, (mainly from the United States, but also a few from Britain, France, Germany, Israel, Ireland and Australia) were seeking advice.

Professionals who subscribe to the false memory theory believe the recovered memories are 'confabulations', or concoctions of fantasies confused with fact, induced by therapists using techniques such as hypnosis and regression therapy. They argue that children who are sexually abused typically do not forget or suppress the memory.

The conference also heard about a number of 'ex-survivors'; women who had accused their parents but then realised that the memory was false and retracted the accusation.

In Britain about 30 accused parents have formed a group called Adult Children Accusing Parents (ACAP) to understand more about false memory syndrome, to raise public awareness and to prevent it spreading.

In every case the allegation came after the accuser claimed to have recovered his or her memory during therapy for an unrelated problem; many want to become therapists; every family is middle class; most are women but at least two are men; some say the abuse occurred during Satanic rituals; many are feminists; most are well educated and some have taken an interest in the New Age or similar cult- like movements; all cut off any member of their family who does not believe them and some plan to sue for compensation.

The suggestion of sueing is made in a book, *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, which encourages the belief that childhood sexual abuse is the root of problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders or depression.

The Independent has interviewed accused parents from seven families and while it is not possible to establish guilt or innocence a strikingly similar pattern of events emerged.

The parents include an 80- year-old former MP, who was accused by his 46- year-old daughter. She said she recovered memories after starting therapy while under stress during her final year as a mature university student. At university, the woman, who has three sons, joined a feminist group and became interested in psychosynthesis, a form of psychology which focuses on the development of human potential, understanding the meaning of life and realising creative potential. About a year ago she began training to become a counsellor. Her mother said: 'In August last year she telephoned me and said she wanted to see me and her father, separately, and meanwhile we were to write down everything that made us inadequate parents.'

She cancelled the meeting. In January, she wrote to her mother saying she had been sexually abused by her father when she was a small child. Her father says the allegation is nonsense and that if he had sexually abused her, her nanny, who bathed her every day, would have seen physical signs.

In another case, a 59-year-old grandmother from London was accused by her 31-year-old son of dancing naked in front of him and soaping herself in the bath in a sexy way when he was a child. He also claimed to have recovered memories of being gang-raped by three or four men when he was four years old, but his mother says no physical signs ever showed. He also claimed that his father had raped him as a child, but then changed this to 'cuddled him in an inappropriate way'.

In January, he accused his mother of touching his daughter's bottom 'inappropriately' and has banned her from seeing her grandchildren. The man, a Cambridge graduate, and part- time social worker, has been in therapy for depression for years. He calls himself a survivor and is training to be a counsellor.

A 61-year-old publisher from London is accused of abusing his 28-year-old daughter, who recovered memories during psychotherapy for anorexia. She had an interest in New Age activities and psychosynthesis; had strong feminist convictions, was training as a counsellor and had worked on a helpline for incest victims.

Last October, she arranged to meet her mother in Hyde Park, London, and told her that her father had abused her as a child.

The mother said the daughter claimed to have 'some recollections, not exact memories', that she thinks she was abused as a child by her father. 'The details were not specific and she still says it's just an idea . . .'

The father said: 'When my wife told me it was a thunderbolt. We had been a very close family and she was a very loving daughter. She has broken off communications and there is not a lot I think I can do except hope she gets committed to something else. But I am pessimistic.'

James's family members' names have been changed to protect their identity.

ACAP can be contacted on 0225 868682.

(Photograph omitted)

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/families-haunted-by-accusations-of-childhood-abuse-a-growing-number-of-parents-accused-by-adult-2324862.html>