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DENIAL

**ABUSE, ADDICTION, AND A LIFE DERAILED—
BASED ON A TRUE STORY**

NANETTE KIRSCH

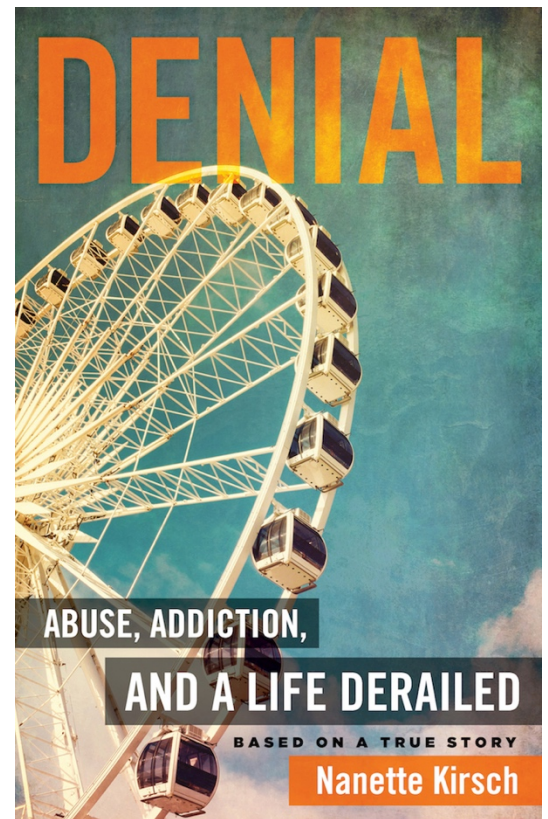
David Wagner is a married father of five and millionaire entrepreneur. He gives generously to family, friends, and causes he believes in, and is easily the funniest guy in the room. Yet beneath his carefree shell, the lingering effects of sexual abuse he suffered at age twelve are luring him into a secretive double life, which threatens to unravel everything he's spent a lifetime building.

David prays daily for forgiveness, but never feels worthy of God's gift of grace. Fear fuels his denial, the fear that even God can't love the broken, sinful person he has become . . . until one day the truth will be denied no more.

Denial is a gritty, yet ultimately hopeful, true-life story, told to inspire survivors of childhood sexual abuse to break its spiritual stronghold and embrace an abundant life of wholeness and peace.

Wagner's roller-coaster life points to two larger truths that provide guidance, hope, and healing to other victims and their loved ones: First, denial gives childhood sexual abuse a stronghold over the lives of survivors. Second, there is a crucial connection between abuse and the persistent, distorted thoughts and compulsive behaviors that many survivors grapple with in adulthood, including substance abuse; sexual addiction; verbal, emotional, or physical abuse in relationships; depression; and far too often, suicide. *Denial* confronts these difficult truths with honesty and compassion through the life of Wagner and his family, with the goal of empowering others to break free of the past and embrace a life of wholeness and peace.

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About the Author Nanette Kirsch

Nanette Kirsch's passion for living out Ernest Hemingway's directive to "write the truest sentence you know" led her to

major in journalism at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and to pursue a career in communication. Today she serves as an outsourced marketing executive, helping companies discover and express the essence of their brand identities. In her blog, *Faith Runner: Journeying to the Heart of What Is True*, Nanette shares life lessons she's learned walking with God as a wife, mother of four children, working woman, and Christian witness.

Connect with the Author

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What Others Are Saying About **Denial**

“No person of even modest goodwill would argue with the idea that the sexual abuse of children is among the worst horrors that exist in our culture, and that any meaningful concept of justice must deal with such conduct with the gravity it deserves. A great deal of good writing has gone into making those kinds of arguments and to raising consciousness about how much more prevalent these crimes are than anyone likes to acknowledge.

“***Denial* picks up where so much of that writing leaves off.** It is the story of how sexual abuse plays out over the course of a life. For a victim of childhood sexual abuse, the criminal act is only the first episode in a long story in which trauma is often compounded with shame and silence, the harms of which can manifest themselves in myriad ways as the survivor tries to learn to cope on his or her own with something that no one is really prepared to face alone. *Denial* tells the story of how this happened in one life and **does so honestly, without either soft-selling things that are dark and difficult or exploiting extremely emotional content for cheap sympathy.**

“Chances are there is someone in your life who is a victim of sexual abuse who has never told you so (and may never have told anyone). My hope is that *Denial* helps crack the door of silence so that more victims get the support they need before the harm that was done to them compounds.”

— **Jay Exum, Former Assistant US Attorney, United States Department of Justice**

“As someone who has dedicated his life to leading victims of sexual abuse and addiction to restoration and wholeness in Jesus Christ, I found *Denial* to be a powerful and transformational work, **both for exemplifying the profound effects of sexual abuse on body, mind, and spirit, and for providing a unique, 360 perspective.** This story radically challenged my own thinking about therapeutic intervention and convicted me that we are not doing nearly enough to support sexual abuse victims in their recovery.”

— **Rob Jackson, MS, LPC, Christian Family University**

“*Denial* gives life and perspective to the discussion of abuse. Reading about the deep lifelong consequences victims encounter has helped shape the way I work with and counsel those living through their own shame and denial.”

— **Jeff Olive, Senior Pastor of United Methodist Church, Conroe, Texas**

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Suggested Interview Questions

For Nanette Kirsch, author of

Denial

Abuse, Addiction, and a Life Derailed—Based on a True Story

Q: What brought you to write this story?

A: David's wife asked me to write the story and sent me boxes of information back in 2009. I did not touch those boxes for five years until issues in my own marriage resulting from my past sexual abuse led me to finally seek help. As I found understanding and peace, I felt the Lord tell me that NOW I was equipped to tell this story, not as a friend of the Wagners (which I am) or even as a writer (which I have been all my life), but as a fellow survivor who had found hope and healing through Christ.

Q: This couldn't have been an easy book to write. Tell us a bit about the process.

A: Writing the book was a three-year process for me: I spent the first year researching, building a detailed timeline and doing extensive interviews; the second year writing, and the third year in the publishing process.

Now my commitment and energy is focused on getting the book in the hands of the people who need it.

I am deeply appreciative of opportunities like this one to share the story and it's message of hope to people who have suffered childhood sexual abuse.

Q: One theme of your books is the role of denial in perpetuating, and perhaps exacerbating, the consequences of sexual abuse in adult victims. Tell us more about that.

A: This is true for all victims of sexual abuse, but especially for men. I think there are several reasons for this that are important to understand:

- By nature men are less likely to share private details of their lives.

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- In man-on-boy abuse the victims often experience deep shame that they could not defend themselves, and many question their sexuality
- And if they experienced a physical response, which many boys do even involuntarily, they are further shamed into thinking that they either liked or invited the abuse.

Denial illustrates, through one man's story, how these seed lies in victims, lies that say what happened to them was their own fault, that they are unforgivable, and that they are unworthy. And so survivors live imprisoned by their own silence and shame, their self-contempt fueling a deadly, downward cycle of self-destruction.

As survivors bring their abuse into the light, the lies lose their power. Spoken out loud in the voice of a now-adult, victims can hear how ludicrous it is to think that a child of 10 or 12 or even 18 could defend himself against an adult with authority and power over him, who probably spent months grooming him into submission psychologically without his knowledge or consent.

As survivors speak of their abuse they can help to educate and protect others from abuse, both by stopping their perpetrators, when possible, and by promoting greater awareness and understanding.

Q: The central character of your book, David Wagner, acted out in so many egregious ways to what could be interpreted by readers to be a fairly low level of sexual abuse. Is his story really typical, or is he just an exceptional case? If so, why was he so deeply affected?

A: I wrestled with this question myself in the research and writing of this story. Here is where I've landed, and this is really one of the core messages of the book.

The devastation of sexual abuse is not directly or only correlated to the severity of the physical assault itself, although that certainly is a factor. It is a time bomb that goes off inside of a child and hurts their body, mind and spirit in really significant ways. Just as adults react differently to the death of a loved one or other difficult situations, kids also are unique in how they react and cope with the pain of sexual abuse.

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Specific to David's situation I'd also point out that the story works hard to convey just how deeply traumatic even the "mild" abuse would be in his specific circumstances: it happened with someone he cared for and trusted deeply; he was in a public setting where fear of exposure would be very high; and he was a child who lacked the tools to resist or process the incident for what it was: a criminal assault.

Further, we don't really know the extent of the abuse he suffered. We know something about the inciting incident that I wrote about in the book, and we know that that abusive relationship continued for some time; but what happened during that time or how the abuse may have progressed we simply don't have insight into.

Q: How does a person distinguish whether they or someone they love is "acting out" from childhood abuse or is simply someone who is entitled or perverted when it comes to their physical appetites?

A: It is impossible, unfortunately, to identify a checklist of symptoms that will help you know for certain that someone you care about has been sexually abused. I'm going to focus my comments here more on men who have been abused by men, since that is where my story focuses.

What you will see is a coalescence of behaviors in abuse survivors living in denial. Across this group you will see a proliferation of broken marriages, substance abuse, homophobia, anger, and depression.

Another warning sign are triggers, seemingly everyday situations that provoke an extreme emotional reaction. An example from David's case: he had an extreme and inexplicable reaction when anything touched his neck, even something as simple as shirt fabric.

Sexuality by its very nature is life-giving. I believe that anyone who seeks depraved and "perverted," as you said, sexual expression is suffering from some type of brokenness.

So if I noticed some combination of these behaviors in someone I knew, since writing this book, I know would ask those questions. It is like anything else in life—

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once you understand the nature of the wounding, it becomes much easier to recognize. And when we know better, we can do better to help and support others.

Q: How are the families of the abuse victim impacted, and how can they overcome as well?

A: I love that you asked this question, because it is really important to address this.

Parents of abuse survivors often suffer deep guilt and pain for not adequately protecting their child. Years later, one of my survivor friends says that his 80-year-old father still cries every time they speak; that pain is so deep.

So parents must forgive themselves. This truly can happen to anyone, no matter how much we love our children or do our best to protect them. When I sign my books for people I use an Einstein quote that “darkness is not a thing itself; it’s just the absence of light.” The more light we bring to the conversation around childhood sexual abuse, the more we do to push out the darkness and minimize the risk to our children.

The secondary victims are the spouses and significant others of abuse survivors. The natural expression of love and intimacy in a relationship that sex was created to be is not a natural expression for a survivor of sexual abuse. It can be overcome together, but it is likely when the abuse has not been disclosed, that the overcoming will begin after some amount of pain and damage to the relationship has occurred to that loved one.

Q: What would have to change for David to have survived the effects of abuse?

A: He needed to end his denial, pure and simple. David believed—wrongly—that “there are just some things you don’t talk about.” He’s not alone, especially as a male survivor of sexual abuse by a man.

But darkness can’t exist in the light. If he had trusted one soul with the truth, the lies would have been exposed for what they were. I hear it in the conversations I mentioned to you earlier. When a woman hears herself say the words, “I was raped, but it was my fault,” the gig is up; the lie is exposed.

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Then and only then can you start to address the pain that lies beneath, and begin the journey to restoration.

The other key is that the person listening must know how to receive the information. It requires love and compassion and listening. No questions. No judgment. Just a willingness to validate their pain and assurance that they are good and so worthy.

Q: What do you think should be the role and responsibility of the church in all of this?

A: Let's first be clear about who we mean when we say "the church." We are the church.

The call is for all of us to courageously speak up when we suspect abuse, to hold perpetrators fully accountable, to love and support victims, and to take measures to reduce the risk based on our knowledge.

As the church—and this is maybe even more difficult—we are also called to pray for and forgive those perpetrators. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; so pedophiles are no less deserving of God's grace and forgiveness.

While that is a long and arduous journey for many survivors, when it happens, it is the most healing and freeing experience you can imagine.

Q: One of the premises of your book is that abuse creates a spiritual stronghold for many victims, a barrier in their relationship with God. Can you talk about this spiritual connection and the role you think it plays in victims' recovery?

A: This is something I learned from my own personal recovery process. I too was living in denial of my past sexual abuse. I was aware of it, but I didn't believe it was affecting my life.

At one point I rather cavalierly prayed over Isaiah 6 and asked God to reveal any obstacle in my relationship with him. A few days later, my husband, under conviction by the Holy Spirit, confronted me lovingly about the intimacy issues in our marriage.

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He told me I was getting worse not better over time. He said he was prepared to live platonically rather than continue the struggle. And he suggested I should go read what God says in the Bible about sexuality—that it was intended to be something good and beautiful.

I did exactly what he said and that's when God hit me between the eyes with the truth that our human love relationships are a mirror for our intimacy with God, especially in marriage. As we learn to experience vulnerability and trust in our closest love relationships, we grow in our ability to experience those same thing in our relationship with Him.

Suddenly I understood why sexual brokenness is such a big problem in our world today. What more powerful tool to separate us from God than to bring brokenness and despair to this most vulnerable and fragile aspect of our human love relationships?

Throughout the process of creating this book God equipped me for—and allowed me to experience—several seasons of intense spiritual warfare, and I anticipate another as this book moves into more and more hands. But God has been faithful to deliver me, and so I am doing my best to be brave and obedient in delivering this life-giving message.

Q: The final chapter of your book focuses on resources for people who have been abused to find help and treatment. Can you share some of those with our audience?

A: Absolutely. Thank you for the opportunity to do that. A wide range of resources are available. I included a list of the leading books on the topic, books like *The Wounded Heart*, by Dan Allender; *When a Man You Love was Abused*, by Cecil Murphy, and *Victims No Longer* by Mike Lew, a classic guide for men.

I also included a handful of Christian counseling organizations that can refer people to local resources.

And I listed some of the top advocacy groups against sexual abuse. David Wagner had several of these books on his bedstand, and he acknowledged spending time

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online educating himself about the issue and its effects on people. That was helpful and healing work he was doing.

I will also mention that the website for my book, denialbook.com, seeks to do more than promote the book itself. It offers a healing wall where victims who have never acknowledged their abuse can give voice to what happened to them for the first time...anonymously. It also features a blog called Living in Denial, where a range of experts and survivors are sharing stories, offering resources and starting conversations.

For adults who are seeking to come to grips with their painful pasts, my hope is that this website will become a valuable step in their journey.

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