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Empathy factor: Helping child abuse victims

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"I see myself as a survivor, not a victim anymore," said Sue Botes, a 46-year-old British expatriate from South Africa, who has embarked on a rare mission in the city.

This week, Botes launched a non-profit support group for women in Dubai who, like her, have been through sexual abuse during their childhood.

The group will meet on the first Monday of every month at a location that will be disclosed only to those on board.

Botes, who will conduct the meetings herself, said she had been abused by her stepfather in her own home when she was a teenager. "I was subjected to this ordeal at least five times over a period of 18 months," she said.

For years, she carried the burden of having to keep quiet about "their little secret" as her stepfather made it out to be and even when she mustered the courage to talk to her mother, little changed. She said the ordeal stopped when they moved house and she became rebellious.

It was only when she was 28 that she came to know about professional help for victims of child abuse. She

said two years of counselling helped her to come to terms with herself. A successful business consultant, Botes today is married and has a daughter.

Counselling matters

"I can talk about my experience now because of the help I received," she said, adding that it had motivated her to start the support group. The group will focus on increasing knowledge on child abuse, changing attitudes among victims and how parents can prevent such atrocities against their children. "It's important to know that child molesters prime the victim before they actually molest the child," she said.

A study conducted by a private psychiatric clinic on 250 students from five schools in the UAE, which follow the UK or US curriculum, revealed that five per cent of these students, aged between 14 and 17, were molested by bus drivers or watchmen, an Arabic paper recently reported.

A study on over 170 students from three charity schools in the UAE said 10 per cent of them were sexually harassed by older students.

The study added that the victims were afraid to report the abuse against their molesters as they were threatened or lured with money by the abusers. The report also added that some perverse students even took pictures of half-naked juniors in toilets and sold them to others.

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