



ONE IN FOUR MEN HAS SUFFERED CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE OR RAPE. A TWO-MAN TEAM RUNS THE COUNTY'S HELPLINE FOR THE SILENT VICTIMS.

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REPORTS

Tony Magee is searching for the right words as he absently taps his fingers on the table in an airless conference room at Mercury headquarters. "What do you call it when something is like something else?" asks the grey-haired 55-year-old, his accent a disarming patter of Midlands-softened Mancunian.

An analogy?
"That's right. It's an analogy," smiles Tony. "Some people might not agree with this, but it's a good analogy. For me, it was as if I had an elastic band attached to my back going all the way back to my childhood," he says, "and when I was 40, it snapped me back to it all."

That's how it was when it hit, says the father-of-two, when the memory of being sexually abused 30 years earlier mentally floored him as sure as any swiping fist.

"It was like a door had been kicked in in my memory and it was a massive avalanche of feelings – anger, shame, disgust, guilt and sadness," he pauses. "The loss of my childhood."

Statistics often suggest that a percentage of victims of sexual abuse themselves go on to become abusers. In nine years, Tony and his colleague have never met a man who repeated the cycle.

So there he was, a heavily built man of 40, 6ft tall and 17 stone, crying his eyes out inside a residential unit for teenagers leaving care in Coventry, the place where he was training at the time.

"It was like being seven years old again," he says, glancing towards the window.

That world-changing day was 15 years ago.

Today, Tony is a volunteer and chair at first step – Leicestershire and Rutland's support service for men who have been victims of child sexual abuse or rape.

Building on what happened to him, Tony is now able to help others who have found themselves in a society where men aren't supposed to be victims.

It's been a struggle keeping the service going these nine years, he says, and the helpline is only open on Mondays, but it's a lifeline for the men of Leicestershire and Rutland whose childhood innocence was stolen by sex abuse.

Run on grants and donations, first step has helped thousands of men, just like Tony, come to

terms with something that should never have happened.

"For me, it's turning my own negative experience into something positive.

"Seeing so many guys and hearing so many stories and allowing themselves to be vulnerable – to me and other people – it's humbling, but it's also a great privilege.

"And if I stop doing it, where are these guys going to go? Who are they going to tell?"

From the age of seven to 11, Tony, a family man with a lightning sense of humour, was sexually abused by a relative.

It is, says the father of two, an unavoidable fact. "It's not something that will ever go away, it's part of me," he acknowledges.

For four years, unknown to his family, he was "encouraged" to perform a catalogue of sex acts. He was powerless and vulnerable.

As a teenager, the abuse surfaced in violent outbursts and, when he joined the Navy after stints at three full-time jobs, his drinking was out of control.

He says: "My negative behaviour was my shout for help.

"Half of 1972 was spent in naval prisons in Hong Kong and Portsmouth. I had anger issues," says Tony, forcing a chuckle at the overt PC-ness of the last comment.

Today, he knows the abuse he endured has marked his life as surely as the inky tattoos blurring his forearms.

"I never spoke about it, I never acknowledged it to myself until I was 40. It's a taboo – men aren't victims.

"But I honestly believe that talking is the cure. It's helped me."

Since first step opened, on June 2, 1997, it has received 4,000

calls for help. Occasionally, the two volunteers will answer the phone only to be met with silence on the other end.

Sometimes, more often than not, there will be a voice of a man who has, for the first time, entrusted another with a secret that not even his closest friends know.

Moreover, first step recognises the numbers they have helped so far are just the tip of the iceberg.

To date, their eldest client was 74 and the youngest was 18.

"The figures used to say that one in six males had suffered sexual abuse up to the age of 16. These figures are now one in four – the same as for women.

"And they come from everywhere, literally," says Tony. "To be old-fashioned, they come from the working class, middle class and upper class, it's the full range.

"We've had businessmen, welders, unemployed. The lot."

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In nine years, Tony and his colleague have never met a man who repeated the cycle.

The first time Tony went for a counselling session, he had a little cut on his thumb, not much more than a scratch.

"I was terrified," he says. "I was gouging it (the cut) until it

bled, it kept me focused, away from doing what I wanted to do, which was run away and hide."

But he stuck it through.

Tony has been having counselling on and off for 15 years and it has helped. He still has those "dark thoughts" but now he's able to cope and deal with them on his terms.

And that's what he's trying to do for the thousands of others who remain locked alone in the pain of silence.

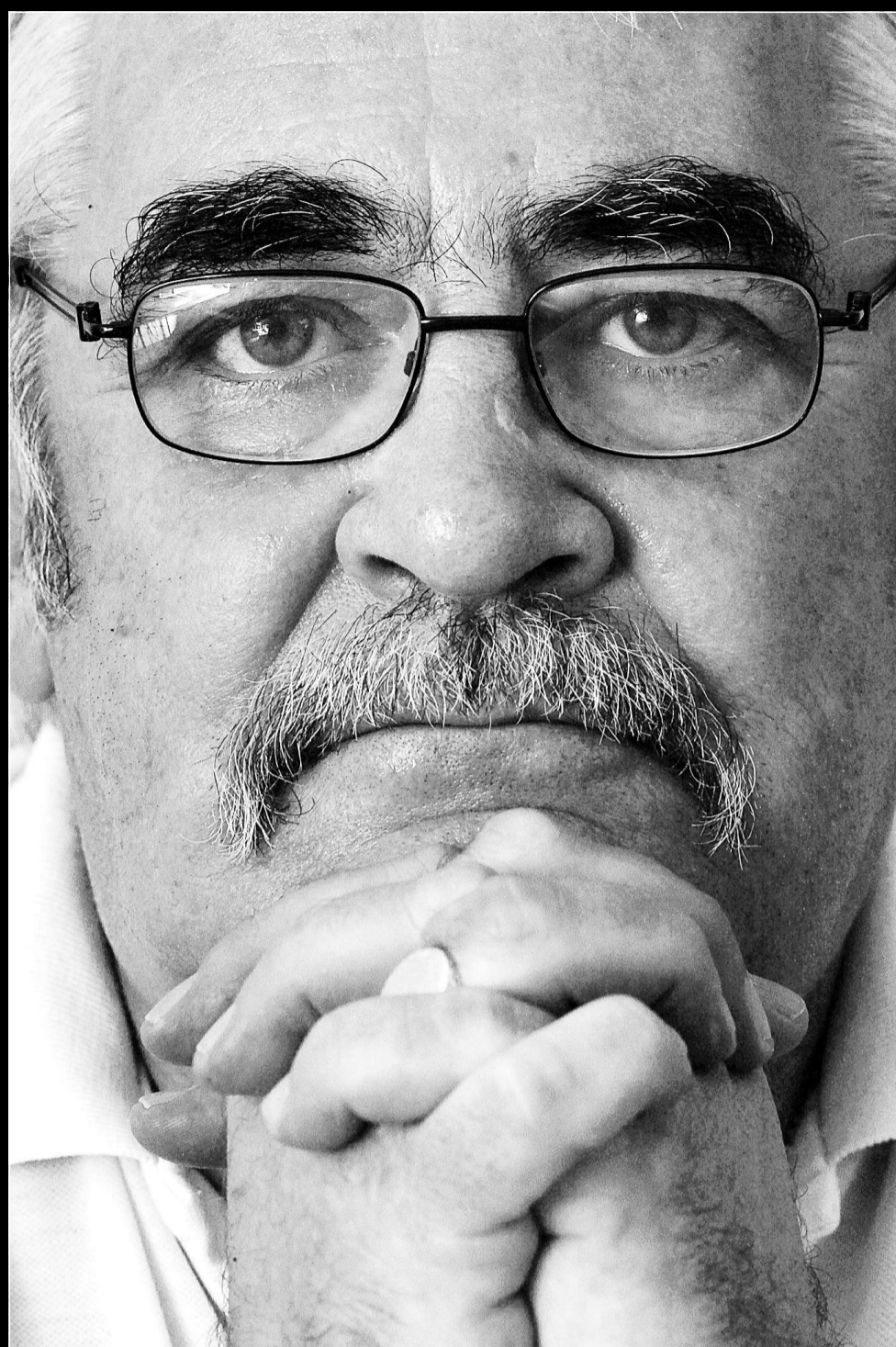
"There's no magic wand, but what we can do is help that person find a way," says Tony, as the interview ends.

"The one thing they will never be able to answer is 'why?' and that's something we can't help with," he pauses, picking up his bag. "And that's the question that everyone will want an answer to."

The first step helpline is open on Mondays, on 0116 254 8535. The organisation is always looking for volunteers and fund-raisers. For more details, e-mail:

firststepleicester@yahoo.co.uk

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PICTURE: CHRIS GORDON / 169982-1

OFFERING HOPE: As a child, 55-year-old Tony Magee was the victim of sexual abuse

SECRET AGONY: How Tony kept his abuse from his parents

Wanting to share his secret with his father, Tony whispered what had happened to him into his dad's ear as he lay unconscious on his hospital death bed. He never revived.

A few years later, when his mum passed away, he also told her – as she lay dead on her hospital bed.

As recently as last year, Tony considered calling the police about what hap-

pened to him with a view to pressing charges against the perpetrator.

However, firmly believing his abuser has never harmed another person, he later changed his mind.