

When a Counselor or Co-Worker Is Charged With a Sex Offense(s)

We have no language for terror, nor are we given a framework for dealing with a counselor and colleague who is charged with sex offenses against children, especially children who relied on that person for safety and guidance.

When you find out that a co-worker is charged with committing sexual abuse of a child (ren), people often experience many things at once. An onslaught of overwhelming feelings often occurs, including:

- Feelings of denial
- A deep sense of betrayal of trust
- Protectiveness for the children
- Confusion
- Anger
- Outrage
- Fear
- Sadness
- Grief
- Feeling responsible
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Vulnerability

In fact, there are at least three separate processes or issues when a person is accused of sexually abusing a child: (1) the impact on a professional level when another counselor commits the cardinal sin as a counselor, (2) the impact on the community when a breach of trust isolates people from one another as they try to regain their balance, and (3) what such a situation does to us personally.

Not unlike any sexual abuse situation and betrayal, the impact can touch every aspect of one's life, including trust, control, guilt, shame, relationships, spirituality, sexuality, identity, and self-esteem. Healing requires that each aspect be examined and re-evaluated. For example, how do I know that people around me are safe? How much control do I really have in my life? "I'm trained to teach people what to watch for to stay safe. Why didn't I see it?"

The following are answers to frequently asked questions for counselors and other school personnel:

1. What do I do first?

The first and best thing to do is to take time to absorb what you have just learned. That usually means to sit down, and call another adult for support. There will be plenty of time to sort things out but it is much more difficult to do while first absorbing the impact of the news.

2. Why didn't I see it? Why didn't we see it? How did this guy go undetected?

Sex offenders are experts at deceit and justification and are often adept at carrying on two different realities at once. Some refer to these two existences as "this is my day work, and this is my private life." The offender also grooms the victim through promises, pressure, and increasingly inappropriate behavior. Finally, the offender also "grooms" the community, often by making himself or herself either invisible or, as one offender put it, "I would be anything the parents (and others) wanted me to be, such as clean-cut, helpful, and willing to spend time with the kids." Between that and the natural denial that such things could even happen, offenders are able to continue their abusive behavior.

3. How many children got hurt?

No one knows (except the offender). Only if other victims report to someone do we have an indication that there were multiple victims.

4. What do I say to parents?

You can share that you, too, were shocked, saddened, and concerned for the children, and that all of you will be interested in the outcome of the investigation.

5. With my training I should know what to do about this, shouldn't I?

Knowing how to help others in crisis and being able to be your own counselor are two different things. In one setting, you are the helper. In the other, you are a secondary victim of the perpetrator's actions. The crime of sexual abuse is isolating on so many levels. Healing from that isolation can't be done alone.

6. How will I trust any counselor ever again?

You will likely never trust the same way or to the same extent again. You will, however, be able to achieve different levels of trust and a more realistic sense of trust-worthiness.

7. I am surprised at how deeply this affected me. Is that normal?

Absolutely, it's normal! Sexual abuse is an attack on the body, mind and spirit of the victims and the impact cannot be overstated. It is also an enormous emotional blow to secondary victims-people who care about the victim. Sexual abuse affects every aspect of a person's life: trust, control, spirituality, sex/sexuality, identity, shame/guilt, self-esteem, relationships, and love.

8. What do I do with my anger and feelings of betrayal?

Know that the feelings are justified. There has been a major violation of trust. There can be no bigger betrayal. Talking to another adult you know or a counselor can help you sort out all the thoughts and feelings you may be experiencing.

9. Why do I feel responsible and ashamed?

Likely because you think you did not protect the child or should have known. Realistically, offenders do not usually abuse kids when another adult is around. They also are good at putting up a good front. If you could have done something different, you would have.

10. How will kids ever trust us again?

Kids will learn to trust the same way you will learn to develop trust with others. Earning trust isn't a one-time endeavor. In any relationship, there are different levels of trust depending on the context. Further, verification and re-negotiation when necessary are ongoing. You can do that by making sure that a person does what they say they are going to do (actions consistent with words); talking to other people (offenders try to isolate people from one another); trusting your gut instincts (if something feels wrong, check it out), and focusing on the behavior of an individual rather than who they are or what position they hold.