

Factors that Contribute to Sexual Abuse and Recidivism

Access to Vulnerable Persons

Contact with vulnerable persons must be regarded as one of the most important factors related to sexual assault and recidivism. Vulnerability may be due to size, intelligence, knowledge, resources, and any kind of influence. Offenders who are not willing to self-limit contact, opportunity, and availability to vulnerable people are demonstrating a dangerous degree of selfishness and disregard for needs and concerns for community safety.

Callousness (Absence of Empathy)

Several factors may contribute to empathy problems. Victims of physical and sexual abuse may either decide not to care or may grow up learning not to care about feelings. Persons with developmental disorders may have unique difficulties understanding, attending to, and processing feelings. Various forms of chronic and acute mental illness may preclude a person or dispose a person to emotional overloading or under-loading, resulting in inadequate attention and responsiveness to affective inhibitors to inappropriate behavior. Some offenders, though self-centered, may be as inadequately attentive to their own feelings as they are to the feelings of others. Like the other factors related to sexual abuse, attachment problems may also underlie the development of deviant behavior and lifestyle patterns resulting in sexual assault. As youthful offenders mature, their deviant behaviors become habits that eventually become internalized and embedded in personality structure and identity.

Inadequate Empowerment (Power and Control Problems)

All people have a desire for self-determination and autonomy. Developmental difficulties, emotional and mental disorders, abuse/trauma, attachment problems, and character disorders can be contributors to empowerment problems that result in a variety of power and control difficulties. Inappropriate and abusive behavior often serves the function of "power stealing" or "power hoarding" in order to remediate this lack of empowerment.

Secrecy/Anonymity - Lack of Accountability

Sexual abuse, though rewarding for the offender, is inherently loaded with shame and can only exist in a context of secrecy. Offenders who continue to live their lives in secretive and anonymous patterns are maintaining their ability to benefit from their abusive behaviors while they avoid the intense discomfort that stems from accountability.

Use of Sexual Thought/Feelings/Behavior to Meet Non-Sexual Needs

People who sexually offend are motivated not simply by a desire for sexual behavior but also by other emotional and identity related factors. There is often an important emotional reward, in addition to sexual reward, that offenders experience from their abusive behaviors. These non-sexual needs vary widely and may range from the reinforcement of a desirable sense of self to the reduction of dysphoric feelings, to revenge or retaliation. Through overuse, offenders may become desensitized to their own arousal, and require increasing levels of stimulus to achieve the same result. For some people the inclusion of deviant elements into sexual arousal patterns has the effect of heightening or restoring the arousing impact of these thoughts, fantasies, and behaviors. For this reason, unchecked deviant arousal patterns tend to become more deviant over time. Due to known social taboos, deviance tends to enter into arousal patterns only under circumstances where the desired result is more powerful or meaningful than the stigma and taboo.

Inadequate Boundaries

Inadequate boundaries is another important factor that contributes to the emergence of abusive sexual behavior. By itself, poor boundaries does not create sexual abuse. However, coupled with other factors, such as a pattern of using sexual behavior to meet non-sexual needs, poor sexual boundaries serve a role in creating a context in which it appears acceptable or desirable to the offender to escalate his or her sexual behavior and cross increasingly serious boundaries.

Distorted Cognitions

Sexual abuse depends upon both external factors (i.e. access to victims, avoiding detection, etc), and the ability to create an internal context that can also support the existence of unacceptable behaviors. Cognitive distortions serve to keep the offender's conscience from interfering with opportunities to act out. Observable patterns of cognitive distortion can be identified in all offenders. Often, these cognitive patterns are directly mirrored in the offenders lifestyle (i.e. offenders with compartmentalized cognition may also live compartmentalized lives in which their family members have very little contact with others.