

When your partner or relative has been charged with a child sex offence.

A brief handbook of strategies

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INTRODUCTION

This is most likely one of the worst - if not *the* worst - experience of your life. You will probably go through a wide range of feelings and experiences including feeling overwhelmed and not knowing where to turn. Hopefully, this book will give you some guidelines that will help you walk the journey.

Hope for the future

The booklet will supply you with some of the information you may need, particularly in the early stages of the disclosure. Additional references and sources of information are also provided.

Origins of this book

The booklet emerged from creative interactions in the partners' support group conducted by the Pastoral Counselling Institute (PCI). This group is a supportive space for those whose partners or other family members have been involved in child sexual abuse.

A common theme expressed by many attendees at the partners' support group is the difficulty navigating the journey. For example, some people have stated, 'If only I had had more information at the beginning. I did not know what to do'. Not only is it a terrible shock to learn that your partner or relative has committed a sexual crime against children, you are also thrust into an unfamiliar world of law enforcement and the judicial system. You may feel unsure of who you should speak to or where to find information about what to do next. This uncertainty may leave you feeling as though you are stumbling through a completely new and *frightening* learning experience.

Is the counselling value free?

The concept of *value free* counselling has had a chequered history. It is usually intended to communicate that counsellors do not impose values on people. This is meant to be accomplished by retaining an objective stance toward the person seeking support and the stories being told. However, the concept of value free counselling becomes difficult when the person has committed serious crimes. Even if the counsellor does not raise the question of values, the legal processes and the community certainly will.

At PCI we consider values an important part of the human experience. As such, values play a critical part in the therapeutic work we undertake, as well as informing respectful

conversations between all of the parties involved. This means that even the values expressed by the offender are considered, and perhaps challenged within respectful conversation.

PCI staff members accept that every person has the right to make their own decisions. However, it is our decision to see any use of the body outside of respectful relationships as unhelpful in developing a healthy, mutually beneficial society. While we maintain that view is based on sound principles it is never imposed on any person with whom we work. We will discuss and share values – even challenge them - but never impose them.

Our approach to working with people is informed by evidence-based psychological theory. The rich tapestry of stories contained in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures provides an additional lens through which we may explore stories. Therefore, we have a strong focus on the value of each person and how we can live more effectively in community with respect and love. It could be described as a spiritual approach rather than a dogmatic religious or denominational approach. We are interested in how people make meaning of their lives and the beliefs and values that sustain them.

At all times we seek to work respectfully with people as they work out their own values and the decisions that follow. Sometimes these personal choices may mean that an offender does not engage in the counselling process. In these circumstances proceeding with counselling is counterproductive; therefore, our staff may make the choice to cease treatment. There may also be times when the legal processes informed by community expectations impose limitations on an offender.

CHAPTER ONE

Some definitions of child sex offences

What constitutes a child sex offence?

It is an offence to involve any child under the age of sixteen years in sexual activity. If the offender is involved in a particular relationship of care and responsibility - such as a parent or a schoolteacher - the age of consent is raised to eighteen years in NSW. Similarly, accessing material (child abuse material) featuring children under the age of eighteen is an offence.

The age of consent is a function of a particular community's attitudes and laws. Some may argue that sixteen is too young to be able to give consent for sexual encounters, especially with a much older adult. However, that is the age that must be addressed in the context of the law as it currently stands in NSW, Australia.

Offences against children can be committed by adults or adolescence (male or female), and in some cases children. This booklet will focus on adult offenders.

Why is Child Abuse Material an offence?

Often people who are charged with accessing child abuse material believe that their behaviour is not as serious as someone who has committed a hands-on offence. They often reason that they are *only* looking at pictures. What they fail to realise is that using children to make such images is abusive, in and of itself. Further, they are helping to create a market for such abusive images. An additional issue - into which offenders rarely have any insight - is that the trade in children for sexual exploitation has become a major source of income for international crime syndicates.

You will notice that this booklet talks about child abuse material not *child pornography*. The latter term has been out of use for some time for obvious reasons; children are *not* pornographic. Consequently terms such as child exploitive material or child abusive material are used. The latter term is the one currently used in legal processes. Accessing *legal* pornography is referred to at PCI as legal exploitive material.

CHAPTER TWO

Feelings you may experience

You may experience a whole range of emotions which may not be covered in this small booklet. The feelings described here are reflective of those most commonly reported by people seeking support at PCI. They do not follow in a straight line. Feelings come when they come without any particular order. It is important to understand there are no right or wrong feelings; there are just feelings.

Shock

Long before you arrive at the myriad of other feelings you will most likely experience shock. You may ask yourself the following questions: 'How could this happen?' 'How could it happen to me?' 'How could this person do this?' 'Did I ever know them at all?'

Sexual crimes against children are particularly difficult for members of the community to grapple with, as they seem so far outside expected behaviour. Even other serious crimes appear to pale into insignificance when compared to crimes against children. It is often considered the worst crime of all.

This crime has come into *your* life and you are directly affected by what has occurred. The offence may be against your own child, a child in the extended family or a child outside of the family. It may be a hands-on offence, where contact has occurred, or involve accessing child abuse material. Whatever the offence, your mind may be racing and you may feel overwhelmed with thoughts, as well as a multiplicity of feelings. Remember, you are not alone, as there are many other people in our community going through the same kind of experience. You are also not *mad*, even though you might think you are heading that way. The thoughts and experiences you are going through are likely to be quite normal, given the circumstances. It will not feel normal to you because it is a *terrifying* new experience, and the nature of this process dictates that there is likely to be a high degree of chaos.

In sum, you are likely to experience significant feelings of shock and disbelief during the initial stages of this life altering journey. This is a normal response to the devastating discovery that your life partner or family member has committed abhorrent crimes against children. You may find it helpful to draw on the following strategies during this difficult time:

Strategy one: ride the waves. You have been dealt a serious blow to your emotions and sense of identity. Therefore, you may experience feelings such as rage, fear, and

hopelessness. These feelings, in addition to resentment, loss, and grief are a normal response to a shocking life experience. Given the nature of this situation, you may need to allow yourself some space to sit with these difficult emotions. Be kind to yourself and accept that this is where you are at right now.

You may also experience some symptoms of anxiety and/or depression (racing and repetitive thoughts, feeling physically on edge and/or low energy or motivation and intense feelings of sadness). This is also normal. However, if these feelings are persistent and they are interfering with your ability to perform the other tasks and responsibilities in your life you may find it helpful to speak to your general practitioner and one of our psychologists at PCI.

Strategy two: seek assistance. This is a developing area of psychology and as such you may need to take a considered approach when seeking assistance.

While resources are not as widely available as one would like there are people to contact. In particular, clinicians who are registered with State Government Child Advocacy Services and the Office of the Children’s Guardian in New South Wales. Such registered persons are qualified to assist you with your questions. In addition, the online support group PartnerSPEAK (<http://www.partnerspeak.org.au/>) run by individuals affected by an offender’s behaviour is a valuable resource available to you at any time.

Strategy three: be appropriately assertive. There are likely to be many obstacles thrown in your way intended to keep you uninformed. The actions of some of those around you may leave you feeling belittled and ostracised. Remember you did not commit the crime, so stand tall and seek the support you need.

Betrayal

Someone you thought you knew and trusted has betrayed you by abusing either your child or someone else’s child. This behaviour breaks all the rules of trust and respect that partners and families need to function well. Feelings of betrayal may lead to questions such as: ‘How could he/she?’ ‘How could he/she do this to the family?’ ‘How could he/she do this to me?’ ‘What has anybody ever done to him/her to deserve such terrible treatment?’ And so the feelings of betrayal run on and on.

Strategy one: treat betrayal for what is. Sexually abusive behaviour needs to be accurately described. In the stunned experience of betrayal it is common for some people to think that they might be over-dramatizing the event. Even the word *betrayal* can seem too

strong to express. However, it is important to allow yourself to *name* child sexual abuse as betrayal and sit with this difficult emotional response.

Strategy two: take time to mourn. Discovering that your partner or family member has committed child abuse offences is a heavy blow. The way in which people work through the story varies greatly, but no one does it easily.

It is quite likely that you will receive all kinds of well-meaning advice from those around you. This can make an already difficult journey even more troublesome. It is important to take time out to create personal space to grieve this betrayal. A part of making space may be asking those around you to just *listen* and keep advice giving for a later time.

Strategy three: avoid making major decisions. It is tempting at this time to want to do something to feel better. Making decisions can give you a false sense of being in control of the situation. However, decisions made in the context of distress can often be quite harmful in the long term. You need time away from major decisions (wherever possible) to receive support, think, tell your story and have time just time for *you*.

Rage

Some people find it hard to feel rage, even if the offence is against their own child or children. Feeling or expressing rage can be particularly difficult for people with strong religious beliefs. In addition, western society has expectations around how women should express their feelings and rage is definitely not one of them!

Strategy one: maintain the rage. Rage seems to be one of the most common feelings for people to experience after disclosure (particularly if it is against their own children). Allowing yourself space to sit with this sense of rage is an appropriate response to a deep sense of loss and betrayal.

Strategy two: seek support. You will quickly find out who is able to provide support and who is not. Support may come from the most surprising quarters. However some people –for a myriad of reasons- may be unable to provide any support. For this reason, it may be prudent to be cautious with those you choose to disclose to. Again, you may find it helpful to seek support from other people in similar circumstances either online (partnerSPEAK.org.au) or in person with one of our psychologists or at the support group offered by PCI.

Strategy three: focus and direct your rage. The stress in your life can be so high, and the rage so intense, that it may be directed at the wrong person. The rage you feel will give you energy, but it can also prompt you to say and do things that you later regret. This is where a support group (online or in person) can be very helpful. Focus your rage on getting the right information, following through on good strategies and keeping your children and yourself emotionally safe.

Exhaustion

By the time you get through shock, betrayal, and rage you may be feeling quite exhausted. Abusive experiences in a family system are emotionally draining, so it is normal to find yourself lacking energy. You may also have less interest in things you previously enjoyed. Working with sexual abuse is an extraordinarily difficult life experience and feelings of exhaustion are reasonable given the situation. However, as has been previously noted, if these feelings are persistent and they are interfering with your ability to perform the other tasks and responsibilities in your life you may find it helpful to speak to your general practitioner and one of our psychologists at PCI.

Strategy one: the experience is normal. If you were not feeling tired and pretty weird then you would really have a problem to be concerned about. Disconnecting from some people and activities around you may be a helpful short term strategy to survive a very difficult situation. When you are feeling somewhat restored you can reengage to seek support from trusted sources.

Strategy two: recover at your own pace. If you feel miserable and do not want to cheer up, that is perfectly normal. It is okay to stay there for a while. We all have different ways of processing life's difficulties. You may find others around you may want you to *cheer up* or *get over it*. It is important to stay firm and remain confident in your ability to move beyond these feelings of misery at your own pace.

Strategy three: try to hold onto some normal routines. The exhaustion may require that you cut down on some commitments, but try to keep the basics going for you and your family. This may mean having regular meals, light exercise, and maintaining a consistent bed time. Continuing with other regular activities such as going to work or school and planning

some pleasurable activities can also be helpful because when there is so much internal chaos, it helps to have some external structure.

Directionless decisions

You may feel as though your world has been turned upside down leaving you feeling directionless. Perhaps the plans you had for your future now seem totally inappropriate. This is a reasonable response to such a shocking event, but it is an awful space to be in. You may also find your inner sense of emotional safety and self-confidence is threatened, as is your sense of being able to accurately discern issues. If you operate from a religious faith persuasion your belief system may feel insufficient for the present experience.

You may also find it difficult to know where to start when making decisions regarding your children and other members of your family. Other questions may arise such as what to do about finances, your home (e.g., should you sell the house? Who pays the mortgage if your partner goes to jail?), and your job.

Strategy one: prioritise your life. Although you may feel pressure to make important decisions right now, the choices you need to make cannot be rushed. However, some decisions have a higher priority than others. You may find *mind dumping* a helpful strategy to reduce confusion about where to start making decisions. Mind dumping starts with noting on paper all of the questions rattling around in your mind (e.g., Who should I tell about my partner's or family members offending? What do I tell the children? Et cetera) in no particular order of importance. Once you have your list of mind rumblings on paper you can start to prioritise by dividing this list into the following categories:

1. **Important, but not urgent:** These issues are important and they do require attention, but they *can* be left for the short term without dire consequences (e.g., Should we sell the house?).
2. **Urgent:** The remaining issues *must* be addressed now. Setting aside the issues listed as important, but not urgent allows you some space to prioritise these most pressing issues. Revising this *urgent* list from most urgent to least urgent (e.g., 1, 2....5, 6) can provide a clear pathway to start making considered choices and decisions (e.g., Where can I get support for the children? Where can I get legal advice? Contacting Centrelink for financial assistance).

CHAPTER THREE

The reactions of others

It is all too frightening. Hopefully you will have friends and family who will provide support for you through this difficult time. However, this is where the story can get really tough. It is not uncommon for friends and family members to suddenly become unavailable or even hostile.

For some people it may feel safer to avoid the whole topic than to stand beside someone affected by sexual abuse. This does not necessarily mean the person is uncaring. It may be that they are simply *unable* to cope with the story at this time. It can be hard to be treated like this by people you thought you could trust. However, we may not know *their* story and the reasons why they are unable to provide support. It may help to view their choice not to provide support as an outcome of *their* life journey and not a reflection of *your* worthiness to receive support.

Not only may individuals find providing support difficult, so too will social groups such as some faith communities. Your story - caught up as it is in the horrific nature of sex offending – may become too difficult for some people in your faith community. At PCI we believe that this is the very kind of issue that should be at the forefront of a faith community's commitment to justice, accountability, and healing.

You must have known. People who have never experienced a sexually abusive event often find it difficult to accept that others in the household did not know that abuse was occurring. This overlooks the fact that many sex offenders can be quite creative in the way they set up the situation to look quite normal while abusing a child. When a partner *is aware* of sexual abuse occurring, it is usually in the context of an abusive and controlling relationship where they are also suffering forms of abuse. In the majority of cases, partners (and family members) have no idea that the abuse is occurring and it is extremely distressing to be disbelieved by people close to you.

Why stay with the bastard? This is a question you may well hear early on in your story. The question itself - and the crude language used - gives you some insight as to how people outside the story feel about what has happened. A common expectation is that people will leave any partner who abuses a child and that is exactly what many people will do. On the other hand, there are a significant number of situations where people stay in a relationship

with the offender, sometimes even reconciling the partnership. It is this latter decision that can infuriate other people, particularly family and close friends.

A person may stay in the relationship with a partner who offends for a whole range of reasons. Some people of faith believe that this is what constitutes the *better for worse part* of the marriage covenant. They may also deeply love the offender, while being horrified by their abuse. Alternatively some partners may be *locked-in* to the relationship for a multitude of complex reasons (e.g., there may be a large family or a disabled child who needs care). However, those who would be critical of a partner's decisions to stay need to be very careful about the judgements they make.

If you're staying, we're leaving. Whatever decision you make about your partner or other relative who has offended, be aware that keeping in contact with an offender may affect your relationship with others. Adult children may cease contact with an offender *and* their partner if they continue to maintain contact. This may include limiting access to grandchildren. Emotions can become very intense and in some cases the issue remains permanently unresolved.

Strategy one: carefully weigh up consequences. Where do you want to be over the next five years and beyond? You may have made sacred promises to stay with your partner in good times and bad, which may be a positive side to your character. On the other hand, adult children and grandchildren may feel they also deserve your loyalty and time. Who gets priority and how to make such decisions? It is a time of sorting out the moral, ethical, and obligatory issues in belonging to a family.

Strategy two: family as a system. Be aware that you are not just dealing with a number of individuals. A family is a complex network of intersecting relationships and needs. When the system feels unsafe its members will strive to bring things into some kind of order that can be understood. Consequently, decisions you make may come into conflict with the needs of other family members as they seek to rebalance the system. You are likely to come across a host of responses from family members (e.g., denial, avoidance, fear or anger) which can make negotiation quite difficult.

At the end of the day it is your life and you must live it as you choose. It is appropriate to be sensitive to the needs of other family members, sadly though, you will not be able to please everyone. Trying to do so will increase your stress enormously. You may still consider

the needs and opinions of others with respect and care knowing that some life decisions may not align with some people in your life.

The content contained here is not exhaustive and there is much more to write. Hopefully, this text will give you a start in the tough journey to discover hope again.

Resources

Partners' Support Group

While PCI staff members provide guidance and information, a lot of the leadership in the group comes from the members themselves as they offer mutual support and encouragement. This collegiate spirit extends to organising community seminars and contributing to PCI publications such as this booklet. The authors are indebted to the group for their generosity and grace, thank you.

If you would like more information about the support group or individual counselling offered by PCI please call the office on 9683 3664.

NSW Office of the Children's Guardian

This office has oversight of the New South Wales Child Sex Offender Accreditation Scheme (NSWCOCAS) which lists the registered clinicians qualified to treat offenders.

Readings

There is material for people whose partners have had affairs or access legal exploitive material but very little written for partners of people who have offended against children.

Moroney, S. (2012). *My husband the rapist*. The Guardian.

Norwood, R. (1986). *Women who love too much*. London: Random House.

Bass, E., & Davis, L. (1991). *The courage to heal*. London: Cedar.

Powell, P. (2005). *What the Bible says about sex offending: A workbook for men in treatment*.

Sydney: Pastoral Counselling Institute.

Online support

PartnerSPEAK: www.partnerspeak.org.au/

(An online peer support forum for those whose partner or family member has accessed child abuse material).