



INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUAL OFFENDERS

This resource offers information on sexual offenders. This can be a difficult topic for people who have experienced sexual assault. The Harborview Abuse & Trauma Center is here to help you. Call us any time for support.

ABOUT SEXUAL OFFENDERS

There is no “typical” person who sexually offends. Offenders come from all backgrounds. They can often seem like ordinary people. Although most offenders are men, all people can commit sexual offenses.

Sexual offenders can range in age, from teenagers to elders. More than half of adult sexual offenders begin offending in their teens. Although younger children can be sexually aggressive or inappropriate, they are not sexual offenders nor culpable by law. Instead, they should be treated as children with sexual behavior problems. They often need extra supervision and specialized treatment.

This resource tries to answer these commonly asked questions:

- *What are the common characteristics of sexual offenders?*
- *What are some common conditions that contribute to sexual offending behavior?*
- *What can be done to help prevent sexual offending behavior?*

COMMON BEHAVIORS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Most adult sexual offenders think about their crimes ahead of time. In some cases, especially with young people who offend, sexual assault can be an impulsive act. Offenders sometimes take advantage of an opportunity to offend. Adult offenders often know their victims and use these relationships to set up situations in which a chosen victim can be sexually assaulted. Sexual offenders can use physical violence, force, or threats. In other cases, offenders use manipulation, abuse a position of power, or use substances to impair a victim.

Planning and manipulating relationships over time to commit sexual offenses is called grooming. This is more common with adults who abuse children. Victims may believe that they are responsible for what happened, even though this is never true. After the assaults, offenders may threaten, pressure or use guilt to keep victims from telling anyone.

How Offenders Justify Their Behavior

Denial is used by offenders to avoid facing the consequences of their actions. Denial means that they refuse to admit to others (or even to themselves) that they have committed sexual assaults. They may say, “It’s a lie. I never did it,” or “That wasn’t really rape, they agreed to it.”

- **Rationalizing** involves blaming the victim, other people or circumstances. Typical thoughts are, "It wasn't my fault, they wanted it;" "they didn't fight back" or "I didn't know what I was doing, I had too much alcohol." These are ways of placing responsibility elsewhere.
- **Minimizing** is used by offenders to deny the seriousness of the acts or the harm done to the victims. ("I didn't really hurt them.") By minimizing their actions, offenders try to make it seem as though what they did was not a big deal.
- **Lack of External Controls:** Offenders look for or create situations where there is little chance of being caught. They often create situations where they are alone with and have control over a potential victim.
- **Seeking Out Vulnerability:** Sexual offenses often involve a power difference. Offenders may seek out victims who are young, who have a disability, or who are impaired in some way. This may include a person who is isolated, asleep, intoxicated, or experiencing emotional distress. An offender may seek out a victim who they think will not fight back or be believed.

COMMON CONDITIONS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO SEXUAL OFFENDING

Typically, there are several factors that contribute to a person developing this type of behavior. It is important to know that offenders always make a choice when they commit sexual offenses no matter what their reasons were. They decide to act even though they know it is wrong. Nothing a victim does can make a person commit a sexual offense.

- **Motivation:** Offenders can have different sexual motivations. They may be sexually attracted to children. They may have a preference for impersonal sex and ignore others' boundaries.
- **Antisocial Attitudes:** Sexual offenders can lack empathy. They may see nothing wrong in taking advantage of people or breaking the law.
- **Background:** Most people who have been abused do not abuse others. However, some people who have been mistreated develop negative feelings about themselves and others. They may try to gain control or relieve emotional pain by harming others.

PREVENTION

There are ways to prevent harmful sexual behavior from developing in young people.

- Help others be accountable and to change their behavior when they cause harm. Consult with friends, family and community about how to increase safety.
- Families can teach and reinforce values that emphasize consent, respect, empathy and personal responsibility.
- Children should not have access to sexually explicit media.
- Children need opportunities to express all feelings in ways that do not hurt others.
- Children who have been physically or sexually abused should have counseling so that they can cope with the trauma.
- Intervene immediately if children or teenagers sexually misbehave. Teach them about rules and boundaries. Protect other children and provide supervision.
- Check out our other resources including "[A Safer Family, A Safer World](#)," and "[Sexual Behavior and Children](#)." Give us a call if you need support. We are here for you.