

Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers

Statement about sexual addiction, sexual abuse, and effective treatment
Nov. 16, 2017



The recent reports of sexual misconduct made against Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and other public figures have brought the concepts of sexual addiction and sexual offending, as well as the treatments for these behaviors, into the public discourse. While the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) commends media outlets for working to shed light on the causes of these behaviors and the treatments available to address them, many articles contain a number of popular misconceptions. Given the importance of this issue in society, ATSA offers the following clarifications.

For treatment to be effective, it must focus on the right issues.

ATSA supports the need for people who are having difficulty controlling their sexual behavior in different contexts to seek treatment. We know from research and experience that treatment can significantly reduce the likelihood of future sexual offending and prevent future victimization. We are pleased to see that many of the individuals who have been reported for sexual offending are, indeed, seeking treatment. We know that treatment works and can be a necessary step toward reform.

What keeps getting lost in the recent coverage of this issue, however, is that most of the behaviors being discussed are, in fact, nonconsensual and are likely not the result of sexual addiction, which is controversial as a diagnosis. Nonconsensual sexual activity is sexual abuse. Treatment for sexual addiction generally will not address the factors that lead people to sexually abuse others.

To prevent sexual abuse, we must understand who sexually abuses.

Most individuals who engage in sexually abusive behavior know their victims. They may hold positions of power or authority, or may be trusted family members and friends. Individuals who sexually abuse others come from all walks of life, all educational and income levels, and include people of all genders.

The reasons individuals sexually abuse others are as varied as the abusers themselves. Some of the many factors that can lead to sexually abusive behavior include sexual attraction, attitudes and beliefs about gender roles, a sense of entitlement, and antisocial traits. Sexual abuse typically involves emotional manipulation, and may or may not include coercion or threats of harm to the victim.

It is hard not to feel shocked when highly educated and successful people are reported for sexual abuse. We need to recognize that the people who commit sexually abusive acts are people we know, people we admire, people we love, and people we trust. And, as the #metoo and #metoowomen movements make clear, sexual abuse occurs far more frequently than most people realize. That's why it is vital to understand the factors that contribute to an individual's decision to sexually offend, the treatment interventions that prevent reoffending, and how to prevent sexual abuse from occurring in the first place.

It's time for a conversation.

It is time to shift the narrative around sexual abuse and broaden the conversation from one of sensationalism to one of prevention. By changing how we discuss sexual abuse – in the media, in politics, in our communities – we can move from surprise and sensationalism to recognition and awareness, and we can move from reaction to prevention.

We need to talk as a society about sexual abuse, its causes, who perpetrates it and why, and who suffers from it. It is when we don't talk about it that we create a dynamic in which sexual abuse can flourish. It is when we do talk about it – even when those conversations get uncomfortable – that we can begin creating a safer society for everyone.

ATSA encourages open discussion and education to help end sexual abuse. We support a greater awareness of the factors that lead to sexually abusive behavior and the methods for preventing it. We invite others to join the conversation and help us create communities and workplaces where no one lives in fear of sexual abuse. Everyone deserves to feel safe.

To learn more about our efforts to end sexual abuse or to arrange to speak with a subject matter expert, visit atsa.com or email atsa@atsa.com.

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ATSA is an international, multi-disciplinary, non-profit association of professionals dedicated to making society safer by preventing all forms of sexual abuse through effective treatment and management of individuals at risk to sexually abuse or who have sexually abused. ATSA encourages prevention through sound research, effective practice, informed policy, and comprehensive stakeholder collaboration.