

Treatment Guidelines for Non-Offending Parents

Non-Offending Parent (NOP) therapist: The therapeutic approach for the treatment of non-offending parents in incest cases is different than the treatment for parents of children who were sexually assaulted outside the home. In incest cases, the non-offending parent is part of the dysfunctional system that resulted in the sexual abuse of a child.

Incestuous sex offenders typically rely on seduction and emotional manipulation to control the victim and the family, more so than physical force, due to the position of trust the offender occupies. Incest abuse is frequently long term, with many instances of abuse over a prolonged period; another difference from stranger assault. The offender may be a loved and valuable person to the non-offending parent, giving exceptional complex distraction to the non-offending parent's ability to protect the child from the offender and support the child in recuperating from the abuse.

The non-offending parent has her personal issues to contend with, such as the simultaneous disclosure of the abuse, a threat that could end her spousal relationship and necessity of functioning as a single parent with the complete loss of the offender's financial and other contributions. Issues commonly addressed in NOP treatment include-

- 1 Grief and loss issues – Loss of the partner, loss of self-image as an adequate parent, loss of her role as a wife, grief as the NOP's own untreated abuse issues are activated
- 2 Attribution of responsibility – Assumption of the NOP's own responsibility, ability to support victim in her disclosure
- 3 Unambiguous victim support – Patience as the victim works through the symptomatology resulting from the abuse, correction of unsafe and unhealthy family boundaries
- 4 Confronting the NOP's minimization and denial – NOPs, siblings and victims frequently collude to deny the extent, severity or impact of the abuse, leaving the victim responsible for solving the family's problems.
- 5 Family role realignment – Almost inevitably, children and adults have assumed inappropriate roles within the family. Either or both parents may relate to the child as a peer, and the victim is expected to meet an adult's needs, including keeping the secret of the abuse. The child may have difficulty resuming a more developmentally appropriate role in the family.
- 6 Re-building relationship with child victim – Offenders rely on strained and distant relationships between family members to control the victim and keep the abuse secret. They may pursue victims who already have stressed relationships with parents, or work within the family to create rifts. The victim has often contended with betrayal, a damaged self-image, feelings of loss of control and premature sexualization. The NOP often benefits from education, direction and support in assisting the victim in processing these feelings.
- 7 Development of a family safety plan that facilitates the Non-offending parent and each family member to develop rules that will help the family incorporate child safety, specifically focusing on the dynamics that could expose the children to further sexual abuse.