

Treatment Guidelines for Victims of Intra – familial Child Sexual Abuse

Victim therapist: As with the non-offending parent, the therapeutic approach for the treatment of victims in incest cases is different than the treatment for children who were sexually assaulted outside the home. Incestuous sex offenders typically rely on seduction and emotional manipulation to control the victim, rather than physical force, due to the position of trust the offender occupies in the family. 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 victim, tremendously complicating the victim's recovery from the abuse. Issues commonly addressed in victim treatment include-

- 1 Grief and loss issues - Betrayal first by the offender and then by unsupportive adults, loss of innocence, sometimes the loss of the offender
- 2 Attribution of responsibility - Victims may find it more comfortable to assume the world is a fair and safe place, and that they have brought the abuse on themselves.
- 3 Self protection - Victims work through the symptomatology resulting from the abuse, including boundary issues and premature sexualization
- 4 A safe place to tell the story - Victims vary widely in the degree to which they wish to discuss details of the abuse. Many benefit from group treatment, to see that they are not alone in their experiences. The victim may also wish to have conjoint or family sessions, to share her or his feelings regarding the abuse with family members.
- 5 Family role realignment - In some families, the offender is more "valuable" than the victim, leading the family to focus on the disclosure as the problem, rather than the abuse. Children may have been harshly disciplined by the offender, leaving the non-offending parent to develop new methods for discipline. In other families, the victim was told she was a rival to her mother for the offender's attention, effectively making her a peer to the adults in the home. Victims need support to assume a more developmentally appropriate role within the family. The NOP who may have been subjugated by the offender must be accepted as the leader of the family.
- 6 Trauma issues - Victims are likely to be experiencing complex trauma, due to the multiple traumas incest victims typically endure. Sensitive and nuanced treatment will keep the victim in a frame of mind to work on recovery issues, without over-stimulating the child and provoking withdrawal or dissociation. Sub-issues include reducing acute distress, learning to regulate affect, and identifying and countering thoughts that underlie negative emotional states.
- 7 Identity issues - The expected developmental issues of childhood and adolescence are complicated by incest. The inevitable distortion of roles may be absorbed by the child or adolescent, and should be addressed and made explicit in treatment.
- 8 Reunification and safety – The parent child bond is threatened by the sexual abuse by the perpetrator and the ambivalent or denying response by the NOP. It is imperative that victims feel validated in the absence of parental validation. However, reunification is best approached by the NOP demonstrating belief and support of the victim's disclosure as the foundation in re-building the mother/child bond.