

WORKING WITH

**sexual**



# offenders

**T**here are populations that even the most seasoned of Christian counselors like to avoid. There are always those borderlines that strike fear in the hearts of all of us. Just when you think you are making a tortured step in the right direction, off they go into that peculiar, raging lunacy that always seems to set you two or three steps back.

Then there are the sociopathic personalities that can cause us to tear our hair out when they never seem to understand our Christian and moral reason. Perhaps no population frightens us more than sex offenders. They might seem dangerous for one thing. For another, society has pretty much given up on them, shutting them up in prisons as best it can and throwing away the key. So, why should we work with them?

You brought us into prison  
and laid burdens on our backs.

Psalms 66:11

Set me free from my prison,  
that I may praise your name.

Psalms 142:7

MARK R. LAASER

The answer may be as simple as remembering that Jesus might have associated with such as these. He was, of course, quite likely to “hang out” with sinners. Jesus continually seemed to know that abused people grow up to abuse people, or as our colleague Sandy Wilson says, *Hurt People Hurt People*.

Sexual offenders do incredible damage. The knowledge of that damage might make it impossible for some of you to work with this population, particularly if you have been sexually abused yourself. For those of you who can see deeper into the soul of an offender, your work may be really fulfilling. Here are six points to think about in treating this population.

### Assessment

One of my current clients is a former youth pastor who had sex with a 15-year-old girl in his youth group. After going to jail for a year, his probation officer is allowing him to be in treatment at our center. Even though he can live at home with his four children, including two daughters, the probation officer won't let him attend any of his children's athletic, social, school, or church events because there will be other children there. In fact, he can't even go to church at this point. Last week he lamented, “I'm being thrown into the general pot of rapists and child molesters and no one has ever bothered to get to know me enough to see if I'm really a danger.”

He's right, and this is a matter of assessment. Since he's gone to jail and been labeled a sex offender, it is being assumed that he is a danger to all children. The truth of it is that he is really oriented to women. The teenager he did offend was fully developed. He is in no way a pedophile.

Accurate assessment is critical. We can't lump sex offenders into some general group and expect for all treatment, boundaries, and prohibitions to be the same. Two things are true: First, not all sexual offenses are the same. The cate-

gory of sexual offending can include the very serious crimes of rape, incest, and molestation. It can also refer to those who voyeur or exhibit themselves and to those who sexually harass.

Offending can mean using the power of your position as employer, therapist, doctor, or pastor to gain sexual access. We refer to this kind of offending as “authority rape” and it is considered a felony in some states. The act of molesting itself can refer to very different age groups or to other vulnerable groups such as mentally ill or geriatric populations.

Second, not all sexual offenders have equal amounts of pathology. Some may suffer from character disorders, depression, and anxiety. Some may deal with addictions. In one study I was involved in, 50% of a population of incarcerated sex offenders was diagnosed as sexually addicted.

Some offenders may be sociopathic and violent. These offenders may need to be incarcerated forever. The vast majority of sexual offenders suffers from treatable illness and should be given the opportunity to get the best possible care.

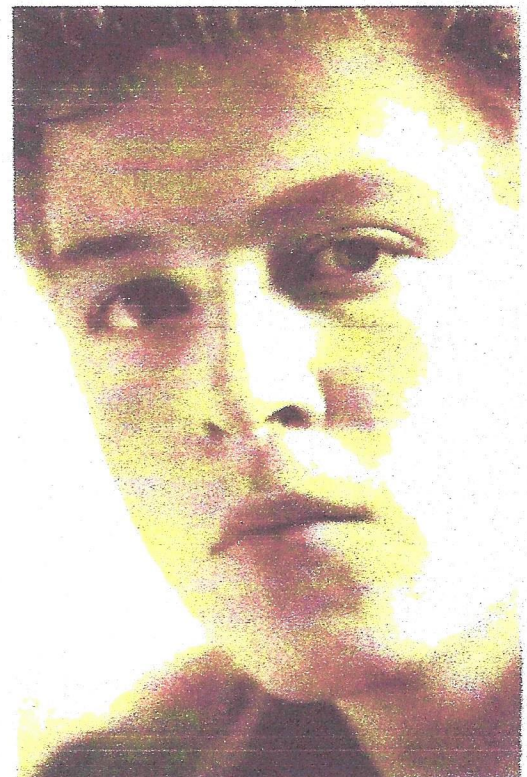
### The Offender's Abuse

We can in no way excuse a sex offender's behavior on the fact that he might have been abused himself as a child. If we are going to treat him, however, we must know how wounded he is. I believe that the reason most offender treatment programs aren't very effective is that they neglect these wounds.

I was speaking recently at a sex offender program in a local prison. The head psychologist said to me before hand, “We spend so much time trying to get these men to understand the damage they've done, we hope you're not here to offer them any excuses about their own abuses.”

My impression of that prison program was that the men in it were getting repeatedly shamed and humiliated by the program staff. This is done in the belief that doing so will prevent them

We can in no way excuse a sex offender's behavior on the fact that he might have been **abused himself as a child**. If we are going to treat him, however, we must know how wounded he is. I believe that the reason most offender treatment programs aren't very effective is that they neglect these wounds.



The offender repeats the kind of abuse that happened to him, only this time he gets to **be in control**.

from re-offending. I think that the opposite is true. These men are shamed and wounded already. If shame and wounds are the reasons why they have become angry, and perhaps violent, then repeating shame and abuse will make them angrier, more violent, and much more likely to repeat their behaviors.

I have worked with a number of priests and ministers who have offended children and young adolescents. It has always been true that these men offended within a one-year variance of when they themselves were offender. That is, if the man was 11 when he experienced abuse, his victims will be between the ages of 10–12.

This is a dynamic generally referred to a trauma repetition. The offender repeats the kind of abuse that happened to him, only this time he gets to be in control. In this way, the offender searches for power over his memories of harm by being in power over the victim.

The way to prevent future offending is to help offenders find healing for their own wounds. This may take time and patience, but it is worth it. If we can get to this population early, we can save hundreds of victims. One treatment director once told me, the average teenage sexual offender will have 1–2 victims. If they are left untreated, he said, they would grow up to have 350 victims by the age of 40.

### **The Offender's History and Rituals**

It is important to take an offender's total history. One of my colleagues tells me that you can generally assume that an offender will never tell you the whole truth. Getting them to do so is always a matter of helping them feel safe and comfortable with you. You will need to talk to spouses and others who may give you what we call "collateral" information. Ultimately, you may need to ask

them to take a lie detector test. This seems like a difficult request on the surface, but I have found it brings a sense of relief to all concerned.

There are several reasons that a total history is important: First, it allows for the opportunity to discover early life experiences and traumas. Second, it may reveal how many early non-sexual boundaries the offender violated. An offender's life may reveal ever increasing emotional and physical invasions. Third, talking about the history will serve the purpose of confession. Finding out if the offender is broken and humble, through an act of confession, may be a critical element in them getting well.

Every offender has a ritual. Rituals are the process by which he goes from the thought of offending to the actual act. Rituals usually involve two major components: thoughts and actions. Thoughts themselves can be complex and multi-factored. There are those thoughts of excited anticipation that build adrenalin. There are sexually lustful feelings that are based on biological desire. These two by themselves compose a powerful neuro-chemical cocktail.

Then, there are mental rituals of justification, minimizing, and denial. Unless an offender is totally dissociated from his feelings (which could be possible due to trauma), he will need to create reasons why it is okay for him to do these heinous acts. These thoughts may be as simple as the denial that he won't get caught or as complicated as anger from past wounds that are projected onto victims.

Actions are any behaviors that are done to prepare to offend. These actions can be short or long. Some might be months in length, while others might be seconds. Some actions are designed to get a possible victim to feel safe enough to spend time with the perpe-

trator. These actions are usually referred to as "grooming" rituals. Other actions may be to find the time, money, or opportunity to offend.

Prevention of future offense demands that rituals are understood. There are usually many boundaries that can be placed at early points of the process of actions so as not to let the offender get to the point where he is beyond any control. Intervening in the thought life of an offender is a matter of talking about even the most delusional of thoughts, so that truth and reality can be brought to bear.

### **Developing Victim Empathy**

My friend and colleague, Marilyn Murray, describes in her book, *The Prisoner of Another War*, how she was raped by a group of men when she was a teenager. After going through much healing, she found herself drawn by her Christian faith to go into prisons so as to minister to sex offenders. As part of their program, offenders must listen to Marilyn tell what it was like to be raped. I have met some of the men who have been impacted by this experience. They were changed and transformed by allowing themselves to feel what it was like to be raped.

This is what we call "victim empathy," the understanding of what it was like to be victimized. For some offenders this might come from understanding how they themselves were victimized in similar, if not identical, ways. For others it might mean being allowed to read or hear the stories of victims. I have seen panel presentations at conferences that were given by released offenders and healed victims and I can't imagine many more powerful experiences than that.

### **Accountability**

Offenders will need to be in accountability for the rest of their lives, even after their times of being on probation.

This will come as a surprise to the average sexual offender. They are not necessarily participants in the process, as many are court ordered to get treatment. You will have to work to help them "buy in" to the process and become willing to work hard for themselves. Christian treatment, of course, offers a hope and a motivation beyond that which secular treatment can provide.

Every aspect of an offender's history and rituals must be clearly understood. When this is the case, plans of defense can be set in place. An offender must prepare in times of strength for times of vulnerability that will inevitably come. A group of people should be aware of the history and rituals and be prepared to confront the offender at the earliest possible point in the ritual. For that reason, offenders will need to go to support groups for the rest of their lives.

Some offenders suffer from chemical or sexual addictions. They might attend groups specifically for those that will also help them be accountable for their sexually offending behavior. I have now had a number of offenders who attend therapy groups at my center. I strongly encourage Christian counselors to start therapy groups or make space available for those who have the maturity to lead support groups.

#### **Medical Care**

Some offenders have complex and multiple psychiatric issues that need medication. The use of brain scan technology can be very helpful in more accurate diagnoses. In severe cases in which all manner of treatment has been exhausted, the use of certain hormonal treatments to achieve a so-called "chemical castration" may be indicated.

#### **Conclusion**

In summary, sexual offenders are a very difficult population, but the rewards of working with them can be very fulfilling. You will see examples of lives transformed that can be truly awe-inspiring. Finally, while I encourage you to work with them, I would also encourage you to get specialized training. Most of all be aware that these people may trigger you in your own sexual pain and challenge you to the full extent of your clinical competency. ☪

*Mark R. Laaser, Ph.D., is an internationally known author and speaker. He serves as Executive Director of Faithful and True Ministries and as Director of the Institute for Healthy Sexuality of the American Association of Christian Counselors.*

