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Abuse is Abuse

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This might be a good time to simply "rip the bandage off" and get back to the basics: Abuse is abuse. Part of what makes it abuse is that one can never know the outcome. As co-blogger Jon Brandt [recently noted](#), research has shown a particularly challenging truth; that those who are abused don't necessarily view their experience as abuse. He states:

One insidious characteristic of non-violent sexual abuse is that it may be unrecognized. When people are asked why they didn't report the abuse, they sometimes say they felt duped, perhaps complicit, but mostly confused. And when victims otherwise liked their offender, they often didn't report because they were afraid of the uncertainty of the aftermath – for themselves and for the offender.

This leads us to question where violence begins and ends. Does it need to be overtly and blatantly violent to be abuse? Australian psychologist [James Ogleff and his colleagues](#) examined survivors of child sexual abuse after 45 years and found:

Overcoming many limitations of previous studies, this study revealed that, in general, CSA victims were 1.4 times more likely to have some form of contact with the police for any matter compared with other members of the general community. Although most (77%) CSA victims did not have an official criminal record, CSA victims were almost five times more likely than others to be charged with any offence, with the strongest associations yielded for sexual and violent offences and breach of orders.

These findings call to mind what many professionals have said in treatment across many decades. To paraphrase [Stanton Samenow](#), you don't need to shoot someone or leave them lying in a pool of blood to have committed an act of violence; "no one was hurt" is a common post facto rationalization made by people who have committed serious acts of violence. We hear this minimizing from perpetrators, victims, family members and society through the myths that surround abuse; especially historic child sexual abuse ("why complain now years later?"), rape ("why didn't they fight back?") and inappropriate/under wanted touching ("it wasn't that bad, it wasn't rape!"). Which begs the questions, how we understand, discussion and recognize abuse as a society as well as an individual? We all know the terminology, language, labels and (for the most part) where to seek help and/or justice; but do we really recognize and process abuse? So we say - "sexual abuse is a broad constellation of acts that is everything and anything"; "sexual abuse happens to other more vulnerable people, not to me and people I know";



SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

Chief Blogger Kieran McCartan, Ph.D. and Associate Bloggers David S. Prescott, LICSW and Jon Brandt, MSW, LICSW are longtime members of ATSA. We are dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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"sexual abuse is a caused by other more deviant not by people I know"; and "well, the system isn't fit for purpose so why bother reporting". We hear so much, see so much that we become desensitized and need the extreme case to come along to enact a conversation, so not the daughter sexually harmed by her father but the football coach that abuses multiple children in their care.

Taken together, these findings remind us that:

- 1) The effects of violence, including sexual violence, can be brief or last a lifetime.
- 2) The effects of violence can occur beyond the awareness of the person who has been abused.
- 3) Abuse poses an unacceptable risk of harm, even if it does not cause acknowledged harm in every case.

Of course, there are other implications:

- Abuse exists at every level of society; it is in our communities and all too often in our own families.
- Only a small minority of those who are known to have sexually abused are at high risk to be re-arrested for sexual abuse.
- People who abuse often do so until they are caught and cautioned by an authority; Being sanctioned in some way for abuse can have dramatic effects on one's behavior.

Why are these points so important to mention?

First, the world has watched as many of our favorite people have recently come to light as having sexually abused others (e.g., a parade of entertainers, athletes, politicians). Perhaps, more importantly, ATSA members, other professionals, and the lay public are once again challenged to re-visit not only what abuse is, but what it means in our lives. ATSA's Executive Board of Directors recently issued a [statement](#) that caused some controversy among ATSA members; some members felt it singled out one side of the political aisle, while other members noted that sexual misconduct seems equally distributed over time across parties. Even beyond our organization, many have expressed concern about the actions of political leaders, while others have appeared to use the actions of others for their own political gain. It often seems that no one is blameless in recent world events.

2016 has been an unforgettable year in world politics, and many of us – the authors included – experience grief that there is not more we can do to influence events around the planet. Just the same, it is vital that we not take our eyes off at least one prize: the elimination of sexual abuse.