

INFORMATION SHEET

What stops people disclosing?

"No-one can help ..."

Why does abuse in so many cases remain hidden for so long? What stops people from telling someone else what is happening to them? What stops people from seeking help?



There are many things; some to do with the offender, some to do with the victim and some to do with those of us who might be in a position to provide help.

The offender

A high proportion of abuse takes place within families. Offenders are usually known to the person that they abuse. Churches operate much as families do. They are close, trusting and interdependent groups. This environment allows offenders to manipulate those that they abuse to prevent them from disclosing the abuse.

Offenders often appear to be respectable members of the church community. They can hold positions of considerable power and prestige. This allows them to manipulate the system to ensure their respectability. The victim can be encouraged to compare their own position within the community and draw the conclusion that they will not be believed.

Remember also that offenders are practiced at deceit and continually work to hide the abuse. They use the problems that the church has in recognising abuse and hearing disclosures to their advantage. Offenders also use threats to stop people disclosing. The fear of retribution is a strong incentive to remain silent.

Offenders use the victim's own sense of guilt to ensure secrecy and actively work to shift the sense of responsibility for what has happened onto the victim; "It wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for you," "It's your fault."

The victim

For an offender, getting their victim to see the abuse as their own fault is often not difficult. Victims of abuse carry an enormous load of guilt. There is also an overwhelming conviction that if they do tell, they will not be believed. Some fear being blamed for what happened, treated as social outcasts, liars or as emotionally weak.

Between the offender playing on their feelings of guilt and the inability of those who could help to allay these fears it is little wonder that many victims don't speak out.

Victims of abuse often feel that no-one can help them. What is the point of seeking help if there is nothing anyone can do?

They can also find it difficult to identify with people who have not experienced what they have experienced. Particularly if the abuse has been going on for a long time it can be difficult for victims to seek help from someone whose life is so far removed from theirs.

Both victims and survivors are often reticent to talk of their abuse. There are many reasons for this but one of them can be an unwillingness to burden others with their pain. They may tell you a little, to see if you cope and how you react, and then tell you a little more later. It is a matter of trust and not wanting to cause distress by what they disclose.

Finally, remember that even though someone who is being abused may desperately want the abuse to stop they are still vulnerable to the offender. Whatever vulnerability has been exploited by the offender is likely to still be there and the offender will deliberately work to maintain that vulnerability and increase dependence.

Those who could help

It is a sad reality that quite often what stops people disclosing abuse is the real or perceived ability of those who could help to respond appropriately.

A simple lack of knowledge about what abuse is leaves people vulnerable to it. This lack of knowledge also leaves the church unable to respond appropriately. It is difficult enough to disclose abuse without having to convince those who could help that what has happened is actually abuse. This is not so much the case with child abuse but is a common problem where the abuse of adults is concerned.

In many churches there is an added hurdle. There is a lack of openness about how to make a complaint or where to seek help. The reasons for this vary greatly; perhaps some churches fear legal action, while others don't think abuse occurs and still others simply haven't thought about it. Whatever the reason, having an open process and readily available information about how to make a complaint removes at least one of the barriers to disclosure.

Apart from organisational barriers, the individuals within churches who may be approached to help can also create barriers. Individuals within churches often have an instinctive disbelief of allegations against members of the church community, particularly those in authority; the person is part of a Christian fellowship, is respected and doesn't show any outward sign of such terrible actions.

A person's lack of effective communication skills and perceived inability to help may stop a disclosure or cause it to be withdrawn. Anyone within a church may be in a position where someone discloses. At the very least, those in leadership and pastoral care positions should be well trained in listening and knowledgeable about how to deal with a disclosure. See the "How to really listen" Information Sheet in this guide for more information.

Some facts about children and young people and disclosure

- In the vast majority of child sexual abuse cases the victim knows the offender.
- The sexual abuse will usually continue until someone stops it.

- Boys and girls of any age can be sexually abused.
- Children and young people must never be assumed to be lying about a claim of sexual abuse.
- Knowing about sexual abuse helps keep children and young people safe and protects them from it. When adults talk openly about sexual abuse, tell them what to do if they are threatened and give them permission to tell someone who can help then, offenders lose some of their power over the child.
- Child sexual abusers prey on children or young people and the people around them. They actively manipulate those who care for the child or young person to make them more vulnerable.
- Some offenders work to undermine the child or young person's reputation so that they won't be believed.
- Offenders recruit vulnerable children or young people and use coercion to prepare them for abuse.
- Most children or young people who are victims of sexual abuse do not disclose at the time and many never do. Disclosures may be delayed weeks, months or years after the abuse began.
- Most cases of child or young person sexual abuse are disclosed accidentally, where the victim behaves or makes a comment that alerts someone.

PLEASE NOTE: This Book Review does not form part of the policy or process for dealing with or preventing abuse within the church but is provided as general information.

For more information or training resources please contact Elizabeth McClean at the Child Protection Unit on 02 9690 9324 or emcclean@pcnsw.org.au