

#6 Exploitation and Sexual Abuse

I worked with Cathy, a 19-year-old female. Her mother's previous partner sexually abused her for several months, beginning when she was 10 or 11 years old. The person who sexually harmed Cathy arranged for them to be alone for extended periods of time. He was skillful at making the relationship covert and presented the experiences to Cathy as if it were a relationship rather than abuse. She was manipulated to believe she was empowered to make choices about when they engaged in sexual contact.

Her offender always gained her agreement for these activities. The sexual abuse began gradually and increased to greater levels of sexual involvement. Cathy disclosed the sexual abuse after her mother's relationship ended with him. Her disclosures were reported, and law enforcement personnel became involved when she was about 13 years old. The person who committed the sexual offenses admitted to his behavior and attempted to rationalize what he was doing by distorting her behavior as cooperation.

Cathy's trauma response to the sexual exploitation included viewing sexually explicit images on her cell phone and texting about sexual topics. Cathy shared some of these activities with her female friends, but most of these actions were hidden. The frequency and intensity of these activities increased over time. Cathy started to meet men online, and some she would meet in person at areas such as truck stops, where she was repeatedly sexually exploited. She was sexually abused again by an older male relative she did not have contact with while growing up. Cathy's story illustrates the rippling impact of sexual harm on children.



Teaching

People who sexually harm children may exploit them by providing them with desired activities and attention. Cathy's experiences of sexual harm led to confusion about what is a healthy relationship. Her trauma response included a pattern of unsafe and attention-seeking behaviors. Unfortunately, she was at greater and greater risk over time. We need to take the time to understand the impact of traumatic experiences on children and the shame they experience. We must understand how they view themselves, the world, and their past experiences so we can help them heal.

