



# Sexual Abuse



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## Changing the social norms on sexual abuse, sexual assault, and sexualised behaviour

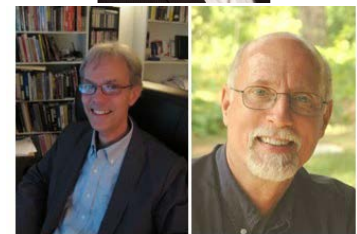
Kieran McCartan, PhD, David Prescott, LICSW, and Jon Brown, MSc

The recent, often deeply courageous statements and disclosures about [sexual abuse](#), [sexual assault](#), and [sexualised behaviour](#) on social media over the last week since the start of the Harvey Weinstein allegations should not shock us. They conform what we already knew, that there is a normalisation of sexual abuse and harassment in our culture.

Over the last couple of years there has been a steady expansion in the number of people affected by sexualised behaviour coming forward, some related to historical cases while some is contemporary. What this indicates is that people feel more confident in coming forward, more confident that they will be believed as well as supported, more confident that the system will respond appropriately and better able to engage socially on the topic. At the same time, there is no denying the bravery behind each disclosure; the stakes are as high as they are unpredictable.

Consequently, the movement towards greater transparency and disclosure brings a multiplier effect. That is, the more that people come forward and talk about sexual harm, the more it's exposed and – therefore – the more that abuse gets reported. As a society, we start to realise that our idealised social norm of “no abuse” is not the reality, that sexual harm is occurring on a daily basis across our communities locally, nationally and globally; therefore, we need to work harder and smarter in responding to it.

While the most recent conversation about the reality and impact of sexual harm focuses on Hollywood, it reflects what we have seen in the world of sport, social care, religious organisations, politics, and education. Once we started to have the conversation about sexual harm, we realised that all same thing was happening cross organisationally, cross culturally, and internationally. The story is all too familiar: it is about power and control, it's about taking advantage, it is about perceptive social norms, low level sexism and social acceptability. It is about similar



### **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.*

*The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.*

people and actions in different contexts! If we think about the parallels between the different contexts we are talking about men (mainly, but not always) in powerful roles that can take advantage of individuals (mainly women, but not always because men have come forward too) desires to achieve something (achieve in an industry or promise of a better life) and offer them a way to achieve it with caveats (sexual abuse, blackmail manipulation) resulting in the victims being placed in an impossible situation that is often perceived as the norm (identified through their multi experiences of the same thing at different times in the same industry and similar stories from their peers) that gets internalised, accepted and normalised. Once we started talking about institutionalised sexual harm in care homes and sport, why did we not think that it would be the same in other areas?

The question is how do we respond? Just like Jimmy Saville, Jerry Sandusky, and too many members of the Catholic Church, Harvey Weinstein is not the only sexual predator in entertainment. This is larger societal issue and taps into the roots of our normative social practices, relationships, boundaries and values.

Perhaps most difficult to consider is that many of those for whom there is strong evidence of wrongdoing – Bill Clinton, Bill Cosby, Donald Trump, and many others – are or have been respected as public figures. Whatever one's leanings, the truth about who has abused can be deeply painful. Indeed, that is one of the many ways that abuse is pernicious and harmful.

Our current situation will not change overnight. The brave people standing up to post “#metoo” are a great start as their actions reveal the scale and impact of the issue at street level. We need to turn this outpouring into a constructive response that prevents sexual harm and changes the support social norms. Violence, including sexual abuse, is just not acceptable. If we've learned anything over the past two decades, it's that sometimes the most practical action one can take is to speak up and speak out. We need to promote the message of a zero tolerance approach to all forms of sexual abuse and violence wherever it is happening and we need to promote and support prevention approaches that will address the problem at the earliest possible opportunity, in schools, in families and in our communities.