

MODULE 1: SEX OFFENSES, OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS

Cycle of Sex Offending

The remaining slides in this presentation have to do with the topic of the cycle of sexual offending. In general, the offense cycle for sexual offending revolves around the interaction of offender thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. For instance, sexual offending is not a random set of events, but rather as a result of a series of multi-determinant decisions.

These decisions are often referred to as seemingly unimportant decisions. Essentially, offenders make decisions that make offending likely, such as seemingly unimportant decision to buy a child ice cream or a seemingly unimportant decision of taking a child to a toy store. These decisions, along with the interaction of situational factors, the affective states of the offender, the learning that takes place during these decision making, and positive reinforcement all contribute to the offense cycle.

The grooming behaviors are very important in the maintenance of sexual offending behavior. Specifically, premeditated behavior intended to manipulate the potential victim and to complying with sexual abuse. Sometimes groomed behavior occurs unknown to the offender. Oftentimes, the offender engages in verbal and physical coercion, seduction, games, and enticements as part of the grooming process.

This grooming process can be initiated after a normal daily behavior, such as tickling or bathing. It could be initiated after planning a manipulation. For example, such as when the offender either manipulates a situation so that he is alone with the victim or takes advantage of an opportunity that presents itself. This groomed behavior can also be initiated through verbal and physical coercion, through the use of threats, or by playing games. Oftentimes, this groomed behavior is reinforced through the offender providing money, gifts, and bribes to their expecting victims.

There are a number of factors that affect the maintenance of a sexual offending cycle. One of the most important of these is cognitive distortions. Individuals primarily neutralize feelings of wrongdoing through the use of excuses and justifications for their sexually offending behavior. These cognitive distortions allow the offenders to remove from themselves any responsibility, shame, or guilt related to the event.

These cognitive distortions protect the individual from self-blame and allow the individual to validate their behavior through these cognitive defense mechanisms. This is often referred to from one of the classic criminological theories of techniques of neutralization provided by Sykes and Matza in 1957 where they focused on the denial of responsibility, the denial of injury, the denial of the victim, the condemnation of the condemners, and an appeal to higher loyalties in the maintenance of an offending cycle.

Specifically, through the use of minimization and denial, most sex offenders minimize or deny their offenses, including the damage caused to the victim, the violence that was used, their responsibility

for the offense, the planning of the offense, and the lasting effects as a result of the offense. Through the use of justifications, sex offenders make excuses as to why they committed their deviant acts. By justifying their actions, these offenders acknowledge their guilt in the acts, but they do not take responsibility for them.

Commonly, they blame the victims for their offenses or justify their offenses through a victims actions. There is also the general lack of victim empathy. Specifically, sex offenders form mental constructs about what they believe the victim wants. And because offenders exhibit narcissistic traits generally, they often believe the victim desires sexual activity from them.

The role of fantasies also come to play in the maintenance of a sexual offending cycle. Historically, it was assumed that sex offenders had deviant sexual fantasies, which in turn motivated them to commit deviant sexual acts. Also it was often believed that these deviant sexual fantasies were conditioned through masturbation, and that fantasies could be modified through deconditioning or aversion therapy. However, there's little empirical evidence that sex offenders have more fantasy than non-sex offenders or that these fantasies are more deviant.

Lastly, there is the role of disinhibitors or potentiators, such as alcohol as it is inhibitor. Many sex offenders blame their deviant sexual behavior on situational or transitory factors, such as drugs, alcohol, stress, and loneliness. Though these factors alone do not necessarily cause deviant behaviors, they can be considered triggers to the commission of deviant sexual acts. These triggering factors can either act as disinhibitors-- the most common of which is alcohol-- or as potentiators, including negative affective states, such as depression.

Both disinhibitors and potentiators can jointly or individually contribute to offending behavior. Here is a chart displaying the example of a typical progression of sex offending. There are multiple steps in the offense chain. It begins with a negative emotional state, followed by deviant fantasies, which leads to cognitive distortions, some elements of planning, the potential role of disinhibitors or potentiators, then the commission of the sex offense. And finally, what results in the continued maintenance of the cycle is whether or not the behavior is reinforced.

For example, at the outset the offender has negative thoughts often leading to self-pity and the idea that nobody likes me or I'm no good. These self-pitying negative thoughts lead to negative feelings. In particular, anger, frustration, loneliness, and feelings of inadequacy. These negative thoughts and feelings interact and leave the offender to make these SUDs-- seemingly unimportant decisions-- that among other things lead them to withdraw from others.

The result of this withdrawal is further loneliness and isolation, which results in a lack of communication that causes the original negative thoughts and feelings to go unresolved. Once the offender is entranced with this negative thought, feeling behavior he or she begins to experience deviant sexual fantasies.

These experiences often lead to masturbation where pleasure is derived as a result of the abusive, deviant fantasy. With this positive reinforcement, the offender's negative thoughts and feelings begin to wane, further reinforcing the negative behavior. Now the offender begins to take steps toward overtly deviant behavior, such as the planning involved by targeting the victim and engaging in a fantasy rehearsal of the future abuse of that particular victim.

This also relates to the offender beginning to groom the victim. Once adequate grooming has taken place, with cognitive distortions occurring to reinforce the grooming process, these stages of the planning come to fruition. And the offender will then abuse the victim. This abuse often occurs along with the use of a disinhibitor, such as alcohol. This abusive act is itself tangibly reinforced of the original fantasy. The offense cycle begins once again if the offender receives positive reinforcement from the behavior and does not get caught for the act.