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Abuse can cause lifelong problems

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Experts say sexual assault can be worse when a priest is involved because it can destroy faith in God.

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ROCKFORD - Old news made headlines last week when the Catholic diocese confirmed a 25-year-old case of sexual abuse of three children by a local priest.

Suddenly, Rockford was forced to face a national church crisis: pedophilia, the abnormal sexual desire for prepubescent children.

Some people questioned the victims' motives in going public, saying, "It was so long ago. Why does it matter now?"

Assuming that victims can "just get over it" shows a basic misunderstanding of how harmful it is when clergymen abuse children, said Julie Runnells, clinical director of Rockford Sexual Assault Counseling.

"It affects them for the rest of their lives," she said, rattling off alcoholism, drug addictions, eating disorders, depression and suicide as a few of the chronic problems survivors commonly face. "They think, 'If God is a loving God, why did he allow this to happen?' Their faith is shattered."

For children, physical and emotional reactions can vary from bedwetting to withdrawal, Runnells said. "But people need to understand that when a child is abused, they only have a child's coping skills."

It is simple enough for an adult to look back with the 20/20 vision of hindsight and say, "Why didn't the child tell someone? Why didn't he or she say, 'No'?" But that's asking a

lot of children who have been made to feel ashamed, said Barbara Blaine, founder of the Chicago-based support group Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests, or SNAP.

"As children, when we are being molested, we are threatened to keep silent. We feel tons of shame, and we tell ourselves it's our fault," Blaine said. "There's not a magical age where you figure out you've got some faulty thinking going on. I had a master's (degree) in social work and was 29 years old before I came to the realization that it was not my fault."

With past cases of clergy abuse making headlines, the climate is right for other victims to come forward.

On an individual level, it usually takes some trigger, such as the birth of a child or another personal milestone, to lead a person to confront childhood abuse, Blaine said.

"It takes a lot of courage," she said. "It's almost like the priest put duct tape over our mouth, and by the time you're able to remove that duct tape, you could be 30, 40, 50 years old."

The sense of helplessness a child victim feels is intensified when the abuser is a priest, Blaine said, because the balance of

power is tipped even more in the adult's favor.

"Our parents, the nuns and principals in school all looked up to the priest," she said. "The abuse is so much more devastating because the priest is held in a position close to God. Many victims feel like they've been raped by God."

Predators count on their power of influence. Typically, they have seductive personalities, which is why people often are surprised by allegations of abuse, said Sue Coppernoll of Oregon, a certified sex educator and ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren.

"Predators are approval seekers, people pleasers, 'nice guys' engaged in a lifelong attempt to convince themselves that they and their behavior are OK," Coppernoll said.

Another common part of the pedophile's profile is that they often are in denial, so they rationalize the abuse or blame the victim, she said.

"They will say, 'The child misunderstood me.' 'The child needed me.' 'The child is lying,'" she said. "There is a mental glitch there."

While the predator maintains power, the victim is paralyzed with fear. "Childhood sexual abuse is an act of theft," Coppernoll said. "The child's self-confidence and trust in himself are stolen by the abuser."

There are degrees of pedophilia, ranging from the person who has sexual thoughts of children but never acts on them to the compulsive abuser who acts out again and again. No matter what the level, it is unrealistic to believe that a predator can be cured, Coppernoll said.

"I do not use the word treatment. The response needs to be acknowledgment and full disclosure to everybody involved - the victims, the families and the church," she said. "They need a lifelong maintenance program, such as a 12-step model. The whole person has to be addressed."

Removing an abusive clergyman from a congregation is not enough, Coppernoll said. Any position of power or authority, where they can influence a family or someone with access to children, is dangerous.

In Rockford's case, the diocese removed the Rev. Harlan Clapsaddle from his Dixon parish after Kevin Misslich and his brothers spoke to officials in 1996. Clapsaddle was placed into therapy and then assigned to limited duties at Provena Cor Mariae nursing home.

The diocese stands behind its reaction, but Misslich says Clapsaddle was protected from public scrutiny.

The Catholic Church is in the spotlight now, but other denominations and other religions have faced similar problems.

"It's not just the Catholic Church. It's every church," she said.

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BREAKOUT BOXES

What's next

The Illinois General Assembly could pass a bill this week that would add clergy to the list of professionals required to report suspicion or evidence of child abuse.

House Bill 5002 unanimously passed the Senate Thursday. The House must agree with the Senate amendment to the bill before it can advance to the governor's desk. The General Assembly is scheduled to adjourn Friday.

Where to get help

Rockford Police: 815-987-5800 or your local police.

Rockford Sexual Assault Counseling: 800-564-8441 815-636-9811 815-544-6821.